

Mentoring

Mentoring programs have received extensive coverage during the past several decades as a preventive measure for at-risk youth. Mentoring is designed to offer such youths a protective factor to counter the risks they face in their daily lives (OJJDP 1998). Although the exact nature of the mentoring relationship varies from program to program and over time, it is generally defined as follows:

A relationship over a prolonged period of time between two or more people where an older, caring, more experienced individual provides help to the younger person as [he or she] goes through life. (CSAP 2000, 2)

Mentoring as a form of prevention dates back to the late-19th century, when the Friendly Visiting campaign recruited hundreds of middle class women to work with poor and immigrant communities (Freedman 2008). Today, a well-known incarnation of mentoring is Big Brothers Big Sisters (BBBS), a program that began in 1904 when a court clerk in New York City began finding volunteers for boys coming through his courtroom. During the same period, a group of women began a similar movement to mentor girls, which began the Big Sisters movement. In 1997 the two groups joined, to form Big Brothers Big Sisters of America. Since their beginning, BBBS agencies have connected middle class adults with disadvantaged youths to provide them with socialization, guidance, and positive role models. BBBS has a network of nearly 400 agencies across the country and serves 250,000 children and adolescents annually. It is the largest mentoring organization in the United States.

Target Population

In addition to serving at-risk children living in high-poverty neighborhoods, some of today's mentoring programs also concentrate on specific segments of the high-risk population—including children of prisoners (Goode and Smith 2005), children in foster care (Ahrens et al. 2008), abused and neglected youths, youths who have disabilities, pregnant and parenting adolescents, academically at-risk students, and adolescents involved in the juvenile justice system (Britner et al. 2006).

Mentoring programs have been supported by private and federal funds. Private entities such as BBBS agencies have been responsible for a large percentage of mentoring programs. Since 2001, federal legislation has provided major mentoring programs, including

- The Mentoring Children of Prisoners program
- The Safe and Drug-Free Schools Mentoring program for children at risk of educational failure, dropping out of school, or involvement in delinquent activities

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- The Mentoring Initiative for System-Involved Youth, for youth in foster care and juvenile justice system (Fernandes 2008)

Several other federally funded mentoring programs also exist.

Theoretical Foundation

Nonparental adults play an important role in promoting healthy development for youth. For high-risk youths who have limited access to informal mentoring by positive role models, structured mentoring programs can play an important role in promoting healthy development. The goal of mentoring programs is to provide youth with positive adult contact and, thereby, reduce risk factors (e.g., early antisocial behavior, alienation, family management problems, lack of commitment to school) by enhancing protective factors (e.g., healthy beliefs, opportunities for involvement, and social and material reinforcement for appropriate behavior). According to the U.S. Department of Justice, mentors

... can provide a youth with personal connectedness, supervision and guidance, skills training, career or cultural enrichment opportunities, a knowledge of spirituality and values, a sense of self-worth, and, perhaps most important, goals and hope for the future. (OJJDP 1998, 10)

Early research findings on the protective effects of close relationships with nonparental adults (Werner 1995) and the results of the BBBS mentoring program evaluation conducted by Public/Private Ventures that demonstrated the positive effects of nonparental adult relationships with high-risk youth (Tierney, Grossman, and Resch 1995) have formed the basis for the proliferation of mentoring programs now serving thousands of youths each year.

Mentoring Models

There are various mentoring models in use today. *Informal mentoring* occurs whenever a youth has an ongoing relationship with an older person, (e.g., a teacher, coach, or family friend) who provides guidance to the young person. These informal mentoring relationships result from frequent, unstructured contacts with the adults. Informal mentoring has been an important force in the life of young people for centuries. *Formal mentoring* occurs when programs provide volunteer mentors for at-risk youth. The formal mentoring relationship between a youth and the volunteer is fostered through a structured program operated by community agencies, faith-based programs, schools, afterschool programs, and other youth-serving organizations. The organizations or agencies usually have a structured program that includes recruitment of youth and volunteers, training of volunteers, guidelines for matching volunteers and youth, and ongoing monitoring and training. Once a volunteer is matched with a youth, the pair agrees to meet over time to engage in various activities.

Several models of formal mentoring have emerged during the past several decades. *Community-based mentoring* (CBM), the traditional model, matches a carefully screened volunteer with an at-risk youth. The pair agrees to meet regularly, usually for at least 4 hours per month. In many cases, the mentoring relationship endures beyond a year. The pair engages in a variety of activities (e.g., sports, games, movies, visiting a library or museum) within the community. Because of a dramatic increase in other formal mentoring programs, CBM programs now account for only about 50 percent of all structured mentoring programs (DuBois and Rhodes 2006).

More recently, *school-based mentoring* (SBM) has become a popular alternative to CBM. SBM also involves the pairing of a young person with a positive role model. In the case of SBM, however, the role model may be an adult or an older student. This model is sometimes called site-based mentoring (DuBois and Rhodes 2006) because, unlike CBM, the mentor and mentee meet at a specific location

rather than engage in activities in various places within the community. The SBM pair usually meets at school in a supervised setting for about 1 hour once a week during or after school. In a few cases, SBM is provided through a community agency, and the youth meets with his or her mentor at a community center. The mentoring activities tend to be concentrated on academics, along with social activities. The relationship usually lasts only about 9 months during 1 school year. In a few cases, the pair meets during the summer or even in the following school year (Herrera et al. 2007). Thus, youths in SBM programs meet with their mentors for considerably less time per month and for a shorter duration than youths in CBM programs do.

Some less popular and more recent mentoring models include *group mentoring*, wherein one mentor meets with a group of youths; *e-mentoring*, in which the two individuals communicate over the Internet; and *peer mentoring*, wherein students are used as mentors (DuBois and Rhodes 2006).

Outcome Evidence

Since mentoring is one of the mostly commonly used preventive measure for at-risk youth, there has been ongoing concern about the extent of its effectiveness for preventing delinquent and other high-risk behaviors. Numerous evaluations of mentoring programs have been conducted, and several meta-analyses have attempted to summarize findings from these studies. A meta-analysis published in 2002 concluded, “[F]indings provide evidence of only a modest or small benefit of program participation for the average youth” (DuBois et al. 2002, 157). More highly structured programs that included support for mentors yielded the strongest effects. A more recent meta-analysis of 39 mentoring programs found modest positive outcomes for delinquency and aggressive outcomes, while outcomes related to school and substance use were somewhat smaller (Tolan et al. 2008). The authors also note that there was great variation in outcomes across studies and that studies using random assignment had greater positive outcomes than other studies. A review of 18 evaluations of mentoring of juvenile offenders found variation in outcomes, with some studies demonstrating small positive effects on recidivism rates and some showing no effects. Again, mentoring that was combined with other supports such as weekly meetings showed slighting higher positive effects on reoffending.

Reviewers authoring these meta-analyses have attempted to determine whether moderators to positive outcomes exist and what they are. However, many studies, including recent ones, provide limited information on potential moderators of outcomes such as the criteria for selecting participants, use of other interventions in the study, support for mentors, key processes of mentoring interventions, and assessment of the quality or fidelity of the intervention. Even the length of the mentoring relationship is often not reported. Grossman and Rhodes (2002) analyzed the data from the national BBBS mentoring programs and found that the outcomes of mentoring varied with their duration. For those in matches that lasted for 3 months or less, the youths experienced a decline in self-worth. However, youths engaged with a mentor for more than 12 months reported a significantly higher level of self-worth and scholastic competence. According to these researchers, the mentoring relationship could actually be harmful if it ends earlier than expected.

A review of three randomized trials of school-based mentoring was conducted recently to determine those aspects of the programs that contributed to positive outcomes (Wheeler, Keller, and DuBois 2010). The three studies were mentoring programs implemented by BBBS affiliates (Herrera et al. 2007); Communities in Schools of San Antonio, Texas (Karcher 2008); and grantees of the U.S. Department of Education’s Student Mentoring Program (Bernstein et al. 2009). The review concluded that school-based mentoring

... can be modestly effective for improving selected outcomes (i.e., support from nonfamilial adults, peer support, perceptions of scholastic efficacy, school-related misconduct, absenteeism, and truancy). Program effects are not apparent, however, for academic achievement or other outcomes. (Wheeler, Keller, and DuBois 2010, 1)

Even among these three evaluations of school-based mentoring programs, great variation existed regarding the program characteristics and the information provided about the programs. The reviewers caution those implementing school-based mentoring programs to consider characteristics of the program, outcomes of interest, and the design of program evaluations. These same cautions extend to agencies implementing community-based and other mentoring models.

Given the consensus from studies that the effects of mentoring are limited to small to moderate outcomes, it is not surprising that researchers have suggested that the extensive support given to implementing mentoring programs for at-risk youth is based on unsubstantiated claims about these programs' effectiveness (Rhodes and Lowe 2008).

Thoroughly documenting protocols for implementing mentoring programs, developing training and support programs for mentors, developing strategies for reducing attrition of volunteers, and designing rigorous studies to evaluate outcomes and moderators of outcomes are among the recommendations put forth by researchers of mentoring programs for at-risk youth.

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