



# Adolescent Health Research Updates

## Supplement to the Adolescent Health Plan

No 3 —March 1997

Research Updates are periodically distributed from the Alaska Adolescent Health Advisory Committee (AHAC). AHAC believes that effective planning for the health of Alaska's adolescents should have a strong scientific basis. Alaska's Adolescents: A Plan for the Future, the 1994 publication by AHAC, was the product of the committee's review of research related to adolescent health at that time. In order to stay current with new information, AHAC continually reviews research dealing with a broad range of adolescent health topics. Summary reports are prepared by AHAC members for distribution to people interested in teen health, especially those who use Alaska's Adolescents as a guide for their efforts in the field. Feedback about the usefulness of these updates would be welcomed.

## Mentoring Programs

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Youth-adult mentoring programs were identified in the Adolescent Health Plan as one of the "promising approaches" to addressing teen health needs. This meant that there were enough positive references to mentoring programs in the research literature to merit its mention, but that there was insufficient evaluation information to meet the committee's criteria for recommending it as an effective strategy. This update provides a closer look at what recent research suggests about this popular approach.

"Mentoring" is defined differently by different people, but generally refers to arranging for a young person to spend time with an older person for a particular purpose. There is a tremendous amount of variation in how mentoring programs are administered, as well as in the outcomes that can be attributed to them. However, anyone considering putting a mentoring program in place (or funding one) would be wise to look closely at what research suggests is the specific factors that have been linked to effective programs.

## The Evaluations

Evaluations of mentoring programs that were conducted after 1985 and which measured outcomes were reviewed.<sup>(1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8)</sup> Three summary analyses of the research literature were also reviewed.<sup>(9,10,11)</sup> Additionally, a number of articles and documents about implementation of mentoring programs were examined for references to the elements deemed necessary for successful programs.<sup>(12,13,14,15,16)</sup>

Seven mentoring programs had evaluations that included outcome data and appeared to be well-conducted research. Because of the huge variation in the design and implementation of the programs, the outcome data cannot be summarized collectively. Programs varied greatly in their:

- **objectives:** *e.g., improve school attendance; improve school performance; reduce drop-out rate; reduce high-risk behaviors such as substance abuse; increase job acquisition; raise self-esteem; reduce anti-social activities; improve relationships with family; improve relationships with peers; provide social and cultural enrichment*
- **age of mentees:** *upper elementary school through high school seniors*
- **type of mentors:** *community or business leaders; college students; retirees; other citizens; volunteers and paid advocates*
- **program sites:** *many, but not all, were inner cities*
- **participants:** *many, but not all, were minority, primarily Black*
- **length of involvement:** *a few months to several years*
- **frequency of contact:** *once every few weeks to several times a week*
- **type of contact:** *formal and structured to informal and unstructured*
- **nature of mentor-mentee relationship**
- **other elements or activities offered mentees** (*e.g., career planning, motivation workshops*) **and/or mentors** (*e.g., training, ongoing supervision and support*); and
- **the amount and type of supports and infrastructure in place.**

Results of the evaluations also varied widely. Two studies showed improvement in school attendance,<sup>(3, 5)</sup> but two showed no difference.<sup>(7,8)</sup> Four studies showed no significant difference in academic performance or graduation rates,<sup>(3,6,7,8)</sup> but three studies showed improved educational attainment, greater post-secondary enrollment, and higher educational aspirations<sup>(1,4,5)</sup>. One study showed significant difference in income acquisition and significantly less dependence on social assistance;<sup>(4)</sup> one study showed no significant difference in wages or job satisfaction.<sup>(6)</sup> Two studies included discipline-related measures; one showed improvement<sup>(5)</sup> but one did not.<sup>(7)</sup> Three studies measured aspects of self concept; two showed improvements among program participants;<sup>(4,5)</sup> one did not.<sup>(8)</sup> One study measured substance use and showed large and significant reduction in initiation of drug and alcohol use.<sup>(5)</sup> This study also showed improved relationships with family and peers.<sup>(5)</sup>

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## Conclusions

The research is not clear regarding whether or not mentoring programs can produce real long-term changes in the lives of youth. However, well-planned and well-run mentoring programs do seem to have potential for building constructive relationships between unrelated adults and youth, meeting an essential developmental need for youth.<sup>(5,9,11,12,13,14,15)</sup>

The benefits of mentoring do not occur automatically. Management factors are central to youth program successes and failures. Positive behavioral changes and improvements in the health status of adolescents (including educational status) are much more likely to result in experienced, specialized local programs that adhere to well-developed quality standards.<sup>(5,11,14,15)</sup>

Specific guidelines for establishing effective programs include<sup>(12,13)</sup>:

- careful program planning;
- energy and commitment from the program manager;
- careful staffing;
- institutionalization and integration of the program;
- careful selection of mentors and youth;
- matching adults and youth;
- clear and specific goals;
- scheduling of sufficient time together;
- setting up tasks to facilitate early relationship;
- training and preparation for adults and youth; and
- ongoing support for mentors.

## Additional Insights Gained from Research

### Program Planning

Many "mentoring programs" are really education and training efforts or youth programs with mentor-like activities and services. It is important to distinguish between the different features of a program when planning, implementing and evaluating it.<sup>(11)</sup>

Often, mentoring programs are designed with a particular type of youth in mind to serve, but the actual youth served by the program are different because someone outside the program is responsible for referring them. This is important for determining what services to provide, and how to provide them, and for arriving at reasonable expectations for the program's impact.<sup>(11)</sup>

### The Mentor-Mentee Relationship

The goals for the relationship should be clear and within the mentor's power to achieve, and the mentor must be empathetic, able to assess accurately the needs of students, and able to apply resources appropriately and regularly.<sup>(11)</sup>

Two categories of mentoring relationships emerged in one detailed study.

- 1) *developmental relationships*, in which the adult volunteers held expectations that varied overtime in relation to their perception of the *needs of the youth*. They had a greater emphasis on keeping the relationship going, enjoyment, and a sensitivity to the youth's satisfaction with the relationship.
- 2) *prescriptive relationships*, in which the adult volunteers viewed as primary *their* goals for the match rather than the youth's. These adults tended to set the goals, pace, and ground rules for the relationship. The mentors were less likely to adjust their own expectations of the youth or youth's behavior.

Developmental relationships were more likely to result in longer-lasting contacts and mutually satisfying relationships, a fundamental requirement for program goals.<sup>(16)</sup>

In general, mentors who felt they had to build a relationship with the youth felt they were less successful than those who concentrated on developing the youth's competence, and were the most self-critical. Mentors who engaged in a concrete activity with the youth to build his or her competence felt most satisfied with the experience.<sup>(11)</sup>

A quality match (mentor-mentee) tends to result in long-lasting relationships (sometimes up to a decade after the match was made), mutually satisfying relationships, as well as higher educational attainment and ultimate income level.<sup>(4,16)</sup>

Paid front-line staff also assume mentoring roles for the youth. They actually interact with the youth more than the mentors do, certainly in school-based programs where teachers and counselors who are part of the project see the students daily.<sup>(13)</sup>

### Program Infrastructure

The standards and supports employed by Big Brothers/Big Sisters of America (BB/BSA) programs are believed to be superior to many other mentoring programs. They are deemed critical in making the relationships work and thus in generating the strong impacts reported.<sup>(5)</sup> The support and supervision necessary for mentoring initiatives to produce effective matches costs roughly \$1000. per match.<sup>(5)</sup>

Practices that are a part of the BB/BSA program deemed critical for its success include: 1) "hard" screening procedures for determining volunteer eligibility (e.g., police checks, personal references and employment status); 2) a well-implemented and consistent system of supervision that will, at minimum, prevent egregious deviations from the program's policies regarding the required frequency of meetings; 3) a match procedure that takes into account youths' and parents' preferences as well as practical, logistical, and other subjective factors; 4) regular contact by caseworkers with match participants—volunteers, youth and parents—during the first year, and intervention as necessary with information and/or referrals.<sup>(14)</sup>

## Summary

Mentoring programs are receiving a lot of attention and many believe they offer a huge potential for addressing many different needs of young people today. It is true that some mentoring programs have produced improved academic performance, healthy behavior, earning ability, and less dependence on social supports. However, mentoring is probably better seen as a way to help meet youth's most basic developmental needs, rather than a way to address specific problems after they occur. Bonnie Bernard perhaps said it best:

"It is neither a panacea nor a substitute for social policy but simply a context in which to create the empathy and caring that is essential for building a good and civil society."<sup>(12)</sup>

In addition to the references that follow this report, there is a wealth of information in the literature regarding the implementation of mentoring programs. Program managers would be wise to consult them, as the practices can have an enormous effect on the ultimate value of a mentoring program.

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