# Evidence Brief

## 10 Good Practices for School-Based Mentoring Programs

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### How Did We Compile This Evidence?

We searched YouthREX's Library for Youth Work and searched online databases using the following key terms: "school-based," "mentoring," and "mentorship."

### PART ONE: Key Messages

#### a) School-based mentoring is effective.

Research has identified the many advantages of school-based mentoring programs, including the "minimal demands on mentors relative to traditional community-based mentoring, heightened supervision and thus fewer safety concerns, easy access for students, and potentially heightened cost-effectiveness" (Komosa-Hawkins, 2010, p. 123). The primary disadvantage was understood to be "the lower intensity of mentoring provided relative to what is typically provided in community-based programs" (Komosa-Hawkins, 2010, p. 123), based on the time constraints of school-based programs. However, recent research (Raposa et al., 2019) revealed *no differences* between school-based and community-based mentoring programs. In fact, the limited time commitment not only serves to "protect mentors from burnout and youth from disappointment" (Raposa et al., 2019, p. 439); this targeted approach, when it draws on the service of skilled volunteers or para-professionals, can be particularly effective for youth (Raposa et al., 2019). The research also suggests that youth mentoring remains "a moderately effective intervention for youth at-risk for a range of psychosocial and academic problems" (Raposa et al., 2019, p. 440).

#### b) Youth experience positive outcomes when mentors have high expectations of excellence and believe that youth can grow and change.

Mentors can support youth by emphasizing their agency and encouraging them to take a strength-based approach to understanding their own lives. Importantly, mentors must be able to hold hope for mentees when they are struggling. Programs should offer a strong, unwavering message of hope and resilience, and can inspire hope by connecting youth to role models who have overcome adversity (Jarjoura, 2013, p. 7); it is particularly impactful and meaningful for Black and racialized youth to be exposed to mentors who are also Black or racialized and have overcome adversity.

With respect to Black youth, research shows that improved academic performance can be experienced, in part, when mentors and teachers "provide feedback to African-American students emphasizing that they have high expectations of their students/mentees, that they believe that

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their students/mentees can meet these expectations, and that they believe that their students/mentees can grow their abilities" (Sánchez, 2016, p. 12). These approaches can translate into improved outcomes for mentees.

**c) Mentoring can facilitate positive outcomes for immigrant, refugee, and/or racialized youth.**
Formal mentoring relationships are particularly helpful to first-generation immigrant and refugee youth as they adapt to a new culture, language, and school system. Youth who are immigrants and refugees "are in critical need of reparative and protective relationships with nonparental adults and older peers who can serve as caring role models, cultural interpreters, and academic guides" (Oberoi, 2016, p. 6). One study found that Black male youth benefitted from mentoring by learning to trust others, ask for help, and feel comfortable with emotional vulnerability (Sánchez, 2016). Research has found that Black male youth benefit in many ways from mentoring, including a decreased likelihood of using substances or participating in, or witnessing, physical or gun violence (Sánchez, 2016). Organizations that work with youth who are immigrants or refugees must take care to develop staff and volunteers' intercultural competency and foster a safe, welcoming space that affirms young people's identities and lived experiences.

Albright et al. (2017) argue that many programs that aim to serve marginalized or racialized youth "hold the potential to reproduce rather than reduce inequality" (p. 363). Many mentoring programs seek to target marginalized youth, and in these settings the "prototypical mentor is a White, middleclass adult and the prototypical protege is an economically disadvantaged youth of colour" (Albright et al., 2017, 363). As mentioned previously, mentoring is most impactful and meaningful when mentors have overcome adversity and can relate to shared life experiences. Organizations should strive to adopt a social justice lens within their organizational culture and actively recruit and hire staff and mentors who reflect the community they serve.

**d) SAFE activities can have a positive effect on outcomes.**
Programs that offer **Structured/Sequenced, Active, Focused, and Explicit (SAFE)** activities have been linked to improved academic outcomes (Smith & Bradshaw, 2017; Watt-Charley & Darroch, 2016; Afterschool Alliance, 2014; Vandell et al., 2004). Although this model is often used in the development of afterschool activities, these components can provide a frame for considering activities in a school-based mentoring program. The presence of all four components together is what researchers have found has the greatest impact (Afterschool Alliance, 2014).

> **Structured/Sequenced:** a predictable routine; also, breaking down activities into smaller parts and sequencing them so youth can build specific skills.

> **Active:** using engaging, hands-on, active strategies to help young people learn, rather than

relying on rote learning.

**Focused:** sufficient time is focused on skill-building and instruction.

**Explicit:** clear goals about what the program will achieve that are communicated to participants in plain and understandable language.


## PART TWO: Summary of Evidence
## 10 Good Practices for School-Based Mentoring Programs

### 1. Partner with other educational institutions.
Partnering with secondary and/or post-secondary institutions can provide access to environments that are "resource-rich" (Komosa-Hawkins, 2010, p. 126), as well as high school, college, and university students who can serve as mentors. Facilitating these relationships and networks may be of particular importance during transition years, specifically when young people begin high school or post-secondary education (NOISE, 2019; Komosa-Hawkins, 2012).

### 2. Understand youth in terms of their strengths, assets, and excellence, and acknowledge their lived experience.
Programs can better serve youth by adopting a strength-based approach and recognizing their assets. This differs significantly from the deficit-based approach that many programs, organizations, and mainstream institutions adopt. Youth programs can also engage with youth in a more humanizing, empowering way, by seeing the 'problems' they face as connected to broader social issues, where the "deficit is within a society and a school system" (Baldridge, 2014, p. 467). Recognize that young people are experts about their own communities and focus on issues that matter to youth. Ideally, programmers should respect the knowledge that youth bring to the table, while also providing the support they need (Glass, 2018).

### 3. Design mentor recruitment to look for key characteristics associated with successful mentoring relationships.
Successful mentoring programs select staff or volunteers who are oriented toward the values and philosophy of the program, then offer training to strengthen mentors' knowledge and skills. Effective mentors show warmth, a sense of humour, and have a foundation in active listening, emotional intelligence, self-awareness, and openness (Resiliency Initiatives, 2010). Ideal mentors are able to accept a mentee's failures or shortcomings (Terrion & Leonard, 2007), and work with the mentee 'where they are at', rather than pushing a mentee to change in a specific way.

Research shows that mentoring relationships are more successful when a mentor is perceived as both credible and relatable by the mentee (Terrion & Leonard, 2007). A mentor's 'credibility' depends on the program's goals. In a mentoring program that targets academic achievement, a mentor who has good grades and strong study skills may be more 'credible.' At the same time, a mentor who has never struggled may be perceived by the mentee as intimidating or not relatable. As referenced above, ideal mentors have skills and habits they can model or teach to a mentee (e.g. academic skills), while also understanding what it's like to struggle and how to bounce back.

Both adults and youth agree that specific characteristics make some people better mentors than others, including: having shared experiences; being open to new experiences; being personally invested and passionate; possessing leadership skills; being recharged by youth; and modelling good behaviours (Donlan et al., 2017).

**a) Consider the benefits of peer mentoring.**
In a school-based program, recruiting peer mentors can yield positive results. Research reveals that peer mentors "reported a greater increase in positive, school-related connectedness and self-esteem than their peers who did not participate as mentors" (Curran & Wexler, 2017, p. 74). These students reported feelings of maturation and independence, as well as increased connection to school peers and interpersonal skills (Curran & Wexler, 2017).

**b) Consider the benefits of same-race mentor relationships.**
While researchers widely agree about the overall benefit of positive and supportive mentoring relationships, there is less agreement about the effects of race, ethnicity, and diversity in youth mentoring relationships (Liang & West, 2006). While some researchers argue that same-race matches are beneficial, others argue that cross-race matches can be just as effective, as long as mentors are culturally sensitive and aware of the positionality of the mentee (Ontario Mentoring Coalition, 2016).

Despite this disagreement, the research we reviewed showed that there are a number of benefits to same-race mentor relationships. Mentors who are matched with mentees of the same race are more likely to be able to relate to experiences of systemic racism, discuss how these experiences have impacted their life, and share healing practices or strategies for dealing with them (Ontario Mentoring Coalition, 2016). The more staff reflect the demographics of the community they work in, the easier it may be for them to also act as role models and mentors (Huang et al., 2014).

Matching a mentee with a mentor of a different race may not be as effective because if the

mentor cannot understand the struggles the youth has faced, they may not be able to provide the same level of guidance and support as a mentor who has experienced the same racial discrimination (Ontario Mentoring Coalition, 2016). If your program is considering cross-race mentor relationships, it is imperative that mentors are culturally sensitive in order to establish trust and effective communication channels with mentees (Liang & West, 2006).

The Ontario Mentoring Coalition (2016) lists a number of factors to consider regarding same-race or cross-race matches (p. 80/81):

- What preferences do the mentee and mentee's family have for matching?
- Does the mentee have same-race role models elsewhere?
- What is the mentee's level of cultural mistrust? How can you support them in exploring discrimination and oppression?
- What is the cultural competency of the mentor and the organization?

**4. Train, monitor, and support your mentors.**

Mentors should receive adequate and appropriate training, both once they are recruited and on an ongoing basis. Intentional and continuous assessment, guidance, and support should be prioritized so that mentors can receive and integrate feedback, mitigate challenges they face, celebrate their successes, set goals, and respond to the needs and concerns of the young people with whom they work, "for the duration of the match" (Komosa-Hawkins, 2010, p. 131; also Lyons et al., 2018). Research indicates that the effectiveness of training can impact mentors' feelings of "closeness, support, satisfaction, and effectiveness" (Chan et al., 2013, p. 12).

Areas of focus for training can include youth development, communication strategies, boundaries and role clarification, anticipated challenges, realistic expectations, confidentiality, mentoring practices, policies and procedures, and the mission and goals of your program (Komosa-Hawkins, 2010, p. 130). Recent research (Lyons et al., 2018) reveals that relationship quality, although critical to influencing school-related outcomes, is not the only thing that matters; the ways that "mentors teach and support youth in developing instrumental skills related to increasing performance at school also has an important role in producing positive effects" (Lyons et al., 2018, p. 10). Therefore, mentor training and support should include a focus on "instrumental activities and skills that are directly relevant to outcomes considered important by programs and the youth who participate in them" (Lyons et al., 2018, p. 10).

You might also consider working to raise critical consciousness, in order to help mentors critique and respond to prevailing power structures (Clonan-Roy et al., 2016). Marginalized youth may want to talk about the issues affecting their lives, but schools and educators may shy away from, or shut down, conversations about oppression. Mentoring programs can facilitate critical consciousness –

"the ability to perceive and interrogate the various forms of oppression that shape one's life, and to take collective action against the status quo" (Lavie-Ajayi & Krumer-Nevo, 2013, p. 1701) – by training mentors to listen to youth, offer validation, and encourage them to reflect on the broader political and social context(s). This is also connected to adopting a strengths-based approach: by redefining the 'problem' as connected to social issues, mentors and programs can practice and promote critical consciousness. Develop a culture in which mentors recognize young people's resilience, resourcefulness, and agency.

**5. Strive to create attunement and trust.**
In therapeutic relationships, attunement refers to the connection between the therapist and client, the "interpersonal context … observed in the context of body language and non-verbal cues" (Pryce, 2012, p. 286). When we apply this concept to relationships between mentors and youth, we can understand this connection as requiring "management of two sets of needs, which often may be quite different from one another" (Pryce, 2012, p. 287). A mentor who is highly attuned to their student will ensure that the young person perceives a "higher level of trust, mutuality, and empathy in their relationship" (Pryce, 2012, p. 287). Mentors may represent only one of many significant adult relationships in a young person's life, which could include other practitioners (youth workers, social workers), so understanding these multiple pathways of influence is important for mentors (Pryce, 2012), particularly with respect to parent and teacher relationships (Chan et al., 2013, p. 12).

It is important for trust to be established between the mentor and mentee. In order for the mentor to gain the trust of the mentee, the mentor must stay true to their word and be transparent with the mentee. Shared lived experiences and being able to relate to one another about similar struggles is an important aspect of building trust (Lindsay-Dennis et al., 2011), a key component for the development and maintenance of positive mentor relationships (Brinkman et al., 2018).

A mentoring relationship that offers strong social-emotional supports has been found to "increase levels of school engagement and connectedness, attitudes toward school, motivation, attendance, and achievement" (Komosa-Hawkins, 2012, p. 394; see also Chan et al., 2013, p. 13; McCoy, 2017). Some research indicates that high-quality mentor-mentee relationships can have positive effects on the quality of parent-child and teacher-student relationships (Chan et al., 2013, p. 10). The *relationship* between the mentor and student is one of the main components associated with the success of a school-based mentorship program (with *effective program design* and *skill building* noted as the other two; McCoy, 2017, p. 38).

**6. Facilitate consistent, long-term relationships.**
Researchers note that establishing trust over time with mentees is key. When this happens, mentors gain access to additional ways of engaging in respect, consistency, and support (Donlan et

al., 2017; Pryce, 2012). As relationships between mentors and youth continue for longer periods, outcomes for youth are strengthened. Relationship consistency and duration should be a significant consideration in planning a mentorship program, even given the time constraints inherent to school-based mentoring. The stability of this relationship can decrease rejection sensitive behaviour in youth, providing a setting in which "youth can practice taking relational risks in a less threatening interpersonal context" (Kanchewa et al., 2018, p. 1093).

### 7. Focus on social and emotional skill development.

Instead of focusing solely on academic abilities, programs should strive to support resilience factors such as intrapersonal skills, adaptability, and stress management (Marcotte et al., 2014). Peer mentoring has been found to be especially effective for students with high anxiety (Rodger & Tremblay, 2003), and research suggests that emotional and social competencies are important in the successful transition from high school to university (Parker et al., 2004).

### 8. Consider incorporating opportunities for group mentoring.

Some literature suggests that programs should offer opportunities for group mentoring. Youth programs that choose a one-on-one model may wish to create opportunities for group mentoring by bringing together all participants periodically to connect, share strategies, and build supportive peer relationships. In a report about mentoring Black male youth, the National Mentoring Resource Centre suggests that "group mentoring programs that develop a sense of unity, brotherhood, caring, and trust among program members may be particularly helpful to Black male youth" (Sánchez, 2016, p. 15). Furthermore, group mentoring may align more closely with the values and aims of an Afrocentric approach to mentoring Black youth (Sánchez, 2016, p. 12). At the same time, one-on-one mentoring continues to give mentees the opportunity for specialized attention to develop skills and access resources that are relevant to their individual goals and needs.

### 9. Consider a program that includes both mentoring and tutoring.

Mentoring is an effective way to address academic achievement among youth. One study found that a program model that included tutoring and mentoring resulted in higher academic improvement, compared to only tutoring (Somers et al., 2016). However, youth who are struggling academically often need support understanding course content. Youth programs that aim to improve academic performance should find a way to support youth with course material, either by reserving time for tutoring, offering group sessions, or helping to connect youth with a tutor outside the program.

### 10. Evaluate your program.

Understand the impacts of your mentoring program and how you can better respond to the needs of students and mentors (Komosa-Hawkins, 2010).

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