

Evidence Brief

Mentorship and Employment: Six Key Questions

1. How can we help youth who are preparing for work, or who are already in the workforce, to succeed and thrive?

Youth workers and mentors can better support youth by **adopting a strength-based approach** and **recognizing young people's assets**, including resilience, resourcefulness, and agency. Research shows that discrimination is a significant barrier to youth participation in the labour market (Lauer et al., 2011; Shier et al., 2014). Engage with youth in a humanizing, empowering way, by seeing the 'problems' they face as connected to broader social issues, where the deficit is located in society and structures, not in youth themselves (Baldrige, 2014).

Youth workers and mentors can help mitigate the barriers to employment faced by youth by **building a young person's social capital** (Miller et al., 2015) – the benefit that comes from social networks and that enables individuals to achieve in ways that they may not be able to on their own. Access to wider networks and opportunities can help young people become more empowered and engaged in their communities, and community-based partners can play a critical role in **engaging employers** and **advocating for investments in youth** (Bird & Okoh, 2016). Programs should **develop a long-term focus on skills development** (Bird & Okoh, 2016). Consider **incorporating entrepreneurship supports**, as youth may not perceive this as a viable career option (House of Commons Committees, 2014; YouthREX, 2016).

2. What kind of supports do youth need to become protagonists of their future and development?

Organizations can empower youth by **creating a welcoming, supportive, and safe environment** where young people feel comfortable to rise to challenges, express their creativity, and try out new skills and roles (Jennings et al., 2006; Pearrow, 2008; Zimmerman et al., 2011). Foster confidence within programming by setting and celebrating goals, normalizing mistakes as integral to the learning process, and recognizing strengths and accomplishments (Crooks et al., 2010).

Youth workers can **enact hope** in young people by providing a space for youth to critically examine, question, and respond to some of the injustices they experience (Flennaugh et al., 2018). Without such solidarity on the part of youth workers, many youth may not have the opportunity to meaningfully engage with and respond to the powers that deeply impact their lives.

3. What are we learning about effective mentorship programs?

Evidence suggests that the main components associated with the success of a mentorship program are: **a) the mentor-mentee relationship**; **b) effective program design**; and **c) skill building** (McCoy, 2017).

Evidence suggests that **peer mentoring** is effective in school-based programs (Curran & Wexler, 2017), especially for students with high anxiety (Rodger & Tremblay, 2003). Peer mentoring relationships are more successful when a peer mentor is perceived as both credible and relatable by the mentee (Terrion & Leonard, 2007). 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.

Youth programs may wish to incorporate **group mentoring** to create opportunities to build supportive peer relationships. Group mentoring can develop a sense of community, caring, and trust, and may be particularly beneficial for Black youth (Sánchez, 2016). 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.

4. What kind of environment or culture allows mentoring programs to take root and develop naturally?

Organizations should strive to **adopt a social justice lens** and actively recruit and hire staff and mentors who reflect the community they serve (Albright et al., 2017). Organizations should **raise critical consciousness** by training mentors to listen to youth, offer validation, and encourage them to reflect on broader political and social contexts.

Successful programs select staff or volunteers who are oriented toward the values and philosophy of the program, then offer training to strengthen their knowledge and skills. Mentors should receive **adequate and appropriate training**, including intentional and continuous assessment, guidance, and support (Komosa-Hawkins, 2010). Research indicates that the effectiveness of training can impact mentors' feelings of "closeness, support, satisfaction, and effectiveness" (Chan et al., 2013, p. 12).

5. What are the characteristics of a successful mentorship relationship?

Effective mentors show **warmth** and **a sense of humour**, and have a foundation in **active listening, emotional intelligence, self-awareness**, and **openness** (Resiliency Initiatives, 2010). They are able to respect the knowledge that youth bring to the table, while also providing the support they need to build leadership capacity (Glass, 2018).

Youth experience positive outcomes when mentors **have high expectations** of their mentees and believe that youth can grow and change (Sánchez, 2016). At the same time, mentors should be able to accept a mentee's failures or shortcomings, and work with the mentee 'where they are at', rather than pushing a mentee to change in a specific way (Terrion & Leonard, 2007). Effective mentors are able to **support youth when they are struggling** and offer a strong, unwavering message of hope and resilience (Jarjoura, 2013).

Research has shown that mentoring is most impactful and meaningful when mentors have **overcome adversity** and can **relate to shared life experiences**, particularly for Black and racialized youth (Jarjoura, 2013). There is evidence that 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).

6. How does a successful mentorship relationship evolve over time?

As relationships between mentors and youth continue for longer periods, outcomes for youth are strengthened. **Relationship consistency and duration** should therefore be a significant consideration in planning a mentorship program. The stability of this relationship can decrease rejection sensitive behaviour in youth by providing a setting in which youth feel more comfortable taking risks (Kanchewa et al., 2018).

Establishing trust is key to a successful and lasting mentoring relationship. When this happens, mentors gain access to additional ways of engaging in respect, consistency, and support (Donlan et al., 2017; Pryce, 2012). 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.

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