

## PROMISING APPROACH # 6

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### **Establish Programs in which Caring Adults Mentor At-risk Youth**

Mentoring programs consist of assigning a caring adult to provide support and guidance to a young person in his or her personal and academic life. Mentoring programs can either be free-standing interventions or be included in youth development programs. Programs can provide one-to-one, community-based mentoring (the most common type); group mentoring in which one mentor is assigned to work with several young people; team mentoring where more than one person works with the same young person; computer online mentoring; peer mentoring in which older adolescents mentor younger children; and site-based programs where the mentor and child/youth meet in a designated place, such as a school, hospital, or community center. The mentors are usually volunteers recruited from businesses, schools, and other community settings.<sup>1</sup>

Mentoring programs have become an increasingly popular intervention for preventing or reducing risky behavior among young people because of their simplicity, relatively low costs, and promising results in many risk areas—including crime and violence, substance abuse, and early school leaving. Although different mentoring programs can have a range of different goals, they are all based on the concept that a structured and sustained relationship with a caring adult will be a protective factor for at-risk youth and make it less likely that they will engage in risky behavior.

However, there is clear evidence that simply pairing an adult with an at-risk young person is not sufficient and that the key to an effective mentoring relationship is the development of trust between the mentor and the young person being mentored, which normally takes at least one year. Keeping the adult-youth relationship strong and positive is essential because, without this element, the programs can have a detrimental effect on young people (for example losing trust in adults). Although mentoring programs have been shown to have various social and academic benefits when implemented properly—particularly for young people who are most at risk—additional research is needed to determine the key factors in a successful mentoring relationship, as well as the long-term effects of mentoring on the participants.

#### **How Do Mentoring Programs Reduce Risky Youth Behavior?**

Appropriately implemented mentoring programs that include steady, frequent meetings between mentors and young people with regular monitoring of the meetings by program staff can be strong protective factors for at-risk youth, particularly for those who are most disadvantaged or have few positive adult influences in their homes. The primary contribution that mentoring programs can make to reducing risky behavior among young people is the sense of connectedness that is created over time between the adult mentor and the young person being mentored. This sense of being connected to a caring adult can make a young person wish to meet the expectations of that adult and not to disappoint him or her. This has the dual effect of reducing the likelihood that young people will engage in risky behavior and improving youth outcomes such as educational attainment. Being exposed to and spending time with adults whom they trust and respect and who do not engage in risky behavior also decreases the likelihood that young people will choose to engage in violent behavior or risky sex. This is because the mentoring relationship increases the chances that they will want to emulate the positive behavior of their adult mentors.

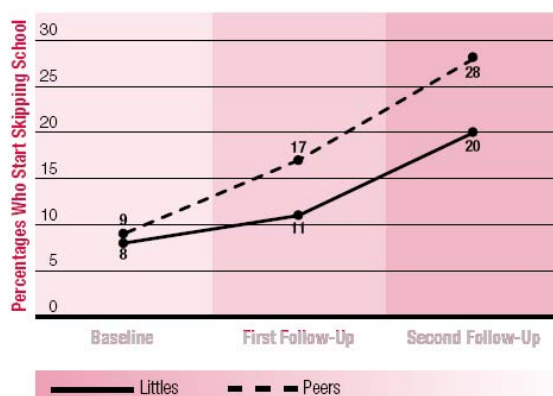
#### **Research Findings: Providing the Evidence Base**

Although mentoring programs have shown to be successful and cost-effective in preventing and/or reducing risky behavior among young people, some claims of their success have gone beyond what can be scientifically

documented. Mentoring programs should not be viewed as a magic bullet to ensuring positive youth development because, ultimately, their success depends on the connection formed between two people, which cannot be predicted by any scientific formula and which takes time to develop.

An impact evaluation carried out of the *Big Brothers/Big Sisters* program in the United States found that after spending 18 months with their mentors, the Little Brothers and Little Sisters (called “Littles” for short) were—in comparison to those in the control group—46 percent less likely to begin using illegal drugs, 27 percent less likely to begin using alcohol, 52 percent less likely to skip school, 37 percent less likely to skip a class, more confident of their performance in schoolwork, one-third less likely to hit someone, and got along better with their families. The Little Brother and Sisters met with their Big Brothers or Sisters about three times a month for an average of almost 12 months, with each meeting lasting about four hours.<sup>2</sup> An impact evaluation of *Big Brothers Big Sisters’ School-Based Mentoring (SBM)* program (different from their community-based programs) showed that Littles were less likely to have started skipping school, in comparison to their peers. As shown in the figure, at the beginning of the program, 8 percent of the Littles and 9 percent of their peers had skipped school. By the end of the first year, 11 percent of the Littles who had never skipped school before the program reported having done so, in comparison to 17 percent of their peers. At the 15-month point, 20 percent of the Littles and 28 percent of their peers had started to skip school. Littles were also slightly more confident that they would go to and finish college.<sup>3</sup>

**Impact of the U.S. Big Brothers/Big Sisters School-Based Mentoring Program on Starting to Skip School over 15 Months**



Source: Herrera and others 2007.

Evaluations of Israel’s *Perach Mentoring Project*, which has now been replicated in over 15 countries worldwide, showed that young people who participated in the program experienced lower dropout rates, were more motivated to learn, experienced significant cognitive improvements, had better attitudes toward school and homework, and read more in their free time. One factor that contributed to the success of the program was the inclusion of incentives for mentors, consisting of the payment of 50 percent of tuition fees and/or academic credits and travel expenses (either to community center or activity location).<sup>4</sup>

### Moving Forward: Factors for Success

- **Screen potential mentors** to determine the adult’s suitability for the difficult and time-consuming task of mentoring, to ensure the safety of the young participants, and to protect the reputation of the program. The matching process should focus on the mentors’ behavior rather than on characteristics

such as age, race, or gender. The families of the young people to be mentored should also be involved in selecting potential mentors.

- ***Provide orientation and training*** to ensure that young people and their mentors share a common understanding of their respective roles, to help mentors to develop realistic expectations of what they can accomplish, and to bridge any differences they may have with the young people they are mentoring.
- ***Ensure that program staff support and supervise*** the mentor-young person relationship to make sure that pairs meet regularly over a substantial period of time, their activities are structured (for example, have an objective and time limits), and they develop positive relationships.
- ***Ensure that the mentor has a steady and frequent presence in the young person's life.*** Evidence has shown that the longer a match lasted, the more positive effects the mentors had on the young people they mentored. Conversely, matches that lasted less than three months had harmful effects on the young people involved (such as lack of trust in adults, less respect for authority, and worse performance in school).
- ***Ensure that mentors respect young people's views*** and that they encourage the development of mutual trust and respect instead of taking on an authoritative role. Mentors should pay attention to young people's need for fun. They should also get to know the families of the young people whom they are mentoring, without becoming overly involved or attached.
- ***Start the mentoring process as early as possible.*** The younger the person being mentored, the greater the impact that the mentoring will have, especially on his or her social behavior.

#### Endnotes

1. Foster, L. 2001. "Effectiveness of Mentor Programs, Review of the Literature from 1995–2000." California Research Bureau, Sacramento CA.
2. Tierny, J., J. Grossman Baldwin, and N. Resch, 2000. "Making a Difference: An Impact Study of Big Brothers/Big Sisters." Public/Private Ventures, Philadelphia, PA.
3. Herrera, C., J. Baldwin Grossman, T. Kauh, A. Feldman, J. McMaken, and L. Jocovy. 2007. "Making a Difference in Schools: The Big Brothers Big Sisters School-Based Mentoring Impact Study." Public/Private Ventures, Philadelphia, PA.
4. Hirshnik, M. 2004. "Perach Mentoring Project: Its Contribution to Mentees and Mentors." The Unit for Research and Evaluation in Teaching and Education. Beit-Berl College, Israel.

<b>Key Implementation Considerations</b>	
<b>Anticipated Outcomes</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increased motivation to learn</li> <li>• Improved attitude toward school</li> <li>• Improved outlook toward future</li> </ul>
<b>Secondary Effects</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Improved academic performance</li> <li>• Greater employability</li> <li>• Improved relationships with friends and parents</li> <li>• Lower school dropout rate</li> <li>• Less drug and alcohol abuse</li> <li>• Less criminal and violent behavior</li> <li>• Less antisocial behavior</li> </ul>
<b>Responsible Agency/Actor</b>	NGOs, schools, local governments, private sector
<b>Targeted Risk Group</b>	Types I, II, or III
<b>Target Age Group</b>	8–18
<b>Cost Elements (Cost per Beneficiary)</b>	United States: A study of 52 mentoring programs found the median cost of one-on-one programs to be US\$1,000 per year per youth, and the median annual cost of a group program to be \$US400 per youth <sup>a</sup>
<b>Necessary Initial Conditions</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Appropriate program infrastructure, including trained staff to screen potential mentors, orientation, training, and ongoing support and supervision of mentors and mentees</li> <li>• Targeting mechanisms to enlist those young people who are most at risk</li> <li>• Outreach program to identify potential volunteer mentors</li> </ul>
<b>Specific Examples &amp; Levels of Effectiveness (Strong Evidence and Emerging Evidence)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• United States: <i>Big Brothers/Big Sisters of America</i>—Strong evidence (<a href="http://www.bbbs.org">http://www.bbbs.org</a>)</li> <li>• Israel (and international): <i>Perach Mentoring Project</i>—Emerging evidence (<a href="http://www.perach.org.il">http://www.perach.org.il</a>)</li> </ul>
<b>Issues to Consider for Replication and Sustainability</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Success depends largely on unpredictable factors, such as the chemistry between a mentor and a young person and any unforeseen circumstances in the mentor or young person’s lives that prevent the relationship from continuing (such as relocation).</li> <li>• The program’s effectiveness may not become apparent immediately, given that building trust within a relationship takes time.</li> <li>• At the local level, programs will need to be adapted to take into account community needs.</li> </ul>

Source: a. J. Baldwin Grossman, ed. 1999. “Contemporary Issues in Mentoring.” Public/Private Ventures, Philadelphia, PA.