

# From Treatment to Empowerment: New Approaches to Youth Mentoring

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## KEYWORDS

mentoring, positive youth development, social capital, empowerment, adolescents

## RESEARCH SUMMARY

### DESCRIPTION

Youth mentoring refers to a relationship between a young person and a non-parental adult with more life experience who offers guidance, support, and encouragement.

This paper argues that current models of youth mentoring overemphasize the mentor-youth relationship and do not pay enough attention to the broader relational contexts in which young people live. The authors review the history of youth mentoring which gave rise to this model, and they present a rationale for updating it to shift away from formal one-on-one mentoring relationships.

The proposed approach suggests mobilizing community resources and helping youth identify, connect with, and draw on relationships with adults whom they already know in order to build natural mentoring relationships. This approach recognizes the assets already present in young people's lives, and emphasizes empowering youth by teaching them the skills to seek meaningful connections with supportive adults in their communities.

This new model is relevant to researchers and program managers as it proposes a significant shift from the current model of youth mentorship. This paper does not include practical tips for implementing the new model. However, it does describe various examples which may be valuable for program managers.

### METHODOLOGY

The authors offer a review of mentoring practices and related publications dating back to 1887. They use this review to outline the history and impact of formal mentoring approaches, and present the rationale for their new model. The authors refer to various recent mentoring approaches, based on the principles of positive youth development and developmental systems theory, that attempt to move beyond the formal, one-on-one mentoring relationship model to focus more on the environmental contexts in which young people live.

### KEY FINDINGS

#### Background:

- Formal mentoring as it is known today emerged in the early 1900s in America in the context of widening class divides, with the "Friendly Visitor" campaign and the beginnings of the Big Brothers Big Sisters program.
- This paradigm of a volunteer from a higher socioeconomic background who is disconnected from the mentee's immediate community and forms a supportive

relationship is still present in the most common mentoring models of today.

- In current mentoring models, families and communities are typically not seen as capable of providing support or are often viewed as a risk to the mentor-youth relationship, especially if they are characterized by low socioeconomic status.

- Formal mentoring practices have placed too much emphasis on the individual while underemphasizing the social and environmental contexts of youth. These can provide valuable support in the form of assets already present in the community, including non-parental adults who can become natural mentors.

- The ongoing emphasis on the one-on-one model of mentoring could partially explain the modest effectiveness of formal youth mentoring. Despite more research and establishment of best practices, the impacts on various academic, behavioural, and psychosocial outcomes have not significantly improved over the past few decades. Furthermore, the benefits of participating in a mentoring program tend to almost completely vanish when the mentoring relationship ends, which is usually within 1 to 2 years. There are also high attrition rates and long wait lists.

- Presently, there is a large disparity in access to natural mentoring relationships, with affluent youth being far more likely to gain support from natural mentors. Such mentors can positively shape young people's educational trajectories, amplifying class divides.

- These challenges suggest the need for broadening the model of youth mentoring.

#### **New Framework:**

- According to the authors, the traditional focus on the one-on-one mentoring model "draws our attention away from the profound opportunity gaps and structural inequality, and from the recognition and cultivation of positive resources that may already exist within children's broader environments" (Schwartz & Rhodes, 2016, p. 3).

- The new model of youth mentoring builds on prior models (the family systems approach and social justice-oriented approach to mentoring) and argues for using resources already present in communities where young people live to recognize and strengthen existing connections in youth's lives, as well as develop potential natural mentors in communities, schools, and neighbourhoods.

- Mentoring interventions should empower youth to identify and tap into those connections.

- There are existing examples of youth mentoring approaches that tap into environmental assets. Youth-Initiated Mentoring engages youth in nominating adults they are already familiar with to be their mentors. Once adults are nominated, program staff screen, train, and support the selected mentors. Intentional Mentoring is another example of a model that also aims to increase the availability of potential mentors, drawing upon

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## **ABOUT THIS SUMMARY**

This paper explains the sociological and historical background which gave rise to the most prominent model of youth mentoring, focused on the one-on-one mentor-youth relationship. It argues for updating this model to focus on strengthening the network of supportive adults that young people have access to and empowering youth to reach out to and cultivate these connections.

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adults already active in schools, after-school programs, and summer camps.

#### **WHY THIS MATTERS**

This new approach reflects a paradigm shift in how youth mentorship is understood. It is primarily intended to inform youth mentorship researchers. However, practitioners and program managers may find the examples of innovative mentoring practices valuable, along with the recommendation to not underemphasize the value of existing community assets and intergenerational connections.

“Importantly, it is the interaction or fit between the availability of potential mentors and youth’s capacity to take advantage of their presence that leads to youth reaping the benefits of mentoring relationships.”

Schwartz & Rhodes, 2016, p. 5).

#### **RECAP**

The proposed model of youth mentoring focuses on tapping into the existing environmental assets that surround young people in their communities. It advocates for empowering youth to identify and reach out to supportive adults in their contexts, as well as build on the connections they already have.

#### **APA CITATION**

Schwartz, S. E. O., & Rhodes, J. E. (2016). From Treatment to Empowerment: New Approaches to Youth Mentoring. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 0, 1-8.