



## Connecting Youth:

# The Role of Mentoring Approach

**“...what happens in mentoring matters and ... fostering a close relationship with a mentee, while necessary, may not be sufficient to promote youth connection beyond the relationship with the mentor. Rather, active and explicit attempts at expanding youth’s networks may be necessary to influence youth connection outcomes” (p. 2426).**

### 1. What is the research about?

The Mentoring Enhancement Demonstration Program (MEDP) was designed to pinpoint what actions mentors could engage in to improve social connections (beyond those developed between the mentor and mentee) and youth outcomes overall.

**Community-based mentoring**, formal mentoring that matches adult mentors with youth mentees, who meet regularly at an agreed upon time and location, has been shown to improve academic, behavioural, social, and psychological outcomes for youth. This results from the improvement of **social connections**, or the level of connectedness youth feel to their communities and the people in their lives. Evidence has shown that youth who engage in community-based mentoring are more willing to seek help, decrease “high-risk behaviours” (p. 2410, such as drug and alcohol use, “delinquent” behaviour, and physical aggression), improve coping and resilience, improve academic attendance and performance, and have a sense of belongingness.

While research has been heavily focused on developing mentor-mentee relationships, there is little evaluation as to what specific activities a mentor should emphasize or focus on to increase the social connections that can improve outcomes for the mentee.

### 2. Where did the research take place?

The MEDP took place across 12 states in the United States, in 23 youth mentoring programs that comprised local community-based and national mentoring organizations.

### 3. Who is this research about?

The research involved youth mentees and adult mentors, specifically:

- **766 youth** between the ages of 11-14. The majority of participants identified as Black/African American (41%), Hispanic/Latinx (21.4%), and white (20%), with 56.7% identifying as female and 43% identifying as male.
- **766 mentors** between the ages of 18-77. The majority of participants identified as white (55.7%), with 17.9% identifying as Black/African American and 10.4% identifying as Hispanic/Latinx; 56.9% identified as female and 40.1% identified as male.

### 4. How was the research done?

Mentees were asked to complete an initial survey (a **baseline survey**) at the beginning of program enrollment. The survey questions assessed the quality of their parental/caregiver relationship, their involvement in extracurricular activities, their closeness to important adults in their lives who are not their parents/caregivers, their attitudes towards seeking help from others, and demographic information. Mentors also completed a baseline survey that only included questions about their demographics.

The mentees were then paired with mentors who shared common interests, and many were paired with mentors of the same race. The mentees were also randomly allocated to either standard mentor programs or to ‘enhanced’ programs that consisted of increased mentor training focused on advocacy, support, and activities that were tailored to the needs and interests of their mentees.

After 12 months, the mentees and mentors were asked to complete a **follow-up survey**. The mentor survey comprised questions assessing their **connecting behaviours**: how they advocate for their mentee, and the quality or closeness of the mentor-mentee relationship. Mentees completed a follow-up survey that asked the same questions as the initial survey.

The **survey results were then assessed and categorized** into three mentor profiles describing closeness and levels of connecting and/or mediating connections in mentor-mentee relationships.

## 5. What are the key findings?

The researchers created **three mentor profiles**:

### i) Status Quo Mentors

Mentors who have low-to-moderate closeness with mentees and low levels of connecting and mediating.

### ii) Close Connector Mentors

Mentors who have moderate-to-high closeness with mentees and low levels of connecting and mediating.

### iii) Connector-Mediator Mentors

Mentors who have moderate closeness with mentees and moderate levels of connecting and mediating.

Across the three profiles, researchers found that there was **an overall increase** in the level of extracurricular activities that the mentees engaged in between the initial and follow-up surveys.

However, mentees of Status Quo Mentors had **no change** in any connections (parents/caregivers and important adults) or in help-seeking behaviours. Mentees of Connector-Mediator Mentors showed **more of an increase** in involvement in extracurricular activities than those of Status Quo Mentors, but **no improvement** in their connections. **Close Connector Mentors offered the best outcomes**, with their mentees reporting **significant improvements** in involvement in extracurricular activities, parent/caregiver relationships, help-seeking behaviours, and closeness to important adults. These results were relevant regardless of demographic differences among mentees.

## 6. Why does it matter for youth work?

The research confirms that certain approaches to youth mentoring are more impactful than others in developing social connections beyond the mentor-mentee relationship. Placing more emphasis on **establishing a stronger connection** between the mentee and mentor can provide young people with an “anchor” (p. 2423) that they can use to help establish other more meaningful connections in their lives.

Youth workers often take on this mentoring role and can work towards improving social connections for their participants through:

- **providing support** to youth and **reinforcing the value of the relationship** to the mentee;
- **modelling healthy behaviours**, such as reaching out for assistance when needed and indicating that it is acceptable to do so;
- **being engaged** in the mentee’s hobbies and interests; and
- **encouraging participation** in extracurricular activities within the mentee’s community.



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