

YOUTH MENTORING:

Creative Strategies for Promoting Youth Health

Increasingly, youth advocates are exploring new approaches to address youth health problems such as teenage pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, substance abuse, and violence that recognize the many psychosocial and environmental factors affecting youth behavior. Youth mentoring is one such approach that focuses on positive youth development and life skills.

Youth mentoring utilizes a social development approach to address the underlying factors such as isolation and lack of supervision that are commonly associated with adolescent health problems. Its goal is to insure that youth can successfully navigate the transition to adulthood through the development of healthy relationships with adults and others, effective problem-solving and decisionmaking skills, independence, and opportunities to contribute to society. Funding youth mentoring, therefore, is one way grantmakers can effectively promote youth health and well-being. This *Issue Focus* describes the methods and strategies of youth mentoring programs, research findings on program effectiveness, and foundation support of youth mentoring programs.

THE ISSUE

Many youth today have fewer responsible adults to nurture and guide them at precisely the juncture in their lives when they need it most. Regardless of the number of adults in the home or family income, working parents are finding it increasingly difficult to spend sufficient quality time with their children. This time famine is happening at the same time youth are facing a bewildering array of threats to their physical and psychosocial health and their social development such as peer pressure, alcohol and drug use, unsafe sexual behavior, and violence. Today's youth often find themselves in search of adult guidance outside the home. Schools, after-school programs, volunteer groups, and other nonprofit organizations are increasingly called upon to pick up the slack.

Contemporary youth mentoring programs have evolved to address the growing need among all young people for relationships with adults. These relationships are particularly critical for disadvantaged youth who may not have many options to buffer them against threats to their development. For these poor youth, mentoring can help provide the

resiliency that makes the difference between developmental success or failure. Even when not designed to address specific health outcomes, mentoring relationships have had positive impacts on problem behaviors (see box below).

THE HEALTH OUTCOMES OF YOUTH MENTORING

As compared to non-mentored youth, mentored youth are:

- less likely to initiate drug use;
- less likely to initiate alcohol use;
- less likely to hit someone;
- more knowledgeable about the consequences of substance use; and
- more likely to respond appropriately to situations involving drug use.

METHODS AND STRATEGIES OF YOUTH MENTORING

There are a variety of strategies used to implement youth mentoring programs. While some programs address a particular health or social development issue, most focus simply on providing young people with a mentor who is committed to their overall health and development. Indeed, mentors are typically not professional tutors or counselors but simply trained as effective guides and friends to young people. With this in mind, it is rather impressive that mentoring relationships have been found to positively affect academic and behavioral outcomes.

Mentoring programs can be structured as one-on-one or team/group. One-on-one mentoring involves the establishment of an ongoing, committed relationship between an adult and young person. Team mentoring fuses the strengths of traditional one-on-one mentoring with the power of group dynamics. In this structure, adult teams of mentors work with a small group of youth providing them with a community of caring relationships to support their growth and development.

The focus of mentoring programs can be career, educational, general social development, or intergenerational.