

# When mentors do this one thing, it can help reduce teen delinquency

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When educators and coaches make kids feel like they matter, it reduces delinquency and destructive behavior. A new study led by a University of Kansas researcher reveals the importance of non-family adults in mentoring youth.

"If you are made to feel useful and important to others, especially in this case by a non-kin and education-based mentor, then you are more likely to have a reduction in delinquency and [dangerous behavior](#)," said Margaret Kelley, associate professor of American Studies.

Kelley is lead author on the study published recently in the journal *Children and Youth Services Review*. Her co-author is Meggan Lee, a doctoral candidate in sociology at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign.

In the quantitative study, the researchers examined the role of natural mentors—informal mentors outside of one's relatives—in light of delinquency and dangerousness outcomes of adolescents using the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health data, known as Add Health, which includes three waves of data collected via interviews in 1994, 1996, and 2000.

In the dataset, the participants reported whether in the previous year they had participated in various delinquent activities that included lying to their parents, shoplifting, getting into a physical fight, hurting someone, running away, taking a car without permission, stealing, burglary, using a

weapon, selling drugs, and more. When older, they were also asked about identity theft, deliberately writing bad checks, and being part of a gang.

Past research has shown positive correlations between mentoring relationships and increased levels of social capital, like self-esteem, education and employment achievements for adolescents as well as lower rates of some types of problem behavior. But factors such as the type of mentor and characteristics of the mentoring relationship complicate the past findings, Kelley said. Researchers wanted to identify clearly what could make for a successful mentoring relationship.

The new study revealed that of the natural mentors respondents identified, teachers or coaches at their school had significant impact on increasing mattering and reducing dangerous behavior.

"Adolescents identified mentors who made an important difference in their life, and those who had non-kin adult mentors also said they mattered to other adults more," Kelley said. "It seems like if they feel like they are important to other people; that's the mechanism that's making this work."

The findings could be encouraging for educators, parents and those who work with youths, especially in trying to prevent at-risk adolescents from heading down a path of delinquency and dangerous behavior that could jeopardize their future and possibly put them in contact with the criminal justice system, she said.

"Making them feel appreciated and providing a sense of belonging for them at this crucial point in their adolescence can change those trajectories," Kelley said.

Because the respondents identified mattering, closeness and ongoing

importance as key factors in a mentoring relationship, it can provide clues for those who run formal mentoring programs to youth, such as Big Brothers Big Sisters and others.

"These programs need to do more than just fill time. They need to really nurture those relationships and have accountability," Kelley said. "We need to do more than just talk the talk. We need to actually get out there and make these kids feel like they're noticed, needed, and socially accepted."

The study also indicates the importance of helping children establish non-kin mentoring relationships early.

"Sometimes when we are doing interventions, they are crisis oriented. They should be, but we also need to have the sustained long-term commitments to really help the growth and development of all kids," Kelley said.

In other highlights of the study, the researchers found different types of mentoring behavior were dependent on the sex of the mentor and the mentee.

Males found guidance and advice from their mentors while women tended to receive emotional nurturing. More females than males, for example, believed their mentor acted like a parent.

The findings also indicated the importance of female [mentors](#) in serving as positive role models. This is timely, Kelley said, given renewed interest in women's rights and the increased visibility of women in leadership roles.

**More information:** Margaret S. Kelley et al, When natural mentors matter: Unraveling the relationship with delinquency, *Children and*

*Youth Services Review* (2018). [DOI: 10.1016/j.chidyouth.2018.06.002](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chidyouth.2018.06.002)

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