Prev Res. Author manuscript; available in PMC: 2013 Dec 26.
Published in final edited form as: Prev Res. 2012 Apr 1;19(2):17–20.

Mentoring Relationships and Adolescent Self-Esteem

Sarah E O Schwartz, Sarah R Lowe, Jean E Rhodes

PMCID: PMC3873158 NIHMSID: NIHMS438739 PMID: 24376310

It is estimated that three million youth in the United States are in formal mentoring relationships in which volunteers are matched with children and adolescents, and this number continues to rise (MENTOR/National Mentoring Partnership, 2006). Many more youth have meaningful, natural mentoring relationships with extended family members, teachers, neighbors, coaches, and other caring non-parental adults. Anecdotal accounts of mentoring relationships and their life-transforming effects on young people abound in the media, including stories of caring adults helping young people to discover their strengths and, in doing so, enhance their feelings of self-esteem and confidence. But how does the research bear on this topic? Below, we review the highlights of this research, first discussing different approaches to youth mentoring and then summarizing the research on (1) the effects of mentoring relationships on self-esteem, (2) factors that predict variation in relationship effectiveness, and (3) the processes through which these relationships exert such effects.

APPROACHES TO YOUTH MENTORING

Youth mentoring is generally defined as a trusting relationship between a young person and an older, more experienced non-parental figure who provides guidance, support, and encouragement to the mentee (DuBois & Karcher, 2005). A range of relationships, from those that develop naturally to those that are formally created through community- and school-based programs, fall under this definition.

Natural Mentors

Natural mentoring relationships typically arise within social networks, and are characterized by bonds between older, more experienced adults and younger protégés. These relationships are typically between youth and extended family members, such as uncles, aunts, grandparents and godparents, but extend to neighbors, teachers, afterschool providers, guidance counselors, church members, and other caring adults. Natural mentors often provide ongoing guidance, instruction, and encouragement, facilitating the adolescents' transition into adulthood. Unfortunately, many youth do not readily find older, supportive adults beyond the boundaries of their household. Several factors, including overcrowded schools, parental concerns about safety, and an overall loss of community cohesiveness and social capital have dramatically reduced the availability of caring adults and restricted their opportunities for informal contact with youth. To address the needs of youth who lack attention from caring adults, people are increasingly turning to volunteer mentoring programs. There is a wide range of approaches to this more formal youth mentoring, but the two most common are community- and school-based programs. In addition, mentoring is being increasingly integrated into other programs for youth.

Community-Based Mentoring Programs

Many mentoring programs are community-based, wherein program personnel match volunteer mentors with at-risk youth. Mentors and youth generally meet on a weekly basis, with each mentor-youth pair choosing where and when to meet (e.g., Karcher, 2005). Community-based mentoring programs typically ask mentors to commit to mentoring for a minimum of one year. Community-based mentoring programs exist across the country, ranging from organizations such as Big Brothers Big Sisters (BBBS), which serves thousands of youth nationwide, to local programs founded by local businesses or community organizations. Some programs target at-risk youth in general, while others are tailored to specific groups of youth, such as juvenile offenders and youth in foster care.

School-Based Mentoring Programs

Beyond community-based mentoring programs, other mentoring programs are integrated into schools. School-based mentoring is currently the fastest growing form of mentoring in the United States (DuBois & Karcher, 2005). In school-based mentoring programs, mentors meet with youth during or after school in the school building and often provide academic assistance in addition to emotional support, guidance, and companionship. Such relationships tend to be shorter than community-based mentoring relationships, due to their being confined to the academic year.

Integration of Mentoring Within Other Youth Services

Just as mentoring programs have been integrated into schools, they have also, albeit to a lesser degree, been integrated into other programs that serve youth, including after-school programs, summer camps, competitive sports teams, church youth groups, and other positive youth development programs. These additional contexts represent rich opportunities for the formation of strong intergenerational ties. Adults in these settings are often afforded ongoing opportunities to engage youth in the sorts of informal conversations and enjoyable activities that can give rise to close bonds. For example, religious communities often provide ongoing encouragement and mentoring through youth outreach and services. Since social policies in general, and mentoring programs in particular, often do not reach or support the most severely disadvantaged youth, churches often play a critical supportive role. This is particularly true in urban, black churches, which tend to be particularly active in their communities and participate in a wide range of community programs. In addition to informal relationships forged through faith-based communities, a large number of formal mentoring programs are also faith-based, either taking place in or being sponsored by a religious organization.

MENTORING AND SELF-ESTEEM

Self-esteem is generally defined as an individual's overall evaluation of his or her self. Studies indicate that low self-esteem in adolescence is associated with a range of negative outcomes, including poorer mental and physical health, decreased economic prospects, and increased levels of criminal behavior (e.g., Trzesniewski et al., 2006). Relationships, and particularly the emotional support and social approval derived from relationships, appear to play a key role in the development of self-esteem (Harter, 1990). Theories in psychology propose that self-esteem derives from close attachment relationships in which children receive empathy, care, and praise from idealized others (e.g., Kohut, 1977). Although this process often takes place in the context of relationships with parents or primary caretakers, this process can also occur with others, including peers, teachers, therapists, or mentors. In fact, the nature of mentoring relationships, emphasizing a close, caring, and supportive relationship between an adolescent and a non-parental adult, may be particularly well-suited to developing adolescents' self-esteem.

A number of studies have examined the impact of mentoring relationships on adolescents' self-esteem. Longitudinal research on natural mentoring relationships indicates that adolescents who report having an important non-parental adult in their lives tend to report greater psychological well-being, including self-esteem and life satisfaction (DuBois & Silverthorn, 2005). In addition, controlled studies of formal mentoring programs suggest that mentoring relationships can have a positive impact on self-esteem. A meta-analysis of 73 evaluations of youth mentoring programs indicated that, although the effect of mentoring programs across a broad range of outcomes (including self-esteem) was generally not large, there was a statistically significant positive influence (DuBois et al., 2011). In another meta-analysis of three large-scale, random assignment evaluations of school-based mentoring programs, the impact on

global self-esteem did not reach statistical significance. However, mentoring had a significant positive impact on adolescents' perception of their academic abilities, which constitutes a specific aspect of self-esteem that is particularly important for adolescents' academic achievement (Wheeler, Keller, & DuBois, 2010). In sum, evidence suggests that mentoring can be an effective strategy for increasing youth self-esteem.

VARIATION IN THE IMPACTS OF MENTORING RELATIONSHIPS

Although the majority of research has focused on the positive effects of mentoring relationships, it is of utmost importance to also examine the possible risks of such relationships. In particular, multiple studies suggest that mentoring relationships that terminate prematurely or relationships in which mentors attend inconsistently may actually have a negative impact on adolescents' self-esteem (DuBois et al., 2011; Grossman & Rhodes, 2002; Karcher, 2005). As noted earlier, relationships play an important role in influencing self-esteem. While this means close and enduring mentoring relationships can positively influence self-esteem, it also means that relationships have the potential to decrease self-esteem. Children and adolescents whose mentors attend inconsistently or simply disappear from their lives may feel rejected and make negative self-appraisals of their likeability or self-worth (Grossman, Chan, Schwartz, & Rhodes, in press; Grossman & Rhodes, 2002; Karcher, 2005). Moreover, since adolescence tends to be a time of fluctuating sense of self (Harter, 1990), adolescents may be especially vulnerable to the negative effects of relationships that do not live up to their expectations. For mentoring programs that target relationally vulnerable youth (e.g., youth from single-parent households, youth in foster care), it is particularly important to consider the potential for negative effects.

In light of research demonstrating the capacity for some mentoring relationships to have negative effects on self-esteem, it is necessary to identify relationship characteristics that maximize the positive effects of mentoring and minimize the potential for negative effects. Below, we highlight three characteristics of mentoring relationships that may influence the effectiveness of mentoring in increasing adolescent self-esteem.

Relationship Intensity

Studies of both informal and formal mentoring have emphasized the importance of relationship intensity, indicated by how often mentors and youth spend time together. As noted earlier, consistent contact can result in increased self-esteem while inconsistent contact can result in decreased self-esteem (Karcher, 2005). Frequency of contact has also been associated with other positive youth outcomes. Regular contact can lead to greater time spent engaging in beneficial activities, the provision of emotional and instrumental support, and deeper involvement of the adult in the youth's social network (DuBois,

Neville, et al., 2002). This involvement, in turn, may enhance the mentee's feelings of security and attachment in interpersonal relationships.

Relationship Duration

Relationship duration represents another key determinant of effectiveness. For example, in a reanalysis of the BBBS community- based mentoring programs, Grossman and Rhodes (2002) found that positive effects on youth outcomes became progressively stronger as relationships persisted for longer periods of time. Even after correcting for selection bias, relative to controls, youth whose relationships terminated within a year appeared to derive the fewest benefits, and those in particularly short matches, terminating within the first 3 to 6 months, actually suffered declines in reported levels of feelings of self-worth and perceived scholastic competence. For youth who were in matches that lasted more than a year, however, positive effects were evident on levels of self-worth, perceived social acceptance and scholastic competence, parental relationship quality, school value, and levels of both drug and alcohol use. Research on school-based mentoring also indicated that youth in relationships that remained intact at the end of the school year showed significant academic improvement, while youth in matches that terminated prematurely showed no impact (Grossman, Chan, Schwartz, & Rhodes, in press). Likewise, natural mentor relationships that endure for multiple years have the strongest effects (DuBois & Silverthorn, 2005).

Relationship Quality

It is likely that, over time, mentors and youth develop emotional closeness, and that such bonds drive the positive effects of mentoring on mentored youth. Research to date has shown that quality of the mentoring relationship predicts social and academic adjustment (e.g., DuBois, Neville, et al., 2002; DuBois & Silverthorn, 2005). Mentors' acceptance and attunement, as well as their ability to adapt their approach based on their mentee's needs, are important indicators of relationship quality and effectiveness. Moreover, relationships that are youth-centered, as opposed to being driven primarily by the interests or expectations of the mentor, have been found to predict greater relationship quality, as well as improving youth's other relationships with adults (Rhodes et al., 2005). A youth-driven approach, however, needs to be balanced with structure and goals. Favorable outcomes are most likely to occur when youth experience both structure and support from their mentors (Langhout, Rhodes, & Osborne, 2004).

THE ROLE OF PROGRAM PRACTICE

Programs that offer adequate infrastructure increase the likelihood that relationships can endure difficult periods. In fact, research indicates that program practices that support the mentor and relationship (e.g., matching on the basis of shared interest, training mentors, offering structured activities for mentors and youth, having high expectations for frequency of contact, and monitoring of overall program implementation) produce stronger positive effects (DuBois, Holloway, et al., 2002; DuBois et al., 2011). These practices, which encompass the program's capacity not only to match mentors and youth, but also to sustain those matches, converge with the beneficial practices identified by other researchers. Unfortunately, moving youth off long waitlists can sometimes take priority over creating high-quality matches. Even among the growing number of programs with careful recruitment, screening, and matching, a relatively smaller proportion devote themselves to in-depth training of volunteers or ongoing support to the mentors. Cost, combined with a general reluctance to make demands on volunteers, is the primary obstacle to providing more sustained involvement and infrastructure beyond the initial match (Rhodes & DuBois, 2006).

The National Mentoring Organization provides a set of research-based best practice guidelines, referred to as the *Elements of Effective Practice for Mentoring,* which provides standards for recruitment, screening, training, matching, monitoring and support, and closure and is publicly available (MENTOR, 2009). Moreover, evidence-based mentor training programs have been developed to maximize the positive influence of mentors on their mentees and minimize potentially problematic mentor practices and beliefs (Kupersmidt & Rhodes, in press). For example, research suggests that unrealistic expectations on the part of the mentor can often contribute to premature termination. Mentor training can be used to help mentors acquire more realistic expectations for their relationships. Such developments represent an important step in identifying key program practices that contribute to positive youth outcomes and in bridging research and practice (see Table 4.1 for recommended program practices).

Table 4.1.

Recommendations for Mentoring Programs: Practices which Contribute to Positive Youth Outcomes[1]

Recruitment	Realistically describe the mentoring program's aims and expected outcomes to potential mentors and mentees, including the benefits and the challenges
Screening	Screen prospective mentors to determine whether they have the time, commitment, and personal qualities to be an effective mentor • Include reference check, background check, and commitment of a minimum of one (calendar or school) year with a minimum of one hour per week face-to-face meeting
Training	Provide mentor training covering basic knowledge and skills to build an effective mentoring relationship • Cover rules, responsibilities and appropriate roles; relationship development, maintenance, and closure; available mentor support and resources; and potential ethical issues that may arise
Matching	Match mentors and mentees based on characteristics likely to increase relationship duration (such as interests, proximity, availability, age, gender, race, ethnicity, personality, and expressed preferences)
Monitoring and Support	Provide ongoing monitoring and support for mentor relationships • Include regular contact with mentor and mentee; support, advice and provision of resources; and structured activities for mentors and mentees
Closure	Facilitate closures in a way that affirms contributions of mentor and mentee and allows for the opportunity to assess the experience and process related feelings • Include procedures to manage both anticipated and unanticipated closures

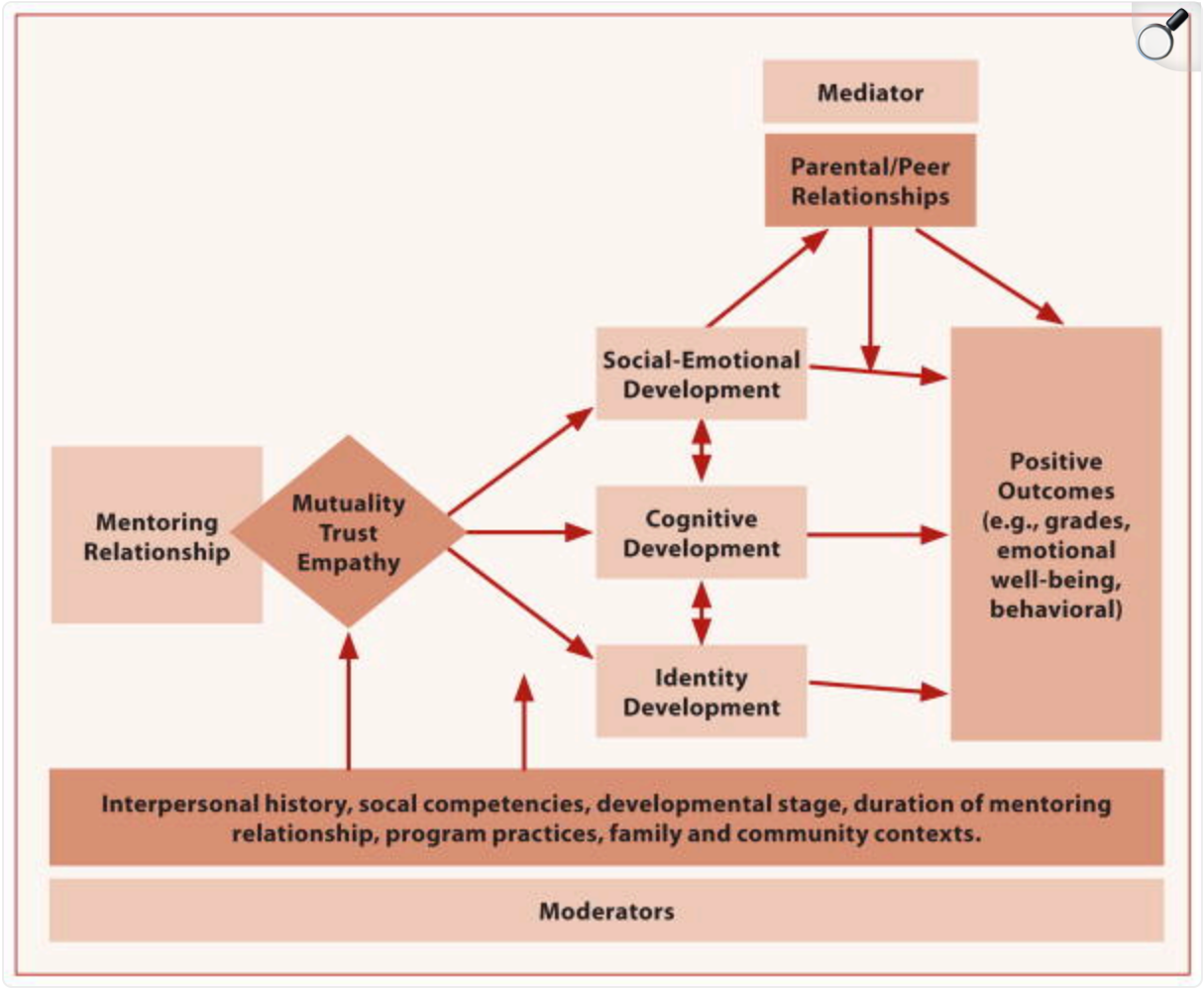
Open in a new tab

[1]Adapted from *Elements of Effective Practice for Mentoring,* 3rd Edition (MENTOR, 2009)

PROCESSES

Based on empirical and theoretical literature, Rhodes (2005) has proposed a model that delineates several processes and conditions presumed to be important for understanding the effects of mentoring relationships on youth (see Figure 4.1). This model suggests that high-quality mentoring relationships exert their effects on academic, behavioral, and psychological outcomes through three interrelated domains of adolescent development: social-emotional development, cognitive development, and identity development. These domains are thought to mutually influence each other, such that improvements in one domain could facilitate improvements in the two others. For example, increased self-esteem and particularly self-perception of academic abilities can also contribute to cognitive and identity development. In addition, the social-emotional benefits of mentoring are assumed to lead to improvements in parental and peer relationships, which in turn influence positive outcomes in a range of other areas. Notably, however, these positive impacts all depend on a foundation of mutuality, trust, and empathy within the mentoring relationship.

Figure 4.1.



Open in a new tab

A Model of the Processes through which Mentoring Relationships Influence Youth

CONCLUSIONS

Close and enduring relationships may have a unique capacity to influence youth self-esteem. By connecting youth with a stable and supportive relationship with a caring non-parental adult, mentoring programs can provide a context in which adolescents can develop self-esteem and confidence in their abilities. These are important youth assets that are associated with positive psychological, behavioral, and academic outcomes. At the same time, mentoring relationships can have a negative impact on youth self-esteem if such relationships are inconsistent or terminate prematurely. Programs play an important

role in fostering high quality mentoring relationships, through careful screening practices, evidence-based training, and ongoing monitoring and support of mentoring relationships. A deeper understanding of mentoring relationships, combined with high-quality programs, enriched settings, and a better integration of research, practice, and policy will better position programs to harness the full potential of youth mentoring.

Biographies

Sarah E. O. Schwartz is currently a fourth year doctoral student in clinical psychology at the University of Massachusetts Boston. She also has a Masters in Education from the Harvard Graduate School of Education and has taught at the middle school and high school level in New York and Boston Public Schools. Her research interests include risk and protective factors in adolescent development and prevention and intervention programs for youth, with a particular focus on mentoring relationships.

Sarah R. Lowe is a sixth year doctoral student in clinical psychology at the University of Massachusetts Boston, and is currently completing her predoctoral internship at Weill Cornell Medical Center/New York Presbyterian Hospital. Her research interests include positive adaptation over the transition to adulthood and resilience after traumatic events.

Jean E. Rhodes (Jean.Rhodes@umb.edu) is a Professor of Psychology at the University of Massachusetts Boston. Rhodes has devoted her career to understanding the role of intergenerational relationships in the lives of disadvantaged youth. She has published three books, four edited volumes, and over 100 chapters and peer-reviewed articles on topics related to positive youth development, the transition to adulthood, and mentoring. Rhodes is a Fellow in the American Psychological Association and the Society for Research and Community Action, and a Distinguished Fellow of the William T. Grant Foundation. She sits on the Board of Directors of the National Mentoring Partnership, the advisory boards of over a dozen mentoring and policy organizations, and the editorial board of several journals in community and adolescent psychology.

References

1. DuBois DL, Holloway BE, Valentine JC, Cooper H. Effectiveness of mentoring programs for youth: A meta-analytic review. American Journal of Community Psychology. 2002;30:157–197. doi: 10.1023/A:1014628810714. [DOI] [PubMed] [Google Scholar]

2. DuBois DL, Karcher M. Youth mentoring: Research, theory, and practice. In: Dubois DL, Karcher ML, editors. Handbook of Youth Mentoring. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage; 2005. pp. 2–11. [Google Scholar]

3. DuBois DL, Neville HA, Parra GR, Pugh-Lilly AO. Testing a new model of mentoring. In: Noam GG, Rhodes JE, editors. A Critical View of Youth Mentoring. Vol. 93. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass; 2002. pp. 21–57. [DOI] [PubMed] [Google Scholar]

4. DuBois DL, Portillo N, Rhodes JE, Silverthorn N, Valentine JC. How effective are mentoring programs for youth? A systematic assessment of the evidence. Psychological Science in the Public Interest. 2011;12:57–91. doi: 10.1177/1529100611414806. [DOI] [PubMed] [Google Scholar]

5. DuBois DL, Silverthorn N. Characteristics of natural mentoring relationships and adolescent adjustment: Evidence from a national study. Journal of Primary Prevention. 2005;26:69–92. doi: 10.1007/s10935-005-1832-4. [DOI] [PubMed] [Google Scholar]

6. Grossman JB, Chan C, Schwartz S, Rhodes JE. The test of time in school- based mentoring: The role of relationship duration and re-matching on academic outcomes. American Journal of Community Psychology. doi: 10.1007/s10464-011-9435-0. (in press) [DOI] [PubMed] [Google Scholar]

7. Grossman JB, Rhodes JE. The test of time: Predictors and effects of duration in youth mentoring programs. American Journal of Community Psychology. 2002;30:199–206. doi: 10.1023/A:1014680827552. [DOI] [PubMed] [Google Scholar]

8. Harter S. Self and identity development. In: Feldman SS, Elliott GR, editors. At the Threshold: The Developing Adolescent. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; 1990. pp. 352–387. [Google Scholar]

9. Karcher MJ. The effects of developmental mentoring and high school mentors' attendance on their younger mentees' self-esteem, social skills, and connectedness. Psychology in the Schools. 2005;42:65–77. doi: 10.1002/pits.20025. [DOI] [Google Scholar]

10. Kohut H. The Restoration of the Self. Madison, CT: International Universities Press; 1977. [Google Scholar]

11. Kupersmidt J, Rhodes J. Mentor training and support. In: DuBois DL, Karcher M, editors. Handbook of Youth Mentoring. 2. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage; (in press) [Google Scholar]

12. Langhout RD, Rhodes JE, Osborne LN. An exploratory study of youth mentoring in an urban context: Adolescents' perceptions of relationship styles. Journal of Youth and Adolescence. 2004;33:293–306. [Google Scholar]

13. MENTOR/National Mentoring Partnership. Mentoring in America 2005: A snapshot of the current state of mentoring. Alexandria, VA: Author; 2006. [Google Scholar]

14. MENTOR/National Mentoring Partnership. Elements of Effective Practice for Mentoring. 3. Alexandria, VA: Author; 2009. Retrieved January 15, 2012 from http://www.mentoring.org/program_resources/elements_and_toolkits . [Google Scholar]

15. Rhodes JE. A model of youth mentoring. In: Dubois DL, Karcher ML, editors. Handbook of Youth Mentoring. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage; 2005. pp. 30–43. [Google Scholar]

16. Rhodes JE, DuBois D. Understanding and facilitating the youth mentoring movement. Social Policy Report. 2006;20:1–19. [Google Scholar]

17. Rhodes JE, Reddy R, Roffman J, Grossman JB. Promoting successful youth mentoring relationships: A preliminary screening questionnaire. Journal of Primary Prevention. 2005;26:147–168. doi: 10.1007/s10935-005-1849-8. [DOI] [PubMed] [Google Scholar]

18. Trzesniewski KH, Donnellan MB, Moffitt TE, Robins RW, Poulton R, Caspi A. Low self-esteem during adolescence predicts poor health, criminal behaviors, and limited economic prospects during adulthood. Developmental Psychology. 2006;42:381–390. doi: 10.1037/0012-1649.42.2.381. [DOI] [PubMed] [Google Scholar]

19. Wheeler ME, Keller TE, Dubois DL. Review of three recent randomized trials of school-based mentoring. Social Policy Report. 2010;24:1–21. Retrieved from November 15 from http://www.srcd.org . [Google Scholar]