

# Mentorships



United Way of Olmsted County  
903 W. Center Street, Suite 100  
Rochester, MN 55902  
507-287-2000

## **Introduction**

The following report is an exploration of a narrow field within the broad context of health and human services work. It is not an exhaustive treatment of all effective programs or approaches within the field, but rather a narrow investigation of a topic of interest.

The subject matter of this paper does not necessarily represent an area of financial investment, grant funding, or other programmatic pursuit for United Way of Olmsted County. Rather, this report reflects on a specific type of intervention that allows individuals to reach their full potential, and presents related research.

There may be a wide variety of programs or services that address individual and community needs, and this report is not designed to enumerate all possibilities. United Way of Olmsted County hopes that readers will think creatively about the ways in which the ideas and experiences contained within the report might inform programs, services, and community changes in Olmsted County.

## **Who is a mentor?**

Youth mentoring involves matching a young person with an older youth or adult who can act as a positive role model either socially, personally, or academically. Generally, mentees lack strong positive relationships with trusted adults and are referred to mentoring programs because they want or need a trusted adult in their lives.

The mentor and mentee may follow a structured or unstructured program, and the pair may build their relationship by pursuing shared interests or hobbies, by working on academics together, or by discussing ongoing events in the mentee's life. Mentorship may be one-on-one or in a small group setting and may take place within the school environment, at a youth-serving club, or in community locations determined by the program participants (youth.gov).

The two most important aspects of the mentor-mentee relationship are the length of the relationship (Bruce & Bridgeland, 2014) and the interest overlap between mentor and mentee (Arbreton, Herrera, McClanahan, Pepper, & Sipe, 2000). This is what makes mentoring distinct from classes or clubs – it requires the development of a genuine one-on-one connection that ideally lasts as long as the student desires. Shared interests allow the pair to connect personally while working or playing side-by-side in an activity they both enjoy. For many mentors and mentees, the relationship can grow to be almost familial, with mentors attending life events and providing support to their mentee for years after the child ages out of the program.

## **The Child-Parent Connection**

In the best-case scenario, the relationship between a child and parents creates a sort of 'home-base' for the child: a relationship that is unconditional and highly predictable. As the child ages, they are able to take appropriate risks such as making new friends,

trying new activities, and exploring new components of their identity. For children with secure connections with their parents, they are able to turn to their parents when life feels overwhelming and unfamiliar, get comfort and advice appropriate to the situation, and then return to exploring on their own (Moretti & Peled, 2004). For children with this type of connection, even situations that create high levels of stress – divorce, relocation, teenage breakups – can be navigated without creating long-lasting ill effects on the child. This trait is known as resilience.

In some cases, the parent-child connection is weak, damaged, or non-existent due to family dysfunction such as neglect, substance abuse, or mental illness. Situations such as divorce, marital conflict, or housing instability can strain the parent-child connection if the parent does not have the skills or time necessary to help their child navigate complex emotions in times of instability. For some parents, emotionally responsive parenting does not come naturally or they did not have this type of parenting modeled for them by their own parents. For other parents, responding to day-to-day challenges in transportation, income, housing, or health makes it challenging to be responsive to their children's needs.

When children try to navigate emotional responses to challenging situations on their own, the result is often maladaptive. Acting out, withdrawing, being oppositional, or over-functioning are just some of the ways in which children try to take control of an uncertain situation. In some cases they may regress and behave in highly-dependent ways in order to elicit the caretaking or soothing response they desire, and in others they may try to cause as little fuss as possible in order to 'not be a burden' to their parents. In both situations, the child is emotionally stunted and unable to respond in an age-appropriate way to challenges (Wadsworth, 2015).

### **Why Mentors?**

For children experiencing this disconnect, particularly in times of trauma or upheaval, a stand-in adult may serve as the trusted adult in the child's life. This creates an alternative 'home base' from which they can explore the world. Well-trained mentors are able to create an emotionally-responsive environment in which children can develop their self-esteem, address their trauma, and begin to grow aspirations for the future.

In many instances, mentors are able to provide guidance and direction in topics that a child's parents are unable to speak to. For instance, a mentor may provide guidance on applying to college and completing financial aid applications for a student who is the first in their family to pursue college. Or a mentor may provide education on sexual assertiveness for students whose parents are uncomfortable or unwilling to discuss sex with their children. A mentor may also work to educate children on conflict resolution when parental attempts to teach such skills have failed. Developing such life skills provides the mentee with tools and information they would not have otherwise had.

## **Children Who Participate in Mentoring Programs:**

- Perform better academically
- Have fewer discipline incidents
- Are less likely to begin using drugs and alcohol
- Express more hope and optimism for their future
- Are more likely to volunteer or become a mentor themselves

(Tierney, Baldwin Grossman, & Resch, 1995) (ADEPIS, 2015) (Bruce & Bridgeland, 2014) (Herrera, DuBois, & Baldwin Grossman, 2013)

## **Successful Models**

**Reach and Rise** is a therapeutic mentoring model coupled with family support/case management run through the YMCA. The overarching goal is to support youth in developing health relationships, becoming productive citizens, and positively contributing to society. Mentors are trained to understand the negative impacts trauma and violence have on a young person's life, then provide experiences to broaden the mentee's sense of what is possible and to develop decision-making skills. The program has been shown to reduce depression, increase levels of self-worth, increase academic achievement, and improve social relationships (National Mentoring Resource Center: Featured Grantees).

**Big Brothers Big Sisters of America** is a national program that has matched Littles with Bigs for over one hundred years. Children are referred to the program in a number of ways, often through county services, but can be enrolled by anyone including parents. A number of specialized programs exist for children with incarcerated parents, military parents, or children in the foster care system. A number of Bigs are employed by law enforcement. All mentors are background-checked and work with the children's parents or legal guardians to develop a consistent routine. The relationship between the mentor and mentee is built on shared hobbies and interests, but often develops into an advisor/advisee relationship as the child grows (bbbs.org).

**Foster Grandparent programs** match seniors aged 55+ with at-risk youth who are often victims of abuse and/or have disabilities. The 'grandparents' provide emotional support, provide academic tutoring, and participate in recreational activities with their 'grandchildren.' These programs often take place at schools, either during the day or directly after school. This program has been shown to have positive academic, behavioral, and mental health outcomes for the youth involved, while at the same time improving the mental health of the grandparents by increasing optimism, social connection, and sense of purpose.

## **Characteristics of Successful Mentoring Programs (Cavell & DuBois; Jekeliek):**

- Work with youth considered most at-risk
- Mentor/mentee relationships are considered long-term investments
- Engage mentors and mentees in side-by-side (just for fun) activities as well as serious conversations
- Keep families actively involved

## **How to Join the Movement:**

- 1. Find ways to connect with youth in our community.** When a child connects with a caring adult over a shared hobby or interest, the adult becomes a role model even if they are not formally acting as a mentor. If you have an interactive hobby such as sports or creative arts, consider offering lessons or acting as a coach. If you have a personal story of overcoming the odds, try to find opportunities to share your story with youth coming from a background similar to yours. Offer to have a high school student shadow you at your workplace and answer questions they have about the career.
- 2. Encourage your children to have healthy relationships with trusted adults.** It takes a village to raise a child and the more adults investing in and caring for a child, the more resilient they are likely to become. Encourage your child to make connections with their teachers, coaches, or even become a mentee in a formal program. Particularly if your child has experienced challenging life situations, it takes time to build the relationship skills and secure attachment mechanisms needed to remain healthy and well-adjusted throughout their lives.
- 3. Become a mentor!** Youth-serving organizations are always in need of positive role models for youth who may not otherwise have them. By becoming a trusted adult in a child's support network, you can help build their resiliency. Before jumping into the work, make sure you can make at least a two year commitment to your mentee. Any less, and you've actually created a new trauma in the child's life – the loss of a trusted adult.

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## **Thanks and Appreciation:**

Liana Michelfelder-Tessum

LeeAnn Howard