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ABSTRACT

The study described in this issue of "Look at Even Start" evaluated the Staff Mentoring Sites program, a mentoring program provided as technical assistance in Even Start family literacy programs. Staff from five Even Start programs with successful family recruitment and retention records were selected as mentors. Requests for nominations for partnering sites resulted in nominations from 34 programs in 20 states; 15 programs were selected. Mentors were trained at a two-day planning meeting in which they developed a framework for the project and practiced activities they would implement at their partner sites. Evaluation and informal phone interviews indicated that "mentees" identified several benefits of the mentoring program: (1) increased awareness of the importance of recruitment and retention; (2) the identification of areas of overlap with other social service agencies; (3) enhanced recognition of the value of staff development and teaming to make effective program changes; (4) improved self-confidence in administrators; and (5) the receipt of support and encouragement. Mentors reported that they developed, refined, and polished their own skills as mentors and in their work in their own programs. The evaluation suggested five basic steps to successful mentoring programs: (1) be ready to participate; (2) build ownership and commitment; (3) develop a framework; (4) commit time and resources; and (5) evaluate the program. Steps for implementing mentoring in family literacy programs and annotated resources on literacy and mentoring are provided. (KDFB)

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Look at Even Start



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the give and take of mentoring

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Eighty pioneering professionals recently completed an Even Start experiment. With generous measures of trust, experience, and open-minds, and with a leap of faith, they pilot-tested a mentoring program tailored to the critical issue of recruitment and retention in Even Start.

Described by one participant as "the best money Even Start ever spent," the Staff Mentoring Sites program was conceived by the US Department of Education in 1994 as an alternative form of technical assistance. Logic and experience suggested that Even Start staff who had worked through the tough issues of recruiting and retaining families most in need of Even Start services would be the best source of ideas for others facing the same problems. "With the right mix of preparation and financial support, a fully activated

and self-sustaining network of mentors could eventually be a powerful staff development resource for the whole Even Start community," says Pat McKee of the federal Even Start office.

To kick off their plan, the Department invited five Even Start programs with successful recruitment and retention records to serve as mentors. The Department also issued a call for nominations for partnering sites, Even Start programs which would welcome mentors — the "mentees," in the jargon of the mentoring field. Twenty states and 34 programs responded, from which 15 were chosen based on the completeness of the proposal and the characteristics of the program.

CONTINUED INSIDE

By C. Ralph Adler and Cynthia Harvell

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INSIDE

Mentoring can work for you > Five steps to productive mentoring



The give and take of mentoring

CONTINUED FROM COVER PAGE



"It was different from what I expected."

Mentors were not simply thrust into their roles without preparation. The Department of Education held a two-day planning meeting in the fall of 1994 with representatives of all five mentoring sites. The goal: to jointly develop a framework for the project, including the five basic concepts that underlie successful recruitment and retention. (See Issue Six of Look at Even Start for a full review of those concepts.)

The main point the participants agreed upon was that mentoring isn't "show and tell." Instead, it's a time for partner sites to see an effective program in action, ask questions about how things are done, and learn why different recruitment and retention strategies work.

In their two-day preparation, mentors practiced many of the activities they would be implementing with partner sites. They began to create problem-solving scenarios, role-playing cards, brainstorming exercises using the quality indicators, debriefing worksheets, process sheets for an action plan, and evaluation forms. All of these were wrapped into a common agenda, which included initial conversations with partner sites to review expectations and reflect on the guiding principles of recruitment and retention and a full range of activities such as observation, focus groups, reflection, and brainstorming.

The team agreed on one approach to use with all partner sites: a visit to each mentor's home base site by representatives

from all five of the Even Start programs they would be mentoring, followed by the mentors themselves making a visit to each of the partnering sites.

Despite the critical "getting ready" phase for mentors, the real world held some interesting challenges and surprises.

"It was different than I expected," said Bonnie Allen, a mentor from the Oneida, New York Even Start program. "We got a read-out on our mentees and had some preconceptions about the problems they were facing. But we didn't know many of the real down-to-earth problems they wanted solved until we got there. We had to be flexible, adapt on the spot."

Diane Givens, a mentor from Webster Groves, Missouri, agrees. "When we first started, we were feeling our way. We were afraid the mentees would expect us to solve all their problems. As we went through the process, we had to take a look at ourselves."

Some mentees expressed their own early thoughts on what the mentoring process would be like. "I had high expectations," said Lori Kersey of Shipperville, Pennsylvania. "I was worried it was going to be a training, although I had a feeling it would be a good training. After it was over, it felt like something different. It felt like we had somebody to rely on, to give us clues about how to get through the glitches. It showed what a true collaboration was. It reassured and excited us. This was more two-way than a training."

"I had high expectations and

some reservations," said Judy Sims of Charlotte Mecklenberg. "I was worried that the number of problems we came up with would make it look like we were having real trouble. But we realized we weren't the only ones having retention



Another unexpected fact of mentoring that many encountered was the amount of staff time it takes to make mentoring work.

A "go with the flow" attitude on the part of mentors seems to have contributed to shared learning and diminishing concerns about the mentoring process. "We went in with the attitude that we weren't there to fix all the problems. We were right up front with that.

We weren't here to criticize or tell people how to do it," said Bonnie Allen. "I went in with listening ears," said another participant, summarizing the frame of mind that resulted in value and meaning for both mentors and mentees.

clearer the qualifications families must have to be recruited," said one mentee. As Diane Givens said, "one program had great concepts but they weren't really directed at the population. We encouraged them not to mold their program around someone

used with their mentees was a "community walk through," where Even Start staff were asked to imagine themselves walking through their community. Who did they see? What are their needs? Where do these families go for services? This activity helped some mentees realize there are other agencies which can better serve current clients and other families that the Even Start program should be reaching.

One common area of discussion related to recruitment was in the clarity, consistency, and depth of recruitment materials.

Another clear benefit of mentoring was promoting the value of staff development and teamwork to make effective changes. Watching the mentors in action, one mentee saw the value of promoting teamwork and learned new ways to structure staff time and tasks. One activity involved identifying possible benefits of meeting more regularly, creating new staff performance criteria, reorganizing and streamlining administration, and increasing communication.

"The way they used staff to provide resources was quite different than our way," reports Judy Sims. Watching her mentors in action gave Judy and her staff new ideas on how to structure staff time and tasks. "I came out with a bigger picture of how to use staff to be more effective, to empower parents."

Another mentee reported, "we will start using different options for families, like home visits until the parent is ready to come to the site." Others made these kinds of typical observations: "the mentors provided several good suggestions for component integration, "the focus

In focus

Mentors from the Madison-Oneida Even Start program visit with the Even Start staff and parents in Gillette, Wyoming. During this focus group parents talked about goals for themselves and their children.



"I let them know it's going to be alright."

Reflecting on the experience in an evaluation conducted by RMC Research and in informal phone interviews, mentees had a long list of benefits, from the practical to the personal.

One clear outcome was a raised awareness of the critical nature of recruitment and retention. "The mentors made

else's model, but around their parents."

Lori Kersey adds, "they made us ask some very hard questions. Why are you serving that family? They convinced us by saying 'you have to let them go...they can do it with help from another agency.' Before they left, we came up with a chart: the families we need to reach, the entry criteria...it made it a very tight program."

One activity many mentors

Mentoring can work for you

groups with our collaborators were fabulous...my collaborators heard how it can work.”

One mentee commented gratefully and at length about how her mentor had helped her work through her own insecurities and inexperience as an administrator. “The one-on-one meetings with administrators [from the mentee site] were invaluable to my working through issues I was having with my staff,” she said.

Judy Sims summed up the value of mentoring to mentees by saying, “I realized how well things worked together among team members — the benefits of strong relationships.”

In addition to all of the practical advice and ideas, mentors simply offered support and encouragement. “What I gave most was letting people know ‘it’s going to be alright,’” said Diane Givens. “I kept telling them it’s going to get better. Keep an open mind. Successes aren’t always big, the small ones are important, too.”

“Just because you’re a mentor doesn’t mean you’re not going to have a bad day.”

Mentors got as much as they gave in this process. In addition to enjoying confirmation that their programs were on track, their own skills were developed, refined, and polished (both as mentors and in their work at their own programs).

“I found out I had a lot more to share than I really thought I did,” said Diane Givens. “I saw that coordinators have the same

needs and concerns and interests. I was able to forget the differences and focus on what we had in common — some real nitty gritty stuff.” Diane said that what she got from mentoring was “the positive feedback that we’re doing creative things. And, the support from others going through the same things. I got empathy from one coordinator about a situation I was going through. She said, ‘just because you’re a mentor doesn’t mean you’re not going to have a bad day.’”

Diane also saw “my team and parents taking ownership of wanting to work with other programs and share honest exchange...talking with mentees on the phone, working through problems.” She cites the “rewarding feeling” she got at listening to a Webster Groves parent coming back from a mentee site, reporting on what she had observed there. “She was articulating to them from a parent perspective, interjecting that they were forgetting the main thing — the families who really need the service.” Diane also reports that the five guiding principles they used with mentees have become and integrated part of their own staff planning at Webster Groves.

Bonnie Allen said she came back home with a feeling that “we’re doing OK. Sometimes we become too critical of ourselves. We do have the right notions in our head.” In addition, Bonnie came away with a renewed appreciation for the difficult job of being an Even Start coordinator. “It’s hard, trying to pull all those pieces together,” she said.

The Staff Mentoring Sites Program proved that there are lots of resources within the Even Start system, peer resources that can be used for staff development and technical assistance, and to promote the concept of family literacy.

You don’t need to wait for the federal initiative to make mentoring work for you. Here are some ideas:

- Identify an important theme for your program (like parenting) and seek out mentors from other programs in your state or region with which you are familiar.
- Identify an area in which your program has had outstanding success and offer your staff as mentors to other programs in your state or region.
- Look into setting up a regional or state-wide mentoring network in your area.
- Promote the concept of family literacy by offering your staff as mentors to area adult education, Head Start, migrant, ESL, and early childhood programs.
- Family literacy is a new area of interest for Title I programs. By being a mentor to your community’s Title I program(s), you can help them explore the potential of using family literacy as a service delivery model.

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The give and take of mentoring

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Five steps to productive mentoring

The findings from the evaluation of the mentoring program suggest five basic steps in successful mentoring programs.

Be ready.

Mentors and partners should be ready to participate. Do the mentors have the talent to raise the experience beyond “show and tell?” Are the partner sites developmentally ready for this kind of experience?

Build ownership and commitment.

Plan carefully and set goals and expectations. Mentors need to establish trust with their partners from the beginning to build ownership in, and shared commitment to, the process.

Develop a framework.

Establish a focus and direction for the process that everyone buys into. Commit the resources and support you need to develop the common message and the materials to carry it out.

Commit time and resources.

Relationships take time and energy. Mentors and mentees need freedom from some current responsibilities to take part in interactive, reflective experiences.

Evaluate.

Mentoring is research in action: learning from experience and applying the learning in new ways.

“You need to be a friend before anything else.”



The long term effects of the mentoring pilot, in terms of real effects on retention and recruitment, will take place over time. But the immediate effects of the building of new and supportive relationships are already clear. Lori Kersey jokes that she gave her mentors “lots of headaches” but acknowledges that everybody benefited. Participants reported that relationships were built in many

small ways: frequent phone calls to work out problems, quiet one-on-one conversations, the open sharing of experiences.

One mentor compared the process to developing a relationship with an Even Start family. “Once the expectation and trust are established, commitment and growth follow.” And, as another said, a mentor relationship has many parts — friend, peer, teacher, student. “But you need to have friend before the others. You need to have trust, support, and understanding” before the hard work of self-assessment, reflection, and problem-solving can begin.

RESOURCES

Fenichel, Emily, editor. (1992) Learning through Supervision and Mentorship: a source book. Arlington, Virginia: ZERO TO THREE/National Center for Clinical Infant Programs.

This source book summarizes the results of a work group who set out to explore supervision and mentorship for staff development in the infant/family field. It offers concrete examples of how these features can be integrated into diverse program settings as seen from the perspectives of students, teachers, front-line practitioner, and administrators. The authors identify obstacles and suggest ways to overcome them to improve the training of infant/family practitioners

through supervision and mentorship. For ordering information, call ZERO TO THREE/KCMS 1-800-544-0155.

Samuels Bryan, Nilofer Ahsoun, and Jill Garcia. (1996). Know your Community: A Step by Step Guide to Community Needs and Resource Assessment. Chicago: Family Resource Coalition.

This guide, drawn from the experiences of North Lawndale, Illinois, presents practical tools that communities and/or program directors can employ in conducting assessments for family support services. It is anecdotal, asset-oriented, and

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Resources

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community-driven. The guide embodies the essential family support principles which builds a community's capacity to design its services for families. It includes numerous surveys, questionnaires, and focus group questions which can be helpful to community and program planners.

Benjamin, L. Ann and Jerane Lord (ed.). (1996) Family Literacy: Directions in Research and Implications for Practice, Washington, DC: US Department of Education

This compilation of ten papers was commissioned by the US Department of Education as background reading for its symposium Research Design Symposium on Family Literacy. The papers feature the perspectives of leading research scholars on diverse but relevant themes in family literacy. The publication serves as a "road map" for practitioners and researchers in topics such as service integration; designing programs for families with disabilities and with racial, ethnic, and cultural differences; recognizing parenting and intergenerational issues; and lessons learned from high intensity family literacy programs. The book can be purchased from the US Government Printing Office, Mail Stop: SSOP, Washington, DC 20402-9328. ISBN 0-16-048460-X.

Levine, James A with Edward W. Pitt. (1995). New Expectations: Community Strategies for Responsible Fatherhood. New York: Families and Work Institute.

This book offers a new way of thinking and acting to promote responsible fatherhood. It discusses two broad themes: promoting the economic viability of families and

encouraging the involvement of all fathers with their children. The book focuses on what can be done in the field, not waiting for governmental reforms. It gives examples of existing programs and suggests practical strategies at the local level. Also from the same organization: Getting Men Involved: Strategies for Early Childhood Programs (1993).

QUESTIONS?



What were the criteria for being a partnering site in the pilot mentoring program?



Even Start sites had to meet several criteria to be a partnering site in the first round of the mentoring program. Projects had to:

- be funded for at least six months but no more than 24 months,
- be nominated by state coordinator, and
- identify specific recruitment and retention concerns.

Also, project staff had to have received training in basic family literacy.



Will the Even Start Staff Mentoring Project be continued?



The Department plans to continue the Even Start staff mentoring project, probably with a shift to a state or regional focus. A new topic will be chosen and the project will take place over the next contract year. Your state coordinator will be informed as plan are finalized over the next few months.

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