

Source: Dubois, D. L., Holloway, B. E., Valentine, J. C., & Harris, C. (2002). Effectiveness of mentoring programs for youth: A meta-analytic review. [Special Issue]. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 30(2), 157-197.

This *Data Trends* summarizes the lead article in this special issue on youth mentoring programs. Although the special issue sheds light on both naturally occurring and volunteer mentoring programs, Dubois and colleagues provide considerable insight into the design and implementation of successful volunteer-based youth mentoring programs. Their analysis indicates that mentoring programs can have an overall positive effect on youth. However, the area of youth mentoring is complex, and the authors note that the “average” youth will receive relatively modest benefits from mentoring programs. Of the mentoring programs studied, the more successful programs were those that were directed toward youth experiencing conditions of environmental risk or disadvantage (i.e., low socioeconomic status) either alone or in combination with individual level risk factors for poor behavioral and emotional outcomes.

Dubois and colleagues conducted a rigorous meta-analysis of 55 empirical studies of youth mentoring programs. Outcomes and elements of each program were compared to a list of 14 dimensions. Those dimensions indicated: 1) the setting in which the mentoring took place, 2) whether the program was monitored, 3) whether the mentor had a helping background, 4) if the program screened prospective mentors, 5) whether mentors were matched with youth, 6) if there was mentor pre-match training, 7) whether mentors were supervised, 8) whether mentors received ongoing training, 9) the existence of support groups for mentors, 10) if there were structured activities for mentors and youth, 11) the role of parent support/involvement in the mentoring process, 12) the youth's expected frequency of contact with the mentor, 13) the youth's expected length of the mentoring relationship, and 14) the average frequency of contact between mentor and youth. Programs that included a majority of these components were associated with more positive outcomes than were programs that included few, or none of them.

Mentoring is an inherently interpersonal endeavor. As a result it may be especially susceptible to obstacles and difficulties that can arise when youth targeted for intervention are already demonstrating significant personal problems....Many of these youth are likely to be in need of relatively extensive amounts of specialized assistance, for example, a situation that is not necessarily well-suited to the primarily volunteer and nonprofessional status of most mentors. Considerations of this nature suggest a need for training and other appropriate forms of program support when attempting to provide effective mentoring to youth who are exhibiting individual-level risk. Dubois et al., p. 189

Findings indicate that five of these dimensions were especially salient to positive outcomes. Specifically, programs with a self-monitoring component, that train mentors on an ongoing basis, and that provide structured activities for mentor and mentee showed more positive results than did programs that do not adhere to these practices. Programs that encouraged parent support and involvement were shown to be very effective, as were programs that recruited mentors with a helping background (i.e., teachers). Results also indicate that youth are more likely to benefit from mentoring that occurs in the home or community, as opposed to schools.

This investigation also revealed that the success of a mentoring relationship is not dependent upon the type of mentoring program (i.e., alone, or in combination with other programs), nor is it dependent upon the program goal (i.e., behavioral, psychosocial, academic, etc.) or model (so long as the above dimensions are incorporated into the program). Additionally, programs targeting youth based solely upon their individual risk factors were shown to be effective if they also incorporated these dimensions in their guidelines. The gender, race, or ethnicity of the mentor correlated less with a successful mentoring relationship than did having a mentor with a helping background.

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This was especially the case for youth who are at risk for poor outcomes. The age, gender, race, and family structure of the youth were also found to be less important to the mentor-mentee match than were the mentor's attitudes and practices toward forming a close relationship with the youth (see insert).

Some evidence indicated that mentoring relationships may do more harm than good for some vulnerable, or at-risk youth if the mentor relationship terminates prematurely. According to Grossman and Rhodes (in press): "[t]he impact of mentoring grows as the relationship matures, and short-lived relationships are associated with negative outcomes for youth" (p. 151). In fact, Dubois et al. found that youth frequency of contact with a mentor was not significant, but youth *expectations* of that frequency were. It is imperative that youth have clear expectations of what to expect from the mentoring relationship.

In conclusion, no single characteristic of the programs under study was found to be responsible for the positive outcomes reported above. Yet in this analysis, several factors emerged to help clarify strategies for effective mentoring programs. Successful mentoring relationships should foster the formation of strong bonds between mentor and youth. There should be ongoing training for mentors, and structured activities for mentors and youth. Expectations for frequency of contact must be made clear to the youth, and parents should be encouraged to support and become involved in the mentoring program. Also, program implementation must be monitored and, as suggested by the editor, mentoring programs should match the child's needs with an appropriate level of expense and intervention.