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Table of Contents

If you're viewing this document online, you can click any of the topics below to link directly to that section.

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Adolescents in our poor urban areas can be an isolated group, deprived of supportive relationships with adults in their families, schools, communities, and work places. This

deprivation can result in poor socialization to adult roles, as well as a paucity of contacts and networks needed for educational and career success. Recently, planned mentoring programs, which purposefully link youth with someone older and more experienced, have become a popular means of providing adolescents with compensatory adult contacts.

These planned mentoring programs for adolescents are, by definition, structured, and their goals can be complex, ambitious, and even grandiose--preventing students from becoming pregnant, dropping out of school, or going to jail; helping them make a successful transition from high school to college; or giving them some undefined but dramatically better chance at life. The mentoring programs vary widely in the duration, frequency and intensity of the planned relationship, and some use a single mentor for as many as fifteen or twenty mentees. The recruited mentors rarely share the mentees' environment or have firsthand knowledge of their daily life at home or at school. Rather, they range from older, more academically successful students at the next educational stage, to mothers and grandmothers, to successful businesspersons.

Obviously, the quality of mentoring relationships differs enormously, as do the tasks that mentors and mentees agree to accomplish. Nevertheless, it is important to set some boundaries to the phenomenon and to distinguish mentoring relationships from other relationships that are simply a kind of help. The following definition should clarify some essential elements in mentoring relationships for youth:

A supportive relationship between a youth or young adult and someone

more senior in age and experience, who offers support, guidance, and

concrete assistance as the younger partner goes through a difficult

period, enters a new area of experience, takes on an important task, or

corrects an earlier problem. During mentoring, mentees identify with

their mentors; as a result, they become more able to do for themselves

what their mentors have done for them.

THE ROLES OF MENTORS

Mentors for adolescents must help compensate for inadequate or dysfunctional socialization or give psychological support for new attitudes and behaviors, at the same time as they create opportunities to move successfully in new arenas of education, work, and social life. In fact, mentoring can be said to include both psychosocial and instrumental aspects.
In their psychosocial roles, mentors act as role models and counselors, offering

confirmation, clarification, and emotional support. Because poor and minority youth often move through contradictory worlds, an important psychosocial role for mentors is to help the mentee understand and resolve these contradictions. In their instrumental roles, mentors act as teachers, advisers, coaches, advocates, and dispensers and sharers of concrete resources. An adult who merely acts as a vague substitute for other missing adults, or who briefly helps with a school assignment or work connection, is not providing the sustained and directive support that is crucial to mentoring.

SALIENCE AND SOCIAL DISTANCE

Although some of the most publicized forms of mentoring have been between extremely prominent adults and ghetto youth, it is clear that successful mentoring generally occurs when the older individual is not removed from the mentee by a great social distance. This is because, with distance, the mentors' values, knowledge, skills and networks may easily seem irrelevant or even nonsensical to the mentees, and their goals for the mentee naive. When this happens, the adolescents will at best only superficially cooperate, and are likely to become cynical and withdraw. However, even apparent social distance can be breached when the mentors provide those concrete resources that the mentees most need. A mentor who drives the mentee to look at a prospective college, joins in studying the catalog, and helps with the application form is both offering important psychological support and showing that, through a series of small steps, distant goals may be within reach.

Matching mentors and mentees of the same social class, race and gender is not the only--or even the best--way to close social distance, and ensure a meaningful connection. Often, in fact, mentoring failures attributed to class, race or gender differences might more accurately be described as a failure to give teenagers the specific support or resources they need. When mentors offer their mentees sensitive support, timely contacts, and other appropriate resources, mentees generally find their mentors quite compatible.

TRUST

A critical aspect of any developing mentor-mentee relationship is trust. As a first step, a mentor can build trust by helping the adolescent achieve a very modest goal. The mentor also needs to be personally predictable, and the mentoring program itself should be of some duration. Disadvantaged mentees come to programs with high hopes, great suspicion--or, more likely, both. Their conflicts are only exacerbated by erratic adults, loosely organized programs, or abandoned initiatives. All these serve to destroy relationships and to harden mistrust.

Particularly in large, complex programs, it is important for building trust in the mentees that the roles of the mentor are openly articulated. Mentors can be free to use any style they want in working with the youth--and probably should--but within a clear arrangement about what the mentoring should achieve for the youth, both

psychosocially and instrumentally.

NATURAL AND PLANNED MENTORING

So far, there are insufficient studies of either the natural or planned mentoring of adolescents either to derive lessons about the differences between them, or to be clear about how best to structure planned mentoring. Drawing from natural and planned mentoring in organizations, we can assume that the bonds between natural mentors and mentees are stronger, because the two individuals have found each other, rather than having been assigned, and because their relationship proceeds fluidly over a long period, rather than being constrained by both program content and structure.
Some mentoring programs for youth appear so short and narrow in their goals that classical mentoring is unlikely to take place. It may be, in fact, too difficult to develop the strong ties of mentoring in some youth programs. However, some youth may be able to take advantage of the looser bonds of good planned programs, if they provide an extended network of social resources in which the adolescents can have access to ideas, influences, information, people, and other resources they might not receive through the stronger ties to one individual.

REALISTIC EXPECTATIONS FOR MENTORING PROGRAMS

Planned mentoring is a modest intervention: its power to substitute for missing adults in the lives of youth is limited. Nor can it compensate for years of poor schooling. Still, it can improve the social chances of adolescents by leading them to resources they might not have found on their own, and by providing them with support for new behaviors, attitudes, and ambitions. When planned mentoring is intensive and extended, it can offer the important help with solving the contradictions of moving into the mainstream society.
Unfortunately, while planned mentoring can increase the availability of adults to a greater number of adolescents, it is unlikely to serve all who need it. Even should mentors be found for every young person, the youth must still make their ways to the mentoring programs, want to be helped, and find the support and resources of the mentors suited to their needs.

Nor can planned mentoring programs pluck adolescents out of poor homes, inadequate schools, or disruptive communities. Mentoring will always be effective only insofar as it accommodates, transforms, vitiates, or expands, the influences of family, school, community, or job. Thus the power of other influences in the lives of youth must be recognized in any attempt to reasonably measure the potential accomplishments of mentoring.

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This digest is based on a study, "Youth Mentoring: Programs and Practices," by Erwin Flaxman, Carol Ascher, and Charles Harrington. It will be available from the ERIC CLearinghouse in early 1989 for $8.00. "Mentoring: A Representative Bibliography," which includes substantive annotations of high quality topical materials, will be available, also in early 1989, from the ERIC CLearinghouse for $3.00.

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[Return to ERIC Digest Search Page]