

## Mentoring During Adolescence

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### Introduction

Mentoring is a common strategy for promoting positive development and preventing problem behaviors among adolescents. Although most scholars agree that adolescence is not universally a time of storm and stress, few would dispute that adolescents encounter a myriad of changes, challenges, and opportunities as they grow and develop. Over the course of adolescence, many young people reshape their relationships with parents and peers, actively explore their current and future personal and professional identities, and often enter into serious romantic relationships.

The sheer number and simultaneous nature of these developments suggest that adolescence may be an especially important time for youth to have a mentor, whether that relationship is informal or through a formalized mentoring program (Darling, 2005). Available research, however, indicates that mentoring programs for adolescents must be carefully designed and implemented in order to meet this promise. We review theory, research, and practice related to the mentoring of adolescents and its potential as a strategy for preventing problem behaviors and promoting positive youth development.

### Definitions and Scope

Many definitions of mentoring have been proposed. Synthesizing various perspectives, DuBois and Karcher (2005) noted that each definition includes three common elements that characterize mentoring relationships: “the mentor is someone with greater *experience* or wisdom than the mentee [who] offers *guidance* or instruction that is

intended to facilitate the growth and development of the mentee, [and] there is an *emotional bond* between mentor and mentee” (p. 3, italics in original). Within these commonalities, mentoring relationships may take several forms.

A central distinction is between informal and formal mentoring relationships. Adolescents may experience informal mentoring relationships, which develop without the assistance of a formal program, with any non-parental adult (Zimmerman, Bingenheimer, & Behrendt, 2005); youth often report coaches, family friends, and extended family members as informal mentors. Although informal relationships are studied less frequently than formal ones, data from large-scale studies such as the Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health) indicate that as many as three-quarters of adolescents and young adults report having had natural mentors (DuBois & Silverthorn, 2005).

Formal mentoring programs help youth and adults develop partnerships within structured community-based, school-based, or e-mentoring programs. In community-based mentoring, the mentor and protégé usually determine the frequency of their meetings, which may be as frequent as 1 h a week or as little as once a month, as well as the location. School-based mentoring typically takes place for an hour a week, on school grounds. By one estimate (Rhodes & Lowe, 2009) about three million youth in the United States are currently in community- and school-based formal mentoring relationships. E-mentoring initiatives, where mentoring is “conducted at least partly by means of electronic communication, such as email” (Miller & Griffiths, 2005, p. 300), are a relatively new phenomenon for which prevalence rates are difficult to determine.

### Theories

Several scholars have proposed theories about the processes through which mentoring may positively impact adolescent development. Rhodes’ (2005) model is the most well known, although others have been proposed (e.g., Parra,

DuBois, Neville, Pugh-Lilly, & Povinelli, 2002). Each of the theories argues that the pair must develop a positive relationship characterized by mutuality, trust, and empathy in order for mentoring to result in desired mentee outcomes. Through this relationship, mentoring affects adolescents' development through direct and indirect pathways as well as affective (e.g., role modeling) and instrumental (e.g., skills instruction) functions.

Theorists propose that mentoring relationships may directly affect adolescents by fostering their social-emotional, cognitive, and identity development (Rhodes, 2005); widening their support networks (Parra et al., 2002; Sterrett, Jones, McKee, & Kincaid, 2011); assisting with academics (Larose & Tarabulsky, 2005); and helping adolescents feel more connected to their communities (Karcher, Davis, & Powell, 2002). These developments are thought to change adolescents' views of self and others and lead to improved parent, peer, and other close relationships (Rhodes, 2005). By encouraging trust, autonomy, and initiative, mentors enhance resilience in development (Parra et al., 2002), and feelings of school and community connectedness are linked with reduced problem behaviors (Karcher, 2008; Karcher et al., 2002). Hamilton and Hamilton (2004) suggest that the instrumental functions of mentoring may be especially important for older adolescents.

In addition to specific theories regarding the processes of mentoring, researchers have drawn on and applied other psychosocial perspectives to understand and evaluate mentoring. Models of risk and resilience (e.g., DuBois, Holloway, Valentine, & Cooper, 2002) suggest that mentors can impact adolescents' development both through reducing risks (e.g., by providing safe activities after school) and promoting resilience (e.g., by teaching coping skills). Attachment theory (e.g., Allen, 2010) may help explain why some mentoring relationships are more successful than others (e.g., based on the youth and mentors' individual differences in attachment that they bring to the relationship) and also illustrate how a positive mentoring relationship may provide

a "corrective experience" (Rhodes & Lowe, 2009) for some adolescents and thus promote positive development.

## Current Research

Studies to assess the efficacy and effectiveness of various mentoring programs have lagged the explosion in the numbers of programs. Many of these studies suffer methodologically from an over-reliance on anecdotal, observational, and/or self-report data and a failure to conduct rigorous statistical analyses (Rhodes & Lowe, 2009). The quality of studies has improved considerably in recent years, however, and several meta-analyses and narrative literature reviews, which summarize the state of research in the field, have been published. We first present research on outcomes across program models (e.g., school and community based). We then consider individual- and relationship-level moderators of these outcomes (e.g., relationship duration). A discussion of the impact of program-level practices on outcomes is reserved for the final section on strategies.

## Mentoring Outcomes Across Program Models

Mentoring is thought to influence a wide variety of outcomes for mentees, including both the reduction of negative behaviors or characteristics and the promotion of positive ones. We present findings for both informal and formal mentoring relationships, although there is considerably more research on the latter. In their influential meta-analysis of the effects of formal mentoring relationships, DuBois et al. (2002) examined five types of outcomes: emotional/psychological, problem/high-risk behavior, social competence, academic/educational, and career/employment. They found that mentoring had a small but significant effect, particularly on career development outcomes, academic outcomes, and problem behaviors. The effect was somewhat larger when programs followed a set of best practices, which we describe later.

In a new meta-analysis, DuBois, Portillo, Rhodes, Silverthorn, and Valentine (2011)

studied 73 independent evaluations of mentoring programs published from 1999 to 2010 (i.e., the era after the first meta-analysis). Findings were largely consistent with DuBois et al. (2002), with additional support for gains in social competence or emotional well-being. The authors conclude that modest effects (i.e., approximately a 9 percentage point advantage for mentored children over non-mentored children) are typical within the programs that comprise the analysis.

**Emotional/Psychological Outcomes.** In their meta-analysis, DuBois et al. (2002) found an average effect size of 0.09 (under fixed effects assumptions) for emotional/psychological outcomes of formal mentoring programs. In a smaller-scale systematic review using more stringent methodological criteria to select studies, Blinn-Pike (2007) found evidence of a positive effect of mentoring on self-related outcomes such as self-control and self-concept. Using the Add Health dataset to investigate the characteristics of youth with informal mentors, Whitney, Hendricker, and Offutt (2011) found that having a high-quality natural mentoring relationship was associated with higher self-esteem and decreased depressive affect.

**Problem/High-Risk Behavior.** Outcomes related to the prevention of problem or high-risk behaviors are especially relevant, as most youth who participate in these behaviors begin to do so during adolescence. DuBois et al. (2002) found a slightly larger effect size for this type of outcome (0.19 under fixed effects); other meta-analyses and several recent studies support this finding. Using meta-analytic techniques, Tolan, Henry, Schoeny, and Bass (2008) found small to moderate effect sizes for delinquency and aggression. Rhodes, Reddy, and Grossman (2005) report that youth who had been in a community-based Big Brothers Big Sisters of America (BBBSA) mentoring relationship for at least 12 months had a significantly lower frequency of alcohol use compared to the control group. In a study of school-based BBBSA programs, however, Herrera, Grossman, Kauh, and McMaken (2011) found no effect of mentoring on mentees' problem behaviors.

Kogan, Brody, and Chen (2011) report that among 345 rural African American high school student seniors, the presence of a naturally occurring mentor was associated with lower rates of externalizing problems. In their study of informal mentoring relationships, however, Whitney et al. (2011) found no difference between mentored and non-mentored adolescents in self-reported delinquency.

**Social Competence.** DuBois et al. (2011) found evidence for an effect of mentoring on mentees' social competence, whereas the earlier DuBois et al. (2002) did not. A variety of researchers have found effects for variables related to specific types of relationships that may be included under the umbrella of social competence. For example, Blinn-Pike's (2007) review indicated strong support for formal mentoring relationships having a small but positive impact on mentees' relationships with parents. Karcher (2008), in a study of 516 (mostly Latino) youth randomized to supportive services or supportive services plus school-based mentoring, found no effect on grades but several positive social outcomes among high school girls (e.g., greater connectedness to culturally different peers, self-esteem, support from friends) but not high school boys.

**Academic/Educational.** Mentoring often is promoted as a remedy for children who are academically at risk or already failing in school (Larose & Tarabulsky, 2005), and there is some evidence to support this use. DuBois et al. (2002) found an average effect size of 0.13 for academic and educational outcomes, indicating a small but positive overall effect. In a randomized trial of a school-based BBBSA program, Grossman, Chan, Schwartz, and Rhodes (2011) found that youth whose matches lasted the entire school year showed significant improvement in teacher-rated academic competence as compared to the control group and youth whose relationships terminated early.

**Career/Employment.** Career and/or employment outcomes may be particularly relevant for adolescents as they prepare for future work. These types of outcomes, however, are less commonly examined. Only 10 studies focusing on career or

employment outcomes were included in the DuBois et al. (2002) meta-analysis, with an average effect size of 0.19; nearly all were doctoral dissertations and most were conducted prior to 2000. In a more recent study, Hellenga, Rhodes, and Aber (2002) found that mentored adolescents were more likely to feel that their vocational aspirations could be attained in the future. Using Add Health data, DuBois and Silverthorn (2005) found that adolescents with informal mentors were more likely to hold a steady job after graduating from high school than adolescents of similar risk levels who had not had a mentor.

### **Individual- and Relationship-Level Moderators of Mentoring Outcomes**

**Intensity and Quality of Relationship.** Research indicates that the benefits of a positive mentoring relationship may increase as the relationship progresses over time, especially in formal programs (Grossman et al., 2011; Jekielek, Moore, & Hair, 2002). In DuBois and colleagues' (2002, 2011) meta-analyses, relationship characteristics such as frequency of contact and longevity were consistently associated with larger outcome effect sizes. Quality of the mentoring relationship also is associated with more positive outcomes for mentees (DuBois et al., 2002, 2011). The types of activities in which mentors and mentees engage may make a difference in relationship quality; in particular, social and academic activities have been linked to closeness as well as emotional and instrumental supportiveness, which are key measures of positive relationships (Herrera, Sipe, & McClanahan, with Arbreton & Pepper, 2000).

**Mentee Age.** The age and developmental characteristics of the mentee also may influence the establishment of a positive mentoring relationship and subsequent mentee outcomes. Some researchers have found that the mentoring relationships of older adolescents are less close compared to those of children (Herrera et al., 2000) and that these relationships have a greater risk of early termination as well as a generally shorter duration (Rhodes & Lowe, 2009). In their meta-analyses, however, DuBois et al. (2002, 2011) found that effect sizes for

outcomes were similar for middle and late adolescents as compared to early adolescents and children.

Recent qualitative work by Liang, Spencer, Brogan, and Corral (2008) provides more in-depth information about how mentoring relationships may differ by age and developmental stage of the mentee. Using age-graded focus groups of youth who reported having informal mentors, Liang et al. developed five themes to capture mentees' views of their relationships. Both children and adolescents emphasized the importance of spending time together and developing trust as well as the status of the mentor as a role model. Adolescents, however, highlighted the significance of being able to learn from mentors' reports of their own mistakes, valued the ability of the mentor to be supportive without imposing values, and desired a more mutual relationship. They also appreciated their mentor's active discussion of future educational and career options, such as exploring information about colleges together.

**Mentee Risk Level.** Results from the DuBois et al. (2002, 2011) meta-analyses suggest that mentees experiencing moderate levels of environmental (e.g., low family income) risk or environmental and individual (e.g., academic failure) risk tend to benefit the most from mentoring. No effects were found for mentees exhibiting only individual-level risk, which the authors suggest may be due to the challenges of establishing and continuing a relationship with youth who are already experiencing personal problems. Grossman and Rhodes (2002) also found that matches with youth who have experienced abuse and neglect are at greater risk for termination. This is not to imply that vulnerable youth should be screened out from programs but rather that program-level best practices to build and sustain relationships are especially important in these instances.

### **Overview of Strategies**

Research on mentoring has primarily been concerned with whether specific programs are

associated with improved outcomes for mentees. There are many different mentoring programs, and they range from programs with a single site to programs that are conducted at many sites across states. Due to this variability in the nature of programs, very few have been able to conduct large-scale, high-quality evaluations to provide the necessary evidence to conclude that they “work.” We discuss these in the following section. Researchers recognize that much of mentoring’s impact depends on the quality of its implementation (DuBois et al., 2002, 2011). Moving beyond determining whether a single program “works,” researchers have focused on program practices that contribute to the success of mentoring relationships. Because these studies often do not focus on any one particular program, they provide generalizable findings that can be implemented in a variety of mentoring practice settings.

## What Works

### Specific Programs

At present, only two specific mentoring programs, Across Ages and Big Brothers Big Sisters of America (BBBSA), have been evaluated consistently enough to make conclusions about whether they are effective. Across Ages is an intergenerational drug prevention program that provides youth with older mentors (aged 55 and older) as well as community service activities, a positive youth development curriculum (e.g., instruction in life skills), and parental involvement. It is the only program with a mentoring component identified as a “model program” in the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Administration (SAMHSA)’s National Registry of Evidence-Based Programs and Practices.

LoSciuto, Rajala, Townsend, and Taylor (1996) compared youth in Across Ages who received mentoring in combination with other services to both a comparison group and students who received the other services but no mentoring. Mentored students had fewer absences from school, used drugs less frequently, and had

a more positive attitude towards school, the future, and elders. In a similar evaluation, Aseltine, Dupre, and Lamlein (2000) also found a host of positive outcomes for mentored students. These included significantly lower levels of problem behavior and substance use as well as higher levels of self-confidence and attachment to their schools and families. The Across Ages program is an excellent example of a program that successfully pairs mentoring with other services to produce positive outcomes, and it has been widely adopted.

BBBSA is one of the largest mentoring organizations in the United States and is listed as an “effective” program on SAMHSA’s National Registry of Evidence-Based Programs and Practices (Rhodes & Lowe, 2009). Several randomized trials of both community-based (Grossman & Tierney, 1998) and school-based (Herrera et al., 2011) BBBSA models have been conducted with subgroups of agencies, and these evaluations are quite influential given that BBBSA agencies usually follow a large number of recommended practices (Rhodes & Lowe, 2009).

Results from BBBSA evaluations have shown small but positive effects for mentored youth. In the community-based evaluation (Grossman & Tierney, 1998), mentees showed significant differences relative to the waiting list control group in the domains of antisocial behavior, academic achievement, and family and peer support. In the school-based evaluation (Herrera et al., 2011), mentees exhibited higher academic achievement and more positive perceptions of their academic abilities. Herrera et al. did not find any differences between mentees and wait list youth in perceptions of their self-worth, relationships with their parents, or rates of problem behavior. They suggest that the school-based programs may impact primarily school-related outcomes, whereas community-based models may influence a broader range of outcomes.

### Programming Strategies

As described previously, higher quality and longer duration mentoring relationships are most

likely to result in the desired outcomes for adolescent mentees (Rhodes & Lowe, 2009). Researchers have identified programming strategies that promote quality and longevity of mentoring relationships and thus can contribute to positive outcomes. DuBois et al. (2002) found that programs demonstrate a larger effect for mentoring when certain best practices are present. In terms of mentor recruitment, effect sizes were larger for programs in which mentors had *experience in a helping role or profession* (0.26 vs. 0.09 for programs where they did not). This suggests that mentoring programs would be well served to target recruitment efforts at this population of potential mentors.

Training is critical for the development of positive mentoring relationships. Herrera et al. (2000) found that mentors who received more than 6 h of orientation and pre-match training spent more time with their protégés and reported having closer and more supportive relationships than did those who received less training. The results of the DuBois et al. (2002) meta-analysis, however, emphasize that ongoing training and support of mentors is equally important for the success of mentoring relationships. Specifically, the effect size for mentee outcomes was twice as large for programs that provided *ongoing training to mentors* (0.22) compared to those that did not (0.11). A very similar pattern was observed for programs in which *structured activities were provided for mentors and youth*. Finally, effect sizes were considerably larger in programs with an *ongoing system to monitor implementation* (0.18) compared to programs without such a system (0.06). Taken together, these results point to the need to invest significant programmatic resources in supporting matches once they are created.

## What Is Promising

Most program-level mentoring strategies can be considered “promising practices” for any of three reasons. First, they may have shown positive results, but only in a few studies. Second, they may have shown mixed results across studies, and

more research is needed to clarify the circumstances under which the strategies are most effective. Third, they may be theoretically linked to mentee outcomes but have not yet been subject to investigation through research.

## Targeting Specific Groups of Adolescents

Many mentoring programs are designed to target youth with specific needs or who are facing particular challenges. Each of these areas generally suffers from a lack of longitudinal studies to evaluate long-term outcomes for mentees in these groups, but in most areas, there are some encouraging findings that point to the need for additional research.

Some special populations of youth targeted for mentoring are primarily identified through schools. Evaluations of mentoring programs for gifted and talented youth have been primarily retrospective and qualitative investigations (Callahan & Kyburg, 2005). Little, Kearney, and Britner’s (2010) study of academically talented youth’s experiences in a short-term, research-based summer mentoring program represents one of the few prospective and quantitative evaluations; they found increases in mentees’ perceptions of their research aptitude and feelings of competence but did not include a comparison group. For academically at-risk youth, mentoring programs have generally shown an ability to improve cognitive/emotional factors and behavioral strategies, but there are virtually no studies linking these mediating aspects with long-term academic outcomes (Larose & Tarabulsy, 2005).

Mentoring may also be implemented as a secondary prevention strategy for youth who are already experiencing problems. For pregnant and parenting adolescents, Blinn-Pike (2005) summarized some positive outcomes for natural mentoring relationships; evaluations of formal mentoring programs are few, however, and the results are generally mixed. There have been very few evaluations of mentoring programs targeting youth who have experienced maltreatment and/or foster care. These adolescents may have difficulty trusting adults and little experience with behaviors that establish and maintain closeness and support (Britner & Kraimer-Rickaby, 2005).

As a result, matches with these youth are more likely to disrupt within a month than matches with youth who have not experienced abuse, trauma, or multiple risk factors (Grossman & Rhodes, 2002). Mentors must understand the vulnerabilities of at-risk youth if the match terminates prematurely, especially if the adolescent perceives this as a form of rejection (Britner, Balcazar, Blechman, Blinn-Pike, & Larose, 2006). Finally, the evidence for mentoring programs targeting juvenile offenders is quite mixed. Some studies, like the Cambridge-Somerville youth study and the 1970s evaluations of Hawaii's Buddy System, found that mentoring actually produced negative effects; other more recent studies across the United States have found some positive effects (see entry on "► [Juvenile Delinquency](#)"), but it is hard to tease apart the effects of mentoring versus other program components in these studies.

### **Promoting Informal Mentoring Relationships Within Other Settings**

Several researchers have drawn attention to the informal mentoring relationships that may naturally develop within settings in which youth spend considerable amounts of time, such as after-school programs. For example, Hirsch and Wong (2005) argue that staff mentoring behaviors related to emotional support, guidance/teaching, and sponsorship/advocacy may influence outcomes for adolescents in after-school programs. Although there is considerable research on after-school programs themselves, there has been very little investigation of the mentoring relationships that develop between staff and participants and whether the quality, intensity, and duration of these relationships is related to program-related benefits.

### **Integrating Mentoring Within Other Services**

As previously described, Across Ages is one program that has successfully combined mentoring with other intervention components, sometimes referred to as a "mentoring plus" model. Evaluations of other mentoring plus models, however, have shown considerable variation in how these programs are implemented and their effects. Further research is needed to understand the

situations in which a mentoring plus model may be most effective.

Kuperminc, Thomason, DiMeo, and Broomfield-Massey (2011) evaluated the effects of Cool Girls, Inc. compared to a version of the program with a mentoring component. Compared to participants without a mentor, mentored adolescent girls showed significant gains in feelings of social acceptance and positive body image; they were also four times more likely to report that they would avoid drug use in the future. Similar work must be conducted comparing the effects of mentoring alone and in conjunction with other service programs from – at least – child welfare, educational, mental health, and juvenile justice systems (Britner et al., 2006).

### **What Does Not Work**

Much of the research presented in this entry suggests that long-term, high-quality relationships lead to the most positive outcomes for youth. The corollary to this – that short-lived matches (e.g., lasting less than 3 months) and those that terminate early often have negative emotional, psychological, and cognitive consequences for youth (e.g., Grossman & Rhodes, 2002) – also is well supported. Evaluations of Big Brothers Big Sisters programs have shown that youth whose matches terminated within the first 3 months suffered significant declines in their global self-worth and their perceived scholastic competence (Grossman & Rhodes, 2002). Thus, programs should devote resources to maintaining relationships rather than simply starting them. Recent research also suggests that re-matching youth whose relationships terminate early may also have negative consequences (Grossman et al., 2011).

### **Summary**

When implemented according to recommended agency practices, formal mentoring programs can serve as an effective prevention strategy to promote a range of positive outcomes for adolescents. Both community- and school-based

programs have demonstrated impacts on adolescents' academic performance, career preparation, self-concept, and social/emotional development, although the effect sizes are often small.

Newer programs comparing mentoring and mentoring "plus" models (e.g., with youth development, skills training, therapy, or other components) are just now emerging as mentoring programmers, and researchers consider a host of risks, assets, and contextual factors that might influence outcomes for adolescents.

A growing literature on naturally occurring (or informal) mentors routinely yields findings that adolescents who report having such mentors (e.g., coaches, after-school program staff) benefit from those relationships. Schools and community agencies should consider ways to facilitate more of these relationships by providing venues, trained staff, and opportunities for interactions for adolescents who could benefit from a mentor.

## See Also

- ▶ [Academic Success During Adolescence](#)
- ▶ [Juvenile Delinquency](#)
- ▶ [Life Skills in Adolescents](#)
- ▶ [Mentoring During Childhood](#)
- ▶ [Social and Emotional Learning During Adolescence](#)

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