

2014

Mentors Support Grandfamilies Raising Grandchildren

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Recommended Citation

Weinberger, S. G. (2014). Mentors Support Grandfamilies Raising Grandchildren. *GrandFamilies: The Contemporary Journal of Research, Practice and Policy*, 1 (1).

Available at: <http://scholarworks.wmich.edu/grandfamilies/vol1/iss1/5>

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Cover Page Footnote

References Dubois, D., Portillo, N., Rhodes, J., Silverthorn, N. & Valentine, J.(2011). How effective are mentoring programs for youth? A systematic assessment of the evidence. *Psychological science in the public interest journal*, 12, 2 57-91. MENTOR 2005. *Elements of effective practice*. (2nd ed) . Alexandria, VA: Author. Weinberger, S. G. (2005b). *Mentoring a movement: my personal journey*. Norwalk, CT: Author.

Practice Brief

**Developing A Youth Mentoring Component of
Kinship Programs**

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ABSTRACT

External mentors can lend a hand; they can provide support to custodial grandparents and great-grandparents caring for grandchildren. This practice brief examines the potential of incorporating a formal youth mentoring component of kinship programs. It discusses how such an initiative can benefit grandfamilies. Youth mentees range in age from elementary to high school age. Adult mentors are recruited from the general community, but may also include high school and college youth serving as peer mentors to younger children.

To ensure maximum protection for all involved, kinship programs that want to develop a mentoring component should follow the *Elements of Effective Practice*, the quality assurance standards that govern all high-quality and sustainable youth mentoring initiatives.

Findings regarding the benefits of mentoring for the general population are also applicable for children of Grandfamilies. Research indicates that youth who are engaged with caring and supportive mentors improve their self-esteem, academic performance, school attendance, peer relationships and career and life skills. Mentors open many new doors for both youth mentees and their families.

Key words: youth mentoring; mentee; mentor

Today, the needs of youth are greater than ever before. Custodial grandparents and great-grandparents are often doing the best job possible to provide for the children in their care. Emotional challenges, economic concerns, and frequently the need to work two and three jobs while caring for multiple children make daily life challenging. Youth mentoring programs are improving the lives of youth in the United States and across the world. Young people with external mentors benefit from improved self-esteem, better peer relationships, academic and school improvements and the advocacy of a mentor (Weinberger, 2005a). Incorporating a youth mentoring component into kinship programs can serve to relieve grandparent caregivers from some of the challenges associated with their role.

Most of us remember individuals who, at different stages in our lives, informally guided, believed in us, and encouraged us to be our best. Teachers, clergy members or athletic coaches often fulfill this role, along with neighbors next door who provided a listening ear along with cookies and milk. Some youth have the ability to independently seek out and surround themselves with mentors. Others would not seek out mentors unless they were deliberately assigned. Individuals including business leaders, educators, retirees and other community members, and high school youth are all joining forces today in what has become a rapidly growing movement called formal youth mentoring. In the United States, Canada and around the world, these programs are proliferating (Weinberger, 2005a).

Elements of Effective Practice in Youth Mentoring

Over more than a decade, researchers, practitioners and other experts in the field of youth mentoring have worked to create a set of guidelines, or “best practices” related to the development of youth mentoring programs. These principles are known as the *Elements of Effective*

Practice (2005). This practice brief discusses the *Elements* as the basis for developing a successful and sustainable youth mentoring component for kinship programs. When such practices are lacking in implementation (Dubois, Holloway, Valentine, and Cooper, 2002), there is increased potential for harmful effects of program involvement on youth.

When creating youth mentoring components, kinship programs should follow the four categories of development suggested in the *Elements*.

1. Program Design and Planning: Youth population to be served; types of mentors to be recruited; types of mentoring (one-to-one, group, team, peer or e-mentoring); location and focus of mentoring.
2. Program Management: Formation of Advisory Council; system for managing program information; fund development plan; system to monitor the program; public relations and communication plan.
3. Program Operation: Orientation of grandfamilies - recruitment of mentors and mentees (the term used by mentoring program for the youth involved); mentor screening; training and matching mentors and mentees; location and focus of program; on-going staff support and supervision; recognition of mentors and mentees; closure steps, when needed.
4. Program Evaluation: Plan to measure program process and expected program outcomes.

MENTOR (2005) has prepared a free Toolkit that can be accessed for kinship programs, outlining all of the components in full detail at www.mentoring.org. The *Elements* define formal youth mentoring as a structured and

trusting relationship that brings young people together with caring individuals who offer guidance, support, and encouragement aimed at developing the competence and character of the mentees (MENTOR, 2005).

Formal youth mentoring programs select caring and committed adult and peer volunteers, representing all walks of life, who are matched with youth and serve as positive role models. Mentors and mentees decide together what they are going to do during their meetings. Typical activities include reading, playing games, going to community activities, playing sports and attending concerts, movies or theatre productions, and finding other ways to have fun together. Mentors and mentees also discuss setting goals, improving school attendance, post-secondary plans, and employment-related skills. Mentors may work with mentees and their grandfamilies members to locate and utilize existing resources and programs.

Effectiveness of Youth Mentoring Programs

How effective are mentoring programs for youth? A 2011 meta-analysis entitled, *A Systematic Assessment of the Evidence*, took stock of the current evidence on the effectiveness of mentoring programs for youth. Research indicates that, from a developmental standpoint, benefits of participation in mentoring programs are apparent from early childhood to adolescence and are not confined to any particular stage of development. Similarly, although programs typically have utilized adult volunteers and focused on cultivating one-to-one relationships, those that have engaged older peers as mentors or used group formats show comparable levels of effectiveness (Dubois et al. 2011).

Mentoring has great benefits. Youth involved in mentoring programs show improved attitudes, more positive peer and family relationships, higher self-esteem, more consistent school attendance, and enhanced academic

achievement. They also voice an increased desire to stay in school and graduate, and are more likely to avoid risky behavior (Weinberger, 2005a). Mentoring is bi-directional; it not only benefits youth, but also the mentors. Mentors improve their own morale, satisfaction, and report feeling better about themselves for having impacted the life of the youth with whom they are matched (Weinberger, 2005a; Weinberger, 2005b).

Designing a Youth Mentoring Component for Kinship Programs

Based on the *Elements*, mentors and youth mentees meet a minimum of one hour weekly or four hours per month. Many mentors opt to spend more time with their mentees. Depending on the program design selected by staff, meetings are held at schools, after-school sites or within the community. Mentors provide youth with guidance, support and nurturing. They also assist mentees in developing the three "C's": character, confidence and competence (Weinberger, 2005b). Mentors may assist older mentees with resume writing, interviewing skills and other aspects related to gaining employment. Mentees savor the attention of their mentor and benefit from mentoring relationships based on trust and confidence (Weinberger, 2005b). Depending on the type of component selected by program staff, mentors may also get involved with the youth's family, and may provide valuable information about existing resources and services. Some configurations of programming modify the typical one-on-one relationship. Group (one mentor working with up to four mentees), buddy (two mentors working with one mentee) and mentoring via the internet are some effective variations (MENTOR, 2005).

Recruiting Mentors for Kinship Programs

How do kinship programs go about the process of recruiting mentors for youth of Grandfamilies? Staff should first by identify existing programs and then inquire about strategies for locating and/or recruiting mentors. Staff may also examine community programs with existing mentoring components with whom kinship programs can partner or where mentors can be recruited. These include:

1. Local school district
2. Boys & Girls Club
3. United Way Agency
4. Voluntary Action Center
5. Big Brother Big Sister Agency
6. Churches and Synagogue
7. Local businesses and Chamber of Commerce
8. Retiree groups
9. Local colleges and universities
10. Municipal employees
11. State resources supporting kinship programs
12. Land grant Universities
13. Online. Go to www.mentoring.org, the website of MENTOR. Insert your zip code under the “find a mentor” section and learn what programs are available in your community.

Tips for Finding a Good Mentor

Kinship programs need to be proactive about searching for mentors. Selecting the right mentors is a critical component of effective programs. When contacting other agencies regarding potential mentors, staff should ask each organization if it incorporates the *Elements of Effective Practice*. These quality standards ensure maximum protection for mentors, mentees, the sponsoring program and families. Screening of mentors includes a

criminal background check, personal references, employment history and last places of residence.

Role of Mentor as Youth Advocate

What can grandfamilies expect from a mentor matched with the child in their custody? One key role of a mentor is that of an advocate for their mentee. Effective programs structure support for mentors in assuming teaching or advocacy roles with youth. The value-added nature of mentors taking on an advocacy role (Dubois, et.al. 2011) has potential benefits for grandfamilies. There are many ways in which a mentor may serve in an advocacy capacity. Advocacy is, for example, when a mentor talks to the mentee's family about behavior at home and achievement at school and then shares this information with teachers. It also includes instances when mentors research opportunities that could be beneficial for the mentee and/or their family, helps the mentee to sign up for after-school activities, and talks with other people who could serve an important role in the life of the youth. Mentors' advocacy efforts may also help mentees identify and utilize skills and resources necessary for future success and opportunities for exploring their talents and interests. Advocacy may include mentors' efforts in exploring post-secondary educational or vocational opportunities, providing academic support, or seeking a tutor if the mentee is not doing well in a subject.

The role of mentor as advocate can assist other grandfamily members in meeting challenges associated with raising their grandchildren. Mentors may offer advice, share their own relevant experiences, and provide resources and contacts that benefit not only their mentee but also other family members. The following case illustrates the diverse role of the mentor:

Julia was seven years old and in second grade when her mother died. Her parents

were divorced and her father did not assume any responsibility for her or her three other siblings. Julia's elderly grandmother stepped in to raise all four children as she was simultaneously caring for two other grandchildren. Life was stressful and difficult, living quarters were small, and her grandma had to work two part time jobs to pay the rent and put food on the table.

Julia's grandmother learned from school staff that Julia was falling behind academically, eating poorly and was highly unmotivated. She turned to school authorities to inquire about help. Luckily, the school and district had a mature youth mentoring program. Julia was matched with Rebecca, a mentor in her fifties. They met for an hour weekly at school. Soon Julia began to trust Rebecca and bond with her. Together they worked on her reading and communication skills and difficulties she was exhibiting with her peers. In her role as advocate, Julia's mentor spoke with the school counselor to receive a tutor to help with her failing grade in mathematics. Julia began to improve steadily.

Julia's grandmother spoke with Rebecca one day, sharing some grave concerns about one of Julia's younger brothers. He was exhibiting problematic behavior and a negative attitude. Rebecca enlisted the help of her own brother to

become his mentor. Later, Julia's grandmother needed assistance with setting up a small bank account in the hopes of being able to save some money for the future. Rebecca was a career banker and, assisted to expedite this process. Clearly mentoring was a "win-win" for this kincare family for these many beneficial reasons.

Beginning a Youth Mentoring Program

Kinship programs initiating a youth mentoring component may find the strategies listed below as helpful "first steps" in developing these services:

1. Determine first that your organization has a strong infrastructure and has both staff and board members who understand the benefits of mentoring and are responsive to developing this initiative.
2. Always start small. Programs have a tendency to want to match as many youth with mentors from the start as possible. While this is an ambitious and laudable goal, long term and quality matches are at stake. Beginning with a pilot of between ten and twelve matched mentor and mentee pairs is recommended in the first year of a program. *Quality rather than quantity of matches* is the key.
3. One size does not fit all! You will have to decide whether you want to establish a mentoring program that is site based (i.e., all the mentoring takes place at a location such as a school, after school program, church or community center) or in the community at the discretion of the mentor and mentee (e.g., Big Brothers Big Sisters).

4. There is no need to reinvent the wheel. There may already be one or more mentoring programs established in your community. Check with your local Voluntary Action Center, United Way, Boys & Girls Club, Big Brothers Big Sisters agency or school district to find out what kinds of mentoring programs are in place and whether your clients are eligible.
5. Make sure that you follow a program that incorporates the *Elements of Effective Practice*, the quality assurance standards of mentoring. These standards were established by a group of experts to ensure maximum protection for all involved in your program. The web site of MENTOR includes a free Tool Kit that can be easily downloaded and contains many suggestions as you begin at www.mentoring.org.
6. Create an advisory committee to help oversee your program. Select well-known individuals in the community who can provide you with time, talent and treasure. You may find it helpful to use the words “wealth”, “wisdom” and “workers” to describe these valuable individuals. They will open doors for you and help in recruitment efforts.
7. Many people rush forward and express wanting to volunteer in your program; but not everyone makes a good mentor. Select your mentors carefully. They must be caring, committed, and responsible, have an outstanding record of employment and be reliable. If these prospective mentors pass all the screening requirements, make sure they are also willing to show up to meet with the mentee when they say they will. Many young people today have had numerous disappointments in their lives. Trust is jeopardized if

mentors say they will show up at a given time and then are not there. Mentors must show evidence of both dependability and consistency.

8. Permissions from grandfamilies must be secured for all youth who will become mentees. Forms should be clearly written and should request permission in the first language of the family. Ask youth if they would like to have a mentor. Explain what a mentor does and how they can be supportive and open doors to career path and other opportunities. Describe some fun activities in which they will engage with their mentor, program expectations, and emphasize that the program is voluntary.
9. Mentor training should include policies and procedures specific to each organization or program. Information and strategies related to effective mentoring should be provided. Training should also incorporate information that is specific to the particular population of youth that will be served. Informational topics for inclusion may include abandonment, grief, loss, anger, family dynamics, and other related issues confronted by children in grand-families.
10. Emphasis should be on insuring that activities and information should be developmentally appropriate for each mentee.
11. One of the most important components for creating a successful mentoring program is on-going support of the matches. When beginning a program, consideration should be given to the staff resources needed to monitor and supervise the matches regularly. An appropriate level of staff support leads to long term matches and program sustainability. Staff should be available to

continually check with each mentor and mentee to find out how the program is going, and if there are any issues or concerns that staff can address.

12. Be willing to dismiss or reassign a mentor if the relationship is not working, or if either the mentor or youth mentee demonstrates a lack of commitment.

How do you know that the mentoring program is working? Kinship programs should build in methods for evaluating the effectiveness of their mentoring component. An essential first step relates to establishing desired outcomes. If, for example, school achievement is an area of focus, it would be important to track school attendance, interim and final report grades and other improvements connected to the mentoring intervention. If the key outcome is improvement in the mental health of a grandchild, then pre-posttests regarding depression, anxiety or another indicator can be administered. Program staff may decide to assess mentor satisfaction and improved morale.

Both pre and post-tests may be administered to youth, mentors and their families to quantify the effectiveness of the mentoring component. There are many validated surveys that can be found in the MENTOR toolkit as well as from agencies such as Education Northwest, educationnorthwest.org. The mission of Education Northwest, located in Portland, Oregon, is to improve learning by building capacity in schools, families and communities through applied research. They have developed comprehensive materials for youth mentoring programs.

Recommendations for Further Study

Formal youth mentoring programs conduct process and outcome evaluations to measure success. Currently much is

known about the benefits of mentoring for Native American and Latino youth, those in the juvenile justice system, and youth in foster care. But less is known from research about the value of mentoring for grandchildren living in grandfamilies. A research project to determine if and how these children benefit from the mentoring experience would be an important contribution to the field.

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