



The Equity Model for Youth Mentoring: Strategies for Supporting Youth Experiencing Marginalization

This Evidence Brief describes the Equity Model for youth mentoring, which builds on three foundational mentoring models. A summary of the evidence outlines 14 practice-based strategies for building equity-focused mentoring relationships with youth experiencing marginalization.

The resource is developed from two articles by Grace Gowdy, Aisha N. Griffith, and Kristian V. Jones – [Why Not All Three? Combining the Keller, Rhodes, and Spencer Models Two Decades Later to Equitably Support the Health and Well-Being of Minoritized Youth in Mentoring Programs](#) (2024) and [Youth Mentoring as a Means of Supporting Mental Health for Minoritized Youth: A Reflection on Three Theoretical Frameworks 20 Years Later](#) (2024).

TWO KEY MESSAGES

01. Traditional mentoring models need to evolve to address the intersecting inequities that shape the lives of youth experiencing marginalization.

Over the past two decades, three theoretical models have shaped the field of youth mentoring:

i) The **systemic model**, developed by Tom Keller, situates the mentoring relationship within a broader network of relationships – including parents/caregivers, program staff, and mentors – emphasizing the interconnected nature of relationships and their influence on mentoring outcomes. It proposes that the success of a youth's mentoring experience is tied to the quality of these secondary relationships.

ii) The **mechanisms of mentoring model**, developed by Jean Rhodes, explores how youth mentoring relationships lead to positive developmental outcomes by focusing on the specific mental health and developmental needs of youth.

iii) The **relational processes model**, developed by Renee Spencer, focuses on the dynamics within the mentor-mentee relationship itself, identifying four core relational processes essential to successful mentoring: *authenticity, empathy, collaboration, and companionship*.

While each model offers valuable insight into effective mentoring, they were developed in contexts that did not fully account for how youth are affected by systemic forces such as racism, poverty, homophobia, ableism, and settler colonialism. In response, Gowdy, Jones, and Griffith (2024) call for a critical re-examination of the foundational frameworks to suggest an “updated conceptual model of youth mentoring that centers issues of equity and social justice” (p. 1211).

The authors propose a new **Equity Model** that integrates **healing-centered engagement**, which prioritizes the strengths and resilience of youth over deficit-based understandings of trauma, and a **strengths-based** approach that views young people as experts in their own lives. The model also draws on the concept of **community cultural wealth**, which highlights the aspirational, familial, linguistic, and navigational knowledge that youth carry with them into mentoring spaces. This model reframes mentoring as a **collaborative** and **reciprocal process** that affirms youth identity and values youth voice.

The Equity Model emphasizes that mentors and mentoring programs should shift from a **saviour mentality** to “one in which they are collaborating to build mentees’ sense of power in an inequitable world” (p. 1351). It also highlights the mutual benefits of mentoring: youth gain identity support and access to opportunities, while mentors deepen their cultural humility and sociopolitical awareness through cross-cultural relationships. The model is meant to be a guide to mentors, mentoring programs, families, communities, and even young people themselves, who are interested in being active participants in the mentoring process.

The Equity Model is grounded in the recognition that young people do not experience challenges in isolation. Rather, **youth navigate complex structural conditions**, including racism, displacement, poverty, and discrimination, that directly impact their mental health and overall wellbeing. This model calls on mentors and mentoring programs to acknowledge these realities and to approach their work with an explicit commitment to equity.

02. Mentorship models must be living, adaptable tools that can evolve in response to the changing needs of youth, rather than final constructs.

The Equity Model challenges the notion that mentoring frameworks should be static. The authors describe the Equity Model as a *living and flexible framework*. It is one that can be revised, reshaped, and reimagined in response to the shifting needs of youth. The model is designed to act as a guide that encourages continuous reflection, responsiveness, and collaboration between youth, mentors, and program leaders. It invites mentors to critically examine their own positionality, values, and biases, and to remain open to growth alongside the young people they support. In doing so, the Equity Model repositions mentoring as a reciprocal and relational process rather than a top-down intervention. As youth face new and emerging challenges – including digital surveillance, environmental instability, and rising political polarization – mentoring programs must be responsive to their needs.

SUMMARY OF EVIDENCE: 14 STRATEGIES FOR SUPPORTING YOUTH EXPERIENCING MARGINALIZATION

01. Provide cultural humility and anti-racist, anti-oppressive practice training to mentors.

Youth-serving organizations should equip mentors with the knowledge, tools, and self-awareness to engage respectfully with youth from diverse backgrounds. This includes **understanding their own biases**, **practicing cultural humility**, and **developing the confidence to advocate for equity**, both within the mentoring relationship and in broader systems.

02. Train mentors to develop relational competencies.

Mentors should receive training grounded in research on relational practices and trauma-informed care. **Trust, empathy, collaboration,** and **emotional connection** are foundational to successful mentoring. Programs should integrate an emphasis on **authenticity, empathy, collaboration,** and **companionship,** as outlined in the relational processes model. This will enable mentors to build strong, trust-based relationships that are **emotionally safe** and **growth-oriented,** particularly for youth who have experienced marginalization. Mentors must be supported in developing these relational processes to build meaningful, lasting relationships with youth.

03. Integrate healing-centered engagement into mentoring practice.

Shift the focus from trauma to **resilience** and **empowerment,** helping mentees see themselves as **agents of change** in their own lives. Healing-centered engagement acknowledges trauma while focusing on restoring **identity, culture,** and **community** as sources of strength.

04. Adopt a strengths-based approach to mentorship.

Rather than focusing on what youth may lack or the trauma they have experienced, mentors should prioritize their **aspirations, talents,** and **cultural assets.** This reframes the mentoring process as one of empowerment, where youth are seen as capable agents in their own development.

05. Recognize and celebrate the community cultural wealth youth bring into mentoring spaces.

Equity-focused mentoring should acknowledge and build on the **diverse forms of knowledge and resilience** that youth already carry. Leveraging the unique cultural resources within communities experiencing marginalization is important, such as **familial, navigational,** and **aspirational** capital, to support mentees' development and wellbeing. Programs can make this shift by inviting youth to share their stories, embracing multilingual communication and honoring cultural practices.

06. Empower youth voice.

Programs should encourage mentees to take an active role in their mentoring relationships, such as setting goals or participating in program planning through advisory boards.

07. Promote identity development.

Support mentees in affirming their cultural, racial, and gender identities. Doing so helps youth build a **strong sense of self,** which serves as a protective factor in the face of systemic challenges and discrimination.

08. Tailor mentoring programs to youth's specific contexts and needs.

Tailor mentoring programs to address the unique needs of youth based on their **cultural, developmental,** and **social** contexts. Effective mentorship must consider the intersecting factors that shape a youth's lived experience, such as their cultural background, socio-economic status, community location, or experiences with systems like child welfare or immigration. A one-size-fits-all approach will not work!

09. Expand mentees' networks to foster the development of social capital.

Youth workers should help mentees grow their networks by connecting them with new **resources**, **opportunities**, and **people**, fostering their growth and independence, and helping them achieve their goals. This could include introductions to employers, community leaders, post-secondary programs, or advocacy spaces.

10. Encourage mentors to see themselves as allies, not saviours.

Equity-focused mentoring requires a shift away from *saviourism*. Mentors must see themselves as allies walking alongside youth, rather than as rescuers or fixers. This looks like valuing youth agency and working in partnership with young people to navigate systems.

11. Highlight the reciprocal benefits of mentoring for both mentors and mentees.

Emphasize that mentoring is a **two-way relationship**, where both mentors and mentees can learn and grow from the experience. While youth gain access to resources and support, mentors also benefit by developing deeper cultural awareness, refining their leadership skills, and expanding their own capacity for empathy and social justice work.

12. Involve families and communities.

Drawing from the systemic model, effective mentoring recognizes that youth exist within a **network of relationships**. Programs should intentionally engage families, caregivers, and other community stakeholders from the design phase through implementation and evaluation. This **collective approach** helps build a supportive ecosystem around youth and enhances program impact.

13. Advocate for systemic change.

Mentors and mentoring programs should not only support youth at the individual level but also recognize and challenge the systems that produce inequity. This includes advocating for policies and structural changes that address racism, poverty, displacement, ableism, and other systemic barriers affecting youth.

14. Use outcome-based frameworks grounded in youth-defined success.

The mechanisms of mentoring model highlights the developmental outcomes of mentoring, such as **identity development**, **emotional growth**, and **cognitive gains**. Programs should use this approach while also **incorporating youth-defined metrics of success**, allowing youth to articulate what meaningful growth looks like for them. This ensures that evaluation reflects youth priorities.

REFERENCES

- Gowdy, G., Jones, K., & Griffith, A. N. (2024). [Youth mentoring as a means of supporting mental health for minoritized youth: A reflection on three theoretical frameworks 20 years later](#). *Youth*, 4(3), 1211–1223.
- Jones, K. V., Gowdy, G., & Griffith, A. N. (2024). [Why not all three? Combining the Keller, Rhodes, and Spencer models two decades later to equitably support the health and well-being of minoritized youth in mentoring programs](#). *Youth*, 4(3), 1348–1363.