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## Elder Mentors: Giving Schools a Hand

By Marc Freedman and Natalie Jaffe

**Matching retirees with troubled youngsters in mentor programs is a cost-effective way to provide young people with much-needed adult role models.**

**M**entoring is threatening to become a buzzword without meaning. We hear about mentoring for principals, for teachers, for students, for employees in a wide range of businesses and industry. There is mentoring by principals, by teachers, by students, by corporate executives, by members of the community. There is mentoring designed to help adult "mentees" (an ungraceful word) be better administrators, teachers, practitioners, or employees; to help youth adjust to society after incarceration or institutionalization; to do better in school, take good care of their children, not get pregnant in the first place, stay out of jail, stop taking drugs—and on and on.

How-to books and articles also abound. Many of them prescribe mentoring as a cure for a whole variety of ailments, and

*The ideas in this article are based on those in Marc Freedman's report, Partners in Growth, (Philadelphia: Public/Private Ventures, 1989) and forthcoming book, From the Goodness of Our Hearts: The Emergence of Mentoring Programs for Vulnerable Youth.*

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few point out that the little we do know about the process indicates that it must be specific both to the nature of the pairing, and to what it is meant to accomplish.

This article discusses one specific type of mentoring: the matching of retired, older persons with young people enduring a crisis period in their lives. It is based on a study by Public/Private Ventures (P/PV) of five intergenerational mentor programs, three of which involved the public schools.

The Teaching-Learning Communities (T-LC) Mentoring Program in Ann Arbor, Mich., and other cities assigns elders as mentors and tutors to junior high school students who are in danger of dropping out. It stresses the arts, career awareness, personal goal setting, consistent school attendance, and educational excellence.

School Volunteers for Boston—which is similar to programs operating in such urban areas as Los Angeles, Dallas, New York, and San Francisco—places elders in classrooms and after-school programs to tutor at-risk youth in basic reading and math skills, and participate in a variety of mentoring activities. The Teenage Parent Alternative Program (TAPA) in Lincoln Park, Mich., pairs Foster Grandparents with teenage parents. The elders help teach the young mothers about parenting and health care for their child, and also watch over the child while the mother is in class.

The programs involve white and

black elders and serve a similar blend of participants. The majority of the young people are from lower income families; the elders are primarily working and middle class.

### Why Mentoring for At-Risk?

Perhaps more than any other institution, the schools have been called upon to promote students' social adjustment, a role formerly played by the family. However, schools are held primarily responsible for promoting cognitive development and often don't have the resources to devote to the socializing task.

The promotion of social adjustment is also limited by the fact that schools are age-segregated institutions: adolescents are not only segregated from adults, but even from slightly younger and slightly older youth. This structure facilitates the specialization of curriculum, but severely inhibits developing broader experience. Few adult models are available, especially from the older generation. Studies by education scholar Joseph Galbo show that students rarely select teachers as significant adults in their lives. And counseling ratios in most urban areas are in the vicinity of 600 students to a single counselor.

And yet, an accumulation of longitudinal research suggests that adult relationships—not only with parents and teachers, but with grandparents, neighbors, and other interested adults—are a common factor among children who achieve success despite

growing up in disadvantaged and stressful circumstances.

In the search for cost-effective approaches to providing the constructive adult relationships that might give a boost to more youth, older adults have intriguing potential. Elders are the fastest growing segment of the population, may be relatively inexpensive to employ, and are themselves 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.

In an effort to discover whether this notion has more than intuitive appeal, P/PV embarked in 1990 on a series of research projects and a demonstration, toward which the first step was the study whose findings are outlined here.

### Strong Bonds Between Elders and Youth

More than half the pairings studied showed significant relationships that provided benefits to both partners. They divided into two types: primary relationships 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; and secondary relationships, in which elders served as helpful, "friendly neighbors," focusing on positive reinforcement but maintaining some emotional distance.

There is a strong basis for these bonds. Rather than being dependent

on "chemistry," the alliances seem to occur when youth are receptive—when they feel alone, at a time of crisis, or when they are ready for change and desirous of adult contact—and elders are enthusiastic and often interested in finding meaningful roles.

The elders interviewed felt a special empathy that appears to derive from the marginal status they share with youth in our society. They also appeared attracted to fulfilling the "elder function," the propensity of the old to share the accumulated knowledge and experience they have collected. Mentoring ability appears to be more easily expressed in the senior years of age.

Perhaps one of the study's most striking findings is that the most effective elders were people 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, and were able to communicate with them from their own experience.

Even in instances where significant relationships did not form, but where sustained contact with older adults occurred, some benefits from the elders' presence appeared to result. The elders became an important part of the environment, helping to create a caring and humanizing setting for the students. They

added diversity to the classroom and the school day.

Significant relationships went a step further, principally in two areas—day-to-day quality of life, and basic skills.

- *Day-to-day quality of life.* All the youth in significant relationships reported improvements in their daily lives, which they attributed to working with the seniors. The young people said they felt better, enjoyed the time together, and looked forward to meeting.

This appears to be critical and not just a "feel good" effect. The youth valued the chance to talk with someone who is not a parent or a teacher, who is not judgmental, and who is paying close attention. The chance to talk allows the young person to reduce stress and gain some perspective.

Christopher Jencks argued 15 years ago for improving the quality of school experiences for youth even without evidence that such improvements produce long-term impacts on achievement. And, in *When Teenagers Work*, Greenberger and Steinberg (1986) restate the case.

- *Basic skills.* Along with emotional benefits, youth in significant relationships cited learning tangibly from the elders' teaching. One learned how to approach math more effectively; another progressed from a D to an A in history; a third learned how to dress and respond appropriately in a job interview.

The benefits youth derive from the elders' instruction and example result from the relationship as well as from the elders' skills, largely

because the youngsters are trusting, engaged, and interested—in other words, in an emotional state conducive to learning—and because the partners are together long enough for progress to be made.

Skill acquisition is also furthered by the elders' concern with accountability. They check in predictably, they notice when assignments and promises are unfulfilled, they applaud success. Because the elders are obviously pulling for the teenagers to succeed, they seem to appreciate rather than resist being held accountable.

In the primary relationships, additional benefits were produced:

- *Stability.* The elders promote active coping on the part of the youth in three ways: instrumentally by being there and standing up for them; emotionally, by caring about what happens to them; and cognitively, through interpreting events.

- *Competence.* The elders encourage a sense of competence principally through developing an appreciation of abilities they already possess.

- *Access and advocacy.* The elders take it upon themselves to help teach the youth how to navigate "the system"; for example, how to interpret job listings and find financial aid for college; how to let the teacher know that the student is working hard and grasping the material; where to go to find a job.

- *Maturity.* The elders promote the maturity of the teens by taking them seriously, requiring them to make their own decisions, practicing being an adult.

## Fostering Relationships

The elders' success with the young people appeared to be attributable not only to their own qualities and the receptivity of the youth, but also to some deft decisions by the programs. Merely adding occasional adult contact to a conventional program will not produce substantial ties and benefits.

### 1. SUPPORTING THE ELDERS' ROLE

The programs support the elders' role by allowing them to function autonomously, making their mandate clear, and providing appropriate staff and administrative support.

- *Autonomy.* At their most effective, the programs resist the impulse to treat elder mentors as paraprofessionals with carefully prescribed functions. Rather, they emphasize getting good people and turning them loose. They also avoid overtraining the seniors, but encourage them to rely on their good instincts.

- *Mandate.* Effective programs also encourage the elder mentors to use their autonomy to play a broad developmental role, with their primary focus on the growth of the young person, rather than the accomplishment of specific tasks.

- *Support.* Given this mandate, the elder mentors require strong and consistent program support, through regular meetings with each other to discuss common issues and problems, an opportunity to form a community with other elder mentors, definition of their status as stipended volunteers rather than "employees"

of the program or school, and assignment to a mentor of a variety of youth with a variety of problems, in order to avoid burnout.

### 2. MAKING THE CONNECTION

The research also suggests five principles for programs that aim to encourage the development of significant relationships:

- *One on one.* Regular opportunities for the mentor and youth to meet privately are essential for the youth to feel that he or she is special to the adult. It apparently does not matter to the young people that the elder may be working with other youngsters, so long as they get their exclusive time and attention when they are together.

- *Purposeful.* Each contact should be structured around something of importance to both parties; it should not be artificial. Building or learning something together is the best example. Addressing a specific task gives something for these strangers to talk about at first, as they work toward a deeper level of understanding.

- *Length, frequency, and continuity.* Although strict formulations are not possible and change over time, some basic rules can be suggested: once-a-week contact appears to be enough as long as participants really get a chance to talk; once a month is insufficient. Closeness can be established in three to four weeks with some youth, but most take two or three months to open up and feel trust. Continuity and consistency are essential; young people desperately want a reliable adult figure.

- *Open-ended.* The programs in which older people make a commitment to stay with the youth "as long as they are wanted" appear to be most effective, even though the relationships rarely last for more than one year.

- *Environment.* The most conducive environments avoid impersonal or public institutional settings and allow for privacy and relaxation. Meeting on the youth's own territory is often desirable; it helps to focus the relationship on meeting the youth's needs. The T-LC program is another example: it has taken over a classroom it calls the mentor center, filled it with living room furniture and private spaces, and serves doughnuts. Students call it "the oasis."

### Conclusion

In closing, we would like to take note of three relevant developments since the P/PV study of five intergenerational programs concluded in 1988.

First, in its recently published study, *Volunteers in the Public Schools* (1990), the National Research Council found that strong school volunteer programs receive enthusiastic support from top administrators and teachers, and have a volunteer coordinator. NRC also found few school programs that use community people to help with guidance activities, and few elderly volunteers. Perhaps this group would be a good resource for the volunteer coordinator to tap.

Second, as part of its extensive

adult/youth relationships research agenda, P/PV has begun assessing the components of the I Have a Dream (IHAD) project in six Washington, D.C., area schools. We have found that the school-based coordinators of the program and the mentors have been welcomed by administrators and teachers as well as by the students involved.

Further, since concluding the intergenerational study, the primary author of this article surveyed mentor programs of all types around the country. Beyond the potential that formal mentoring may have for helping individual youngsters, he identified a number of areas of broader significance, one being the role played in schools by full-time coordinators employed to administer the mentoring component. While ostensibly coordinators, these people become primary mentors—often of more significance to the youth than their designated, volunteer mentors.

The coordinators' success seems to emanate from their proximity to the young people. They are present each day, their offices become a caring refuge, and they have time to talk. Soon youngsters who are not even part of the mentor program begin gravitating to these oases.

Socially, the coordinators tend also to be close to the youth: most "came up" the same way as the young people, often in the same neighborhoods, and understand their circumstances more easily than outside volunteers. The project coordinator role may represent a back door reinvention of the school social

worker, a victim of budget cuts and the focus on academic basics that has been a legacy of educational reform. Its return may well be one of the major legacies of the nation's current love affair with mentoring.

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The curriculum team's job is to establish goals for the curriculum and use established criteria to measure how well that curriculum meets stated goals.

The guide is available from the Comprehensive Health Education Program, Southwest Regional Laboratory, 4665 Lampson Ave., Los Alamitos, Calif.

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