How U.S. Children Spend Their Time
AND
Mentoring Relationships and Programs for Youth

Instructions:
1. Read both of these articles.

2. Type out the answers to the questions below. Your answers should take approximately one to two pages, double-spaced.

Questions:
1. According to Larson, what have been the consequences of the shift in the past 200 years of decreased involvement of children and adolescents in labor activities?

2. What does the research suggest about how U.S. children and adolescents spend their time in comparison to children from other countries? According to Larson, what are some of the developmental implications of these choices in leisure time activities? Have your choices for your own use of time as a child and adolescent affected who you are today; if so, how?

3. Rhodes and DuBois make the point that not all mentoring relationships are equally effective. According to these authors, what conditions increase the likelihood that the relationship will be result in positive outcomes for the youth?

4. Rhodes (2005) provides a theoretical model for how, specifically, mentoring relationships may translate into positive outcomes for youth. Briefly describe this model. How does this model fit with your own experiences in either formal or informal mentoring relationships (and you can answer this from the vantage point of the mentor or the mentee— whichever applies)?
How U.S. Children and Adolescents Spend Time: What It Does (and Doesn't) Tell Us About Their Development
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Abstract
Young people develop as "the sum of past experiences," and data on their time use are one means of quantifying those experiences. U.S. children and adolescents spend dramatically less time than in the agrarian past in household and income-generating labor. Because such labor is usually repetitive and unchallenging, this reduction has probably not deprived youths of crucial developmental experience. The schoolwork replacing this time has a clearer relationship to developmental outcomes. American teens, however, spend less time on schoolwork than teens in other industrialized countries. American teenagers have more discretionary time, much spent watching television or interacting with friends; spending large amounts of time in these activities is related to negative developmental outcomes. Increasing amounts of young people's discretionary time, however, appear to be spent in structured voluntary activities, like arts, sports, and organizations, which may foster initiative, identity, and other positive developmental outcomes.

Keywords

time use; developmental experiences

Children's and adolescents' use of time, a topic of public debate since the 1920s, has reemerged as an issue of national concern. Alarm is voiced that American youths do too little homework, spend too little time with their parents, and spend too much time watching television and, now, playing computer games or surfing the Internet. The after-school hours have been identified as a time of risk, when unsupervised children are endangered and teenagers use drugs, commit crimes, and have sex. The underlying question is whether young people are spending their time in ways that are healthy and prepare them for adulthood in the competitive, global world of the 21st century. Another, related question is whether young people are being overscheduled and denied the creative, exploratory freedom of youth.

Time, as economists tell us, is a resource—one that can be used productively or squandered. For developmental psychologists, study of children's and adolescents' use of this resource offers a means to examine their portfolio of daily socialization experiences. Data on their time spent in different activities provide estimates of how much they are engaged with the information, social systems, developmental opportunities, and developmental liabilities associated with each context. Of course, information on time spent in specific activities is only a rough proxy for actual socialization experiences. The impact of watching TV for 2 hours depends on whom a child is with, what the child watches, and how the child
interprets it. Even two siblings eating supper with their parents each night may have much different experiences of this time. Nonetheless, assessment of time spent in different activities provides a useful starting point for evaluating a population's set of developmental experiences.

A LIFTED BURDEN OF REPETITIVE DRUDGERY

If we look back over the past 200 years, the most striking historic change in young people's use of time is that youths spend much less time on labor activities today than they did in America's agrarian past. In current nonindustrialized agrarian settings, household and income-generating labor fills 6 hours a day by middle childhood and reaches full adult levels of 8 or more hours per day by the early teens. By comparison, in the contemporary United States, time spent on household chores averages 15 to 30 minutes per day in childhood and 20 to 40 minutes in adolescence; income-generating activities account for little or no time, except among employed older teenagers (Larson & Verma, 1999).

Has this dramatic reduction in labor taken away valuable developmental experiences? In a comprehensive review, Goodnow (1988) found remarkably little evidence that household chores foster development. Children gain activity-specific skills (e.g., cooking skills), and care of younger children, if well-supervised, may bring positive outcomes. But evidence for broader developmental gains is thin. In reality, much time spent on chores in traditional agrarian settings involved highly repetitive activities, like carrying water and weeding fields; likewise, in contemporary America, most chores are mundane, with little challenge or developmental content. Evidence on the developmental benefits of U.S. adolescents' employment is more positive but also mixed. Definitive longitudinal studies indicate that employment during adolescence increases likelihood of employment and wages in early adulthood; however, teen employment over 20 hours per week is associated with greater delinquency, school misconduct, and substance use (Mortimer, Harley, & Aronson, 1999). Except in atypical circumstances in which youths have intellectually challenging jobs, it is hard to argue that more than 15 to 20 hours of employment per week brings additional developmental gains. Certainly, spending some time in chores and, especially, employment may provide useful learning experiences, but the dramatic reduction in youths' time in these repetitive labor activities appears to be a developmental plus.

Historically, this large burden of labor has been replaced by schooling, and schooling has clearer benefits. Young people often feel bored and unmotivated while doing schoolwork, as they do during chores and employment, and many experience schoolwork, too, as drudgery. But unlike labor activities, schoolwork brings experiences of high challenge and concentration. Amount of time spent in education correlates with youths' knowledge, intelligence, and subsequent adult earnings (Ceci & Williams, 1997), and is related to growth of a society's economy. Thus, economically and in other ways, the displacement of labor by schoolwork is a positive change in young people's time use.

American youths, however, spend less time on schoolwork than youths in most industrialized nations. As with other activities, the largest cross-national differences occur in adolescence (Table 1). U.S. teens spend approximately
Table 1. Average daily time use of adolescents in 45 studies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Nonindustrial, unschooled populations</th>
<th>Postindustrial, schooled populations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>United States</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Household labor</td>
<td>5–9 hr</td>
<td>20–40 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paid labor</td>
<td>0.5–8 hr</td>
<td>40–60 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schoolwork</td>
<td></td>
<td>3.0–4.5 hr</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total work time</td>
<td>6–9 hr</td>
<td>4–6 hr</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TV viewing</td>
<td>insufficient data</td>
<td>1.5–2.5 hr</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talking</td>
<td>insufficient data</td>
<td>2–3 hr</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sports</td>
<td>insufficient data</td>
<td>30–60 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structured voluntary activities</td>
<td>insufficient data</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total free time</td>
<td>4–7 hr</td>
<td>6.5–8.0 hr</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. The estimates in the table are averaged across a 7-day week, including weekdays and weekends. Time spent in maintenance activities like eating, personal care, and sleeping is not included. The data for nonindustrial, unschooled populations come primarily from rural peasant populations in developing countries. Adapted from Larson and Verma (1999).
three fifths the amount of time on schoolwork that East Asian teens do and four fifths the time that European teens do. These differences are mostly attributable to American teens doing less homework, estimated at 20 to 40 minutes per day, as compared with 2.0 to 4.0 hours in East Asia and 1.0 to 2.5 hours in Europe. These figures do not take into account national differences in length of the school year (it is shortest in the United States) and overlook differences between individual students and school districts—some U.S. schools and state legislatures have recently taken action to increase homework. These figures also overlook possible differences in quality of instruction. An hour of schoolwork may yield more learning in one country than in another. Nonetheless, they provide one explanation for American students’ lower test scores and raise questions about whether American youths are being disadvantaged in the new competitive global marketplace.

**THE EXPANSE OF FREE TIME**

What American youths, especially adolescents, have in greater quantities than young people in other industrialized nations is discretionary time. Studies carried out since the 1920s have found that 40–50% of U.S. teenagers’ waking time (not counting summer vacations) is spent in discretionary activities. Current estimates are 25–35% in East Asia and 35–45% in Europe. Whether this time is a liability or gives American youths an advantage depends largely on what they do with it.

**Media Use**

American teens spend much of their free time using media, particularly watching television. Studies indicate that TV viewing is American youths’ primary activity for 1.5 to 2.5 hours per day on average. Curiously, the averages in other nations are quite similar. Within the United States, rates of viewing are found to be highest in late childhood and among boys, youths of low socioeconomic status (SES), and African Americans across income levels.

Current theories emphasize that viewers are active, not passive—they “use” media. Research indicates, however, that TV is rarely used for positive developmental experiences and that viewing is associated with developmental liabilities. A high amount of time watching entertainment TV—which constitutes most of youths’ viewing—is associated with obesity and changed perceptions of sexual norms. Watching more than 3 to 4 hours per day is associated with lower school grades. Controlled longitudinal studies show that rates of viewing violence predict subsequent aggression (Strasburger, 1995). TV watching may sometimes be used for relaxation: Much viewing occurs in the late evening, when young people wind down before bed. But, on balance, TV time is developmentally unconstructive.

The new kid on the block, of course, is computer and Internet use, and we know little about developmental impacts of these new media. Rates of use in the United States are still small, but are increasing steadily. A recent national survey found recreational computer use to account for an average of 30 minutes per day for youths over age 8, with greater use among higher-SES youngsters (Roberts, Foehr, Rideout, & Brodie, 1999). Children spend more time playing computer
games, whereas adolescents devote more time to e-mail and other Internet activities. As with television, there are important concerns: about effects of violent and pornographic content, commercial exploitation, participation in deviant Internet groups, and social isolation among frequent users. At the same time, computers and the Internet permit more active individualized use than television and thus have more developmental promise. Young people can use these media to obtain information, develop relationships with people different from themselves, learn job skills, and even start companies, irrespective of their age, gender, ethnicity, and physical appearance. The question of developmental benefits versus liabilities for this use of time is not likely to have a singular conclusion; answers are likely to differ across uses and users.

Unstructured Leisure

The largest amount of U.S. youths’ free time is spent playing, talking, hanging out, and participating in other unstructured leisure activities, often with friends. Play is more frequent in childhood than in adolescence, accounting for 1.5 to 3.0 hours per day in the elementary years. It is gradually displaced by talking, primarily with peers. U.S. first graders appear to spend about as much time playing as first graders in Japan and Taiwan, but play falls off more quickly with age in East Asia (Stevenson & Lee, 1990).

Abundant theory and research suggest that play promotes positive development. Piaget viewed play as an arena for experimentation and adaptation of mental schemas (including concepts and strategies) to experience. Research substantiates that play has relationships to children’s cognitive, linguistic, social, and emotional development (Fisher, 1992). McHale, Crouter, and Tucker (2000), however, found that among 10-year-olds, more time spent in outdoor play was associated with lower school grades and more conduct problems. Thus, more time playing does not necessarily facilitate more development.

Adolescents’ talking, it can be argued, is play at a symbolic level. Social interaction is an arena for exploration and development of emotional, interpersonal, and moral schemas. Therefore, we might expect time spent interacting with peers to be associated with developmental gains similar to those for time spent playing. Little research has directly addressed this question, but longitudinal research shows that spending more time interacting with friends in unstructured contexts predicts higher rates of problem behavior (Osgood, Wilson, O’Malley, Bachman, & Johnston, 1996). This relationship is undoubtedly complex, depending on the content of interaction, individual dispositions, and numerous other factors. But these findings certainly contradict the argument that youths need large amounts of unstructured, free time.

Structured Leisure Activities

U.S. adolescents stand out from East Asian youths in time spent in voluntary structured activities, like sports, arts, music, hobbies, and organizations. (Insufficient comparative data exist for younger children.) Even so, the current media image of “overscheduled kids” is misleading. Among American teens, the average amount of time spent in these activities per day is measured in minutes, not
hours (Table 1), although there is mixed evidence suggesting this time is increasing (Fishman, 1999; Zill, Nord, & Loomis, 1995).

What are the developmental benefits and costs of spending time in these activities? When participating, young people report experiencing high challenge, concentration, and motivation. This combination, which rarely occurs elsewhere in youths’ lives, suggests they are engaged and invested in ways that provide unique opportunities for growth. Theory and a partial body of research suggest that these activities are associated with development of identity and initiative, reduced delinquency, and positive adult outcomes (Larson, 2000; Mahoney, 2000), although some studies have found sports participation increases alcohol use. More research is needed, but there is good reason to hypothesize that, under the right conditions, structured activities provide unique developmental experiences.

CONCLUSIONS

Are U.S. children and adolescents spending their time in ways consistent with optimal development? This question, I confess, makes me cringe. Taken to its logical conclusion, it suggests submitting every moment of youth to utilitarian “time and motion study.” We know too well from current trends in education that when things can be measured—for example, by test scores—policy discussions focus on measures as ends in themselves, irrespective of more important harder-to-measure variables. Given our limited state of knowledge and the loose relationship between how time is spent and what youths actually experience, overemphasis on time allocation is certain to mislead. It also overlooks individual and cultural differences in learning processes and developmental goals. Human development is not a board game that can be won by having ones pieces spend the most time on selected squares. Developmental science needs models that conceptualize time as one among many variables affecting growth.

With these cautions firmly in mind, it seems important to consider quantities of time as part of the package when appraising young people’s portfolio of developmental experiences. Should U.S. teenagers’ schoolwork time be lengthened to match that of East Asian teens? In fact, East Asian societies are engaged in intense public debates about the stress and developmental costs associated with their adolescents’ exclusionary focus on school achievement. Recent U.S. efforts to require more homework for all young people are probably justified, and there are empirical rationales for experiments with lengthening the school year and redistributing summer vacation throughout the calendar. But I think the most pressing issue for U.S. youths is not further increasing schoolwork time, but ensuring consistent quality in what happens during this time. My research shows that adolescents, including honor students, are frequently bored during schoolwork (this is also true in East Asia). It may be less important to pack more studying into the day than for researchers and practitioners to find ways to increase the quality of engagement for all students.

Are Americans’ large quantities of discretionary time—40 to 50% of waking hours—a developmental asset or liability? A romantic view sees large blocks of unstructured time giving youths opportunities to explore, create structure on their own, learn to think outside the box, and perhaps “find themselves” in the
existential ground zero of free choice. The underlying reality is that, left to themselves, children and adolescents often choose to spend time in unchallenging activities, like hanging out with friends and watching TV. Although some social interaction and time for relaxation are undoubtedly useful, it seems unlikely that spending many hours in unchallenging contexts fosters development. The hypothesis that youths need and benefit from unstructured free time, nonetheless, remains worthy of creative research, especially if the time they spend on schoolwork increases.

The small but possibly growing amount of time children and adolescents spend in structured voluntary activities provides more developmentally promising use for some of these discretionary hours. In these activities, youths often experience challenge and exercise initiative. When adult leaders give responsibility to youths, they may provide better contexts for learning to create structure and think outside the box than can be found in free play or social interaction (Heath, 1999). In the absence of better knowledge, however, the current rush to create activities for after-school hours is unwise. Research is needed to determine the features of these activities associated with positive outcomes and how to fit participation to individuals' developmental readiness. A fundamental question is how to create activities with enough structure to contain and channel behavior without compromising youths' sense of agency.

Ultimately, development is probably best served by combinations of complementary activities, including those that shape good habits, teach literacy, build interpersonal relationships, foster initiative, and provide relaxation. The task of future research is to illuminate how quantities and qualities of experiences in different activities act in combination to affect development. Certainly, development is much more than an additive "sum of past experiences." We need to consider how individuals interpret, synthesize, and grow from experiences. Evaluation of time allocation is a useful entry point for examining links between experience and development, but only one small piece of a much more complex inquiry.

Recommended Reading

Larson, R., & Verma, S. (1999). (See References)

Note

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References


Section 1: Critical Thinking Questions

1. Define ecological systems theory and a transactional model (according to Wills and Yaeger). How does transactional modeling facilitate the study of ecological systems?

2. Most of the articles in this section relate to child development, adjustment, or well-being. According to the evidence in these articles, what risk and protective factors within the microsystems and mesosystems of youth are important for positive development?

3. According to Marshall, what exo- and macrosystem factors affect access to high-quality child care? What portions of the population are most constrained by these factors? What are implications for intervention?

4. How do socioeconomic, ethnic, or cultural factors influence parental school involvement according to Hill and Taylor? How can school policies overcome barriers to involvement?

5. Larsen notes that some studies have found participating in sports may increase substance use in youth. How might the coaching intervention by Smith and Smoll in Section 4 buffer this effect? How do Smith and Smoll’s findings relate to the protective factors identified by Wills and Yaeger?
6. Graham measures “the balance of power” in the ethnic contexts of schools quantitatively. What qualitative aspects of ethnic contexts may affect peer victimization? What are the potential benefits of multiethnic school environments for individuals, communities, and society?

7. Why does Patterson’s review of studies with different sampling strategies strengthen the conclusion that child adjustment and development is not significantly affected by parental sexual orientation? What additional study designs could contribute to research on this topic?

8. Larsen states, “A fundamental question is how to create activities with enough structure to contain and channel behavior without compromising youths’ sense of agency.” Why is fostering a sense of agency important for youth development?

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Mentoring Relationships and Programs for Youth
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Abstract
Mentoring is one of the most popular social interventions in American society, with an estimated three million youth in formal one-to-one relationships. Studies have revealed significant associations between youth involvement in mentoring relationships and positive developmental outcomes. These associations are modest, however, and depend on several intervening processes. Centrally important is the formation of close, enduring connections between mentors and youth that foster positive developmental change. Effects of mentoring programs likewise typically have been small in magnitude, but they increase systematically with the use of program practices likely to support relationship development. Gaps between research and practice are evident both in the indiscriminate use of the term mentoring in the prevention field and in a focus on the growth and efficiency of mentoring programs at the expense of quality. Continued expansion of effective mentoring will require a better alignment of research and practice.

Keywords
mentoring; preventive intervention; nonparent adults; youth

Organized approaches to mentoring youth in the United States date back to reform-oriented initiatives in the juvenile court system more than a century ago. These efforts gave rise to Big Brothers Big Sisters of America (BBBSA), the largest and most well-known program of its kind. The past decade has witnessed a remarkable proliferation of similarly focused programs that pair caring, adult volunteers with youth from at-risk backgrounds. An estimated three million youth are in formal one-to-one mentoring relationships in the United States, and funding and growth imperatives continue to fuel program expansion (MENTOR, 2006). Even larger numbers of youth report experiencing mentoring relationships outside of these types of programs with adults such as teachers, coaches, neighbors, and extended family.

Anecdotal accounts of the protective qualities of mentoring relationships and their life-transforming effects on young people abound in the media. Youth mentoring has entered the American lexicon, appearing on a U.S. postage stamp and in countless public service announcements. Federal funding for mentoring programs has increased substantially as well, with annual congressional appropriations of $100 million since 2004. It is only relatively recently, however, that social and behavioral scientists have focused their attention on a more rigorous examination of mentoring for children and adolescents. In this article, we review
programs

In American society, with mentoring relationships. Studies have shown that positive developmental outcomes in youth develop are modest, however, the most consistent result is the formation of strong positive relationships. Evaluators have been small in number and practice are evidence of the effective programs in which mentoring relationships are arranged and supported by program staff. A meta-analysis of 55 mentoring program evaluations (DuBois, Holloway, Valentine, & Cooper, 2002) found benefits of participation in the areas of emotional/psychological well-being, involvement in problem or high-risk behavior, and academic outcomes. Yet, in comparison to other prevention programs for children and adolescents (Durlak & Wells, 1997), the effectiveness of mentoring programs was found to be relatively small. The few studies that collected follow-up assessments of mentoring programs revealed even weaker effects, suggesting an eroding of benefits after youth left programs and relationships with mentors ended.

More recently, Jolliffe and Farington (2007) explored the effects of youth mentoring on recidivism among juvenile offenders. Their analyses, which were based on 18 evaluations, revealed a somewhat smaller overall effect of mentoring than was reported in the meta-analysis conducted by DuBois and colleagues. Still another recent meta-analysis looked at a broader range of outcomes associated with mentoring relationships for youth across 40 investigations (Eby, Allen, Evans, Ng, & DuBois, 2008). Results indicated that youth experiencing mentoring fared significantly better than those who did not, but the size of these differences again was relatively small and below those associated with mentoring for college students and adults.

Findings in evaluations of individual mentoring programs have also been mixed. This includes the BBBSA mentoring program. This program has been widely touted as effective based on the findings of a large, random-assignment evaluation of the program (Grossman & Tierney, 1998). Yet the magnitude of these effects was small and generally reflected a relative slowing of negative trajectories rather than outright improvements among those receiving mentoring (Rhodes, 2002). A recent large random-assignment evaluation of BBBSA’s newer, school-based mentoring program (Herrera, Grossman, Kauh, Feldman, & McIlvane, 2007) revealed similar findings. At the end of the school year, there were significant improvements in participants’ academic performance, perceived scholastic efficacy, school misconduct, and attendance relative to nonmentored youth.

MENTORING RELATIONSHIPS AND YOUTH OUTCOMES

Numerous studies have examined mentoring relationships and their consequences for youth development. Illustratively, in a longitudinal study of a nationally representative sample of young adults, DuBois and Silverthorn (2005) found that those who reported having had a mentoring relationship during adolescence exhibited significantly better outcomes within the domains of education and work (high-school completion, college attendance, employment), mental health (self-esteem, life satisfaction), problem behavior (gang membership, fighting, risk taking), and health (exercise, birth control use). (They controlled where possible for the same or related measures at the start of the study as well as indices of individual and environmental risk.) The magnitude of these associations, however, was fairly small, with the reduction in risk for negative outcomes attributable to having a mentor typically less than 10%. Similar findings have emerged in evaluations of programs in which mentoring relationships are arranged and supported by program staff. A meta-analysis of 55 mentoring program evaluations (DuBois, Holloway, Valentine, & Cooper, 2002) found benefits of participation in the areas of emotional/psychological well-being, involvement in problem or high-risk behavior, and academic outcomes. Yet, in comparison to other prevention programs for children and adolescents (Durlak & Wells, 1997), the effectiveness of mentoring programs was found to be relatively small. The few studies that collected follow-up assessments of mentoring programs revealed even weaker effects, suggesting an eroding of benefits after youth left programs and relationships with mentors ended.

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These effects were again generally small in magnitude and, when youth were reassessed a few months into the following school year, they had for the most part eroded to nonsignificance.

Taken together, available research indicates that, although mentoring relationships can indeed promote positive development among young people, these benefits are modest in size. Nevertheless, when all relationships are combined, as in most of the analyses described above, notably more positive outcomes for some youth may be masked by neutral and even negative outcomes for youth involved in less effective mentoring relationships. For mentoring to fully realize its promise as a safe and effective intervention for young persons, programs will need to be informed by a deeper understanding of the processes that are the root of these differences.

WHEN AND HOW DO MENTORING RELATIONSHIPS WORK?

To this end, it is critically important to understand how mentoring relationships affect youth. 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 Fig. 1). First and foremost, beneficial effects are expected only to the extent that the mentor and youth forge a strong connection that is characterized by

![Diagram of mentoring relationships](image)

**Fig. 1.** Model of youth mentoring (Rhodes, 2005). Close, enduring mentoring relationships influence youth outcomes through social/emotional, cognitive, and identity development.
mutuality, trust, and empathy (component a in Fig. 1). For this type of bond to arise, mentors and youth are likely to need to spend time together on a consistent basis over some significant period of time (Spencer, 2007). Only then may youth derive significant benefits. In a reanalysis of data from the previously noted evaluation of the BBBSA program, for example, positive effects on youth outcomes became progressively stronger as relationships persisted for longer periods of time and were greatest when relationships lasted at least 1 year (Grossman & Rhodes, 2002). For youth in relationships that terminated prematurely within the first 6 months (i.e., less than half the 1-year commitment that volunteers were asked to make), there were no clear benefits and, in at least one instance (alcohol use), a significant increase in problems relative to a randomly assigned control group. Beyond issues of time, research indicates that the extent to which mentors and youth establish a strong connection is influenced by the dynamics of their interactions with each other. Langhout, Rhodes, and Osborne (2004), for example, found that outcomes were most favorable when youth reported experiencing not only support but also some degree of structure in their relationships with their mentors. In general, close and enduring ties appear to be fostered when mentors adopt a flexible, youth-centered style in which the young person's interests and preferences are emphasized, rather than when they focus predominantly on their own agendas or expectations for the relationship (Morrow & Styles, 1995).

As shown in Figure 1, well-established mentoring relationships may contribute to positive youth outcomes through three interacting developmental processes: social-emotional, cognitive, and identity-related. There are several ways in which the social-emotional development of children and adolescents may be furthered through mentoring (path b in Fig. 1). By serving as a sounding board and providing a model of effective adult communication, for example, mentors may help youth to better understand, express, and regulate their emotions (Rhodes, Grossman, & Resch, 2000).

The model further assumes that positive socio-emotional experiences with mentors can generalize, enabling youth to interact with others more effectively (path c). In support of this prediction, benefits of mentoring relationships have been indicated to accrue in part through improvements in youths' perceptions of their parental relationships as well as their relationships with peers and other adults in their social networks (Rhodes, Reddy, & Grossman, 2005; Rhodes et al., 2000). Mentoring relationships similarly may affect a range of cognitive developmental processes (path d). This aspect of the model is derived from theory and research that highlights the role of social support from adults in fostering cognitive gains during development. In particular, through interactions with mentors, children and adolescents may acquire and refine new thinking skills, becoming more receptive to adult values, advice, and perspectives. In support of these possibilities, close, enduring ties with mentors have been found to predict improvements in academic and vocational outcomes (e.g., Herrera et al., 2007; Klaw, Fitzgerald, & Rhodes, 2003). Finally, as noted, mentoring relationships also may facilitate identity development (path e). Illustratively, mentors may help shift youths' conceptions of both their current and future identities. Markus and Nurius (1986) have referred to this regard to "possible selves," or individuals'
ideas of what they might become, what they would like to become, and what they fear becoming. More generally, relationships with mentors may open doors to activities, resources, and educational or occupational opportunities on which youth can draw to construct their sense of identity (Darling, Hamilton, Toyokawa, & Matsuda, 2002). Findings regarding mentors' protective influence on risk behavior (Beier, Rosenfeld, Spitaley, Zanksy, & Bontempo, 2000) and academic outcomes (Rhodes et al., 2000) are suggestive of a more positive future orientation in their identities. For this type of guidance and support to be realized, however, mentors may need to model appropriate behaviors and values. When youth perceive potential adult mentors to be involved in problem behavior, they are more likely to engage in the same types of behavior themselves (Beam, Gil-Rivas, Greenberger, & Chen, 2002).

In the theoretical model, both mentoring relationships and the pathways linking them to youth outcomes may be conditioned by a range of individual, family, and contextual influences (see Fig. 1, g arrows). Several findings are consistent with this assumption. Youth who are overwhelmed by social and behavioral problems, for example, appear to be less likely to experience strong, enduring ties with their mentors and, perhaps consequently, also receive fewer benefits (Rhodes, 2005). Environmental adversities such as family instability and socioeconomic disadvantage also frequently can pose challenges to the formation of mentoring relationships (Spencer, 2007). Yet, youth from backgrounds of environmental risk have been found to be especially likely to benefit from mentoring (DuBois et al., 2002), thus suggesting that the challenges presented by such circumstances need not form barriers to effective relationships.

Returning to the issue of mentoring program effectiveness, it is noteworthy that significantly stronger positive effects on youth have been found when programs have incorporated a range of different practices that would be expected to promote the types of close, enduring, and developmentally enriching relationships that are highlighted as desirable by the preceding theory and research. These practices include training and ongoing supervision of mentors, expectations of relatively frequent meetings and long-lasting relationships between mentors and youth, program-sponsored activities to enhance the development of mentoring relationships, parent support and involvement, and the addition of other programs and services to supplement mentoring (DuBois et al., 2002; Herrera et al., 2007; Jolliffe & Farington, 2007). In their analysis, DuBois et al. (2002) found that expected effects for programs utilizing the full complement of evidence-based practices that they identified were nearly three times as large as the benefits found for youth in the typical program.

CONCLUSIONS

Recent research indicates that mentoring programs are likely to be effective to the extent that they are successful in establishing close, enduring connections that promote positive developmental change. Policies that demand greater adherence to evidence-based practice and the use of rigorous evaluations are needed to ensure that quality receives as much attention as does quantity. Models of successful program replication can help guide such growth (see Box 1).
Box 1. The across ages mentoring program

One mentoring program, Across Ages, has achieved the status of "model program" on the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration’s National Registry of Evidence-based Programs and Practices. Even as Across Ages has expanded to over 75 sites nationwide, it has continued to demonstrate adherence to its core set of practices, relatively low volunteer attrition, match durations that greatly exceed national averages, and evidence of encouraging behavioral, academic, and psychosocial outcomes (Taylor, LoSciuto, & Porcellini, 2005). In this program, 10- to 13-year-olds are matched with volunteers aged 50 or older. Volunteers undergo a rigorous screening followed by 10 hours of preservice training. Additional features of Across Ages include:

- Pre-match training of youth
- 1-year commitment (mentors and youth)
- Weekly face-to-face contact for a minimum of 2 hours
- Monthly in-service meetings for mentors for supervision, training, and support
- Weekly phone calls to mentors/weekly meetings with youth
- Community service projects
- Structured activities and goal setting

Practices and policies to cultivate greater availability of mentoring relationships for youth are based on the assumption that these ties can offer measurable benefits to young people. Findings from recent research offer support for this viewpoint. Yet there are equally important ways in which the available evidence fails to support current trends in practice and policy. One area of concern is the increasingly broad range of activities—such as tutoring, after-school, and service learning programs—that are argued to constitute mentoring. Underlying this trend seems to be the perspective that any program in which adults are brought into contact with young people may count as providing mentoring regardless of the nature or time frame of the relationships that are involved. Yet, because the processes involved appear to be complex and, in some cases, entail fundamental changes in the ways that children and adolescents think about themselves and their relationships, it should not be assumed that all programs connecting youth with adults would tap into relationship processes in a meaningful or beneficial way.

A second area of concern is that mentoring programs and policies too often have been implemented with insufficient attention to available research. Mentoring strikes deep emotional chords and has attracted powerful constituents who, at some level, have looked to research only to confirm what they intuitively hold to be true. Many organizations and funding sources have adopted aggressive growth goals to increase the numbers of youth mentored. Consequently, largely untested approaches to mentoring (e.g., group, peer, online) have been championed, while existing models have relaxed minimum requirements for volunteer screening, commitment, and training. These approaches have been successful in reducing the burden that is placed on agencies and volunteers yet seem to be directly at odds with the types of practices that research indicates are needed to establish and sustain high-quality mentoring relationships (Rhodes & DuBois, 2006). In effect, mentoring programs have moved in a direction that is in danger of trivializing what research indicates is at the very heart of their intervention: a caring adult–youth relationship. If youth mentoring relationships are to offer optimal and sustained benefit to young people, theory and research will need to
assume a more central role in the development and growth of interventions to cultivate and support such caring relationships between adults and youth.

Recommended Reading


Rhodes, J.E. (2002). (See References). A comprehensive, highly accessible overview of what is known about youth mentoring.

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Note

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