

RESEARCH SUMMARY

“Back to the Future: Mentoring as Means and End in Promoting Child Mental Health”

What is this article about?

This article was written to gently disrupt the field of mentoring and spark innovation related to research, practice, and policy. The article begins with a broad overview of the history of youth mentoring and how our current research evidence (from randomized trials and meta-analyses) has largely found a small-to-modest impact of youth mentoring programs. The article then explains how the field of mentoring has responded to these somewhat disappointing results by changing or replacing existing models and programs, improving the delivery of existing programs, lowering expectations about mentoring and its impacts, and even redefining youth mentoring. The article concludes by introducing a “bilateral framework” that can bring clarity to the future of youth mentoring (discussed in more detail below).

What were the key ideas?

This article discovered that mentoring relationships can be divided into two broad categories, hence the term “bilateral.”

The Mentoring Relationship is the Goal: In this category, the mentoring relationship itself is seen as the primary goal, purpose, and ideal outcome of any mentoring program or initiative. Sometimes also referred to as “supportive mentoring,” the key focus for mentoring programs in this category is introducing caring and supportive mentors into the lives of young people to support their general development and meeting expected milestones. In other words, this category views mentoring relationships as preventative and promotion-focused, rather than a targeted intervention focused on specific outcomes. In this category, mentors are often broadly trained to primarily focus on developing a close emotional connection with their mentee through fun-based activities, rather than focusing on the development of specific forms of knowledge and skills. In other words, mentors function as companions and confidants who respond flexibly to the changing needs and interests of their mentees, rather than strictly focusing on narrow and pre-determined goals. For mentoring programs and initiatives who adopt this category, the primary marker of success is the length and strength of mentoring relationships. Put simply, the continued presence of a high-quality mentoring relationship that endures for a long period of time is the bottom line.

The Mentoring Relationship Leads to the Goal: In this category, the mentoring relationship itself is not seen as the primary goal, purpose, and ideal outcome of any mentoring program or initiative. In contrast, this category views mentoring relationships as vehicles, tools, or contexts for working towards and achieving specific goals. In other words, this category views mentoring as a targeted intervention to address narrow and pre-determined goals, rather than a general prevention and promotion strategy that flexibly responds to the needs and interests of mentees. This category can be further broken-down into two smaller approaches: targeted and transitional. In targeted mentoring programs and initiatives, mentors are trained to primarily focus on certain “targets” or needs while hanging out with their mentee, such as preventing drug use, low grades, and bullying. Targeted mentoring programs can also “target” specific groups of mentees, such as newcomers, or young people

who identify as neurodiverse or members of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community. In transitional mentoring programs and initiatives, mentors are trained to help support mentees during a difficult transition period, such as aging out of the foster care system, adjusting to a new diagnosis, or transitioning from high school to college or university. Taken together, for mentoring programs and initiatives who adopt this category (targeted or transitional), the primary marker of success is the achievement of specific goals and/or a successful transition, not necessarily the length and strength of the mentoring relationship. In other words, this category does not singularly tie its success to the quality and length of the mentoring relationship, but rather the skills and knowledge that are achieved through the mentoring relationship.

Why does this research matter?

This article has three main takeaways for mentoring programs and practitioners.

Broaden and Diversify the Mission of Mentoring: This article gently challenges the idea that supportive mentoring relationships that last for 12 or more months should be the only model we prioritize and value. Mentoring programs should consider offering more targeted and transitional mentoring if their communities need and desire this kind of support. These more short-term and focused models possess extreme value and promise.

Be Intentional and Realistic: Programs are encouraged to be explicit and transparent about the type of mentoring opportunities they provide. Rather than automatically adopting the supportive model, programs are encouraged to think whether a more targeted or transitional approach would be more beneficial? While making these decisions, programs can ask themselves several questions, such as: Is our program designed to support the overall development of mentees or are we focused on a specific set of outcomes? Does our program “target” specific groups of mentees? What primary role do mentors play? What is the intended program duration? How is program success defined?

Complete the Principles of Quality Mentoring Self-Assessment: Mentor Canada has developed an innovative online self-assessment tool to help mentoring programs think more intentionally and realistically about their programming. The self-assessment tool poses questions designed to generate reflection and help programs determine which category of relationships they “fall into” and how they can apply certain fundamentals of quality mentoring to their specific contexts. [Click here to learn more.](#)

Reference

Cavell, T.A., Spencer, R., McQuillin, S.D. (2021). Back to the Future: Mentoring as a Means and End in Promoting Child Mental Health. *Journal of Clinical Child & Adolescent Psychology*, 0(0), 1-19.