

The effects of mentoring at-risk youth

[Life](#), [Adolescence](#)



THE EFFECTS OF MENTORING AT-RISK YOUTH Abstract: Mentoring has arguments both for and against its effectiveness in relation to at-risk youth. These programs have been known to help in areas of self-esteem, attitudes toward drugs and alcohol, grades, attendance and disciplinary problems in school. Although, the scope of at-risk youth can be quite narrow, if administered correctly it can be inclusive of all teens with emotional and behavioral problems. These programs should not be considered a quick fix to such a large problem, but it can be used as a means to an end.

Mentoring programs for youth and teens considered to be at-risk have begun to grow throughout the country. Not all programs agree on a generalized approach, but it is fair to say the concept is the same when dealing with this group of youth. The term mentor is basically described as a trusted counselor or teacher. The term at-risk, for purposes of this study, relates to youth from single parent households, who exhibit emotional and behavioral problems. The overall consensus is to pair a responsible and caring adult with a troubled adolescent youth.

The ultimate goal is for a relationship to form and to build a bond of trust with an adult who can in turn, help them deal with the troubles that often arrive in life. Unfortunately, many adolescents are never given the opportunity to build relationships with caring adults. Nearly a quarter of all American children will live in single-parent homes, and half of the current generation of children will live in a single-parent household during some point in their childhood (Dryfoos, 1998).

There are a host of factors that contribute to this situation such as changing economic, social and cultural conditions have increased the vulnerability of

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negative life outcomes for adolescents' (Dryfoos, 1998). Natural mentors are described as close family members such as father, mother, uncles, aunts, brother's, sister's and/or grandparents. In order to address the problems that have come to light as a result of the diminished availability of natural mentors, volunteer mentoring programs have multiplied in recent years (Freedom, 1993; Rhodes, in press). Just as natural mentoring, volunteer mentoring involves building a relationship between the youth and adults, as to offer support in meeting the youth's academic, social, career, and/or personal goals (Dubois, et al. , in press). It is estimated that as many as five million American youth are involved in some type of mentor program being it in school or community based.

They range from such programs as the renowned Big Brothers/Big Sisters to other less structured programs. Without such programs to assist these youth, once they are adults, they are more likely candidates for divorce, high unemployment; physical and mental problems, drug and alcohol abuse, and quite often become involved in more criminal activity (Patterson, DeBaryshe, & Ramsey, 1989). If left unchecked, these problems could prove costly both to society and the individual.

Whereas the approximate average cost of a well organized and operated mentoring program is estimated at around \$1, 000, taking into account a per child per year projection, it could eliminate or at least marginalize the need for future social services (Grossman & Gary, 1997). Youth without the proper social support framework or low levels of social support, has a tendency to be withdrawn, and show a lack of concern about their future. They are negligent, and more likely to harm others than were youth who had the

privilege of being exposed to a proper social support system (Kashani, Reid, & Rosinberg, 1989).

Although only a vice mentoring could provide some social support and could improve the way these youth function in society. Some theorize that youth develop deviant behavior because they lacked the opportunity to interact and or relate with positive role models within their community (Hawkins & Weis, 1985). Mentors can at times be that beacon of hope or the voice of reason which would allow these youth to see and appreciate appropriate social behavior and could in turn curve their delinquent behavior.

Most mentoring programs are forced to rely on the kindness of the community for support and this usually comes in the form of volunteers and donations (Keating, Tomishima, & Foster, 2002). Even though the effectiveness of mentoring programs are often brought into question, the Big Brothers/Big Sisters of America organization has a proven track record of successful unions between caring adults and at-risk youth. This organization conducted a study of at-risk youth over the course of approximately one year to show the effects of a positive mentor to mentee relationship.

The results revealed they were less likely to become involved in the following activities: 46% illegal drugs, 27% start drinking, 52% skip a day of school, and 37% to skip a class. The mentees were more trusting of parents, and not as prone to lie to them, they also felt more support from their friends. High intensity programs can be effective, especially those with more one-on-one interaction in the form of frequent meetings throughout the month, meeting between 2-4 hours at each visit along with frequent phone contact (Tiernay and Grossman, 1995) (Keating, Tomishima, & Foster, 2002).

In this age of technology there is a host of opportunities available for the tech savvy to capitalize on when it comes to mentoring. E-mentoring is the next step in mentoring programs. A program has been in existence for the past 11 years, created by a group of researchers from Drexel University called the “I Could Be” program, in order to study the effects of online mentoring. So far the results have been mostly positive. Online mentoring can be both an effective and viable option when compared to the traditional face-to-face method.

Given the current nature of working conditions, organizations may seek to implement e-mentoring programs due to their ability to be both cost-effective and time saving compared to the traditional approach. The study showed that students who were comfortable using computers tended to get the most out of the program. Students with the lowest level of confidence at the beginning of the program saw the biggest gains. One of the major drawbacks is that, you’re not face-to-face. The major advantage is the ease of access to more than one mentor.

Concerns regarding the overall security of children may have helped to slow the growth of this type of program. Unfortunately high dropout rates and poor academic performance have seemingly become synonymous with the experience of African American male youth. Upon visiting just about any public school in the Country you are bound to find African American male youth almost aimlessly wondering the halls, as if they have been alienated from the educational process and left to their own devices to discover the American dream for them.

Their presence is scarcely seen in the gifted and advanced academic classes, while at the same time they are highly represented in remedial classes. When it comes to suspension and expulsion they dominate the list in comparison to their White male counter-parts (Bailey, 1996; Center for the Study of Social Policy, 1990; “ Federal Report,” 1999; Ford, Grantham, and Bailey, 1999; Lee, 1992; Skiba, Michael, Nardo, and Preston, 2000; Trescott, 1990). They are often observed hanging out on street corners or in the malls, where they are viewed with both fear and contemptment.

They often give up on the education process entirely because they feel as if the things learned there do not apply to them and they seek elsewhere for success. The educational system is often viewed as a way to place a label upon them and to stifle the potential for them to grow as individuals (Narine, 1992) (Bailey & Paisley, 2004). Reports have stated that approximately 1 out of every 4 male African Americans have to report for court ordered supervision and that there are more African American men controlled by the court than there are enrolled in college (Bass & Coleman, 1997; Green & Wright, 1992; Mauer, 1990).

Although only 15% of African American youth are represented in the juvenile population, they constitute approximately 43% of juveniles in public facilities and 34% in private custody (Bailey, 1999, FBI, 1996; Sickmund et al. , 1997). There is an apparently clear overrepresentation of African American male youth in juvenile facilities. This in turn makes for a negative self-image as well as creating an inherit distrust and disrespect of authority (Lee & Bailey, 1997) (Bailey & Paisley, 2004). Minority and poor populations are grossly underserved within the educational system.

As a result these students are less likely to be assigned to classes that would prepare them for college and they are quite often being taught by teachers working out of their field (The Education Trust, 1998). Unfortunately, the majority of most minority and poor populations have the least amount of qualified teachers. The fact is most of these kids will not escape the confines of such experiences and thus will not seek higher education because of feeling an inability to perform in the college arena (Bailey & Paisley, 2004).

African Americans populate a mere 17% of the total school system, yet they account for 32% of suspensions and 30% of all expulsions (Skiba et al. , 2000). When it comes to graduating from college African American males have a devastating 1 in 12 chance and when it comes to high school dropout rates they have a 1 in 4 chance (Trescott, 1990). For those who realize the need for higher education and choose to pursue college and university enrollment in the United States, they will find what it means to be a true minority because African American males only account for 3. % of the college population (U. S. Bureau of the Census, 1998) (Bailey & Paisley, 2004). Mentoring is viewed by some as an intervention for at-risk youth who need assistance and preparation for adult life as well as being a conduit of sorts to curb dropout rates, delinquency, unemployment and a host of other ill's associated with troubled youth (Mech, Pryde, & Rycraft, 1995) (Blechman, 1992). The effects of mentors and mentor programs in general vary greatly and according to how the study is conducted it allows for objective to be set in order to quantify the study.

Some studies suggest that mentors have no beneficial impact on the mentee, while they do note some changes occurred but some of the changes

were outside the scope of the study (Royse, David, 1998). The first thing we should mention is that the study conducted by Big Brothers/Big Sisters of America was conducted over a 15 month period. It is believed that more relevant changes might have taken place had the study been conducted over a 24 or 30 month period. Longer matches between mentor's and mentee's were believed to be more productive by parents than shorter ones.

It is important to note while mentoring does have positives effects, it is not and should not be considered the quick fix to our at-risk youth, problems (Frecknall & Lurks, 1992) (Royse & David, 1998). The second thing to consider is although most mentors kept accurate logs concerning time spent with mentee's, some did not. This in turn made it difficult to accurately account or report the times of volunteers since these logs were incomplete. With that being said, it made accounting for actual time of contact between mentor's and mentee's difficult, to say the least.

If the mentor is not consistent when meeting the mentee, the overall objective could be hindered significantly (Roaf, Tierney, & Hunte, 1994). It is vital to keep records in regard to the relationship between the mentor and mentee. This can be difficult because mentee's are sometimes concerned about their image among peers so they are reluctant to explain the presence of a mentor. Even though some results say mentoring is ineffective, the fact remains that the lives of at-risk youth are substantially affected by a caring adult (Garmezy, 1985; Rutter, 1987; Werner & Smith, 1992; O'Sullivan, 1991).

This should be evidence enough as to the need for even more mentoring projects to be formed, refined, and applied to those in need of such services.

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These programs may not always have immediate tangible results. They have proven to be not harmful while at the same time, having potential to catapult mentee's into their destiny (Royse & David, 1998). In conclusion, I've often heard it said that children are the future and we should teach them well and let them lead the way. Although they are the future, yet and still, America is letting a minority segment fall by the way.

One thing is sure, if people are not given hope and allowed to see themselves as viable members of society; they will abandon all morals and rules that govern the land. Although mentoring can be a key element in getting at-risk youth back on track, it should not be the only source to help these youth. This must be done with all due diligence in order to insure the future survival of all Americans. If something is not put in place soon, America will have alienated an entire generation.

This will have created a third world society within the borders of the land of the free and the home of the brave. References: Bailey, D. F. , Paisley, P. O. (2004). Journal of Counseling and Development v. 82 no. 1 p. 10-17 http://www.icouldbe.org/csewi/public/pg_evaluation.asp http://www.infed.org/learningmentors/youth_mentoring_in_perspective.htm Keating, L. M. , Tomishima, M. A. , Foster, S. (2002). Adolescence v. 37 p. 717-34 Royse, D. (1998). Adolescence v. 33 no 129 p. 145-58