



## PEER MENTORING: HARNESSING POSITIVE INFLUENCE

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Navigating adolescence is challenging, and adding new environments or life situations during this time can make it overwhelming. Young people need the unfaltering support of family, friends, and peers (Bruce & Bridgeland, 2014). One of the strategies that providers of health and social services use to support youth is mentorship. Mentorship is the relationship forged between a person with experience and another person who might gain from that experience. Having a mentor—someone who is a friend, cheerleader, or role model—can be invaluable to a young person and may be the reason a young person avoids unhealthy behavior. **Peer mentoring** is a form of mentorship that usually takes place between a person who has lived through a specific experience (mentor) and a person who is new to that experience (mentee).

### THE POWER OF PEER INFLUENCE

In adolescent pregnancy prevention (APP) and other youth-serving programs, peer mentoring can be used as a way to improve outcomes for the youth served. Although there are several forms of peer mentoring, in APP programs, this relationship generally takes the form of **cross-age peer mentoring** in which the mentor is a youth who is in high school or just starting college and the mentee is a younger adolescent. Because studies have shown that young people's peers can have both positive effects (e.g., academic achievement, pro-social behaviors) and negative effects (e.g., risk-taking, delinquent behaviors), the power of peer mentoring comes from youth-to-youth relationships, which foster the potential for positive peer influence (National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth, 2011).

### Roles of Peer Mentors

Depending on the focus of the peer mentoring program, the following are roles that a peer mentor might have (youth.gov, 2015):

- **Role model:** The mentor demonstrates good judgment and behavior for the mentee to follow.
- **Supporter/cheerleader:** The mentor is supportive and encourages positive behavior.

### Qualities of a Good Peer Mentor

- Personable
- Confident
- Reliable
- Available
- Respectful
- Sensible
- Supportive
- Positive
- Passionate
- Aware/knowledgeable

- **Adviser:** The mentor provides sound and responsible advice on aspects of decision making and behavior. *Clear guidelines must be established regarding the type of advice a mentor may offer and at what point a referral for professional services may be needed; a mentor must be given referral resources and a procedure to follow.*
- **Advocate:** The mentor advocates for the mentee, which includes helping with academic and personal needs.
- **Friend:** The mentor is a friend to the mentee. This is perhaps the most important role and is vital to maintaining a positive, long-term mentoring relationship. *Clear ground rules must be established regarding the boundaries in the mentoring relationship (e.g., shared information, activities, or behavior).*

## Peer Mentoring and Youth Development

Peer mentoring supports the positive youth development (PYD) framework by capitalizing on the strengths and assets of mentors to develop those of their mentees. Peer mentoring develops relationships that enhance a young person’s social and life skills, provide opportunities for them to positively engage with their community, and make personal improvements, all of which promote PYD.

PYD engages youth in a way that positively shapes their transition to adulthood while viewing youth as both a resource and partner in the process. Five key indicators are used to measure PYD: competence, confidence, connection, character, and caring or compassion, also known as the Five Cs of PYD, all of which are fostered by peer mentoring activities (Lerner, 2005). Most successful peer mentoring programs apply a developmental approach—allowing mentor and mentee to drive their mentoring relationship—rather than an instructive or prescriptive approach. This developmental approach emphasizes the Five Cs of PYD.

### Five Cs of Positive Youth Development

1. **Competence** is having a positive view of one’s actions in specific areas, including social, academic, cognitive, and vocational.
2. **Confidence** is having an internal sense of overall positive self-worth and self-efficacy, identity, and belief in the future.
3. **Connection** is having positive bonds with people and institutions—peers, family, school, and community—in which all parties contribute to the relationship.
4. **Character** is having respect for societal and cultural rules, standards for correct behaviors, and a sense of right and wrong (morality).
5. **Caring or compassion** is having a sense of sympathy and empathy for others.

## Benefits for Young People

Peer mentoring, when it involves a meaningful, long-term relationship, benefits both the mentee and the mentor. For the mentee, the most valuable thing about peer mentoring is feeling that someone cares about them and that they are not alone in navigating the challenges of their day-to-day life. For the mentor, the most valuable thing is feeling good about having made a difference in someone else’s life.

## BENEFITS OF MENTORING

Mentor	Mentee
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increased self-esteem</li> <li>• A sense of accomplishment</li> <li>• Creation of networks of volunteers</li> <li>• Improved empathy and moral reasoning</li> <li>• Interpersonal community and conflict resolution</li> <li>• Improved relationship with parents</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Enhanced self-esteem and self-confidence</li> <li>• Healthier relationships and lifestyle choices</li> <li>• Improved interpersonal skills</li> <li>• A sense of connectedness</li> <li>• Decreased likelihood of initiating drug and alcohol use</li> <li>• Improved behavior both at school and at home</li> <li>• Better attitude at school</li> <li>• Increased high school graduation rates</li> <li>• Decreased high school dropout rates</li> <li>• Higher college enrollment rates</li> </ul>

Sources: National Mentoring Partnership, 2009; Cavell, DuBois, Karcher, Keller, & Rhodes, 2009.

### MAKING THE MATCH: MENTORS AND MENTEES

For peer mentoring to be successful, the most important factor is the relationship between mentor and mentee. Mentor-mentee matching is typically done according to type of experience, gender, preferred language, and ethnic background. However, these factors may vary depending on the focus of the peer mentoring program and the community it serves. In determining an ideal mentor-mentee match, compatibility is an important consideration (National Mentoring Partnership, 2009). Mentor-mentee compatibility may be assessed through interviews, observation, and feedback. The criteria for compatibility should include shared interests, similar backgrounds, and experiences.

For a mentoring relationship to thrive, a good mentor-mentee match should take into account three core elements: (1) experience; (2) guidance; and (3) an emotional bond (National Mentoring Partnership, 2009). Because the relationship is between peers, it is essential that the mentor be someone who possesses broader experience or wisdom than the mentee, which enables the mentor to guide the mentee through the adolescent experience. Finally, the success of this relationship hinges largely on the emotional bond that develops between mentor and mentee, a bond that is built on trust, confidence, and competence.

### ELEMENTS OF SUCCESS

Implementing the peer mentoring program requires clarity of intent and a commitment to constant and consistent monitoring. Successful peer mentoring programs include five specific elements (adapted from Garringer & MacRae, 2008):

1. **Clear program design:** The program must include a clearly defined set of outcomes. Guidelines for implementation must be established. Staff roles and responsibilities must be clearly outlined, including their roles and responsibilities in supporting the mentors. A training plan must be developed, and training must be provided to staff. Mentors must be provided with specific guidelines, expectations, roles, responsibilities, and training. A process for evaluating the peer mentoring program must be developed and followed.
2. **Participant recruitment, screening, and selection:** Strategies for recruitment should focus on how to engage the youth who are the intended service population. Having a clearly defined population of

potential mentees will help establish criteria for the potential mentors. Guidelines for recruiting, screening, and selecting mentors must be established. Youth should be engaged in the development of recruitment materials.

3. **Peer mentor training:** Peer mentors are youth themselves and, as such, require support, guidance, and training from program staff in order to be successful. There should be an established plan that outlines the scope of the mentoring relationship with clear guidelines for conducting mentoring activities and communication.
4. **Activities for the mentor-mentee interactions:** A developmental approach should be applied to the peer mentoring program. Let the activities be youth-driven and informal, rather than prescriptive and instructive. Mentors need guidelines, tools, and resources, including ideas for fun, diverse, and meaningful activities for the mentor-mentee interaction.
5. **Ongoing supervision and support:** The initial peer mentoring training should be supplemented with ongoing skill development and support, which is particularly important in fostering the success of peer mentoring relationships.

## VOICES FROM THE FIELD

**Smart Girls kNow** engages college and high school mentors who support the curriculum by providing group mentoring to participants before each lesson. Mentors also meet with mentees on a one-on-one basis during program activities. Mentors guide the service-learning project, allowing it to be youth-driven. Brittany Schwartz, Program Coordinator, recommends training mentors on topics such as diversity, inclusivity, and fidelity. She reminds us that peer mentors are themselves young people: “They have so much professional and personal development yet to experience.” She emphasizes that peer mentors also need guidance. Learning from a recent experience, Smart Girls kNow adopted a policy that prohibits peer mentors from interacting with their mentees on social media for the duration of the mentoring relationship: “Too many personal-mentoring boundaries were being crossed or violated.” Brittany is happy to share her program experiences on peer mentoring. She can be reached at [Brittany.Schwartz@cabarrushealth.org](mailto:Brittany.Schwartz@cabarrushealth.org).

**Alliance for Healthy Youth.** All4Youth’s Concerned About Teen Success (CATS) program has been implementing the peer mentoring strategy for 25 years. CATS recruits high school students as mentors for peers or slightly younger teens who are also in the program. Following a youth-driven approach, CATS mentors are responsible for prioritizing topics for group or one-on-one mentoring discussions. These trained mentors also help facilitate team-building activities for program participants. Cheryl Biddle, Founder and Executive Director, proudly shares the story of a young person who came to CATS as a mentee and went on to be a mentor for 3 years: “This young man is now on the CATS staff, and he is focusing his energy on helping young men avoid risk behaviors.” When asked what message she would send about peer mentoring programs, Cheryl says, “I recommend implementing the peer mentoring strategy with eyes wide open. There are so many moving parts. You really have to pay attention, and remember to always keep the youth’s best interest at heart.” She can be reached at [CBiddle@all4youth.org](mailto:CBiddle@all4youth.org).

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