

Youth Mentoring and Delinquency Prevention

Although the exact nature of the mentoring relationship varies from program to program, youth mentoring is generally defined as a consistent, prosocial relationship between an adult or older peer and one or more youth (Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention [OJJDP], n.d.). Generally, the goal of mentoring programs (as it relates to delinquency prevention) is to provide youth with positive adult contact to 1) reduce risk factors for delinquency such as early antisocial behavior, alienation, family management problems, and lack of commitment to school; and 2) enhance protective factors, including healthy beliefs, opportunities for involvement, and social and material reinforcement for appropriate behavior (OJJDP, 1998a) (for more information, see the *Model Programs Guide* literature review on [Risk Factors for Delinquency](#)). Therefore, in addition to establishing positive prosocial relationships, mentoring programs tend to focus on several common goals, including life and social skills, general youth development, academic enrichment, career exploration, leadership development, and college access (Garringer, McQuillin, and McDaniel, 2017).

Scholars suggest that mentoring, as a form of prevention, dates back to the late-19th century, when the Friendly Visiting campaign recruited hundreds of middle-class women to work with poor and immigrant communities (Freedman, 2008). Since then, many different forms of mentoring relationships have been incorporated into workforce and youth development programs or developed as stand-alone mentoring programs. However, the growth of mentoring programs has significantly increased over the years, and it is a challenge to determine how many mentoring programs exist today (Garringer, McQuillin, and McDaniel, 2017).

Mentoring programs have been supported by both private and federal funds. Private entities have been responsible for a large percentage of mentoring programs (Fernandes, 2008). Federal funding for mentoring has been provided to a variety of federal agencies, including the following programs:

- The Juvenile Mentoring Program (OJJDP, 1998b)
- The Mentoring Children of Prisoners Program (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2011)
- The Safe and Drug-Free Schools Mentoring Program, for children at risk of educational failure, dropping out of school, or involvement in delinquent activities (U.S. Department of Education, 2005)
- The Mentoring Initiative for System-Involved Youth, for youth in foster care and juvenile justice system (OJJDP, 2006)
- Mentoring Opportunities for Youth Initiative (OJJDP, n.d.)

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The focus of this literature review is on the different types of mentoring models for youth at risk or already involved in the juvenile justice system and their various components, including setting, mode of delivery, and target population. The review also provides a summary of mentoring programs that have been evaluated and discusses gaps in research on program implementation. There is also additional information about research and effectiveness available on [the OJJDP National Mentoring Resource Center](#).

Theoretical Foundation

Nonparental adults and peers play an important role in promoting healthy development for youth. Research suggests that mentoring relationships can 1) increase the social-emotional development of children and adolescents and challenge the negative views youth hold of themselves; 2) improve cognitive development and thinking skills, which help youth be more receptive to advice and instruction; and 3) facilitate identity development (Rhodes, 2002, 2005; Dubois et al., 2011).

There are several theoretical frameworks that explain how these social and psychological benefits might emerge from mentoring relationships, including 1) attachment theory, 2) social support, and 3) resiliency theory.

Attachment theory suggests that the bonds or attachments that an infant or child forms impact how their future relationships develop, the characteristics of those relationships, and the levels of trust or closeness they experience (Bowlby, 1969). Youth who experience close attachments with parents develop a secure base or foundation from which to explore the physical and social world, facilitating development of trusting relationships with nonparental adults (Sroufe and Waters, 1977; Rhodes, Contreras, and Mangelsdorf, 1994; Zimmerman, Bingenheimer, and Behrendt, 2004).

Secure attachments that youth form during infancy and childhood can also evolve into a perceived sense of **social support** during adolescence. Social support includes emotional support, tangible aid and service, cognitive guidance, and appraisal support or information that is useful for a youth's self-evaluation (Heaney and Israel, 2002). Such support is delivered by parents or other individuals within a youth's social network. These trusted individuals can provide the guidance and material support (e.g., rides to community centers, monetary support to join sports teams) needed to create opportunities for youth to develop mentoring relationships (Zimmerman, Bingenheimer, and Behrendt, 2004).

Resiliency theory suggests that the positive or protective factors in a youth's life can buffer him or her against the potentially negative consequences of risk factors and prevent juvenile delinquency (Vanderbilt-Adriance and Shaw, 2008; Werner, 1993). Thus, the presence of available and caring mentors, as a protective resource, may provide youth with the necessary guidance, support, and supervision needed to help them overcome individual, peer, familial, school, and community risk factors (Hawkins et al., 2000). For high-risk youth who have limited access to informal mentoring by positive role models, mentoring programs may provide a buffer against potential negative factors in their lives and play an important role in promoting healthy development.¹

Despite the benefits associated with mentoring relationships and the potential for such relationships to contribute to delinquency prevention, research also indicates that mentoring programs and relationships are not without risk themselves (DuBois et al., 2011; Herrera et al., 2011). Some have found potentially negative effects associated with short-term or prematurely ended mentoring relationships

¹ For more information, see the *Model Programs Guide* literature review on [Protective Factors Against Delinquency](#).

within programs, including feelings of loss and rejection and a reduced willingness to engage in future mentoring opportunities (Grossman and Rhodes, 2002; Zilberstein and Spencer, 2017). Others have suggested, based on their findings, that youth may experience greater risks than rewards if the mentoring relationships are of poor quality (Lyons and McQuillin, 2019).

Mentoring Models and Components

There are no standard approaches to delivering mentoring programs; mentoring models and components tend to vary substantially (Garringer, McQuillin, and McDaniel, 2017). There are various mentoring models in use today, but most fall into two categories: *informal* or *formal* mentoring.

Informal mentoring, sometimes called “natural mentoring,” occurs whenever a youth has an ongoing relationship with an older person who provides the youth with guidance or support that has the potential to benefit one or more areas of the youth’s developmental progress (National Mentoring Resource Center, n.d.). Such relationships tend to exist between youth and extended family members or youth and non-related individuals, including neighbors, church members, teachers, and other school personnel (Schwartz, Lowe, and Rhodes, 2012). These natural relationships emerge organically within a youth’s existing social network and result from the frequent, unstructured contacts youth have with adults in their day-to-day lives (DuBois and Silverthorn, 2005; DuBois and Rhodes, 2006; Busse, Campbell, and Kipping, 2018).

Given the organic nature of such relationships, there is considerable variation in their specific form, duration, and function; however, most relationships tend to extend over significant portions of a youth’s development (DuBois and Karcher, 2014).

Formal mentoring occurs when programs provide volunteer or paid mentors for at-risk youth. The formal mentoring relationship between the youth and the volunteer is fostered through a structured program operated by community agencies, faith-based programs, schools, afterschool programs, and other youth-serving organizations. The organizations or agencies usually have a structured program that includes recruitment of youth and volunteers, screening and training of mentors, guidelines for matching mentors and youth, and ongoing monitoring and training. Once a mentor is matched with a youth, the pair agrees to meet over time to engage in various activities (DuBois and Rhodes, 2006; Busse, Campbell, and Kipping, 2018).

Several forms of formal mentoring have emerged during the past several decades, and they tend to vary according to 1) setting (community-based, school-based, or electronic methods); 2) mode of delivery (peer or group mentoring); and 3) target population (DuBois and Rhodes, 2006; Kaufman, 2017; Kuperminc and Thomason, 2014; Noam, Malti, and Karcher, 2013; Ahrens et al., 2008).

Setting

Community-Based Mentoring

Community-based mentoring (CBM) matches an at-risk youth with a mentor. Mentors can include any adult in a community organization or the wider community. The pair agrees to meet regularly, usually for at least 4 to 8 hours per month, and can be supported in establishing either a short-term or long-term mentoring relationship. Typically, the pair engages in developmentally appropriate social activities within the community, including sports, games, movies, or visiting a library or museum. Youth are usually referred to the CBM program by a parent or guardian (Erdem et al., 2016; Garringer, McQuillin, and McDaniel, 2017; Borden, 2010).

School-Based Mentoring

School-based mentoring (SBM) involves the pairing of a young person with a positive role model in school. The mentor may be an adult or an older student. The mentoring activities tend to be concentrated on academics, along with social activities (Grossman et al., 2012).

This model is sometimes called site-based mentoring (DuBois and Rhodes, 2006) because, unlike CBM, the mentor and mentee meet at a specific location rather than engage in activities in various places within the community. The SBM pair usually meets at school in a supervised setting for about 1 hour once a week during or after school. Schools are the common site, perhaps because they are better able to capitalize on the knowledge, referrals, and support of adults who are already active in that setting (Borden, 2010; Erdem et al., 2016; Herrera et al., 2007). In some cases, SBM is provided through a community agency, and youth meet with their mentors at a community center or other similar location.

The mentoring relationship, established through SBM programs, usually lasts only about 9 months during a school year. In a few cases, the mentor-mentee pair meets during the summer or even during the following school year (Grossman et al., 2012; Herrera et al., 2007). However, many SBM programs have been working over the past decade to build more consistent, multiyear mentoring relationships (Herrera et al., 2011).

E-Mentoring

E-mentoring refers to the practice of using electronic methods, entirely or in part, as the primary channel of communication between mentors and youth (Kaufman, 2017). The key difference between e-mentoring and other forms of mentoring is based on whether they occur in person. In traditional mentoring, relationships are created and nurtured by consistent face-to-face contact. However, e-mentoring creates relationships by relying on the internet or social media to connect youth with mentors. Electronic conversations can occur via email, chat, web, message boards, or other social media platforms that are popular among youth. Such communication can include face-to-face time depending on the specific program, but it is not required (DuBois and Rhodes, 2006).

E-mentoring creates more flexible and diverse opportunities to develop and maintain mentoring relationships. Such programs provide options to homebound youth with chronic illness, those differently abled, and youth in rural areas (Kaufman, 2017). Because mentors and youth are not limited to specific geographic locations in e-mentoring, this increases the pool of available mentors and allows individuals, who may never meet, to build relationships. E-mentoring provides a more flexible schedule, and youth can have access to their mentors without altering their day-to-day schedules (Karcher et al., 2006; Hamilton and Scandura, 2003).

Mode of Delivery

Most mentoring tends to take place one-on-one, between a youth and older, more experienced adult (DuBois and Karcher, 2014; Garringer, McQuillin, and McDaniel, 2017). However, mentoring programs may adopt other modes of delivery, including 1) *group mentoring*, wherein one or more mentors meet with a group of youth; or 2) *peer mentoring*, wherein students usually 2 or more years older than the youth serve as mentors.

Group Mentoring²

Group mentoring usually involves one or more mentors working with a least 2 but no more than 32

² Group mentoring in this section focuses on formal mentoring programs. However, informal mentoring programs that can occur may involve group mentoring of youth in afterschool programs and sports teams.

youth (Kuperminc and Thomason, 2014). Group mentoring programs can vary in size, number of mentors, and the mentor-to-youth ratios (Kuperminc, 2016; Jones, 2016). These programs are based on the premise that mentors who interact with small groups of youth can develop a number of fruitful and productive relationships simultaneously (Herrera, Vang, and Gale, 2002). Group mentoring is different from other forms of mentoring because it encourages two-way relationships: mentor-to-youth and youth-to-youth (Kuperminc, 2016). Such programs are ideal for youth who are uncomfortable in one-on-one meetings with adults or other youth.

Group mentoring programs tend to occur in a structured environment such a school or other youth-serving organization in the community. Consequently, youth have access to several adults, including teachers, youth workers, and other adults willing to serve as mentors (Karcher et al., 2006; Herrera, Vang, and Gale, 2002). These mentoring programs can also vary in terms of programmatic goals such as substance abuse prevention or improving academic performance.

Peer Mentoring

Cross-age, one-to-one peer mentoring programs include youth who are at least 2 to 3 years older than their mentees and fulfill roles similar to those in traditional forms of adult mentoring (Noam, Malti, and Karcher, 2013). This form of mentoring is based on the premise that older youth can serve effectively as role models and provide guidance to the mentee. Peer mentoring typically occurs in school or community settings, with youth in high school matched with those in middle or elementary school. Such programs are highly structured and supervised, with at least six to eight meeting sessions (Karcher and Berger, 2017).

An advantage of peer mentoring is its potential to enhance learning and support for behavioral change based upon a perceived sense of social support and psychological safety that younger youth receive from older youth. In addition, older youth may reap benefits from serving as mentors, as it may help them to meet their own social needs (Smith, 2011).

Population-Specific Mentoring

Some mentoring programs can be designed to build mentoring relationships between caring adults and a wide range of youth populations, while other programs provide population-specific mentoring. For example, some mentoring programs target specific segments of high-risk populations—including youth living in high-poverty neighborhoods, youth of color (Sanchez, 2016); lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning, intersex, and gender nonconforming (LGBTQI-GNC) youth (Rummell, 2016); immigrant and refugee youth (Oberoi, 2016); children in foster care (Ahrens et al., 2008; Taussig and Weiler, 2017); children of incarcerated parents (Goode and Smith, 2005; Jarjoura, 2016); youth involved in commercial sex activity (DuBois and Felner, 2016); youth with disabilities (Lindsay, 2018); and youth with mental health challenges (Britner et al., 2006; Munson and Railey, 2016). Other mentoring programs concentrate on abused and neglected youth, pregnant and parenting adolescents, academically at-risk students, and justice-involved youth (Munson and Railey, 2016; Britner et al., 2006).

While many mentoring programs do not specifically focus on delinquency prevention, some population-specific programs often focus on overcoming the risk factors for delinquency most associated with the target population of interest. For example, many ethnic minority youth deal with factors related to ethnic identity and belonging to a cultural group. Therefore, mentoring programs for minority youth are sometimes designed to promote cultural awareness/pride and can help facilitate ethnic or racial identity and relationship development (Wakefield and Hudley, 2007; Sanchez et al., 2014). Alternatively, there are linguistic, educational, developmental, economic, and cultural gaps that

immigrant and refugee youth face in U.S. society. Therefore, mentoring programs for immigrant and refugee youth sometimes provide social support and assist in academic or language tutoring and building self-esteem and personal skills (MENTOR, 2015; Oberoi, 2016). Mentoring programs for youth returning home from residential placement focus on matching youth with adults in the community who can serve as positive role models, since many youth return to the same environments or circumstances that contributed to their initial delinquency (Eddy and Schumer, 2016; Bouffard and Bergseth, 2008). Similarly, mentoring programs for youth with mental health challenges may match youth with mentors who also have experienced mental health problems and who thus may be especially well-equipped to guide youth in navigating the health system and life (Koplewicz, 2013; Munson and Railey, 2016).

Elements of Effective Practice

While there are no standardized approaches to mentoring, the *Elements of Effective Practice for Mentoring* (Garringer et al., 2015) identifies six elements to create and sustain quality youth-mentoring programs and successful relationships. These research-informed elements include 1) using strategies that match the goals and structure of the program and ensure the *recruitment* of appropriate mentors and mentees; 2) *screening* prospective mentors to determine if they have the time, commitment, and desire required to be effective mentors; 3) providing *training* that ensures that all mentors have the basic knowledge, attitudes, and skills needed to develop effective relationships; 4) using strategies that examine the individual characteristics of mentors and mentees to *match and initiate* relationships; 5) *monitoring and supporting* mentoring relationships; and 6) ensuring the appropriate *closure* of mentoring relationships.

These six elements are intended to be applicable, with adaptation when appropriate, across almost every type of mentoring program and ensure that youth-mentoring relationships are safe, effective, and produce positive outcomes for youth involved in such programs (Garringer et al., 2015).

Outcome Evidence

Mentoring programs seek to positively affect outcomes such as delinquency, aggression, drug and alcohol use, mental and behavioral health, and educational engagement and achievement. A particular program may focus on promoting specific outcomes, such as substance use, but many, such as Big Brothers Big Sisters, adopt a more general approach to promote overall positive development across several areas. Numerous evaluations have been conducted to examine mentoring program effectiveness, including several meta-analyses.

Evaluations of Individual Programs

Several different mentoring programs have been evaluated using rigorous research designs that compare outcomes for youth assigned to receive mentoring through a program with a comparison or control group of otherwise similar youth. These interventions are generally implemented with children ages 6–18 in schools, clinics, or other community settings. They have been implemented in rural, urban, and suburban areas. The following examples from *CrimeSolutions.gov* and the *Model Programs Guide* represent some of the most relevant interventions. See also the [National Mentoring Resource Center](#) website for a more comprehensive list of reviews of mentoring programs.

The [Big Brothers Big Sisters \(BBBS\) Community-Based Mentoring Program](#) provides one-to-one mentoring in a community setting for at-risk youth. BBBS was found to be associated with a statistically significant reduction in youth reports of initiating drug and alcohol use and antisocial behaviors. In addition, mentored youth reported statistically significant, better relationships with parents and emotional support among peers. However, these effects were small in magnitude, and the program did

not have a statistically significant effect on several other outcomes such as reported academic performance (grades and absences) or self-worth (Tierney, Grossman, and Resch, 2000).

The [Adolescent Diversion Project \(Michigan State University\)](#) is a strengths-based, university-led program that diverts arrested youth from formal processing in the juvenile justice system and provides them with volunteer college student mentors who carry out the community-based structured mentoring program. The program results have shown a statistically significant reduction in the rates of official delinquency, but no significant effect on self-reported delinquency (Davidson et al., 1987; Smith et al., 2004).

[Career Academy](#) is a “school within a school” that uses a multifaceted approach for academic success, mental and emotional health, and labor market success. Mentoring is one of the program components, in that youth are matched with adults who can provide career guidance. Three studies examined the outcomes of Career Academy (Kemple and Willner, 2008; Kemple and Scott-Clayton, 2004; Page, 2012) and found that it had a significant, positive effect on earnings among young men in the Academy group, but no significant effect on young women’s labor market outcomes or on all participating youth’s high school completion rates, postsecondary education or attainment, or social adjustment outcomes.

[E-mentoring Program for Secondary Students with Learning Disabilities](#) is a program designed for high school students with mild learning disabilities to improve their ability to identify postsecondary career goals and the necessary steps to achieve those goals. Students were mentored by college students on a password-secure website with virtual classrooms where topics related to postsecondary transition were discussed, including problem solving, decisionmaking, time management, and self-advocacy. Students who received the e-mentoring intervention were found to differ significantly in a favorable direction from the control group on outcome measures of transition competency, self-determination, and social connectedness (Collier, 2009). However, there was no significant difference between the groups on measures of ratings of educational or career goals, academic connectedness, and familial connectedness.

[Cross-Age Peer Mentoring](#) is a school-based, peer-mentoring program in which high school students provide one-on-one mentoring to late elementary and early middle school students. The goals of the program are to promote mentees’ connectedness (to school, parents, and the future) and improve academic achievement by experiencing a supportive relationship with an older peer at school. Students in the program had significantly greater change in a favorable direction than the control group on measures of spelling achievement and connectedness to parents. However, there was no significant difference between the groups on measures of connectedness to school or to the future (Karcher, Davis, and Powell, 2002; Karcher, 2005).

The [Cognitive-Behavioral, Group-Mentoring Intervention for Children with Emotional and Behavioral Disturbances](#) program is designed to improve child behavior and family functioning among 8- to 12-year olds with mental health disorders, and their primary caregivers. The program uses mentors to provide training, coaching, modeling, and reinforcement in social communication and problem solving. Children in the program showed significant improvements in the frequency of externalizing and internalizing problems, social problem solving, and frequency of appropriate social skills and behaviors, compared with children in the control group. There were, however, no differences between the groups on measures of attachment to parents or levels of stress reported by their parents (Jent and Niec, 2009).

[Operation Peacekeeper](#) is a community- and problem-oriented policing program in Stockton, Calif.,

designed to reduce gang involvement and violence among urban youth (10 to 18). Youth outreach workers served as positive role models and mentors for youth in neighborhood settings. Their role was to make sure youth understood the consequences of violence and the positive alternatives to gang membership. This program was associated with a statistically significant decrease in the monthly number of gun homicides. Also, when compared with gun homicide trends in other midsize California cities, the reduction in homicides in Stockton could be associated with the program (Braga, 2008).

In addition to the mentoring interventions that have demonstrated positive outcomes, the following are examples of programs from *CrimeSolutions.gov* and the *Model Programs Guide* that did not demonstrate consistent, positive justice-related behavioral or attitudinal effects.

A study of the [Check and Connect](#) school-based mentoring program, which was designed to reduce school absences and promote student engagement, found that students who participated in the mentoring intervention had fewer days absent and a larger percentage of days present in school, compared with a comparison group at the end of the 2-year intervention period. However, they also had lower standardized math scores than the comparison group, and there were no significant differences in outcomes related to GPA, course failure, and standardized reading scores (Guryan et al., 2017) Another study of the same program found that after 3 years, there were no statistically significant differences between youth in the mentoring program and those in the control group on any of the education-related outcomes assessed (Heppen et al., 2017).

A study of the [Brief Instrumental School-Based Mentoring Program \(BISBMP\)](#), an intervention designed for at-risk middle school students, found that students participating in the mentoring program had better math grades, reduced school behavioral office referrals, and increased life satisfaction, compared with the comparison group, which were all statistically significant differences (McQuillin et al., 2015). However, the program did not significantly affect students' measures of teacher or school connectedness, tardiness, school absences, or grades in English, reading, or science. Given these mixed findings, the program was revised to include enhancements to mentor training and supervision and to the program curriculum. A new study of the [BISBMP – Revised](#) (McQuillin and Lyons, 2016) found that students participating in the mentoring program had fewer unexcused absences, higher math and English grades, and higher self-reported levels of life satisfaction, compared with the comparison group; these differences were all statistically significant. Thus, this program demonstrates how evaluations can be used to adapt and revamp mentoring programs and thereby achieve more promising outcomes.

Meta-Analyses

Several meta-analyses have also examined the effect of mentoring on youth outcomes. Such research has found small, positive effects for mentoring programs on crime and delinquency, drugs and substance use, education, psychological functioning, school attendance, school grades, and academic achievement test scores (DuBois et al., 2011; Thomas, Lorenzetti, and Spragins, 2013; Tolan et al., 2013; LaValle, 2015; Meyerson, 2013). However, these effects range considerably, depending on the type of program and the quality of the study.³

A meta-analysis of 73 independent evaluations of mentoring programs (DuBois et al., 2011), published from 1999 to 2010, found support for the effectiveness of mentoring for improving both prevention and promotion outcomes across social, behavioral, emotional, and academic domains. These positive effects

³ For more information, see the practice profile for [Mentoring](#) on *CrimeSolutions.gov*.

were apparent for all ages of mentees, but modest in their average magnitude or size. The evidence indicated that programs were more effective when 1) mentees had been exposed to significant levels of environmental risk or had preexisting difficulties, 2) samples included greater proportions of male youth, 3) there was a good fit between the occupational or educational backgrounds of mentors and the goals of the program, 4) mentors and youth were paired based on similarity of interests, and 5) programs were structured to support mentors in teaching or advocacy roles with mentees. It should be noted, though, that these associations are correlational and thus do not necessarily indicate that the program characteristics involved had a causal influence on program effectiveness.

One examination of four randomized controlled trials (RCTs) evaluated formal mentoring interventions to prevent drug and alcohol use in adolescents (Thomas, Lorenzetti, and Spragins, 2013). In two of the studies, mentoring reduced the rate of alcohol use initiation, and in one study, mentoring reduced the initiation of drug use. The study authors did not identify any adverse effects from the interventions.

A meta-analysis of 46 studies (Tolan et al., 2013), which was an update of a previous meta-analysis (Tolan et al., 2008) examined the link between mentoring and delinquency, aggression, drug use, and academic achievement for at-risk and delinquent youth. The authors found that the main estimated effect sizes, averaged over all available evaluations, were positive and statistically significant for each of the four outcomes (aggression, externalizing problems, drug abuse, and academic achievement/school failure); however, there was substantial variability from study to study. Effect sizes appeared stronger for academic functioning and delinquency than for aggression and drug use. In their examination of moderators, they found larger positive effects when professional development was a motive for becoming a mentor and when mentoring programs emphasized either emotional support or advocacy.

Smaller meta-analyses of subgroups also provide insight into the outcomes that mentoring can produce. In a meta-analysis of five studies on the effectiveness of mentoring programs for children with significant externalizing and internalizing behavioral problems on parenting stress and youth outcomes (La Valle, 2015), results revealed evidence of a small positive effect of these specialized mentoring programs on youth outcomes such as internalizing, externalizing, and interpersonal symptoms, and on parenting stress. The moderator analyses revealed that using programs in which mentoring is the sole intervention, and not part of a multicomponent intervention, was associated with enhanced effectiveness. There were also no statistically significant differences between mentors who were paired with one mentee and those who engaged in group mentoring.

Another meta-analysis of mentoring programs (Meyerson, 2013) targeted youth with behavioral and emotional problems. This analysis of 13 studies indicated a small-to-moderate effect of specialized mentoring programs across different youth outcomes. Moderator analyses yielded several program characteristics and practices that were correlated with greater estimated effectiveness, including using formal mentors, school or clinic settings (instead of purely community-based mentoring), and provisions for parental involvement.

Yet another meta-analysis (Wood and Mayo-Wilson, 2012) did not find that mentoring had a strong effect on youth outcomes. An evaluation of six studies on the impact of school-based mentoring for adolescents on academic performance, attendance, attitudes, behavior, and self-esteem found that effect sizes were very small across outcomes, and that most were not statistically significant. The authors concluded that the mentoring programs included in their review did not reliably improve any of the included outcomes.

Taken as a whole, findings from meta-analyses suggest that mentoring can have a positive effect on youth outcomes. However, as has been noted (DuBois et al., 2011), it does not appear that mentoring program impact has improved substantially over the past few decades. Specifically, although the level of impact that participation in a mentoring program produces, for the average participating youth, is “within the range of effects observed for other types of interventions for children and adolescents”, it “fails to reflect discernible improvement over the previous generation of mentoring programs” (DuBois et al., 2011:57).

However, research also demonstrates that the size of the effect can vary, and there are certain moderators, or features, of the mentoring relationship and mentoring program that tend to be associated with better outcomes for youth. Examples of key moderators suggested by research include the length and quality of the relationship as well as both the timing and types of training the program provides to mentors (Grossman and Rhodes, 2002; Zilberstein and Spencer, 2017; Lyons and McQuillin, 2019).

Gaps in Research and Program Implementation

Although research supports mentoring as a useful approach in addressing risk and protective factors for youth, the details about program content, features, and promising approaches are lacking, and there is variation in program components, which limits understanding of how exactly mentoring can benefit youth (Tolan et al., 2013).

For future studies, some researchers recommend more reporting on the mentor and mentee perspectives (Thomas, Lorenzetti, and Spragins, 2013) or greater attention to programs that target specific populations of children, such as those with mental health challenges (La Valle, 2015; Meyerson, 2013). Others identify a need for closer examination of mentoring programs serving higher-risk youth (Garringer, McQuillin, and McDaniel, 2017) and of the effect of mentoring on outcomes such as educational attainment, juvenile offending, and obesity, which are of significant interest to policymakers and others (DuBois et al., 2011). Finally, it has been suggested that there should be further study on whether youth who experience durable relationships with their mentors experience better long-term outcomes than similar non-mentored peers (Wood and Mayo-Wilson, 2012).

Most recommendations emphasize a continued need for more high-quality research of mentoring programs, which includes randomized controlled trials (La Valle, 2015; Meyerson, 2013; Tolan et al., 2013), adequate sample sizes (Thomas, Lorenzetti, and Spragins, 2013), minimized attrition (Thomas, Lorenzetti, and Spragins, 2013), and more studies that identify mediating and moderating relationships, including the amount of mentoring that participants receive and the level of youth’s behavior difficulties (Wood and Mayo-Wilson, 2012).

Conclusion

The goal of mentoring is to provide youth with positive adult (or older peer) contact to enhance protective factors and reduce risk factors. While there are no standard approaches to mentoring, such programs are increasingly diverse and vary considerably in terms of age groups, target populations, models, and intended outcomes. Today, given the proliferation of different types of mentoring across a wide variety of youth-serving organizations, it is particularly challenging to discern how many mentoring programs exist and how many children and young people are engaged in mentoring relationships (Garringer, McQuillin, and McDaniel, 2017).

Much research has been done on mentoring programs, and overall findings reveal relatively small, positive effects related to outcomes in crime and delinquency, substance abuse, education, mental health, and behavioral health. However, other programs have not resulted in positive outcomes, and researchers are still searching for the most promising approaches, program design, dosage, and theories of change (Dubois et al., 2011; Wood and Mayo-Wilson, 2012; Meyerson, 2013; Tolan et al., 2013; LaValle, 2015). Researchers recommend that future studies focus on quality randomized trials to specify the practical and theoretical components of mentoring interventions, rather than program evaluations that use less specific and rigorous methods.

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