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research in action

Why Youth Mentoring Relationships End

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About the Research in Action Series

Overview

Last year, MENTOR released the *National Agenda for Action: How to Close America's Mentoring Gap*. Representing the collective wisdom of the mentoring field, the *Agenda* articulates five key strategies and action items necessary to move the field forward and truly close the mentoring gap. In an effort to address one of these critical strategies—elevating the role of research—MENTOR created the Research and Policy Council, an advisory group composed of the nation's leading mentoring researchers, policymakers, and practitioners.

In September 2006, MENTOR convened the first meeting of the Research and Policy Council with the goal of increasing the connection and exchange of ideas among practitioners, policymakers, and researchers to strengthen the practice of youth mentoring. The *Research in Action* series is the first product to evolve from the work of the Council—taking current mentoring research and translating it into useful, user-friendly materials for mentoring practitioners.

With research articles written by leading scholars, the series includes ten issues on some of the most pressing topics facing the youth mentoring field:

Issue 1: Mentoring: A Key Resource for Promoting Positive Youth Development

Issue 2: Effectiveness of Mentoring Program Practices

Issue 3: Program Staff in Youth Mentoring Programs: Qualifications, Training, and Retention

Issue 4: Fostering Close and Effective Relationships in Youth Mentoring Programs

Issue 5: Why Youth Mentoring Relationships End

Issue 6: School-Based Mentoring

Issue 7: Cross-Age Peer Mentoring

Issue 8: Mentoring Across Generations: Engaging Age 50+ Adults as Mentors

Issue 9: Youth Mentoring: Do Race and Ethnicity Really Matter?

Issue 10: Mentoring: A Promising Intervention for Children of Prisoners

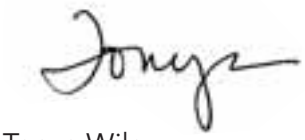
Using the Series

Each issue in the series is designed to make the scholarly research accessible to and relevant for practitioners and is composed of three sections:

1. **Research:** a peer-reviewed article, written by a leading researcher, summarizing the latest research available on the topic and its implications for the field;
2. **Action:** a tool, activity, template, or resource, created by MENTOR, with concrete suggestions on how practitioners can incorporate the research findings into mentoring programs; and
3. **Resources:** a list of additional resources on the topic for further research.

As you read the series, we invite you to study each section and consider what you can do to effectively link mentoring research with program practice. Please join us in thanking the executive editor, Dr. Jean Rhodes, and the author of this issue, Dr. Renée Spencer, for graciously contributing their time and expertise to this project.

Gail Manza
Executive Director



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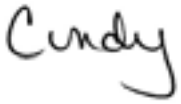

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RESEARCH

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Why Youth Mentoring Relationships End

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Introduction

A mention of youth mentoring brings to mind powerful and often poignant stories of how a committed and concerned adult came along at just the right time and made all the difference in the life of a young person. But what happens when mentoring relationships do not go well? Although relationship failure rates can vary greatly across programs, general estimates show that only approximately half of the mentoring relationships established through formal programs last beyond a few months (Rhodes, 2002), and the rate is even higher among more vulnerable youth (Grossman & Rhodes, 2002). This is especially disturbing in light of research indicating that when relationships end within the first three months they may have the potential to do harm (Grossman & Rhodes, 2002; Karcher, 2005). Understanding why some formal mentoring relationships end early can help prevent some of these occurrences and enhance efforts on the part of programs to promote connections that do indeed make a positive difference for youth.

Researchers studying other types of mentoring relationships, such as those between adults in the workplace and between professors and students in higher education, have observed that half of protégés surveyed report at least one negative mentoring relationship (Eby, McManus, Simon, & Russell, 2000; Kalbfleisch, 1997). Indeed, negative experiences, such as conflict, disappointment, and regret, are a fundamental component of all interpersonal relationships (Duck, 1994) and thus can be expected to some degree in youth mentoring relationships as well. Further, negative experiences may be more salient for participants and may more readily distinguish relationships of varying quality (Rhodes, Reddy, Roffman, & Grossman, 2005).

Further, in contrast to naturally occurring mentoring relationships, formal mentoring programs tend to match youth and adults from strikingly different backgrounds. Most adults who volunteer to serve as mentors in formal mentoring programs are White and reside in middle- to upper-income households (MENTOR/National Mentoring Partnership, 2006), whereas many of the youth targeted by these programs tend to be of color and to reside in low-income households (Freedman, 1993). Thus, mentoring programs are often grappling with the tall order of facilitating the development of meaningful relationships between two strangers whose life experiences may be worlds apart. There are, of course, numerous success stories providing evidence that these differences can be transcended. However, paying closer attention to what happens when things do not go well can help us better identify and meet the special challenges posed by creating and sustaining formal mentoring relationships between youth and adults.

Current Research

Research focused explicitly on understanding negative youth mentoring experiences is quite rare. However, current research on mentoring relationships more generally—particularly that which addresses relationship quality and duration—does point to some important factors for understanding and preventing early endings.

Youth and Mentor Characteristics

Some youth and volunteer characteristics associated with shorter matches have been identified. The age of the young person at the time of matching is one factor. Community-based matches with older youth (13-16 years of age) tend to be of shorter duration than those with younger youth (Grossman & Rhodes, 2002). Conversely, a recent national impact study of Big Brothers Big Sisters school-based mentoring programs noted that middle and high school youth tended to benefit more from school-based mentoring than did the elementary school-aged youth (Herrera, et al., 2007). Other youth factors associated with shorter relationships include risk status and gender. Relationships with youth who have more complex problems, such as a history of emotional, sexual, or physical abuse, or who were referred to a mentoring program in response to psychological or educational difficulties, tend not to last as long (Grossman & Rhodes, 2002). In addition, female matches tend to end earlier (Grossman & Rhodes, 2002) and one study (Rhodes, Samp, & Litchfield, 2007) found that girls were significantly less satisfied than boys in short- and medium-length mentoring relationships, suggesting that girls may also be more sensitive to early terminations. On the volunteer side, one study found that adults with lower incomes tended to have shorter matches as did married adults in their late 20s (Grossman & Rhodes, 2002). These findings should not be interpreted to mean that mentoring programs should not match older youth, youth facing significant challenges, or young married volunteers; rather they suggest that such matches may require a greater investment on the part of the program in the way of training, monitoring, and ongoing support and supervision to ensure the success of these relationships.

Relationship Processes

At the relationship level, evidence is mounting that relationship duration and strength are associated with youth outcomes (Grossman & Rhodes, 2002; Herrera et al., 2007). Longer matches tend to be associated with more positive benefits for youth (Grossman & Rhodes, 2002; Herrera, 2004; Herrera et al., 2007), as do relationships in which participants feel a sense of closeness or personal connection (Herrera et al., 2000; Parra, DuBois, Neville, & Pugh-Lilly, 2002). There is also some evidence that matching mentors and youth on the basis of shared interests may facilitate the development of closer relationships (Herrera, et al., 2000).

Other process factors that appear to distinguish more and less enduring and supportive relationships include the consistency of contact between participants (Karcher, 2005) and the mentor's approach to the relationship (Morrow & Styles, 1995). Mentors who engage in more social activities with youth, even in school-based mentoring relationships, tend to report higher levels of closeness in their relationships (Herrera et al., 2000). Further, youth in matches with adults who take a more prescriptive approach tend to be less satisfied with the relationship than youth in relationships where the adult takes a more developmental or youth-centered approach (Morrow & Styles, 1995). Prescriptive mentors place primary emphasis on their own goals for the young person, which are often unrealistic or not developmentally appropriate, and pay less attention to building an emotional connection with the young person. In contrast, developmental mentors tend to devote their efforts in the early months of the match to establishing a strong connection with the young person. These mentors place a high value on making the relationship enjoyable, and set developmentally appropriate expectations that are informed by the youth's preferences and interests (Morrow & Styles, 1995).

Given that some matches can continue for months with little or no contact between mentor and youth, it is important to consider whether dosage, or amount of contact between mentor and youth, is the more critical factor. The school-based mentoring impact study (Herrera et al., 2007) suggests that both dosage and duration may be important. Matches that persisted into the summer but had little to no contact (i.e., less than monthly contact) during those summer months tended not to last as long. Further, relationships with infrequent summer contact were perceived by youth as lower in quality as compared to matches that had communicated at least biweekly during the school break (Herrera et al., 2007).

Program Factors

Programs play key roles in facilitating the development of mentoring relationships. Pre-match training and orientation as well as ongoing training or staff contact during the mentoring relationship appear to contribute to more satisfying and effective relationships (DuBois et al., 2002; Herrera, et al., 2000). In one study of both school- and community-based mentoring programs, mentors who received fewer than two hours of training reported the lowest levels of closeness and support in their relationships with youth, whereas mentors who received more than six hours of pre-match training and orientation tended to spend more time with their protégés and also reported higher levels of closeness (Herrera et al., 2000). Training was also a key factor in the national impact study of school-based mentoring (Herrera et al., 2007). Mentors who received more pre-match and ongoing training not only reported higher levels of closeness with their mentees but were also more likely to continue to mentor the child into a second year. In addition,

programs with adequate resources, space, and staff support tended to foster more successful relationships. Finally, findings from this same study also indicate that promoting summer contact between mentors and youth may serve to lengthen and strengthen these relationships.

Early Ending Matches

One qualitative interview study of early ending matches (Spencer, 2007) points to other factors that may contribute to premature endings. Analysis of in-depth interviews with 31 adult and youth participants in two community-based mentoring programs yielded the following themes: (a) mentor or protégé abandonment; (b) perceived lack of protégé motivation; (c) unfulfilled expectations; (d) deficiencies in mentor relational skills, including the ability to bridge cultural divides; (e) family interference; and (f) inadequate agency support.

Abandonment and Lack of Interest

Some youth and mentors interviewed had been abandoned by their partners who never returned phone calls or simply never showed up for a scheduled visit. Youth and mentors alike described feeling disappointed and one youth had decided not to be matched with another mentor, despite his initial enthusiasm for the program. In a few cases, the mentors reported having the sense that the young person was not particularly interested in having a mentor. These adults suspected that the youth had been encouraged by a parent or peer to participate in the program but had little to no real interest in having a mentor.

Unfulfilled Expectations

Several mentors described entering the relationship with some clear expectations about what they hoped it would be like, even though they expressed few preferences during the matching process. When these expectations were not met, these adults struggled a bit with their relationships. Some mentors had not anticipated how great the needs of the youth might be. They described feeling beleaguered by going to the youths' homes and seeing the reality of their living conditions and the difficulties the families faced. Other mentors expected to experience mostly positive feelings when with their protégés and seemed unprepared for the challenges that can be encountered when building relationships with vulnerable youth.

Deficiencies in Mentors' Relational Skills

Several relationships seemed to falter in part because of the lack of important relational skills on the part of the mentor, namely (a) a lack of youth focus; (b) unrealistic, or developmentally inappropriate, expectations of the youth; and (c) low awareness of personal biases and how cultural differences shape relationships. Some youth depicted their mentors as having a difficult time engaging with them on their terms. Some mentors

conveyed unrealistic expectations about reciprocity in the relationship and were disappointed when their protégés did not initiate or reciprocate contact or overtly express appreciation of the mentors' efforts. A few mentors seemed unaware of the ways that cultural differences between themselves and their protégés may have been influencing the nature and course of the mentoring relationship and were not adept at bridging these differences.

Family Interference and Lack of Agency Support

Finally, the mentoring dyads were embedded within other contexts, namely the mentoring program and the youth's family. In one case it was suspected that an unsupportive family member had undermined the relationship by interfering with effective communication between the mentor and youth. In a few cases, program staff appeared to have missed opportunities to shore up struggling relationships.

Discussion

Not all early endings are avoidable, as some mentors and youth will experience unanticipated changes in their life circumstances that preclude the continuation of their mentoring relationships. However, many relationships dissolve due to factors that may be avoidable, such as disappointment and dissatisfaction with the relationship. Close attention to the negative experiences encountered by mentors and youth can help us identify key roles programs may be able to play in preventing some relationship failures.

Although the empirical literature on why mentoring relationships end is quite sparse, offering little in the way of evidence-based guidance for program practices, the current evidence does point to some practices worthy of consideration. Research indicating that matches made with older youth and those with more complex problems, such as psychological difficulties or histories of abuse, suggests that such matches may need higher levels of program support to ensure their success. Special efforts may also need to be taken to nurture the development of female matches so that they last long enough to be satisfying to the youth participants. Volunteers should be carefully screened and consideration given to the likelihood that their life circumstances, such as lengthy breaks between college terms or heavy work or family responsibilities, may interfere with consistency and continuity in the mentoring process.

The research on early ending relationships presented here also suggests that attention to the expectations mentors and youth bring to the mentoring relationship is needed. Mentoring programs may be able to offer greater assistance with identifying and articulating preferences for and expectations of the mentoring relationship. Descriptions of a variety of prototypical matches could be developed and presented to prospective program

participants to elicit some of these preferences and expectations. In addition, spending more time up front informing potential mentors and protégés about the nature of mentoring relationships, typical challenges that may arise, and how these can be handled, could help mentors and youth begin to identify their expectations for the match and potentially reduce the rate of relationship failures.

Programs could also discuss the importance of ending the relationship appropriately from the start. Mentors and protégés may need to know up front their options for ending a relationship so that they do not abandon the relationship when they become uncertain about how to handle a difficult situation or have decided they no longer want to continue. Matches that must end due to external forces or those that simply are not working well may benefit from assistance with appropriate termination. Even those programs that hope to encourage relationships that continue indefinitely should have clear guidelines and expectations for ending relationships.

Training directed toward helping mentors identify some of their cultural and class-based values and beliefs and developing skills for effectively engaging in cross-cultural relationships with youth could be critical to the success of some mentoring relationships. Training models have been developed for counselors to foster the development of helping professionals' cultural competence, which includes cultural knowledge, skills, and personal awareness (Sue & Sue, 2003). Research indicates that such training is associated with greater satisfaction with the treatment process among clients of color (Constantine, 2002). These models could be modified to be more directly applicable to mentoring relationships and incorporated into mentor pre-match and ongoing training. Social class differences and knowledge about child and adolescent development could be addressed in this way as well. In addition, programs can also improve their efforts to reach volunteer mentors with backgrounds more similar to the youth being served.

Monitoring of matches and ongoing training for mentors are among the program practices associated with more positive youth outcomes (Rhodes & DuBois, 2006). These practices may also serve to reduce early endings. Regular contact with matches on a periodic basis may provide program staff the opportunity to identify difficulties as they arise and step in to provide assistance or to facilitate termination in the event of an inappropriate match. Ongoing training may provide mentors with the chance to receive assistance with challenging situations and assist them with continued development of their skills as a mentor.

Examining mentoring relationships that end early can provide important lessons that, if studied, can help us in our efforts to promote high-quality youth mentoring relationships. Once the match between a mentor and a young person is made, the work has only just begun. By identifying and addressing common pitfalls in formal mentoring relationships, programs can better support mentors and youth in their efforts to build close, enduring, and growth-promoting relationships.

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ACTION

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Why Youth Mentoring Relationships End

As practitioners who work with youth, the first motto of all mentoring programs should be "Do No Harm" to the youth being served. Research demonstrates that mentoring relationships that end prematurely have the potential to harm the mentee, leaving him or her in a worse situation than if no mentoring had been received. In the struggle to prevent early termination, the mentoring field is always looking for new information about the factors that predict or cause relationships to end prematurely. Dr. Spencer's article provides significant insight into some of the underlying causes of match failure. In her summary of the research, Dr. Spencer identifies six factors that may contribute to early match termination: 1) mentor or protégé abandonment; 2) lack of protégé motivation; 3) unfulfilled expectations; 4) deficiencies in mentor relational skills, including the ability to bridge cultural divides; 5) family interference; and 6) inadequate agency support. She also suggests a number of strategies to prevent or correct these issues in mentoring programs, including the idea of creating a series of descriptions of "typical" matches which can be used to assess mentor preferences and expectations.

Using the Relationship Prototypes

This action section tackles Dr. Spencer's recommendation by creating eight typical match descriptions and explains how these descriptions might be used with program participants. There are a number of ways these prototypes could be incorporated into program operations.

- Prospective mentor interviews: While program staff members generally ask mentors what kind of relationship or mentee they are looking for, mentors often reply that they are "up for anything" or have "no preferences." The prototypes could be used to prod potential mentors with concrete examples of how a relationship might work.
- Mentor training: The prototypes could be used as scenarios with mentors discussing expectations, their reaction to the situation, and strategies for coping or addressing it as needed.
- Supervision or ongoing training: Mentors could use the prototype to assess their current relationship. Mentors would make an "X" on the arrow demonstrating where they think the relationship is now and a "star" where they would like it to be. Program staff can help mentors explore strategies to move the relationship from the "X" to the "star" or discuss coping strategies in areas where movement is unlikely or unrealistic.

In all of these contexts it is important to ask questions and generate discussion or dialogue with the mentor(s). Suggested questions include: What are some possible explanations for this situation? If this was your relationship, what would you do? How would you feel? What kind of support would you want from the program? What might the relationship look like when you combine two or more characteristics?

With all of these strategies, the purpose of the prototypes is the same—to assess mentor expectations about the match; to gauge mentor relational skills and motivation in various circumstances; and to determine how much and what kind of agency support is wanted and needed by the mentor.

Programs may want to develop additional prototypes based on prior relationships in their program or other characteristics that result in very different relationship dynamics. For example, assessing mentor preferences about developmental versus prescriptive approaches to mentoring could be extremely useful for program staff.

Prototype Descriptions

To create the prototype descriptions, we identified five categories of factors that affect the functioning and feel of the mentoring relationship. The categories are: 1) mentee temperament; 2) mentee motivation/engagement; 3) mentee environment; 4) personal mentee challenges; and 5) relationship intensity. While there are many other factors that also impact the relationship, these categories were selected based on the following criteria:

- Commonality – the ability of program staff to understand the description by connecting it to a specific match in their program;
- Duality – the presence of two extremes that have distinct, tangible effects on the relationship;
- Neutrality – the extremes represent two alternatives that indicate preferences but are not valued as good versus bad;
- Control – the ability of the program to know the characteristic/preference about a specific mentee before making a match as opposed to general characteristics about the population being served (e.g., risk of teen pregnancy).

For each category we have identified the two extremes and developed a description of how that extreme might be demonstrated in a mentoring relationship. The arrow represents the spectrum of variations that lie between the two extremes. While each prototype examines only one characteristic in isolation, it's important to recognize that in most mentoring relationships, multiple factors interact with each other.

1. Mentee Temperament and 2. Mentee Motivation/Engagement

Shy, reserved, quiet	◄·····►	Outgoing, chatty
Apathetic, disinterested	◄·····►	Very engaged

Relationship example

The mentee doesn't talk much. The mentor repeatedly tries to engage the mentee by asking questions, telling stories, etc. The mentor asks the mentee what he/she wants to do but usually gets one word answers. The mentor encourages the mentee to call anytime but never hears from him or her. The burden of making contact, planning meetings, and making conversation falls heavily on the mentor. This may last for a few weeks or months.

Relationship example

Mentee is very chatty, always talking, and asking questions, some of which may be inappropriate and personal. The mentee calls the mentor all the time and wants to spend much more time with the mentor than the program requires. The mentor often has to tell the mentee that he/she is unavailable to talk or visit. This behavior may happen almost immediately after matching or after the pair has been together for a few months.

3. Mentee Environment

Stable, supportive	◄·····►	Chaotic, unstable

Relationship example

The mentor and mentee are meeting regularly and get along well. The mentee seems well-adjusted and has a solid support network of family and friends. The mentee is doing well in school and is involved in a number of other activities.

Relationship example

The mentee's living environment is unstable and the mentor is concerned that an older sibling is the cause of substance abuse in the home. The mentee's parent(s) work multiple jobs but are struggling financially. As a result phone service in the home is sporadic and the family moves frequently making it difficult to reach the mentee. The mentor always picks up and drops off the mentee at home as poverty and crime are prevalent in the mentee's neighborhood.

4. Personal Mentee Challenges

Well-adjusted	Emotional/Behavioral Challenges
Relationship example The mentor and mentee engage in a number of activities. The mentee is able to focus on specific tasks and is comfortable trying new things with the mentor. The mentee relates well to others and is able to follow directions, express emotions, and control behavior.	**Relationship example** The mentor and mentee meet regularly but the mentor never knows what to expect. The mentee is generally friendly and excited about their meetings. However, sometimes in the middle of an activity the mentee will become suddenly angry or upset. The mentee has difficulty focusing on one task and the mentor feels pressured to change activities often.

5. Relationship Intensity

Collegial, friendly	Personal, involved
Relationship example Mentor and mentee enjoy each other's company and have fun together. They meet regularly as required by the program and participate in a variety of activities but don't do anything "extra." They talk about school, career, the future, etc. but keep many aspects of their lives private.	**Relationship example** Mentor and mentee are very connected in multiple aspects of life including school and family. They see and talk to each other often, usually more than the program requires. They share their hopes, dreams, failures, and successes and see the other as an integral part of their life.

Why Youth Mentoring Relationships End

MENTOR/National Mentoring Partnership. The leader in expanding the power of mentoring to millions of young Americans who want and need adult mentors. *www.mentoring.org*

- Ongoing Support, Supervision, and Monitoring
  www.mentoring.org/program_staff/support/ongoing_support_supervision_and_monitoring.php
- Reaching Closure
  www.mentoring.org/program_staff/closure/reaching_closure.php

Mentoring Partnership of Minnesota. State partnership that provides support and advocacy for mentoring efforts in the state of Minnesota. *www.mentoringworks.org*

- Tools for Mentoring Adolescents: Building Trust and Attachment With Your Mentee
  www.mentoringworks.org/sites/a234b4c8-ec92-4a0c-8351-434a90b6c1cc/uploads/TMA-_4_Building_Trust___Attachment_with_Your_Mentee.pdf

Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory - National Mentoring Center. National organization that provides training and technical assistance to youth mentoring programs. *www.nwrel.org/mentoring*

- Going the Distance – A Guide to Building Lasting Relationships in Mentoring Programs
  www.edmentoring.org/pubs/going_the_distance.pdf
- Overcoming Relationship Pitfalls, Fact sheet.
  www.edmentoring.org/pubs/factsheet10.pdf

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MENTOR is leading the national movement to connect young Americans to the power of mentoring. As a national advocate and expert resource for mentoring, in concert with a nationwide network of state and local *Mentoring Partnerships*, MENTOR delivers the research, policy recommendations, and practical performance tools needed to help make quality mentoring a reality for more of America's youth.

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