

# Youth Mentoring: Improving Programmes Through Research-Based Practice

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*Despite growing interest in youth mentoring interventions, the base of evidence on which programme and policy decisions are made remains curiously thin. In this article, the evaluation literature is reviewed and areas that merit additional research are identified. Recent programme evaluations have shed important light onto some of the factors that increase the effectiveness of interventions. Nonetheless, few studies have delved into how variations in the characteristics of youth, mentors, relationships, and programmes affect outcomes. Greater collaboration between mentoring researchers and practitioners in design and implementation of programmes and evaluations, and the deployment of a broader range of research methods, would result in a more nuanced understanding of this intervention strategy.*

**Keywords:** youth mentoring programmes, evaluation, outcomes, relationships, research.

## Introduction

There is no shortage of information on the topic of youth mentoring. In addition to a growing number of academic books and peer-reviewed journals devoted to the topic, the sheer volume of articles and online reports is enough to numb even the most curious of minds. Yet despite this wealth of information, the base of evaluation findings on which policy and practical decisions rests remains curiously thin. Mentoring strikes deep emotional chords and has attracted powerful constituents who, at some level, look to evaluations to confirm what they intuitively hold to be true. As such, practitioners and policy makers tend to value pure and simple findings that can be used for action. Although it can be difficult to satisfy such appetites while remaining true to the evidence, a more nuanced message need not be the enemy of youth policy. A realistic calculation of what it takes to deliver high quality, effective youth mentoring could, in fact, lead to allocations for programme enrichments that would yield a higher return on investments. Effective (and cost-effective) solutions are in everyone's best interest and premature conclusions built on weak evidence can foster complacency and, ultimately, less effective interventions. So, what do we know about the efficacy of youth mentoring?

## Mentoring Programme Evaluations

Evaluations of formal one-to-one mentoring programmes have provided evidence of their success at reducing rates of a range of problem behaviours, academic difficulties,

and psychological disturbances (DeWit et al., 2006; DuBois, Holloway, Valentine, & Cooper, 2002; Grossman & Tierney, 1998; Karcher, 2005; Keating, Tomashina, Foster, & Allesandri, 2002; LoSciuto et al., 1996; Portwood, Ayers, Kinnison, Waris, & Wise, 2005). Yet, such evidence is in relatively short supply. Evaluations vary in their ability to rule out confounds, and there exists a constant tension between the real and the ideal. The quality of experimental designs, as well as adherence to study procedures, can easily fall prey to the vicissitudes of meagre, short-term funding streams and glitches in programme implementation. And, when effects are found, their implications are not always clear. With a large enough sample, small effects can show statistical significance, whereas larger effects can be obscured by small samples. Moreover, important outcomes may go unmeasured, or remain undetectable within short intervals. Conversely, positive outcomes assessed immediately, or relatively shortly, after interventions may not persist over time. Other problems include unspecified programme inputs, heavy reliance on self-reports, the use of psychometrically unsound instruments, high attrition, absence of control or comparison groups, inconsistent sampling procedures, and the collection of data at a compressed or single time point. Additionally, a publication bias that favors the selection of studies with significant effects over those showing no effect makes it nearly impossible for practitioners to learn the lessons of unsuccessful programmes and can overstate benefits.

Even when well implemented, evaluations have not been particularly encouraging. Findings from the few evaluations that have been conducted since DuBois et al.'s (2002) meta-analysis do not suggest the strong effects that are central to arguments for investment in mentoring initiatives. In some instances, negative or no effects have been found (e.g., Blechman, et al., 2000), or effects erode to insignificance within only a few months of programme participation (Aseltine et al., 2000). In fact, only one mentoring programme, *Across Ages*, has achieved the status of "model programme" on the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) Registry of Evidence-based Programmes and Practices (NREPP), an online registry of independently reviewed and rated interventions.

Big Brothers Big Sisters (BBBS) was listed on this registry as an "effective programme," a designation that stemmed, in part, from the landmark study of their community-based mentoring programmes (Grossman & Tierney, 1998). The evaluators traced the experiences of youth given access to the programme, as well as a control group, over time. Several widely cited, statistically significant differences in behaviour and academic functioning between the mentored youth and the control group were uncovered after 18 months.

It is important to note, however, that statistical significance does not necessarily indicate practical significance and, in that regard, standardised effect sizes are considered a more useful metric of evaluation (Flay et al., 2005). In statistical terms, effect size represents the degree to which two groups differ (in this case, the mentored group versus the waiting list control group). Although there are no easy conventions for determining practical importance, Cohen's (1988) standards for interpreting effect sizes are as follows: an effect size value of 0.20 is a commonly used benchmark for a "small" effect, 0.50 for a "medium" effect, and 0.80 for a "large" effect. DuBois et al. (2002) calculated two different effect sizes from the BBBS community-based programme evaluation data: the magnitude of change over time (pre-programme versus post-programme estimates) and the post-programme difference between participants in the mentored versus the waiting list groups. These

effect size estimates were quite small (.02 and .05, respectively), a finding that the authors characterized as “not necessarily consistent with the manner in which results of the large-scale evaluation frequently have been cited by the media as demonstrating a large impact for mentoring relationships” (DuBois et al., 2002, p. 177). Characterisations of the cost-benefit ratios that were derived from these data were also reported in optimistic terms. For instance, researchers recently noted that BBBS yielded a “net monetary benefit” (Aos et al., 2004, p. 131) when, in fact, the benefits exceeded costs by only the narrowest of margins when including both taxpayer and other costs (estimate of \$1.01 benefit for each \$1.00 of cost). When calculated only in terms of taxpayer cost (i.e., excluding volunteer and in-kind contributions), the benefit per dollar was \$3.28 (ibid., 2004).

A recent large randomized evaluation of BBBS’s newer, school-based mentoring programme (in which interactions between youth and mentors typically are confined to the school setting and the one-year minimum commitment of mentors is shortened to the 9-month school year) also produced mixed findings (Herrera et al, 2007). At the end of the first school year, youth assigned to receive mentoring showed significant improvements in their academic performance, perceived scholastic efficacy, school misconduct, and attendance relative to a control group of non-mentored youth. These effects, however, were generally small in magnitude; the overall effect sizes for school-related outcomes was .09 and, for non-school related (e.g., behaviors, psychosocial), from .02 to .18. And, when youth were re-assessed a few months into the following school year, the significant findings had for the most part eroded to non-significance.

Despite these somewhat discouraging findings, the fact that mentoring programmes are able to attenuate problems across diverse programme approaches, relationships, and youth is laudable and gives grounds for cautious optimism about the viability of the mentoring interventions. In light of the vast diversity in the quality and duration that exists in the mentoring relationships, however, it would have been unrealistic to expect a relatively loosely structured social programme to produce dramatic, across-the-board reversals of the negative trajectories that are typical of adolescence. Indeed, matches vary considerably in their effectiveness, depending on the characteristics of the individuals involved and the quality of the relationships they form. In fact, when Grossman and Rhodes (2002) reanalyzed the BBBS community-based mentoring data taking the quality and length of relationships into account, wide variations in programme effects emerged. But when all relationships are combined, as was the case in the analyses conducted for national evaluations, positive outcomes are easily masked by the neutral and even negative outcomes associated with less effective mentoring relationships. The challenge is to identify those programme inputs that contribute to better outcomes.

A study that includes a systematic, up-to-date meta-analytic review of the current literature and a thorough test of the moderators would thus represent a significant contribution to the literature. Several well-designed evaluations of multiyear mentoring programmes are underway or completed which, when combined many other smaller evaluations that have been conducted in recent years, will provide a better sense of the mediating variables and their association with outcomes. The inclusion of these additional studies will help practitioners and policy-makers to establish more realistic goals and expectations concerning programme scale, intensity, length and outcomes. At this point, as unsatisfying as it may

sound, Roberts et al.'s (2004) conclusion that, robust research does indicate benefits from mentoring for some young people, for some programmes, in some circumstances, in relation to some outcomes, is probably the closest to a "bottom line" on mentoring that can be reached.

## **Future Directions**

To guide youth policy and practice, additional research on the theory, practice, and effectiveness of youth mentoring is urgently needed. To this end, several recommendations can be made.

### ***Adhere to Established Standards of Evidence***

Mentoring fits within the broader field of prevention science and, as such, should more directly align itself with the field's standards of evidence. In particular, prevention scientists have developed a set of criteria for evaluating prevention programmes and policies (Flay et al., 2005). The criteria involve first establishing and conducting rigorous trials, similar to those that have been completed (Herrera et al., 2007) or are underway (Bernstein & Hunt, in progress; Brock, in progress; DeWit et al., in press), and showing "consistent positive effects (without serious iatrogenic effects) and reported at least significant long-term effects." Although the jury is still out regarding the latter stipulations, the new crop of high quality evaluations are likely to significantly advance the field. Assuming effectiveness, however, the report suggests that the interventions meet several additional criteria. This includes having manuals, training, and technical support, evidence of the ability to "go to scale," clear cost information, and monitoring and evaluation tools so that effectiveness can be tested in various settings. The field of mentoring has made notable strides in many of these areas, but a thorough cost-benefit analysis coupled with a more systematic approach to establishing effectiveness and disseminating interventions would better align youth mentoring with the broader field of prevention science.

Along these lines, there is also a need for greater involvement of prevention researchers in all phases of the process of designing, piloting, implementing, evaluating, and disseminating interventions in the area of youth mentoring. New mentoring initiatives should have well developed evaluation systems in place *prior* to implementation. To date, the role of research has been predominantly to evaluate programmes once they have been developed, and often only after they have been widely dispatched to the field. Instead, researchers and practitioners should work together to specify the goals and procedures of the particular approach to mentoring. Where possible, experimental designs should be employed and data from multiple sources and methods should be collected.

### ***Understand Variation***

Even the best models are likely to be more helpful in some contexts than others, and for some groups than others. Systematic comparison of practices of differing type and intensity are needed within all relevant programme areas, including recruitment, training, matching, supervision and mentor/mentee activities. Comparing traditional approaches to newer models would help to advance practice. Also necessary is information regarding the core elements of successful mentoring relationships, and how these might vary as a function of

the needs and characteristics of particular youth. Such information has become increasingly important, particularly as programmes are encouraged to serve specialised populations or are implemented in new settings. There is growing evidence, for example, that boys and girls experience and benefit from the mentoring process in different ways, with girls reporting more troubled maternal relationships at baseline and being more affected by relationship disruptions (Rhodes et al, in press). The same may hold true for younger versus older youth and for youth from differing ethnic backgrounds. Similarly, many of the young people served by mentoring programmes have particular needs. They may be in foster care, have learning disabilities, have a parent who is incarcerated, etc. Screening tools that permit greater specification of baseline risk, strengths, and circumstances and strengths of their families are likely to be particularly helpful in this regard.

Finally, mentoring is often included as part of a larger youth development programme that has several different components. Researchers thus need to compare stand-alone mentoring programmes to those that integrate mentoring with other services, and examine the extent to which mentoring adds to the effectiveness of programmes with multiple components (e.g., Blechman, et al., 2000; Taylor, et al., 1999).

### ***Understand Quality and Duration***

Although policy makers are increasingly calling for quality mentoring programmes, exactly how quality is defined and measured remains somewhat unclear. Systematically assessing programme quality across a range of relationships (youth-volunteer, youth-staff, volunteer-staff, staff-administration) and relating these to outcomes can provide an empirical rationale for supporting enhancements in mentoring programmes. Moreover, research to date has focused predominantly on the effects of mentoring over a relatively short period of time. The more substantial benefits that may be associated with longer-term relationships have yet to be examined. Another important consideration may be whether relationships are continued for the full duration of whatever expectations were established, even if for only a short period of time (De Ayala & Perry, 2005; Larose, et al 2005). Research on the role of duration and intensity, including the minimum required dosage to achieve various outcomes, the role of expectations, and the effects of long waiting lists is needed.

### ***Assess the Underlying Processes of Mentoring***

During programme conceptualization, programme developers should articulate the goals and the theoretical models of change that guide their approach, including the processes that are thought to mediate outcome and their temporal ordering. Indeed, although a relationship between a caring adult and a young person lies at the heart of mentoring, little is known about how such relationships actually influence youth outcomes. By more thoroughly examining relationship processes, researchers can help mentoring programmes develop more effective strategies for training and supervising mentors. Researchers examining these models should investigate relationship processes from both the mentors' and mentees' perspectives with attention to the broader influences of families, schools, and communities. Qualitative research, which provides in-depth descriptions of how relationships develop and why they sometimes fail, as well as longitudinal studies of outcomes, have a vital role to play in theory development (Colley, 2003; Philip, 2003; Sanchez, et al., 2006; Spencer, 2006).

## Conclusion

The goal of this review was to investigate the existing evaluation literature on youth mentoring, and determine areas on which researchers should focus to better inform practitioners and policymakers. Recent programme evaluations shed light on interventions currently underway; however, variations (e.g. in methodological, programmematic and youth characteristics) limit cross-study comparisons. Meta-analyses, such as DuBois et al. (2002), overcome many limitations of individual programme evaluations and review articles, and a synthesis of more recent and ongoing studies would be a valuable undertaking. Furthermore, more attention should be paid to moderators of programme impact, such as characteristics of youth, mentors, and programmes. Additional research should investigate how markers of mentoring relationship quality impact on youth outcomes.

To achieve the above suggestions for future research, collaboration between researchers and mentoring practitioners is needed. To better serve mentored youth, such parties should work together to design and implement programme evaluations. Consistency in methodology and measures used would enable a greater extent of cross-programme comparisons, leading to a better understanding of what mentoring approaches work and for whom.

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