

Evidence Based Practice Resource Series



“Supporting Best Practice in Western Sydney”

Literature Review: Key Evidence Messages for Effective Youth Mentoring



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- > Increasing strength based practice
- > Increasing knowledge of evidence base
- > Increasing confidence to apply knowledge
- > Increasing conscious work practice



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Key Elements of Effective Youth Mentoring

Effectiveness of Mentoring

“Many benefits for young people, mentors and the community are to be found in the mentoring literature (e.g. Freedman 1993; Tierney et al. 1995, Dondero 1997; Guetzloe 1997). Depending on the nature of the program, they variously include a range of measurable behavioural differences such as reduced likelihood of skipping classes, and broader outcomes such as improved school attendance and performance, improved relationships with family and friends, reduced likelihood of teenage pregnancy and increased feeling of self worth.

Taken as a whole, it is fair to say that the available evidence supports positive outcomes for young people under certain circumstances.

It is only relatively recently that there has been enough information available from relatively rigorous evaluations of different types of programs to tease out the factors that are most likely to lead to positive outcomes (e.g. DuBois et al. 2002; Jekielek, Moore and Hair 2002). Overall, the meta-analysis of 55 program evaluations carried out by DuBois et al. (2002) found that the programs included were effective and that effectiveness was not dependent on whether mentoring took place alone or in conjunction with other services; whether the program had general psycho-social goals or more focused goals; or whether or not it followed the model of the Big Brothers Big Sisters program (used as a measure because of its prominence as a ‘good practice’ model). The first of these findings tends to contradict other research suggesting that mentoring should not be regarded as a stand alone intervention and is most effective when seen as one of a range of youth services (Benard 1992). However, not all programs are equal in their effect. Within this generally positive picture, some factors are related to more positive outcomes. Two of the most significant are the presence of a number of both theory and empirically based ‘good practices’, and the formation of strong relationships between mentors and mentees (DuBois et al. 2002, p. 157). Ongoing training for mentors, structured activities for mentors and young people, expectations for frequency of contact, mechanisms for support and involvement of parents were among the strongest predictors of reported positive outcomes (p. 188). Jekielek, Moore and Hair (2002), who compared a substantial number of programs according to a youth development model, report that significant positive effects increase with relationship duration, frequent contact, youth centred mentor mentee relationships and the mentee’s positive perception of the relationship. Conversely, short-term relationships have the potential to harm children. Inadequate support for both mentors and young people can lead to the breakdown of mentoring relationships, leaving already vulnerable young people feeling abandoned.”

“While mentoring has burgeoned over the past couples of decades, especially in the US, Canada and Britain, for almost as long, there have been calls for caution about its overwhelmingly positive image. It is not a social policy that will address ‘underlying socioeconomic, systemic, structural roots of disadvantage’ (Benard 1992).

Research suggests that enthusiasm for mentoring should not be allowed to run ahead of the evidence. Mentoring is not a panacea for all young people and is problematic with some groups of young people. More generally, there is a dearth of evidence on the long term impacts of formal mentoring programs. Roberts et al. (2004) argue that on the basis of the available evidence non-directive mentoring delivered by volunteers is not necessarily the best approach for young people ‘at risk’ or already involved in antisocial behaviour or criminal activities.

They do not suggest that mentoring cannot work but caution that not enough is known about the circumstances that could make it work for some groups of young people, and the safeguards needed to ensure that they are not harmed by mentoring. Rhodes (2001) suggests that, while the research indicates that there is considerable value in well designed and supported mentoring programs, mentoring is not a substitute for a caring family, community support or a concerted youth policy agenda. Therefore, in addition to developing and strengthening mentoring programs, we should also look to strengthening other supportive contexts for young people.”

(extracts from Hartley, R. (2004). *Young people and mentoring: towards a national strategy*. A report prepared for Big Brothers Big Sisters Australia, Dusseldorp Skills and The Smith Family. Retrieved 26th March, 2008)

The following summarises key messages from the literature for effective youth mentoring programs:

Program Design

- Structure and implementation of the program tailored to meet the needs of the target group – taking into account ethnicity, Indigenous status, age and particularly ‘at risk’ status (Wilczynski et al, 2004).
- Youth mentoring programs should be integrated rather than stand-a-lone – they should be linked in with a range of services provided by the auspice organisation in related fields (Hall, 2003; Wilczynski et al, 2004).
- Development of well defined program objectives and operating principles (MacCallum & Beltman, 2002; Wilczynski et al, 2003)
- Strong, clearly defined and documented structures and policies in place regarding the thorough screening of mentors, matching of mentors and mentees, training of mentors and ending the mentoring relationship (Hall, 2003; Wilczynski et al, 2004).
- Evaluation processes and mechanisms to be built into the program from its inception – external evaluations are preferable to internal evaluations (Wilczynski et al, 2002).
- The establishment of strong interagency networks with organisations working in related fields (Hall, 2003; MacCallum & Beltman, 2002; Wilczynski et al, 2004).
- Programs that are based on a number of both theory and empirically based ‘good practices’ are related to more positive outcomes (Hartley, 2004).
- Involvement of young people, parents, other key stakeholders in program planning (MacCallum & Beltman, 2002; Wilczynski et al, 2003)

Target Group

- Youth mentoring programs offer the greatest potential benefits to ‘at risk’ youth – especially those experiencing conditions of environmental risk or disadvantage, including low family socioeconomic status (Hartley, 2004; DuBois et al, 2002).
- Conversely, positive effects seemed to be lacking where young people had been identified as being at risk ‘solely on the basis of individual-level characteristics’ such as academic failure. (DuBois et al, 2002).
- DuBois et al. (2002) found that the developmental level of the young person (whether they were in ‘late childhood/early adolescence’ or ‘middle/late adolescence’) did not significantly affect the size of the effect of a mentoring program but there may be an optimal timing for mentoring as a preventative intervention and ‘the receptivity of youth to mentoring at differing stages of development’.

Mentor Characteristics

- Screening of potential mentors to assess traits such as an ability to listen, a non-judgmental attitude, flexibility, respect for and ability to relate to young people and reliability and consistency (Wilczynski et al, 2004).
- The ability to model relevant behaviours and skills (Rhodes & DuBois, 2006).
- There is no evidence to indicate whether it is preferable to employ paid or volunteer mentors – however payment may be more important when attempting to recruit specific groups of mentors, such as Indigenous people, who are likely to fall within a lower socioeconomic bracket (Wilczynski et al, 2002).

Matching Mentors and Mentees

- Matching process based on a clear and consistent policy (Wilczynski et al, 2002)
- Primary focus in the matching process is the interests, needs and goals of the young person (Wilczynski et al, 2002).
- None of the mentor characteristics (eg. age, race or gender) that staff tend to take into account when making a match correlates strongly with mentee outcomes – however matches that take into account both the youth's and mentor's preferences (relating to demographic characteristics, attitudes, and preferred activities) are more likely to result in relationships that are satisfying to both parties (Sipe, 2002).

Mentor Training and Support

- Training both prior to the mentor-mentee matching process and on an ongoing basis (DuBois et al, 2002; Hall, 2003; Sipe, 2002; Wilczynski et al, 2004).
 - Mentors should be required to undergo at least 20 hours of training prior to being matched with a young person (Wilczynski et al, 2002).
- Training carried out by suitably qualified staff, which includes a program overview, commitment requirements, boundaries and limitations, crisis management and problem solving, communication skills, project policies, confidentiality and liability information, 'dos and don'ts' regarding relationships, cultural sensitivity and a description of the screening process and suitability requirements (Wilczynski et al, 2004).
- Regular and consistent monitoring and supervision of mentors and mentees (DuBois et al, 2002; Sipe, 2002; Wilczynski et al, 2004).
 - While frequency will depend on the individual project, an average of once per month is recommended, especially during the early stages of the relationship (Wilczynski et al, 2002)
- Mentor support strategies such as a formal launch event, regular peer support groups, regular newsletters, recognition of the contribution of mentors within the general community, and consulting with members regarding program improvements (Wilczynski et al, 2004).
- For programs in which mentors take on dual roles relating to the young person, training to prepare the adult to shift between the two distinct roles (Sipe, 2002).

Mentee Orientation and Support

- Orientation for mentees to establish expectations for the mentoring relationship, and to make them aware of grievance procedures and guidelines on appropriate behaviour for mentees and mentors (Hartley, 2004; Sipe, 2002; Wilczynski et al, 2003; Wilczynski et al, 2004).
- Provide regular opportunities for feedback from mentees, parents and other stakeholders and process for managing grievances (MacCallum & Beltman, 2002; Wilczynski et al, 2004).
- Mechanisms for the support and involvement of parents/guardians (DuBois et al, 2002)

The Mentoring Relationship

- The formation of a strong relationship between mentors and mentees is a key factor associated with positive program outcomes (Hartley, 2004)
- Outcomes are most favourable when mentors provide youth with both structure and support (Langhout, Rhodes, & Osbourne, 2004).
- Undertaking structured activities together (DuBois et al, 2002; Hall, 2003; Wilczynski et al, 2004).
- Youth-centred relationships (ie. those that engage the mentee in decision making, selection of activities etc) are found to predict greater relationship quality and duration as well as improvements in how youth experience their relationships with other adults (Hartley, 2004; Rhodes & DuBois, 2006; Sipe, 2002)
- Positive youth outcomes are associated with multiple features of the mentoring relationship, including frequency of contact, emotional closeness, and longevity (DuBois et al, 2002).
- Developing connections with key person's in the youth's social network, such as their parents, enhances effectiveness (Hall, 2003; Rhodes & DuBois, 2006).

Duration of Contact

- Mentoring relationships that last over one year yield the most benefits (Grossman & Rhodes, 2002; Rhodes & DuBois, 2006)
 - Youth participants of the Big Brothers Big Sisters program, who were in relationships that lasted a year or longer, reported improvements in academic, psychosocial, and behavioural outcomes (Grossman & Rhodes, 2002).
- Recommended that mentoring relationships last a minimum of six months, with an ideal length of 12 months (Wilczynski et al, 2003).

Frequency of Contact

- Maintaining regular, scheduled contact and having clear expectations regarding the frequency of contact from the onset of the relationship (DuBois et al, 2002; Hall, 2003; Sipe, 2002; Wilczynski et al, 2004).
 - The ideal frequency of contact is once per week (Wilczynski et al, 2002).

Ending the Relationship

- If a predetermined end point is known, ensure that both the mentor and mentee are made aware of this from the onset – it is critical that the mentee is given adequate time to prepare for this and activities should be devised to mark the end of the relationship (Wilczynski et al, 2004).

Empowerment

- The goal of empowering young people should inform as many aspects of project implementation as possible (MacCallum & Beltman, 2002; Wilczynski et al, 2004).

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