

Mentoring

1. Range of Approaches

Youth need positive relations with caring adults. Parents often fill this central need, but many youth benefit from relationships with other adults in addition to their parents. Therefore, the mentoring of youth by adults stands alongside the many program approaches that are expected to promote positive youth outcomes. (Jekielek 2002)

While traditional mentor relationships, those caring learning alliances which happen naturally and evolve from formative relationship of mutual respect and trust, are ideal; this paper focuses on formally organized mentoring, where individuals are named as mentors by a third party, in anticipation of what they might do. This form of mentoring involves the matching of an adult to a young person in the hope of creating a relationship of mutual respect, wherein the older, experienced mentor provides support, advice, and challenge to the younger person.

There is a broad range of approaches to organized mentoring. Hall (2003) quotes Kate Philip of the University of Aberdeen in describing the complexity of mentoring:

Mentoring can hold a range of meanings and the terminology reveals a diverse set of underlying assumptions. For example, youth mentoring has been associated with programmes aiming at coaching, counseling, teaching, tutoring, volunteering, role modeling, proctoring, and advising.

The process itself may also be described variously as ‘reciprocal’, ‘helping’, ‘advising’, ‘leading’; or ‘facilitating’ as ‘a collaborative enterprise’ with shared ideals; or as a ‘learning process’ by which the mentor leads by example. (Hall, 2003)

In an attempt to distinguish the key elements of any mentor-“mentee” relationship, Roberts (2000) wrote described the following essential attributes of organized mentoring: a formalized process; a supportive relationship; a helping process; a teaching-learning process; a reflective process; and a career development process. (Hall, 2003)

2. Theoretical and conceptual bases (key ideas)

In a synthesis of ten mentoring programs conducted in the United States for which there was evaluative data, Susan Jielekek (2002) and her colleagues identified the elements of mentoring programs that resulted in 1) positive outcomes for youth and 2) better-quality relationships.

Key program practices that were found to be associated with positive youth outcomes are listed below:

- Youth in longer-lasting mentoring relationships have better outcomes. Generally, significant positive effects increase as a mentoring relationship endures.
- Conversely, youth in mentoring relationships of shorter duration (3 to 6 months) experienced no significant improvements; and youth in relationships lasting less than three months may have suffered harm. Having a relationship dissolve quickly may feed a youth's fears of rejection.
- Youth benefit from mentors who maintain frequent contact and who know the mentee's family.
- The program participant's positive perception of the mentoring relationship increases the chances of successful outcomes.
- Mentees who are the most disadvantaged and/or at-risk are especially likely to gain from mentoring programs. However, in the programs evaluated, youth had to meet a certain threshold (e.g. evidence of motivation, not extremely shy, and no indication that their circumstances are so difficult as to tax the program beyond its capabilities) in order to participate.
- Cross-race matches are as successful as same-race matches.
- The effects of mentoring seem to be limited in duration; suggesting that at-risk youth may need particularly long-lasting interventions to create life-changing impacts.

(Jekielek et al, 2002)

While the evidence related to the program characteristics that contribute to effective mentor-mentee relationships comes from less-rigorous studies, the findings suggest that the following are helpful to the creation of quality relationships:

- Structure and planning;
- Pre-match training;
- Post-match training and support;
- Supervision of the match;
- Consideration of mentor-mentee interests in the matching process;
- Inclusion of some social activities as a potential avenue for building trust; and
- A youth driven approach to the relationship, with expectations of the mentor adjusting for the particular needs of the youth.

(Jekielek et al, 2002)

Very similar lists of factors appear elsewhere in the literature. John Hall (2003) conducted a review of the literature entitled "Mentoring and Young People" and, in addition to the work by Jekielek and her colleagues, he cited the work of Brown (2001) and Herrera, Sipe and McClanahan (2002). Brown adds "closure steps" to the list of practices that contribute to a successful mentoring experience; and Herrera et. al. cite the importance of shared decision making by the mentor and the mentee.

Examples of Mentoring Programs

Numerous programs include mentoring as a primary or augmenting strategy for improving youth outcomes. Listed below are several programs that have been evaluated by experimental methods and that have involved youth over the age of 12.

Big Brothers/Big Sisters (BB/BS) programs match adult volunteers with at-risk youth, most of whom come from lone parent families. The one-to-one relationships that are formed in this program are designed to last at least a year. The program goals/objectives focus on safety and security, emotional support, information and technical and academic skills, social skills, and improved peer and parental relationships.

The Buddy System provides one-on-one mentoring to multi-ethnic youth who are referred by schools, police, courts or social welfare agencies. Mentors are trained to establish a warm trusting relationship and create a plan to change targeted behaviors. The program includes group mentoring when appropriate and feasible, and youth are given \$10 per month if their behaviors improve.

Building Essential Life Options through New Goals (BELONG) matches undergraduates with middle school students for 2 semesters. Program components include mentoring activities, tutoring, and instruction in life skills. The program objectives are to teach the necessary academic and personal skills to improve functioning within school and to alter the likelihood that youth will use alcohol, tobacco, or other drugs.

Career Beginnings operates in 24 sites throughout the U.S. and Canada. Target youth are in grades 11 and 12. The program involves mentoring and academic support provided by the schools. Adults in the community are trained to be mentors and are asked to devote two years to working with a student. Mentors are paired with students in a one-to-one relationship to facilitate their successful transition from high school into college, technical training, or competitive employment.

Numerous other programs have been evaluated, some by non-experimental or quasi-experimental methods, and are included in the Synthesis by Jekielek (2002), the Literature Review by Hall (2003), and the Meta-Analytic Review by Dubois (2002).

3. A summary of empirical research evidence

Susan Jekielek (2002) and her colleagues produced a synthesis of mentoring programs for youth for the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation. They included in the synthesis, ten programs that had undergone evaluation. To the extent possible, they included program evaluations that used a rigorous experimental methodology to test for the impact of program participation on youth outcomes.

Based on these evaluation studies, youth who participate in programs that include stand-alone mentoring or mentoring as one component of a comprehensive intervention have the following positive outcomes, compared with similar youth:

- Significant reductions in school absence;
- Higher college participation;
- Better school attitudes and behavior;
- Less drug and alcohol use (especially among minority youth);
- Less likelihood of hitting others;

- Less likelihood of committing misdemeanors or felonies and major offenses;
- More positive attitudes toward their elders and toward helping;
- Improved parental relationships and support from peers.

On the other hand, it was not clear from these studies whether mentoring was helpful in improving grades, improving all behaviors related to delinquency, or improving self-esteem. Also, David DuBois and his colleagues, in their meta-analytic review of youth mentoring programs (2002) reported that an overall favorable effect of mentoring was notably absent when youth are referred to a mentoring program solely because of an individual-level characteristic. Instead, mentoring may be most appropriate for youth who are at-risk, primarily, as a result of environmental characteristics. The explanation posited was that mentoring is an inherently interpersonal endeavor; and, the needs of youth who are at-risk solely because of an emotional, behavioral, or academic problem may be beyond the ability of the mentor to address.

Literature from other countries was more limited, but studies within the UK cited the importance of having a mentoring program properly integrated into its organizational context and for appropriate links to be established with other services and opportunities (Hall, 2003).

4. References

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