

YOUTH MENTORING PROGRAMS

POLICY BRIEF



BACKGROUND

One-on-one instruction, otherwise known as mentoring, is one of the oldest forms of teaching. Mentoring is when youth or “mentees” are matched with responsible, caring “mentors,” usually adults. These mentoring relationships are meant to provide youth with mentors who can provide support, guidance, and opportunities to help youth succeed in life through a developed emotional bond.¹ Mentoring can be formal, where mentors receive training from a formal and structured organization (i.e. Big Brothers Big Sisters). Mentoring can also be informal, where mentors support mentees without having received any training from a structured organization. Regardless of whether mentoring occurs formally or informally, the key components of mentoring include creating caring, empathetic, consistent, and long-lasting relationships with youth as well as serving as a role model, teacher, and advisor.

There has been a surge in youth mentoring programs due to an increasing amount of positive youth development research that has demonstrated that these programs are beneficial. The rising popularity of youth mentoring programs, in part, has been a response to an increase in the numbers of children living in single-parent homes, a lack of access to and/or availability of sufficient numbers of other caring adults within a youth’s community, and a lack of community resources and institutions that can bolster child and youth development, particularly in under-resourced communities.

Recent research has provided evidence that these programs can positively influence children’s psychological, social, and behavioral outcomes. Because of these improved outcomes, there have been efforts made to direct the usage of youth mentoring programs towards youth at-risk for a diverse set of problems such as antisocial behavior, school failure, etc. While there is much governmental, corporate, and philanthropic support for youth mentoring programs, there is less research that can inform the practice of mentoring. This brief will cover what we know about how mentoring relationships influence youth development, research on youth mentoring programs, and future implications.

WHAT DO WE KNOW?

There are many young people who do not have strong and sustained relationships with caring adults.

In a study of 14,000 U.S. children, 40 percent of children did not have a strong emotional bond with their caregivers.

This emotional bond – or “secure attachment” as referred to by psychologists – is crucial to a child’s success later in life. Researchers found that children that did not have a secure attachment to a parent are at a greater risk for educational and behavioral problems.²

There is an overrepresentation of youth from disadvantaged homes and communities who do not have caring adults in their lives.⁴

13.5 million American youths do not have formal or informal mentors in their lives.

This leaves them short of caring adults who have the ability to help them when they most need guidance and support. Children and youth who lack a strong relationship with a caring adult while growing up are at a greater risk to a host of difficulties, ranging from academic failure to involvement in serious risk behaviors.⁴



Research has suggested that youth who come from backgrounds with increased risk factors are more likely to successfully transition to adulthood when they have a caring adult in their lives.⁴ In response to these findings, the area of positive youth development research has investigated the different ways in which we can help support at-risk youth. A promising intervention method that has created opportunities for at-risk youth to be engaged with non-parental, caring adults is through youth mentoring programs.

A robust amount of research has supported youth mentoring programs as a promising approach to improving youth outcomes, but these programs still face a variety of challenges that stunt their overall potential.

Youth mentoring programs have the potential to improve youth outcomes in several domains including:^{4,5,6}

- Improved academic performance and school attendance.
- Improvements in self-esteem.
- Improvements in youth-perceived social support.
- Improved relationship quality with peers, parents, and other adults.
- Reductions in substance use, violence, and other risk behaviors.

Extrapolations from research have suggested that youth mentoring programs and their associated positive outcomes can save taxpayer dollars and fuel the economy.⁷

- Recent research has shown that for every dollar invested in effective mentoring programs, there is a return of \$2.72.⁷
- This return on investment presumes that mentoring has long-term educational and vocational benefits for participating youth, however, this assumption is still largely untested.⁴

Obstacles that inhibit overall effectiveness of youth mentoring programs include:^{4,8}

- Inability to recruit, screen, train, and retain sufficient numbers of mentors to meet program demands.
- Inconsistent benefits across different mentoring programs.
- Fading effects of positive outcomes after program participation ends.
- Some youth have worse outcomes due to unreliable, early termination of mentoring relationships, or authority-undermining attitudes.

In general, these trends emphasize the importance of the amount of care that needs to be taken into account when attempting to “scale-up” existing mentoring programs or funding newer, start-up programs.⁴ A solid infrastructure is essential for delivering effective youth mentoring programs.



Mentoring programs that have the greatest effects incorporate evidence-based practices, which include:⁴

- Targeting youth who are most likely to benefit from mentoring.
- Using systematic and rigorous approaches to screen and train mentors.
- Clearly describing program goals and expectations for future program evaluation and implementation.
- Creating and implementing activities that help foster mentor-youth relationship development.
- Providing ongoing support for mentors to help them strengthen their mentor-mentee relationships as well as minimize premature match closures.
- Supporting and involving youths' caregivers.

There are many initiatives that are promoting program quality in various sectors of the mentoring field.⁴

- MENTOR/National Mentoring Partnership has developed the Elements of Effective Practice for Mentoring to provide guidelines for effective practice. Many state and regional partnerships support the adoption of these guidelines.
- Big Brothers Big Sisters is piloting and evaluating an extensive set of evidence-based enhancements to its existing mentoring program.
- Friends for Youth has created a tool, Screening Applicants for Effectiveness, that is designed to help screen out potential child predators and prevent child molestation.
- These initiatives require a professional, well-trained workforce to staff youth mentoring agencies. To meet this need, many new education and training opportunities are emerging, but sustainable support is key.

Innovations are abundant. Mentoring programs are experimenting with a variety of things such as, but not limited to:^{4,8}

- Alternative delivery formats and structures such as online-mentoring and peer, group, and team models.
- Incorporating mentoring into specific community settings such as the workplace or after-school programs.
- Embedding additional youth-thriving supports to existing, standard services.
- Tailoring services to certain populations and cultural groups, such as children of prisoners.



MOVING FORWARD

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The robust amount of research that has been done in the mentoring field continues to guide future researchers and practitioners in improving evidence-based practices for youth mentoring. The key points that follow provide paths forward that can help inform and improve future practice.



YOUTHS WHO HAVE LONGER AND RESPONSIVE RELATIONSHIPS WITH MENTORS EXPERIENCE BETTER OUTCOMES.

For example, a study done on the Big Brothers Big Sisters programs showed that youths in mentoring relationships that lasted at least 12 months had improved health and social outcomes when compared to youths who were not mentored.⁹ Youths who had a short-term mentoring relationship that ended prematurely did not show any significant improvements in health and social outcomes.⁹ Another study on the Big Brothers Big Sisters programs found that mentees who had mentoring relationships that lasted longer than 12 months were more likely to feel confident about doing their school work, had higher grades, skipped fewer school days, and were less likely to use drugs or alcohol.¹⁰ This study also found that youths in mentoring relationships of shorter-duration

(three-to-six months) did not have any significant improvements in academic, social, and substance use outcomes.¹⁰ Although longer relationships are associated with better outcomes, it is also essential that these are quality mentoring relationships, in which mentors are developing a supportive and responsive relationship with youths.¹ A responsive, caring, and long-term mentoring relationship in addition to ongoing mentor support (through professional program personnel) is important in improving youth outcomes.^{1,8}



FACILITATE CONNECTIONS BETWEEN RESEARCH AND PRACTICE.

Research on mentoring has proliferated in the past years and has added to existing research and practice bases. With such robust bases of knowledge, it is important that both research and practice are closely integrated in that they are informed by one another. This relationship between research and practice is important in efficiently and effectively meeting youths' mentoring needs. This is especially the case when thinking about creating and incorporating additional innovations to existing youth mentoring programs. For example, researchers who were interested in implementing a youth thriving framework/additional supports (i.e. Step-It-Up-2-Thrive) into existing youth mentoring programs (i.e. Big Brothers Big Sisters America) found that these additional supports did not significantly improve outcomes for youths.⁸ Although these additional supports were created based on youth positive development theory and research, they were not as

effective in practice. These new insights from research inform future practice in regard to a youth mentoring program's capacity to provide additional supports and frameworks to existing services. In general, we can leverage findings from research to best provide services for our youth.



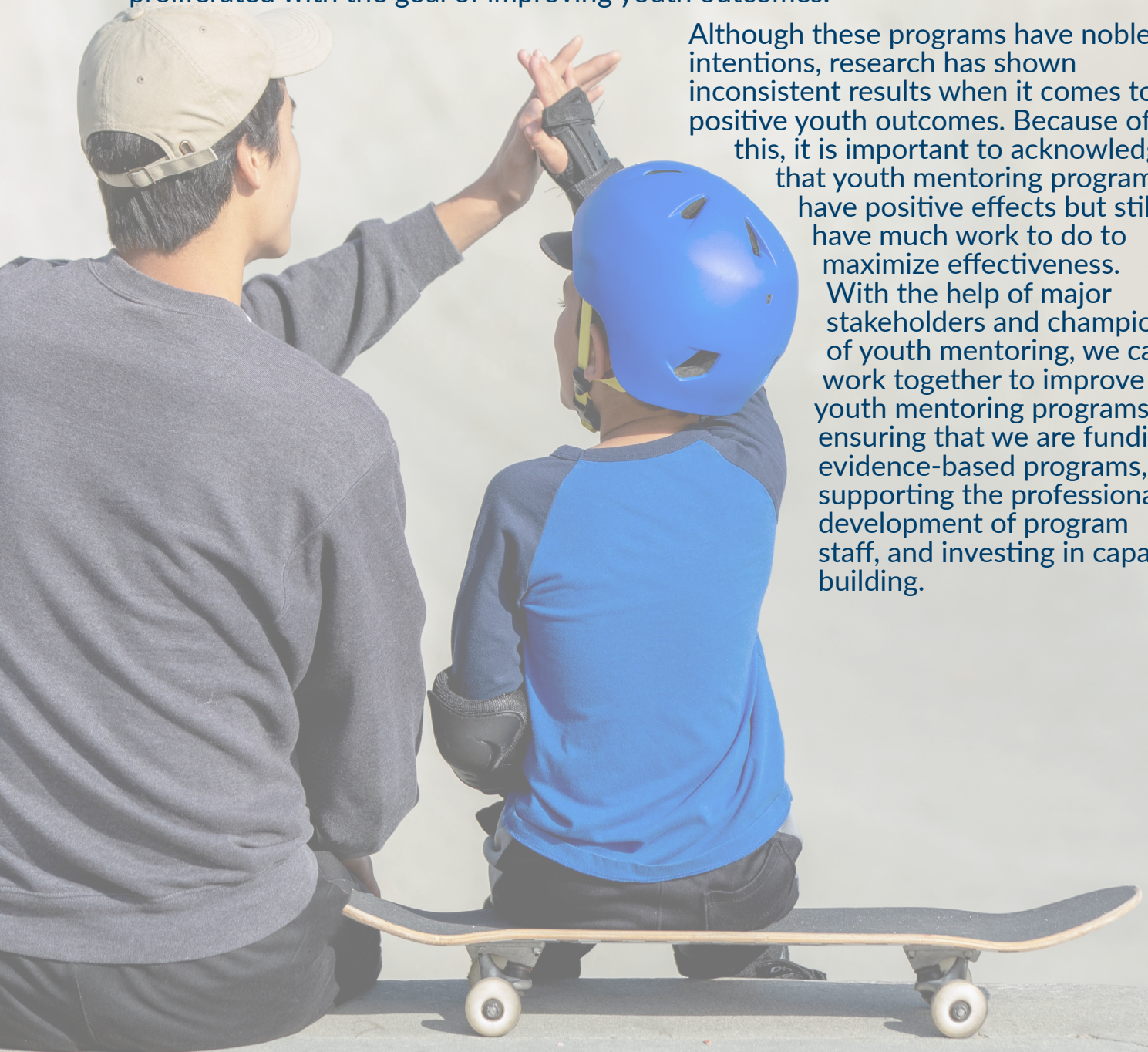
ENSURE ALL STRUCTURED MENTORING IS QUALITY MENTORING.

Although quality youth mentoring has been codified through the Elements of Effective Practice for Mentoring, there is still a broad interpretation of “mentoring” in public policies and funding programs.³ This broad interpretation can lead to inconsistent quality and ultimately, inconsistent results that do not significantly improve youth outcomes. While initiatives to improve and ensure quality mentoring are increasing, it is also important for major stakeholders (i.e. philanthropic sector, parents and youth, government officials, etc.) to participate in quality assessment and continuous improvement of mentoring programs.³ Champions of youth mentoring can also promote quality mentoring systems by funding evidence-based programs, supporting the professional development of program staff, and investing in capacity building.³

CONCLUSION

Mentoring plays an important role in our children's and youths' lives. Whether informal or formal, mentoring relationships matter. 13.5 million American youths do not have mentors who are caring and responsive mentors. This lack of mentoring has consequences that can affect young people, their communities, and our country. A caring and responsive mentor can serve as a protective factor for at-risk youth who may be susceptible to challenges such as dropping out of school to disengaging from society. As a result of this mentoring gap, youth mentoring programs have proliferated with the goal of improving youth outcomes.

Although these programs have noble intentions, research has shown inconsistent results when it comes to positive youth outcomes. Because of this, it is important to acknowledge that youth mentoring programs have positive effects but still have much work to do to maximize effectiveness. With the help of major stakeholders and champions of youth mentoring, we can work together to improve youth mentoring programs by ensuring that we are funding evidence-based programs, supporting the professional development of program staff, and investing in capacity building.



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