

Evidence Brief

Seven Approaches to Inform Mentorship Programs for Black Youth

How Did We Compile This Evidence?

We searched YouthREX's Library for Youth Work and searched online databases using the following key terms: "Black youth," "mentoring," "academic achievement," and "employment."

Summary of Evidence: Seven Approaches

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

Organizations can better serve Black youth by adopting a strength-based approach and recognizing their assets. This differs significantly from the deficit-based approach that many organizations and mainstream institutions adopt. Youth organizations can also engage with Black 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 that has failed Black youth" (Baldrige, 2014, p. 467). Train mentors to integrate a strength-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. 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.

3. Raise critical consciousness in Black youth.

Many Black youth 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 strength-based approach; by redefining ‘the problem’ as connected to social issues, mentors and programs can practice a strength-based approach and promote critical consciousness.

4. Inspire hope by emphasizing Black youth's agency, resilience, and potential.

Research shows that Black youth can benefit from *critical consciousness*, but talking about systems of oppression can also leave youth feeling disempowered. Some research shows, for example, that talking excessively about anti-Black racism can cause Black youth to want to distance themselves from identifying as Black. While youth programs should create space for Black youth to talk about their experiences, these messages “must be balanced by a strong emphasis on agency, empowerment, and the overcoming of obstacles” (Briggs, 2018, p. 547).

Organizations should offer a strong, unwavering message of hope and resilience. Youth programs can inspire hope by connecting youth to Black role models who have overcome adversity (Jarjoura, 2013, p. 7). Mentors can support Black 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. Research shows that Black youth can experience improved academic performance, 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 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.

5. Consider a program model 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 tutoring sessions, or helping to connect youth with a tutor outside the program.

6. Expose youth to academic and vocational opportunities.

Youth programs should connect Black youth with both vocational (e.g. trades, employment training) and academic opportunities after high school. It is well-documented that Black youth are disproportionately ‘streamed’ away from pursuing higher education within the mainstream school system. Youth programs can address this by connecting high school youth with Black mentors who have pursued college or university. At the same time, not all Black youth are interested in or able to pursue college or university. Briggs (2018) recently conducted a study of second-generation Caribbean Black youth navigating education and employment in Toronto. The author argues that organizations should offer mentoring programs that “address the issues of racism on daily basis while providing tools and networks to be prepared for the job market” (Briggs, 2018, p. 547) by connecting youth with community organizations and post-secondary training. Briggs (2018) also suggests that Black youth “who are not academically inclined require access to jobs that offer stability, self-esteem, and a living wage” (p. 547).

7. Incorporate opportunities for group mentoring.

There is limited research on the efficacy of different program models for Black youth, but some literature suggests that youth organizations should offer opportunities for group mentoring. 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 can give mentees the opportunity for specialized attention to developing skills and accessing resources that are relevant to their individual goals and needs. 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.

References

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