

# RESEARCH



# FACTS and

# FINDINGS

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## Mentoring

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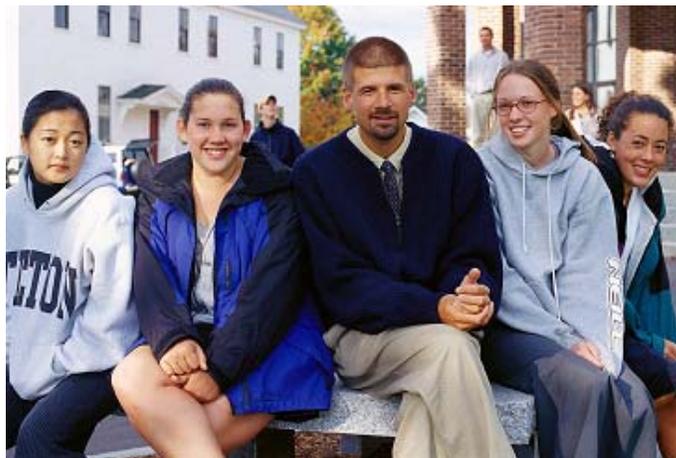
Mentoring has become a visible and popular strategy for supporting the development of disadvantaged youth (Walker, 2000). It is easy to understand and intuitively appealing. Adults who can identify a mentor in their own lives need no convincing that a mentor can be important, even life-changing. Popular representations of mentors, as in the films *Steel Magnolias* and *Music of the Heart*, and the book, *Tuesdays with Morrie*, provide vivid images of mentors and their protégés. The prospect of becoming a mentor offers a way for people who care about inequality in our society to make a difference. For those who question the value of costly government programs, mentoring appears to be a low-cost alternative that can be sponsored by local organizations and built into existing programs.

### Impact and Program Quality

Research has born out the common-sense expectation that introducing a caring adult into the life of a young person in need can have significant benefits. In the largest study (Tierney, Grossman, & Resch, 1995), researchers took advantage of long waiting lists in Big Brothers/Big Sisters programs in 8 cities to construct a true experiment. Applicants were randomly assigned to either the program (that is, the “treatment group”) or to a waiting list, to be matched with a mentor after 18 months (a “control group”), which was already the average waiting time. Compared to applicants in the waiting list, boys and girls in the Big Brothers/Big Sisters Program were less likely to start using drugs and alcohol or to hit other children; they had more positive attitudes toward school and better grades and attendance; they also reported better relations with peers and family members. These findings demonstrate that

mentoring is a positive experience, but they must be treated with some caution because they are rather modest in size and no effects were found in some other areas that were measured.

Both the positive impact of mentoring and the modest size of that impact have been confirmed in a “meta-analysis,” which is a powerful technique for combining the results of multiple studies. DuBois, Holloway, Valentine, and Cooper (2002) examined the results of 55 program evaluations, including the Big Brothers/Big Sisters study and found generally positive outcomes in the domains most often targeted by mentoring programs: 1) emotional/psychological, 2) problem/high risk behavior, 3) social competence, 4) academic/educational, and 5) career/employment. Impacts were strongest in programs that most closely matched *program quality criteria* derived from the literature: continuing mentor training (i.e., after initial orientation and training), structured activities, expectations



for frequent contact, involvement of parents, and monitoring of matches by staff. Impact was also greater when pairs met frequently, were close emotionally, and stayed together.

**Improved parental relationships.** More refined analysis of the data from the Big Brothers/Big Sisters evaluation also provided invaluable guidance to practitioners. One critical finding is that much of the power of the mentoring relationship to improve attitudes toward school and academic performance occurs indirectly, through improvements in relations with parents (Rhodes, Grossman, & Resch, 2000). That is, mentors help youth get along better with their parents and parents in turn help youth do better in school. This illustrates a more general principle, which is that mentoring does not operate in a vacuum; it should be treated as one part of a larger, interconnected effort to improve conditions for disadvantaged youth. In addition, mentors should not be seen as substitute parents, stepping in to do the job that parents are unable to do. By working in concert with parents, mentors can be more effective themselves and can support parents in doing what no one else can do.

**Need for enduring relationships.** Even more profound in its implication for practice is the finding that enduring relationships are essential. The effect of mentoring proved to be much stronger when matches lasted for a year or more (Grossman & Rhodes, 2002). In fact, youth whose match with a Big Brother or Sister broke up within a year were worse off than unmatched youth in the control group. It appears that youth who most need a caring adult in their lives can be damaged by an unfulfilled promise. Anyone seeking to arrange mentoring relationships or become a mentor must take this finding to heart and “first do no harm.” Firm commitment by the mentor and effective support for the relationship (e.g., a skilled staff person to advise the mentor) are essential elements. Although mentoring relies heavily on volunteers, it is not free; only a strong professional staff can provide the support that is needed to make it work.

### **Support Natural Mentoring**

The danger that a failed match may be harmful suggests that conventional mentoring programs are not always the best means of promoting mentoring. Another approach is to encourage and support “natural mentoring,” that is, the development of mentoring relationships without the direct intervention of a program that creates the match (DuBois, Neville, Parra, & Pugh-Lilly, 2002; Hamilton & Hamilton, 2004). One source of enthusiasm about mentoring is research on resilient children, that is, children who overcome multiple risks that generally predict serious problems (Werner & Smith, 2001). The enduring presence of a caring adult is a critical aspect of resilience. The adult may be a parent but may also be an aunt, a neighbor, a religious leader, or a youth group leader. In addition to trying



to create such relationships where none existed before, as mentoring programs do, one might attempt to strengthen a relationship that already exists. In one program, troubled boys were asked to identify someone they already knew whom they looked up to. That person was then asked to play a more active and supportive role in the boy’s life, and given advice on how to do so and payment in compensation for the time needed (Hobbs, 1982).

### **Increase Mentoring Opportunities**

Another approach is to create “mentor-rich environments” (Freedman, 1993) for youth, that is, settings in which youth and adults interact naturally and form attachments in the same way that peers become friends. Older youth, for whom the chance to go out to eat or see a movie with an adult is not so exciting as it is for a 12-year-old, may be more likely to spend time with an adult when both of them are trying to accomplish a task together. Workplaces and community service projects are two examples of such settings (Hamilton & Hamilton, 2005). Internships, apprenticeships, and cooperative education are examples of programs in which youth learn from work, often with the guidance of an adult who is identified as a mentor. Sometimes this only means that the adult teaches the youth how to do a job, but often the lessons extend beyond the workplace to planning for the future and even into personal matters. Moreover, many adults in places where youth work are willing and able to serve as mentors. Authorizing adults to play a mentoring role and supporting them in it can extend the benefits of mentoring far beyond the capacity of mentoring programs.

## Mentor Training Tools

[www.human.cornell.edu/youthwork/mentoring/training.html](http://www.human.cornell.edu/youthwork/mentoring/training.html)

This mentor training program was designed to help novice mentors gain expertise more quickly. This training focuses on mentoring. However, mentors also need some orientation to the particular program in which they are participating. Such an orientation would specify the program's goals, describe its operating procedures and guidelines, and identify key actors.

### Training Activities

[www.human.cornell.edu/youthwork/mentoring/activities.html](http://www.human.cornell.edu/youthwork/mentoring/activities.html)

The Training Activities address a central aspect of being a workplace mentor: how to teach in a workplace. Mentors need to know how to teach and advise youth informally outside of a classroom and they need to think through what to teach, but they need to know other things as well.

By their nature, the following training activities are generic; they apply to a wide range of occupational areas and work settings. Many mentors have told us that they are confident in their ability to teach occupation-specific knowledge and skills. For both these reasons, we do not attempt to address training issues related to specific occupations.

Mentor training often emphasizes building relationships and mutual understanding between adults and youth. We have chosen to focus on the work mentors and youth do together, believing that relationships grow out of that joint activity.

### Trainer Guides

[www.human.cornell.edu/youthwork/mentoring/guides.html](http://www.human.cornell.edu/youthwork/mentoring/guides.html)

Trainer Guides accompany the training activities. The guides briefly describe the training activity, the training purposes, the materials needed and the how much time to allow. Instructions explain how to implement the activities and provide additional background information. The trainers are encouraged to adapt the sessions to their own environment.

## Announcing the *Cornell Youth in Society Program*

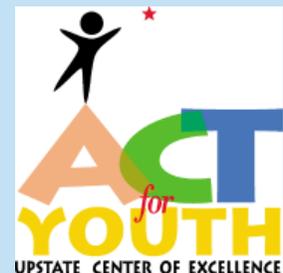
Acknowledging the broadening of its activities since the Cornell Youth and Work Program was created in 1990, we have renamed it the *Cornell Youth in Society Program*. The new name invokes multiple contexts and activities where youth development occurs, not only in workplaces but through service, in schools, in youth and adult organizations, through the media, in juvenile justice, in faith-based organizations, in family and in communities. It also recognizes that youth are not only learners, but active participants and citizens in society as well. Finally, the new name calls attention to the importance of connectedness of youth to people and activities in their communities as they make the transition to adulthood, a focus of our recent research and outreach on mentoring relationships.

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The Upstate Center of Excellence invites you to visit the ACT for Youth website where additional copies of this newsletter and many other youth development resources are available.

[www.actforyouth.net](http://www.actforyouth.net)



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