

Fostering Intergenerational Relationships for At-Risk Youth

by Marc Freedman



A Boston-area businessman regularly shares his memories and memorabilia with high school students.

Photo courtesy of Boston Partners in Education

Many at-risk youth are growing up isolated from the range of caring and consistent adult relationships so important for navigating the treacherous course from adolescence to adulthood. An accumulation of research from the social sciences suggests that adult relationships—provided not only by parents, but by grandparents, neighbors and other interested elders—are a common factor among resilient children, who achieve success despite growing up under disadvantaged and stressful circumstances. An important, and not often addressed, question for social programs and policy is whether the circumstances of more at-risk youth could be improved through efforts designed to provide greater access to helping relationships with interested adults.

In the search for new, cost-effective approaches to improving the life chances of at-risk youth, older adults can be considered a potential source for establishing developmental relationships with these young people. Elders are the fastest growing segment of the population, may be relatively inexpensive to employ, and are in need of opportunities for socially productive activity. There is considerable intuitive appeal to the notion of bringing together these two segments of the population for mutual benefit.

Intrigued by this potential, Public/Private Ventures (P/PV), a nonprofit program development and research

organization based in Philadelphia, launched a study two years ago designed to provide a better understanding of what really happens when elders and at-risk youth are brought together. In an effort to develop this understanding, P/PV staff visited five exemplary intergenerational programs. Funding for the study, entitled *Partners in Growth: Elder Mentors and At-Risk Youth*, was provided by the Luke B. Hancock Foundation of Palo Alto, California, and the Skillman Foundation of Detroit, Michigan.*

The five initiatives studied involve adults in the Foster Grandparent Program, retirees from several labor unions, and other older volunteers. They seek to aid teenage mothers (Teen Moms in Portland, Maine, and the Teenage Parent Alternative Program in Lincoln Park, Michigan), jail-bound young offenders (IUE/The Work Connection in Saugus, Massachusetts), and students in danger of dropping out of school (School Volunteers for Boston and the Teaching-Learning Communities Mentors Program in Ann Arbor, Michigan).

The study sought to answer a series of questions and concluded with a sturdy appreciation of the potential of intergenerational relationships for youth at risk of a variety of life disruptions. The questions and the study's answers, briefly stated, follow.

Will intergenerational relationships form?

We found that bonds between elders and youth *will* form in social programs structured for that purpose. Despite a sharply age-segregated society and some initial hesitation, the participants were in most cases able to forge powerful attachments.

What do the relationships look like?

The relationships studied divided into two types, primary and secondary. The former are characterized by attachments approximating kinship, great intimacy and a willingness on the part of elders to take on the youth's full range of problems and emotions. In secondary relationships, elders served as helpful, "friendly

neighbors," focusing on positive reinforcement but maintaining more emotional distance.

Do they result in benefits for the youth?

Benefits from exposure to the elders appeared to exist for all youth in the programs. However, youth in primary and secondary relationships consistently cited an improvement in the quality of their day-to-day lives and described learning a variety of functional skills as a result of their alliance with the older persons.

Young people in primary relationships reported an additional tier of benefits. They described elders helping them weather potentially debilitating crises, bolstering their stability and sense of competence, acting as advocates on their behalf, and providing important access to the mainstream community.

All in all, these relationships appear to help change the life trajectory of the youth—from one headed for failure to a more adaptive path of survival.

Frances Matthews and Steve Jackson

Frances Matthews, a widow and the mother of three grown children, is a retired hospital technician. An energetic person who has maintained a great love of learning, she attends a local community college part time, where she is pursuing an associate degree in liberal arts. In the Teaching-Learning Communities Mentors Program in Ann Arbor, Michigan, Frances, who is white, is partnered with 15-year-old Steve, who is black.

Steve, an 8th-grader, lives with his single mother (who is ill with diabetes), a younger brother, his sister, and the sister's boyfriend. Tall for his age, soft-spoken and awkward, Steve has been struggling academically and trying hard to hold his family together at home, where he is responsible for all the household work.

Frances talks about their relationship and the mentoring experience:

"I always liked history, but I'm no teacher. But that's OK. If you can help a kid, if they understand where you're coming from, they realize that you're . . . only here to help them and sort of point out the why's. Then they can really relax and respond . . . I never say you're wrong, I just encourage them to try a different approach.

"He said, 'I'd like to go to college but I couldn't.' I said why not? He was a little startled . . . I said

you can go to college if you want to. It won't be easy. There are ways you can earn money to go to college. So I gave him a little bit of hope, you know, not a lot but a little insight that it's not an impossible situation."

Under Frances's tutelage, Steve went from a D to an A in history during the course of the year. Steve took her advice to heart, about school as well as coping with his family problems:

"I figured out she was just going to be a tutor, but she turned out to be more like a friend. She said 'I'm here to help and I hope we can be friends.' We didn't always talk about schoolwork . . . It was fun because, you know, I had a couple of problems at home with my brother. We were talking about that. She was sort of like an outlet.

"Well it was real sensible advice; she told me don't take things to extremes . . . She's kind of mellow about things. She kind of motivated me to do more schoolwork . . . She kind of made it interesting . . . She was just there for me when I had any problems . . . I don't look at Frances as an older person. She doesn't make you feel like you're a 3-year-old and you need to be told what to do and how to do it. Being with her was like getting practice being an adult."

Are there benefits for elders?

The elders interviewed described meeting their own needs precisely through providing the kind of attention, caring and commitment the youth craved. Beyond simply getting out of the house and earning money, relationships with young people offer elders the chance to pass on skills developed over a lifetime, get a fresh start in a relationship with a younger person, and play the appealing, and somewhat idealized, role of mentor. The role also provides the elders with a challenge: helping youth change their lives. They find the assignment sometimes frustrating, at other moments exhilarating, and always engaging.

Why do intergenerational bonds form?

There is a strong emotional basis—not only among the surveyed participants, but fairly widespread among elders and at-risk youth—for the formation of bonds. Rather than being dependent on “chemistry,” these alliances seem to occur when youth are receptive—lonely, at a time of crisis, ready for change and desirous of adult contact—and elders are enthusiastic but also lonely and intent on finding meaningful roles in their senior years.

The elders interviewed felt a special empathy that appears to derive from the marginal status shared by elders and youth in our society. Perhaps one of the study’s most striking findings is that the most effective elders were individuals who had not lived what would commonly be considered “successful” lives. Many had endured strained family relationships, struggled at low-paying jobs, and battled personal problems, such as alcohol abuse. Partly as a result of surviving—and surmounting—such difficulties, these elders seemed to understand the youth, were able to use their own experience as real world teaching tools, and speak the language of their young partners.

Lessons for Programs

The elders’ success with the young people appeared to be attributable, in



In Portland, Maine, Foster Grandparent Doris Willey provides support to her teen mom and her daughter.

Photos: Susan Lavigne

considerable measure, to some shrewd decisions by the five programs studied. The elders’ location in an optimal spot—as neither parents nor professionals—left them relatively free from role constraints and untainted by the mark of authority. At their most effective, the programs reinforced this natural advantage through supporting the elders’ role and through effectively bringing them together with the youths.

The programs manage this function in three critical ways:

Autonomy. It would be easy for the programs to transform the elders into

paraprofessionals by giving them a crash course and letting them handle a carefully prescribed set of low-level functions. However, at their most effective, these programs resist this impulse and protect the integrity of the nonprofessional role. In doing so, they emphasize getting good people and turning them loose, encouraging the seniors to use their experience and good instincts.

Mandate. While giving the elders autonomy is essential, this strategy is compromised unless the elders approach their work with the clear knowledge that youth development is



Since his retirement, Maurice White has been a full-time volunteer teaching computer skills to elementary school children in the Boston Partners in Education program.

Photo: Kevin McElhinney



the legitimate and proper objective of their efforts. Programs can stimulate progress by making the elders' developmental role clear from the outset. A common problem is for the mentors to view their proper role as performing a task—such as tutoring—and not using this task as a route to building trust and friendship.

Support. The downsides of autonomy are that it puts pressure on the elders and that it can be isolating. The five programs studied neutralized this problem effectively, convening regular sessions that enabled seniors not only to commiserate and ventilate

frustrations but to learn from each other. Out of this contact comes another set of attachments—to each other and to the program staff—that contributes greatly to the elders' satisfaction and decision to remain with the program.

Making the Connection

The research suggests a set of important principles for programs interested in effectively bringing together elder mentors and youths:

One on One. The importance of forming relationships directly between

the two individuals, older and younger, cannot be underestimated. An essential aspect of significant relationships is that the partners, particularly the youth, feel that they are special to the other person. It apparently does not matter to the youth that the elder may be working with other young people, so long as he or she gets one-on-one time and attention when together. The youths jealously guard their time with the older person; as one teenage mother explains, "I look forward to Tuesdays. I know I get my time together with Cora, and it's all my time."

Purposeful. Another important principle is structuring contact around something important to both parties; it can't be artificial. Building or learning something together is the best example of this strategy, but actually any fairly clear purpose will suffice. The teenagers and older women in Teen Moms, for example, are brought together around the goal of preventing child abuse. The young girls are terrified about abusing their babies and view being good parents as the most important goal in their lives. The older women also have a deep concern for the well-being of the children. This common purpose gives their meetings a goal, even if the elder and youth end up dealing with childrearing methods only tangentially.

Length, Frequency and Continuity. Although strict formulations are not possible and needs change over time, some basic rules about contact can be advanced. Once-a-week meetings appear to be enough as long as participants really get a chance to talk; once a month is insufficient. Closeness can be established in as quickly as three or four weeks with some youths, but most take two or three months to open up and develop trust.

Continuity and consistency are essential. The youths are experienced with adults who let them down, as they are with other sources of turmoil and erratic behavior. They want to know they can count on seeing their partner in a regular way, and also that they have the option to get in contact with the elder in case of emergency.

Environment. The setting where the youth and elder connect appears to exert considerable influence on the type of relationship they develop. The most conducive environments avoid the inhibiting impersonal or institutional settings and allow for privacy and relaxation. Meeting on the youth's own territory is also helpful in focusing the relationship on meeting the young person's needs. Some programs and elders within programs are able to create environments that put the partners at ease and insulate them from outside pressures and concerns.

Photo courtesy of Boston Partners in Education



A school volunteer and student discuss a favorite school subject.



Volunteer Jack Gordon is legally blind, but it hasn't stopped him from tutoring Boston students in reading for the last 10 years.

Photo: Robert Shoen

Implications for Policy

While these findings are far from conclusive, and while much work remains to be done in this field, they suggest important implications for policy.

First, intergenerational relationships offer a new role for older people. From the perspective of elder productivity, the discovery that a variety of elders can help at-risk youth is of great significance. At present, many older people have few choices, particularly elders of little means. Remaining in their communities and working with young people is clearly a preferred option for many in the older population. On the policy level, the experience of these programs supports the wisdom of expanding serv-

ice opportunities for seniors.

Second, the activities of the five programs studied point to some alternative directions for social intervention. They show that it is possible to use unrelated, nonprofessional adults to help improve the life chances of youth in need. These programs aspire to do more than provide counseling, social support, role models or professional services; they attempt to seed genuine relationships, ones that in a significant proportion of cases take on the appearance of extended family. By using older adults from the community to fulfill these roles, they contribute to building what is essentially a self-help strategy. The elders give the young people their phone number, they take them out to dinner, get them jobs with their relatives, and open up

social networks to the adolescents that were formerly closed to them.

As these implications underscore, the notion of engaging older people to help at-risk youth contains many natural advantages, and as such constitutes one of the most intriguing approaches to appear on the policy landscape in quite some time. Further programming and exploration in this area appear fully justified. ■

**Single copies of the complete study, Partners in Growth: Elder Mentors and At-Risk Youth, may be obtained from Public/Private Ventures, 399 Market St., Philadelphia, Pa. 19106.*

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Mary Dubois and Cindy Burke

Mary Dubois, who was widowed in her early 20s and raised several children on her own, survived her hard life with a lot of strength. Now living in her own home in a working-class section of Portland, Maine, Mary is a Foster Grandmother in the Teen Moms program.

Cindy Burke, whom Mary visits each week, is a 20-year-old single mother of two young children. Cindy dropped out of high school in the 9th grade after the birth of her first child and lives on AFDC. The past year was particularly traumatic for Cindy; her boyfriend committed suicide, a tragedy that almost sent her over the edge.

On one level, Mary helps Cindy learn how to cook, to budget better, and to blow off steam safely when the children are getting to her. On another level, she provides emotional support and friendship. Cindy says:

"It's like she's been through it and it seems like she knows what I am going through. I told her today that I really needed some help about

seeing another guy. I am sure she's going to come up with something like she always does. You give her time to think about something and the next week she'll say 'You remember when you mentioned this' and you know she'll come out with something.

"The day it happened [the suicide] she was right over and she gave me a great big hug and asked me if I was alright, and if I was going to be alright, which really helped me out ... I called my dad and he really didn't want to talk about it ... But with Mary you can talk about it and she's not going to shut you out. That's what my parents have always done to me. If they don't agree with what I say they'll shut you right out and you won't see them for a couple of weeks ... Mary comes over every week and no matter what I say to her she's right there still ... She's like my best friend, my mom, the whole works."

According to Mary:

"I really enjoy being with her. In

fact, I wouldn't mind if my son brings home a girl like her to me. She's a very good mother. It shows in the children. She's very attentive to the children. My relationship with her is different than a mother/daughter relationship. I'm too dominating with my own children, but I do not dominate her. I think a grandmother/granddaughter would be much more like it.

"I tell her not to down herself so much. She feels so inferior. She's a pretty girl, to me. She's got an awful lot going for her. She downs herself, says 'I have two children.' I say you had a bad marriage, it didn't work; that's not your fault. It's just little things to make her feel good, to love herself ... I taught that to my children ... They are individuals. They don't have to copy this one or that one. What do you want to do with yourself? I don't teach them, I talk with them about it. They are special. Cindy is a beautiful mother."