

Mentoring programs -- how effective are they?

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Whether it's parents, teachers, coaches, or family friends, there's no question that adults serve as powerful role models for youth as they transition from childhood to adolescence to adulthood. Mentoring programs across the United States have tried to harness the power of positive role models in the hopes that relationships with an adult mentor will help to support kids' socioemotional and cognitive development. But are mentoring programs effective? And do all programs have equally positive effects?

A new report in *Psychological Science in the [Public Interest](#)*, a journal of the Association for [Psychological Science](#), takes a close look at the research that has accumulated over the last decade and identifies the aspects of mentoring programs that seem to help – or hinder – kids' development across many domains.

It may seem like common sense that [kids](#) benefit from having mentors in their lives, and that the kids who are at risk – for poor performance in school, for engaging in risky behaviors, or for negative health outcomes – stand to benefit the most from a mentoring relationship. These assumptions are the reason that mentoring programs are used as an intervention strategy in many different settings, including education, juvenile justice, and public health. But mentoring programs vary along many dimensions and serve diverse populations, so it's important to establish the aspects of these programs that benefit different groups of kids.

In this report, David DuBois, a professor of Community Health Sciences at the University of Illinois at Chicago, and co-authors review over 70 existing evaluations of mentoring programs and they confirm that mentoring programs do confer many benefits. In general, mentoring programs seem to improve kids' outcomes across behavioral, social, emotional, and academic domains, and they can help improve outcomes in several of these areas at the same time. And research suggests that it's never too late to establish an effective mentoring relationship, as mentoring programs seem to make a difference for youth of all ages. DuBois argues that these results "speak to the universal importance of caring relationships for us as social animals, whatever our age."

Despite the overall benefits of mentoring programs, improvements in youth outcomes tend to be modest and it is not clear how well such gains hold up over time. Furthermore, while mentoring does seem to help boost kids' academic test scores, there's little rigorous research on whether it contributes to other policy-relevant outcomes, such as overall educational attainment, juvenile offending, substance use, or obesity prevention.

Mentoring programs appear to be most effective for youth who have some pre-existing difficulties or who are exposed to heightened levels of environmental risk, but most programs probably can't handle the demands of youth with really serious difficulties. Matching mentors and mentees according to their interests helps to produce greater benefits for kids, probably because this kind of matching helps kids and mentors connect and find activities that they enjoy doing together. The research also finds that kids benefit more when programs help mentors to provide useful guidance and act as an advocate on kids' behalf. DuBois notes that there are real risks of youth experiencing a mentor as "one more adult telling them what to do" and of mentors "crossing boundaries and become over-involved in a youth's life." He adds, though, that many mentoring programs clearly have developed "effective ways to navigate

these concerns so that mentors can share their knowledge and life experience and be powerful allies for vulnerable young people."

Given the number and diversity of mentoring programs in the United States, some programs are undoubtedly more effective than others. In order to achieve the biggest return on investment, DuBois and his co-authors urge policymakers to support the use of evidence-based practices, like mentor screening and training. Policymaker support for mentoring practices that are grounded in scientific evidence will help to create and sustain high-quality mentoring programs for youth.

According to DuBois, finding out what works in mentoring programs is especially important during these tough economic times. Mentoring programs allow communities to make strategic use of their own human capital (i.e., through people volunteering their time), thereby amplifying the reach of community programs and supports for your people.

"Because of this potential," says DuBois, "mentoring programs represent a particularly exciting direction for maintaining strong investments in the future of our nation's youth despite the economic challenges that are currently facing the country."

Provided by Association for Psychological Science

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