

This final commentary addresses the importance of better understanding different types of relationships in youth mentoring and the potential impact of each type on youth outcomes.

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Structuring mentoring relationships for competence, character, and purpose

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AT A TIME WHEN the popularity of youth mentoring is soaring and programmatic innovations abound, the need for greater precision in our understandings of how youth mentoring works and under what conditions it is likely to be most effective is becoming both more urgent and more challenging to meet. What gets called youth mentoring now takes a number of forms (one-to-one, group, peer), occurs in different mediums (face-to-face, online) and numerous contexts (communities, schools, religious organizations), and serves youth of all ages faced with myriad challenges (single-parent households, foster care, parents who are incarcerated). How do we build evidence-based understandings of what constitutes high-quality mentoring in a way that adequately encompasses and accounts for this diversity? The authors of the articles in this volume begin to address this challenge by identifying and examining some potentially cross-cutting dimensions of these relationships that may distinguish higher-quality relationship

styles. To the rich and insightful contributions in this volume, we add a few reflections and additional considerations.

Descriptions of styles of mentoring need to be explicit about the goals of the mentoring relationship. If it is seeking to develop only hard cognitive skills, such as reading and math, then a more prescriptive, purposeful relationship is in order. But in today's changing world, where globalization and technology are changing both the career trajectories and the skills required, a wider range of competencies is needed, including the capacity for self-regulation, application (sticking with things, locus of control), empathy (a relational capability that underpins social skills), or what researchers call "character capabilities."¹ To a growing extent, these capabilities influence life chances, including labor force opportunities, income, emotional well-being, health, and social connections. Much research suggests that children from more affluent homes have more opportunities and scaffolding for developing these character skills, making them more competitive in today's society.² Beyond the attainment of skills, some evidence suggests that a sense of purpose—finding meaning in commitments and aspirations or making a difference in the world in some way through work or family—may distinguish happier and healthier teens.³ We should think of mentoring relationships as an opportunity to hone critical skills and foster a sense of purpose among less advantaged youth.

The study of different styles of mentoring relationships could also be greatly informed by the parenting literature, as there is a rich and robust literature on parenting style and youth outcomes. One example is Baumrind's typology of parenting relationships. It has two major elements: warm responsiveness and demandingness or control, similar to those identified by Karcher, Keller, and others in this volume. Combining these two axes yields a typology of four basic parenting styles: (1) high-warmth, low-control parents are "permissive"; (2) high-warmth, high-control parents are "authoritative"; (3) low-warmth, low-control parents are "uninvolved"; and (4) low-warmth, high-control parents are "authoritarian." Controlling for other factors, children with authoritative

parents do significantly better on a range of psychosocial outcomes than do children with parents displaying the other styles, with the children of disengaged parents faring the worst.⁴ Thus, the most successful parents combine clear, consistently enforced rules with warmth and responsiveness. Perhaps skillful mentors who adopt an authoritative approach to mentoring, balancing warmth with structure, are likely to be most effective in terms of generating key character capabilities.

Finally, we expect that youth characteristics play an important role here. Not all youth are equally suited for mentoring. Although some advocates might argue that every youth would benefit from the compassionate attention of a volunteer adult, most concede that mentoring is neither a substitute for professional treatment among youth with serious emotional, behavioral, or academic problems nor a necessary inoculation for all youth. In addition to youth's baseline functioning, their relationship histories and access to additional sources of support are likely to affect the degree to which youth can engage in and benefit from mentoring. Some youth entering mentoring programs have had a history of deeply supportive relationships, while others have had relationships characterized by negativity or even abuse or neglect. These differences are likely to have implications for mentoring relationship quality, style, and outcomes. Indeed, Zand and colleagues found that youth with better preexisting adult relationships and stronger family and school bonds formed higher-quality relationships with mentors.⁵ How might youth's relational histories influence mentors' relational styles? What could programs do to best support and encourage mentors to engage with youth with more challenging relational histories in positive and growth-promoting ways?

Together, the articles in this volume offer a richer, more complex rendering of relational styles and processes than has been laid out previously in the mentoring literature, achieved by returning to the roots of some of well-known ideas, reworking and refining them conceptually, and extending them through further empirical work. We expect this work will spark further fruitful debate, discussion, and elaboration of how relationship styles and

mentor-youth interactions influence youth outcomes that we believe can be deepened even further by drawing on knowledge from related fields. We hope that such work will inform the practice of youth mentoring in ways that help the youth served be better equipped to meet the demands of, and even flourish in, today's rapidly changing and increasingly complex world.

Notes

1. Lexmond, J., & Reeves, R. (2009). *Building character*. London: Demos.
2. Shonkoff, J. P., & Phillips, D. A. (Eds.). (2000). *From neurons to neighborhoods: The science of early childhood development*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.
3. Damon, W. (2008). *The path to purpose: Helping our children find their calling in life*. New York: Free Press.
4. Baumrind, D. (1991). The influence of parenting style on adolescent competence and substance abuse. *Journal of Early Adolescence*, 11(1), 56–95.
5. Zand, D. H., Thompson, N., Cervantes, R., Espiritu, R., Klagholz, D., LaBlanc, L., et al. (2009). The mentor-youth alliance: The role of mentoring relationships in promoting youth competence. *Journal of Adolescence*, 32, 1–17.

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