

Evidence Brief

Eight Promising Practices for Mentorship Programs for Young Black Women

How Did We Compile This Evidence?

We searched YouthREX's Library for Youth Work, and searched in online databases using the following key terms: "Black youth," "young Black women," "youth mentorship programs," and "best practices."

Summary of Evidence: Eight Promising Practices

1. Understand young women in terms of their strengths, assets, and excellence.

Organizations working with young Black women should strive to adopt a strengths-based approach that recognizes their strengths and assets. This differs significantly from the deficits-based approach that many organizations and mainstream institutions adopt. Youth organizations can also engage with young Black women in a more humanizing way, by seeing the 'problems' they face as connected to broader social issues, where the "deficit is within a society and a school system that has failed Black youth" (Baldrige, 2014, p. 467). Train mentors to integrate a strengths-based approach into their mentoring relationships. Develop an organizational culture in which staff recognize young people's strengths, such as resilience, resourcefulness, and agency.

2. Apply an intersectional approach.

Young Black women are at the centre of a number of intersecting forms of oppression. An intersectional approach highlights the various effects of identity markers such as race, class, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, religion, age, and ability on an individual's lived experiences. This approach recognizes that these identity markers exist simultaneously and cannot be separated from one another (Canadian Women's Foundation, 2015). Programs working with young Black women must be aware of these intersecting forms of oppression and design their approach accordingly (Canadian Women's Foundation, 2015; Ontario Mentoring Coalition, 2016).

3. Design mentor recruitment to look for key characteristics associated with successful mentoring relationships.

Successful mentoring programs select 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. Successful mentors continue to hold hope for their mentee, particularly when the mentee is struggling.

Research shows that peer mentoring relationships are more successful when a peer 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 peer mentor who has good grades and strong study skills may be more 'credible.' At the same time, a peer mentor who has never struggled may be perceived by the mentee as intimidating or not relatable. 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 knowing how to bounce back.

Program staff should look for mentors who show a basic capacity for these qualities, then design training to strengthen and refine mentors' skills and understanding of the program's values and approach.

4. 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). Young Black women may not have enough representation of leaders that they can relate to, and having a Black mentor can provide them with a positive role model (Brinkman et al., 2018; Ontario Mentoring Coalition, 2016; Lindsay-Dennis et al., 2011).

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?

5. Strive to create trust.

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).

6. Raise critical consciousness.

Programs working with young Black women should strive to raise their critical consciousness in order to help them critique and respond to prevailing power structures (Clonan-Roy et al., 2016). Young Black women may want to talk about the issues affecting their lives, but schools and educators may shy away from, or shut down, conversations about race. Youth organizations 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). Agencies can do this by training mentors to listen to Black 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 a strengths-based approach and promote critical consciousness.

For young Black women, raising critical consciousness will support critiquing and responding to the power structures within their lives that contribute to the systemic racism and sexism they have experienced (Lindsay-Dennis et al., 2011; Clonan-Roy, 2016). The achievement of critical consciousness may allow girls and women to resist domination, negotiate self-representation, and work towards transformation (Clonan-Roy et al., p. 103).

7. Avoid mentors being seen as authority figures.

Young Black women may be hesitant to trust an adult who is perceived as an authority figure. Negative perceptions about Black girls' behaviour may have affected the way that they have been treated by teachers and other authority figures (Brinkman et al., 2018). Brinkman et al. (2018) note that “when girls speak up about their experiences of victimization in school or struggle to stay focused and emotionally regulated because of trauma they have experienced, these girls are then sometimes punished by adults” (p. 8). Research has shown that young people's previous experience with adults will likely affect their openness toward similar future relationships, so ensuring that mentors make it clear to mentees that they are not an authority figure is important (Brinkman et al., 2018).

8. 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, Wang & Piliawsky, 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.

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