

Evidence Brief

Four Promising Practices to Inform Mentorship Programs Supporting Challenged Academically-Driven Youth

How Did We Compile This Evidence?

We searched YouthREX's online Knowledge Hub, Google Scholar, and Google using the following key terms: "support," "academically driven," "youth," "challenging/high-risk," "protective factors," and "mentor."

Definition of Key Terms

Academically-driven youth are high-achieving individuals who are self-motivated to excel in school. **Challenges outside of the classroom** could include experiences of discrimination/marginalization, isolation, poverty, trauma, disruptive family life, and mental health issues, such as anxiety, depression or other emotional/behavioural challenges.

Summary of Evidence: Four Promising Practices

1. Recruit mentors (adults and peers) with key characteristics for 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.

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. Youth programs can inspire hope by connecting youth to mentors who have overcome adversity (Jarjoura, 2013).

Research shows that **peer mentoring relationships** are more successful when a peer mentor is perceived as both credible and relatable (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.

2. Create an inclusive, supportive, and engaging learning environment.

School communities must **celebrate the strengths and interests of all students**, including those who experience challenges outside of the classroom, as well as provide **culturally-relevant supports**. The results of one study (Taylor, 2016) suggest that even small increases in student engagement can have significant impact on a young person's likelihood of graduating. In this way, **targeted supports** can help to close the achievement gap (Taylor, 2016).

Students are more likely to succeed if they perceive their school atmosphere as conducive to learning, believe educators are interested in their pursuits, receive practical teaching, and feel valuable and included in the learning atmosphere (McGaha-Garnett, 2007). Youth are able to communicate with educators and other school personnel when they feel empowered, and can then take ownership of their behaviours, allowing them to adapt to different teaching styles and to varying expectations (Way, 2010).

Effective educators mindfully work to identify and remove barriers to student engagement and address challenges in order to better support young people in **building a connection to the school community** so that they have the support necessary to persevere through to graduation (Taylor, 2016; Weghlage et al., 1989).

Educators have a responsibility in influencing students' academic and psychological health, either positively or negatively, given the considerable amount of time that they spend with students. Educators are encouraged to provide multiple pathways for students to participate in school activities in order to build meaningful relationships with school adults and peers (Taylor, 2016; see also practice 4, below). In order to facilitate connectedness and build social capital (the "web of networks, norms, and trusting relationships that enable people to address community issues through collective action" (Flanagan et al., 2014, p. 296)), educators should strive to build personal connections with youth, and foster a safe, welcoming space where youth feel valued.

3. Invest in young people's academic goals and provide space for youth to grow and change.

Educators who demonstrate **high positive academic and behaviour expectations** for all students are more successful; by pushing students to excel in areas of academic, social or athletic strength, educators can use successes to build students' understanding that ability is not a static trait and that growth is always possible (Taylor, 2016).

Mentors working from a strength-based approach should provide feedback to 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).

4. Facilitate or support youth engagement in volunteer, extracurricular, and employment opportunities.

Emphasizing both academic and **non-academic goals** can benefit young people who experience challenges outside of the classroom. For example, researchers learned that the academic experiences of youth with emotional/behavioural challenges were improved when those young people engaged in placement or employment opportunities (Chung, 2017).

Some academically-driven youth may face isolation, resulting in depression or anxiety; this could derive from a limited capacity to connect with peers or avoidance to connecting with those who do not share their goals or aspirations. **Without a sense of connectedness, students are more likely to adapt a pessimistic attitude toward their personal goals.** Volunteering provides an opportunity for youth to build **social capital** (Handy & Greenspan, 2009), and young people who volunteer report higher levels of perceived social support, feeling that “there were people they could go to for help” (Flanagan et al., 2014, p. 306).

Involvement in extra-curricular activities can be affected by many factors, including economic status, parental support or access to transportation (Way, 2010), but a high level of connectedness can result in an increase in extra-curricular involvement, building bonds between students and the school community (Way, 2010).

These opportunities outside of the classroom can contribute to a young person’s learning by **emphasizing healthy relationships, social identity, social justice, a sense of belongingness and community, and meaningful purpose** (Chung, 2017), and can influence school engagement and academic performance in association with **higher self-confidence** (Chung, 2017). Community involvement can therefore be an effective way to support students to further their education (McGaha-Garnett, 2007). Youth especially benefit from engagement in activities when those activities are understood to be meaningful (Armstrong & Manion, 2013).

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