FYSB Family & Youth
Services Bureau

PEER MENTORING:
HARNESSING POSITIVE INFLUENCE

August 2022

CONSIDERATIONS FOR USING PEER MENTORSHIP WITHIN ADOLESCENT PREGNANCY PREVENTION (APP) PROGRAMMING

Assess whether a peer mentorship model aligns with your program's current needs, goals, and capacity.

To observe significant impacts on youth behaviors, peer mentoring models require long-term commitments and resources. Be sure your team/organization has the time and capacity to design, train, implement, and sustain the program.

Prioritize a positive youth development (PYD) framework from beginning to end.

PYD emphasizes strengths, assets, and skill building for youth that are developmentally appropriate. The tenets of PYD should be incorporated into all phases: planning, recruitment, selection, program activities/structure, and supervision of the mentoring program.

INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

Adolescence is a period of physical, emotional, and identity development (Caskey & Anfara, 2014; Salmela-Aro, 2011). Navigating these significant developmental changes during adolescence can be challenging. In addition, many young people interact with new environments (e.g., schools, extracurricular activities, summer programs, college) and new life situations (e.g., playing on competitive sports teams, having new friendships and romantic relationships, applying to college, seeking opportunities for leadership) they have not encountered before (Caskey & Anfara, 2014). When navigating these changes and new experiences, the support of family, trusted adults, friends, and peers becomes especially important (Bruce & Bridgeland, 2014; Meltzer et al., 2018). One strategy used to support youth as they navigate the above is mentorship.

Mentorship is a relationship forged between a person with experience and another person who might gain from that experience (DuBois & Karcher, 2014). Having a mentor—someone who is a friend, cheerleader, or role model—can be invaluable to a young person. It may even be the reason a young person avoids unhealthy behaviors or engages in prosocial ones, such as holding leadership positions,

Set aside time for continuous training and supervision.

Remember that mentors are peers. They will need developmentally appropriate training and support to navigate the new relationship and responsibility. Identify an adult coordinator who will facilitate frequent check-ins and ensure all guidelines are being followed.

volunteering, or participating in sports (Bruce & Bridgeland, 2014; Weinrath et al., 2016).

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 of similar age who is new to that experience (mentee) (Kupersmidt et al., 2020). Peer mentoring can enhance a young person's social and life skills, provide opportunities for them to positively engage with their community, and encourage them to make personal improvements (Andrews & Clark, 2011; Bruce & Bridgeland, 2014; Karcher, 2005; Leidenfrost et al., 2014), all of which promote a young person's development in positive ways.

THE POWER OF PEER MENTORING

In APP and other youth-serving programs, peer mentoring can be used to improve outcomes for the youth served (Leidenfrost et al., 2014; Pierre, 2019). Although there are several forms of peer mentoring, the mentoring relationship in APP programs generally takes the form of cross-age peer mentoring, in which the mentor is in high school or just starting college and the mentee is a younger adolescent (Karcher, 2005).

Because studies have shown that young people's peers can have both positive effects (e.g., encouraging academic achievement, prosocial behaviors) and negative effects (e.g., encouraging risk-taking, delinquent behaviors; (Brechwald & Prinstein, 2011; Karakos, 2014; Laursen, 2018), the power of a strong peer mentoring program within an APP program is its ability to use formal and informal prosocial youth interactions to drive positive influences on behaviors and outcomes (Burton et al., 2021).

Roles of Peer Mentors

When thinking about developing a peer mentoring program, it is essential to inform young people about the roles and attributes of a quality mentor. This will help to ensure that new peer mentors meet expectations of the role a peer mentor should play and that young people understand the role a peer mentor should play in their lives. Depending on the focus of the peer mentoring program, the following are roles that a peer mentor might have (youth.gov (n.d.b)).

Role model: The mentor demonstrates good judgment and behavior for the mentee to follow.

**Supporter/cheerleader:** The mentor is supportive and encourages positive behavior.

Advisor: The mentor provides sound and responsible advice on aspects of decision-making and behavior and can also help a young person develop wider networks to provide support or linkages to resources. 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. As an advocate, the mentor also helps link the mentee with resources aligned with their needs and goals.

Friend: The mentor can be a special friend to the mentee—someone with whom they feel safe and comfortable. Because the mentor-mentee relationship is not reciprocal in the same way that most friendships often are, it may feel slightly different than other friendships. Clear ground rules must be established regarding the boundaries in the mentoring relationship (e.g., shared information, activities, behavior).

Young people may think about mentors just being people they "like," but there are key attributes to identify and consider. In a recent promising substance use prevention program, mentors were described as STARs (Figure 1), which means they are **s**afe, **t**rustworthy, **a**vailable, and **r**esourceful (Powell et al., 2021). These attributes reflect not only the personal characteristics of a mentor but also their skillset in connecting the mentee to useful information or guiding them in making healthy decisions. It is best practice to identify more than one peer mentor per mentee whenever possible, to help young people develop a social network of positive influences (Kuperminc et al., 2020). A great example of this is a program called Thread, where young people are given a network of mentors they can rely on, called "families."

Figure 1. Attributes of a quality peer mentor
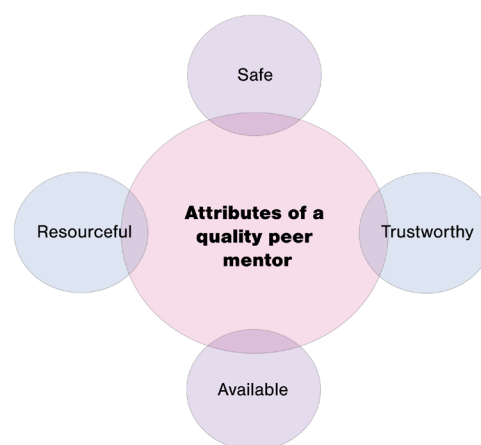
Source: Powell, T., Offiong, A., Lewis, Q., Prioleau, M., Smith, B., Willis, K., Kachingwe, O. (2021). Better Together. Intervention developed for the B Lab. Baltimore, MD.

Peer Mentoring and Youth Development

Most successful peer mentoring programs apply a developmental approach—allowing the mentor and mentee to drive their mentoring relationship—rather than an instructive or prescriptive one. PYD is an asset-based framework that considers young people as a resource and partner in the mentorship process and engages them in their transition to adulthood (Lerner, 2005). PYD is defined by seven tenets, known as the seven Cs: competence, confidence, connection, character, caring/compassion, contribution, and creativity. Each tenet is explained in Table 1 (Dimitrova et al., 2021; Lerner, 2005; Lerner, 2009). Strong peer mentoring programs support and build on the seven Cs, capitalizing on the strengths and assets of mentors to develop those similar strengths and assets in their mentees.

Table 1. Seven Cs of Positive Youth Development

1. **Competence** is one's understanding, ability, and skill for taking actions in specific areas, including social, academic, cognitive, and vocational areas.

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 ethical behaviors, and a sense of right and wrong (morality).

5. **Caring/Compassion** is having a sense of sympathy and empathy for others.

6. **Contribution** is thinking beyond oneself and adding positively to one's community and society at large.

7. **Creativity** is being able to think outside the box and use new ideas for decision making and problem solving.

Benefits for Young People

Peer mentoring that involves a meaningful, long-term relationship can benefit both the mentee and the mentor (youth.gov (n.d.a) ; Benton et al., 2020; Cavell et al., 2009; Layzer et al., 2017; Senteio et al., 2018; Stapley et al., 2022). 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 (Karcher, 2005). Evidence also suggests that mentees develop a sense of autonomy and sound decision-making skills as a result of quality mentoring (Davis & McQuillin, 2022). For the mentor, the most valuable thing is feeling good about having made a difference in someone else's life and having a more positive self-identity (Douglas, et al., 2021; Douglas, et al., 2019). Mentoring also provides opportunities for new and improved skills in interpersonal interactions and leadership (Bruce & Bridgeland, 2014; Stapley et al., 2022). Below are more details on the benefits of quality peer mentoring for both the mentee and mentor, which are further explained in the citations listed at the end of this tip sheet.

Benefits of Quality Peer Mentoring

Mentee	Mentor
• Enhanced self-esteem and self-confidence	• Increased self-esteem, self-worth, and self-respect
• Healthier relationships and behaviors	• A sense of accomplishment
• Improved interpersonal skills	• Relationships with a network of other volunteers
• A sense of connectedness to peers and others	• Improved empathy and moral reasoning
• Decreased likelihood of initiating drug and alcohol use	• Improved conflict resolution
• Increased intention to practice risk reduction skills (e.g., using a condom or other birth control method)	• Leadership skill development
• Improved behavior at school and home	• Improved relationship with parents
• Increased engagement and sense of belonging at school	• Increased knowledge of sexual health and risky behaviors
• Increased sense of autonomy	
• Increased chance of graduating high school	
• Higher chance of enrolling in college	

Sources: Benton et al., 2020; Cavell et al., 2009; Layzer et al., 2018; Stapley et al., 2022.

MAKING THE MATCH: MENTORS AND MENTEES

For peer mentoring to be successful, there must be a strong relationship between the mentor and mentee (Ben-Eliyahu et al., 2021). Mentor-mentee matching is typically done according to the mentee's life experiences and the mentee's gender, preferred language, or racial/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. Mentor-mentee compatibility may be assessed through interviews, observations, and feedback. The criteria for compatibility should include personality, shared interests, similar backgrounds, and experiences. The 2014 National Mentoring Summit provided a resource guide on how to create successful mentor-mentee matches.

According to MENTOR, a good mentor-mentee match should consider three core elements: (1) experience, (2) guidance, and (3) an emotional bond. 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 or support the mentee through the adolescent experience. In some cases, the mentor may not have had the exact experience but should be able to make connections to similar experiences or offer a listening ear to help the mentee feel supported (Kupersmidt et al., 2020). Finally, the success of this relationship hinges largely on the emotional bond that develops between the mentor and mentee—a bond that is built on trust, confidence, and competence (Kupersmidt et al., 2020). By being a good listener, the mentor will reinforce the value of the relationship and strengthen the emotional bond. Although programs that last one calendar year (or one academic year) have been shown to produce positive outcomes for both mentors and mentees, there is no "perfect" program duration to strive for given each program's goals, theory of change, and structure are different (Garringer et.al, 2015). However, the key factor is to ensure that the mentoring relationship lasts the intended duration of the program (Garringer et al., 2015). If not, it increases the chances of mentees experiencing negative outcomes related to the early ending of the relationship (DeWitt et al., 2016; Grossman et al., 2012). MENTOR provides a supplementary document with specific elements of effective peer mentoring practice.

ELEMENTS OF SUCCESS

Implementing a peer mentoring program requires clarity of intent and a commitment to constant and consistent monitoring. Successful peer mentoring programs include six specific elements (adapted from Building Effective Peer Mentoring Programs in Schools: An Introductory Guide from the U.S. Department of Education's Mentoring Resource Center):

1. **Clear program design and plan:** The program must include a clearly defined set of guidelines for training, implementation, and desired outcomes. Staff roles and responsibilities must be clearly outlined, including how to supervise and support mentors. A process for evaluating the peer mentoring program should be developed and followed.

2. **Rigorous participant recruitment, screening, and selection:** Strategies for recruitment should focus on how to engage the intended service population of young people. Having a clearly defined population of potential mentees will help establish criteria for the potential mentors. For mentors, guidelines for recruiting, screening, and selecting must be established. Young people should be engaged in the development of recruitment materials.

3. **Peer mentor training:** Peer mentors are young people themselves and, as such, require support, guidance, and training from program staff to be successful. Mentors must be provided with specific guidelines, expectations, roles, and responsibilities. There should be an established plan that outlines the scope of the mentoring relationship with clear guidelines for conducting mentoring activities and communication.

4. **Intentional mentor-mentee matching:** The key to a successful peer mentoring program is ensuring the best match between mentors and mentees. Consider racial and gender identities, life experiences, culture, and interests. At times, it is difficult to predict what will lead to a perfect match despite considering all the important factors. If a mentoring relationship is not mutually beneficial, it is appropriate to establish a new mentor-mentee match.

5. **Activities for the mentor-mentee interactions:** A developmental approach should be applied to the peer mentoring program, considering the interests of the mentors and mentees. Activities and interactions should 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, but they also need the freedom to be leaders themselves. Provide opportunities for both one-on-one and group activities with other mentor-mentee pairs.

6. **Ongoing 360 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. There should be consistent check-ins with peer mentors to discuss successes and challenges with their mentees. In addition, consistent communication should be maintained with the mentees to ensure they are being supported by their mentors.

PROGRAM SPOTLIGHT

Fourth R: Uniting Our Nations Peer Mentoring Program

Based in Canada, Fourth R offers several programs aimed at supporting the development of healthy relationships. One such program is a strengths-based peer mentoring program that is centered on Indigenous teachings and customs. Implemented in high schools, the 16-week program provides one-to-one peer mentorship between first-year (9th grade) and upper-level (10th–12th grade) students. The program's goals are to:

- facilitate and foster healthy relationships with self and peers,
- promote and support Indigenous cultural identity within the school setting, and
- help the academic and social transition from middle to high school.

The program was created in collaboration with Indigenous educators and community members, intentionally incorporating the Seven Grandfather teachings: love, respect, humility, honesty, wisdom, truth, and bravery/courage. The group meets weekly during the lunch hour under the supervision of an Indigenous adult facilitator who engages the participants in various activities, some of which are culturally focused.

The program has demonstrated significant impacts on both mentees' and mentors' health and academic outcomes (Coyne-Foresi et al., 2019; Crooks, Burleigh, et al., 2015; Crooks et al., 2017; Rathus, 2022). A case study from faculty at Western University provides more information about lessons learned and ways to adapt the program to different populations (Crooks, Exner-Cortens, et al., 2015).

Impact of Fourth R Peer Mentoring Program on Mentees and Mentors

Mentees
- Improved mental health
- Stronger interpersonal relationships
- Increased connection to cultural identity

Mentors
- Positive influence on help-seeking behaviors and decision making
- Stronger connections to others
- Increased knowledge and appreciation for Indigenous culture

RESOURCES

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