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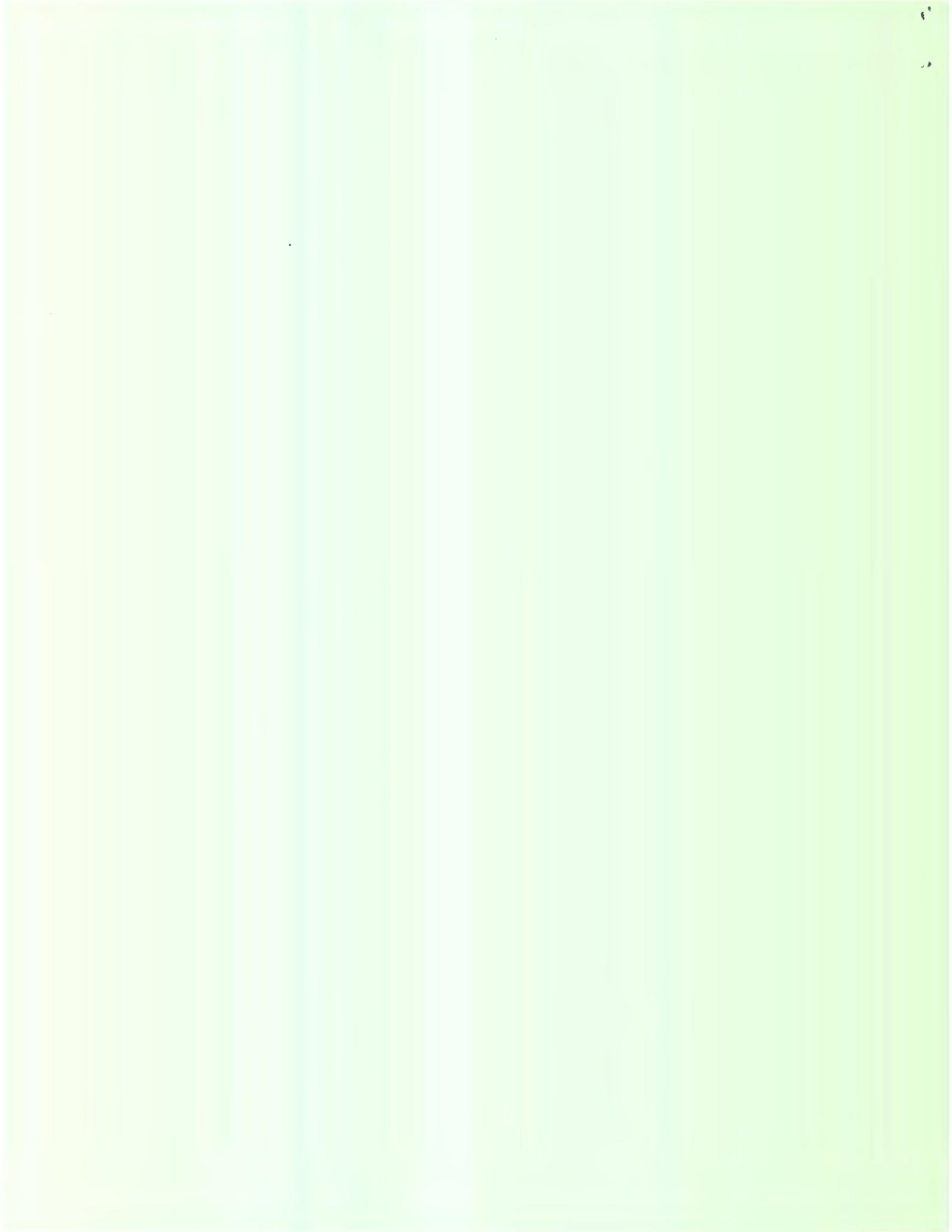
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Understanding How Youth and Elders Form Relationships:

A Study of Four Linking Lifetimes Programs

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Youth need caring and consistent relationships with adults to transition successfully into adulthood; yet increasingly, many youth are growing up isolated from this support. The question that inevitably arises is whether this void can be filled by social interventions. One programmatic response has been creation of mentoring programs that recruit adult volunteers to work with youth in need of adult support. Although practitioners and policymakers have embraced the idea that these programs can provide youth with supportive relationships, little research evidence currently exists to support this claim. Thus, mentoring programs have been proliferating over the past five years or so in a knowledge vacuum, with very little common meaning among practitioners and advocates, and no set of established best practices or operational lessons.

Specifically, we do not know whether these matches result in relationships akin to those that occur naturally, nor do we understand the processes through which programmatic relationships are developed and sustained, or the role of the program in their development. Because programmatic adult/youth relationships have not been studied, we know little about what makes them effective, or conversely, what makes them fail to develop or decline.

This study--the first product of P/PV's four-year research initiative on a variety of adult/youth relationships programs--was designed to examine the relationships formed between elders (ages 55 and older) and at-risk youth (ages 12 to 17) at four Linking Lifetimes intergenerational mentoring demonstration sites developed by Temple University's Center for Intergenerational Learning. This study examined the activities of these pairs (what they do together and talk about), the relationship formation process (whether and how these relationships develop, how they are sustained, how and why they end), and their practices (what constitute effective and ineffective practices in these relationships).

P/PV interviewed participants of the Linking Lifetimes program in Springfield, Massachusetts, which serves young offenders; the Memphis program, which serves seventh- and eighth-grade teen mothers; and the Los Angeles and Miami programs, which target middle school youth living in high-risk neighborhoods. At each site, elders were required to meet at least weekly with their youth for between four and 10 hours. The elders received stipends, ranging from $2.20 to $6.00 per hour, and reimbursement for expenses.

We conducted face-to-face semistructured interviews with youth and adults separately at all four sites at two points in time. The first interview, occurring when matches had been meeting an average of 3.5 months, was designed to explore the early stages of the relationship by examining participants' expectations and early interactions. In the second interview, conducted approximately nine months later, participants were asked to recall and describe critical incidents or memorable interactions with their partners that were

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either pleasant or unpleasant experiences. Thus, participants' feelings and behaviors were explored by examining points in the relationship that the participants identified as being significant. A total of 26 pairs are the focus of the analysis.

IDENTIFYING SATISFIED PAIRS

The study is based on the hypothesis that in order for an adult volunteer's relationship with a youth to facilitate positive outcomes for that youth (e.g., improved school performance, increased prosocial behavior), an effective relationship must first develop. We define an effective relationship as having those characteristics that promote both pair members' satisfaction, thus providing evidence that a bond has been established. This study does not address whether effective or ineffective relationships influence outcomes for youth.[*] It is, rather, a systematic attempt to define the practices of effective relationships.

The first step was to characterize each of the 26 pairs as being either satisfied or dissatisfied with the relationship. Three indicators of satisfaction were developed, two of which were the same for adults and youth:

- Feelings of liking, attachment to, and commonality with the other member; and

- Commitment to the relationship, expressed as a desire to continue it.

The third indicator of satisfaction was assessed differently for youth and adults. For adults, this indicator was their perception of being appreciated or of making a difference in the youth's life. For youth, the indicator was the extent to which they viewed the mentor as a source of support. To establish this indicator, we examined both the mentor's and the youth's perceptions of what the mentor did and how the youth responded, and found that these perceptions were not necessarily the same. Matches were categorized as being satisfied or dissatisfied based on aggregate scores across these three dimensions.

IDENTIFYING EFFECTIVE AND INEFFECTIVE PATTERNS OF INTERACTION

Of the 26 pairs, 17 (roughly two-thirds) were identified as being satisfied, and nine matches (one-third) were identified as being dissatisfied. The 17 satisfied pairs were

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[*] P/PV will address this question through its studies of eight Big Brothers/Big Sisters programs, two pilot mentoring programs that match adult volunteers with youth adjudicated in the juvenile justice system, and seven college-based mentoring programs funded by Campus Partners in Learning.

then compared with the nine dissatisfied pairs to determine if there were any differences in interaction in the following areas:

- How often the matches met or talked by telephone, what they actually did together, and what they talked about; and

- Styles of interaction, defined as how the adult and youth carried out their interactions.

We found that the particular activities the pairs engaged in were not a determinant of satisfaction. Both satisfied and dissatisfied pairs met regularly (on average 1.5 times a week) and took part in similar activities--eating out together, going shopping, watching/participating in sporting events, and talking about school, family, etc.

Differences were discovered, however, in the participants' styles of interaction. In fact, one significant theme appears to underlie the styles of interaction that distinguish satisfied from dissatisfied pairs: in relationships where the elder and the youth reported satisfaction with the match, the elder was able to identify areas in which the youth needed help, and to find a way to address those areas in ways that the youth accepted. While the areas in which the youth required help varied, the style used in addressing them was consistent.

Elders in satisfied relationships allowed the relationships to be youth-driven in their content and timing. They waited for the youth to lower their defenses and to determine when and how trust would be established; and to signal if, when and in what way the divulgence of personal problems or challenges would occur--indeed, to define the mentor's role. This process lasted anywhere from weeks to months, with the elders trying to determine the needs of the youth by identifying their interests, to build trust in the relationship by taking those interests seriously, and to work on those areas in which the youth were most receptive to help.

For matches in which the participants were dissatisfied with their relationship, the reverse was true. The youth did not have a voice in determining the types of activities engaged in, and the elders were prescriptive in determining the areas in which they would help the youth. In these matches, a degenerative process began: the youth tended to "vote with their feet"--to not show up for meetings and to withdraw from the relationship.

While the patterns identified were not observed in every match, and could appear in both satisfied and dissatisfied pairs, our analysis focused on identifying those central tendencies of the relationships that were most consistently reported, and that served to distinguish satisfied from dissatisfied pairs. Although no one match could be said to interact effectively in every way and none could be said to be completely ineffective, differences in styles of interaction were observed in the following areas: the adult's

understanding of the youth's reluctance to trust; the adult's understanding of the youth's role in the relationship; the adult's emphasis on the youth's disclosure; the adult's methods of offering support and advice; the adult's attitudes toward the youth, based on the adult's perceptions of the youth's family, social class and culture; the adult's expectations for the relationship; and the adult's involvement with the youth's family.

The Adult's Understanding of the Youth's Reluctance to Trust

Adults in satisfied pairs were more likely than those in dissatisfied pairs to realize that these young people, like any other adolescents, would initially be reticent or reluctant to trust unfamiliar adults. Because the adolescents in these programs may have been disappointed by previous relationships with adults, most likely with their parents, these elders seemed to recognize that additional sensitivity was required and that the youth would need time to develop trust in the relationship.

According to the adults interviewed, the reluctance to trust was particularly evident during initial meetings. All the elders found the youth uncommunicative at first, and many times, the elders felt that they were talking to themselves. They reported that when the youth did talk, it was only to answer the adults' questions, and these responses were often monosyllabic or simple shrugs. However, mentors who were successful seemed to recognize the reason for this silence, and were able to avoid taking it personally. Instead, these elders considered possible reasons why the youth were not talking, and adjusted their expectations accordingly.

The Adult's Understanding of the Youth's Role in the Relationship

How the adults interpreted the youth's role in the relationship served to differentiate satisfied from dissatisfied pairs. Adults in satisfied relationships were more likely to include the youth in determining both the activities that the pair would do together and the areas in which they would help the youth. These mentors were more likely to follow their youth's suggestions for activities, and to select additional activities based on their youth's responsiveness. Conversely, elders in dissatisfied relationships were less likely to follow their youth's suggestions for activities or consult the youth about the areas in which they needed help.

Adults who expressed satisfaction with their relationships chose to work through the youth's initial silence by assessing what the youth were willing and unwilling to do. The elders did this by listening closely to what the youth did say--the things the youth expressed interest in, activities they described as being fun, careers they wanted to pursue-- then tailoring their activities to the youth's interests. By allowing the youth to determine the relationship's activities, the elders enabled the youth to determine the direction of the relationship--the linchpin of building the youth's trust.

While the elders waited for the youth to express their interests, the mentors learned through trial and error what the youth's interests were by observing how they responded to various activities that the mentors chose: going out to eat, going on outings, shopping, talking, etc. However, the youth's interests were not always recreational. For example, some mentors tried to design activities around their youth's career interests. And when youth in satisfied relationships expressed an interest in finding employment, their mentors helped them by driving them around town to interviews, and by introducing them to potential employers.

Mentors in dissatisfied relationships were more likely to follow the ineffective pattern of thinking the youth had no preferences for activities because the youth did not talk much, or not taking these preferences seriously--defining them as frivolous. Interestingly, the youth had no problem voicing their preferences to the interviewers.

The Mentor's Emphasis on Disclosure

Mentors in satisfied relationships were more likely to realize that the youth might not be comfortable disclosing intimate details about their families or themselves to an unfamiliar adult. These mentors surmised that delving into the youth's private lives could be beyond the scope of their involvement, and instead waited for the youth to decide whether one of the mentor's roles would be as a confidante.

Conversely, the most common and critical mistake mentors in dissatisfied relationships made in attempting to establish close, trusting relationships was to begin the relationship with the activity that youth find most emotionally challenging, namely, by asking the youth to talk about those things that can be very difficult to discuss: poor school performance, criminal records, or dysfunctional or abusive family behaviors.

The youth did not appear to understand the importance of "having a good talk," and viewed their mentors' efforts to force disclosure quite negatively. Unfortunately, since these mentors viewed disclosure as an important criterion for establishing a successful relationship, they often continued to push while the youth continued to resist.

Methods of Offering Support and Advice

How the mentor offered support and advice to the youth also differentiated satisfied from dissatisfied pairs. Adults in satisfied relationships were more likely than adults in dissatisfied relationships to demonstrate their support, to respond to requests for help in a neutral and nonjudgmental manner, and to offer practical suggestions for solving problems.

Demonstrating support. Mentors in satisfied relationships were more likely to offer consistent reassurance and kindness by reminding the youth that they were available to talk at any time, and that they enjoyed their time with the youth. Mentors also demon-

strated this reassurance and support through their actions. For example, one mentor visited and wrote letters to his youth when the youth was sentenced to a drug treatment program.

Suggesting how to solve problems. Once an adult did become aware of problems, either through the youth's disclosure or through observation of the youth, he or she could either judge and criticize the youth, or attempt to remain neutral and offer alternatives for solving the problems. Mentors in satisfied pairs typically chose the latter course of action, avoiding reprimands and judgments but offering instruction the youth defined as being useful.

For example, in the beginning of their relationships, most adults were faced with missed appointments and unanswered telephone calls. How the adults responded to this testing behavior was instrumental in the relationships' development. Elders in satisfied pairs were persistent with the youth, explaining how much they enjoyed their meetings and their desire for continuing in the program. These statements were coupled with practical suggestions for helping the youth to remember appointments. The youth in satisfied pairs who discussed family problems appreciated the mentors' assistance in negotiating relationships with family members. Their mentors provided them with strategies for getting through arguments that the youth implemented.

Criticizing and preaching. Mentors in dissatisfied pairs tended to be critical of their youth. The youth were very clear, as evidenced by their behaviors, that they would not tolerate their mentor's use of criticism, even if it was clear to them that the mentor did so in attempts to advise or instruct.

The Adult's Attitudes Toward the Youth Based on Their Perceptions of the Youth's Family, Social Class and Culture

Mentors in satisfied relationships were more likely than those in dissatisfied relationships to show awareness of the need to remain sensitive to the circumstances their youth grew up under. These mentors attempted to relate, on some level, to the experiences that their youth were going through--often by drawing on some event or feeling in their own lives. Mentors in dissatisfied relationships were more likely not to accept the youth for who they were or where they came from.

The Adult's Expectations for the Relationship

Adults in satisfied pairs realized from the outset that the relationship would be one-directional: they were the givers and the youth were the recipients. They understood also that while there would be benefits from the relationship, the primary benefit--at least initially--would be that they were active and helping someone. These mentors tried to have realistic expectations about changes that might occur in the youth and to recognize that the youth showing up for meetings, expressing appreciation, and having a good

time with them were all accomplishments. Mentors who expected that the gains of the relationship would be great--that they would establish a "mentoring" relationship where the youth outwardly esteemed and valued the mentor and the mentor transformed the youth--were typically very disappointed.

The Adult's Involvement with the Youth's Family

All elders interviewed discussed the difficulty of establishing a relationship with the youth's family. Elders in satisfied relationships were more likely to inform the parents of the purpose of the program and their role in the youth's lives, making clear that they were not the parents' replacements. These elders appeared to respect the youth's family, but also understood that their relationships with the youth were primary--they knew that their relationships with the family had to be established through the youth. These mentors were careful to stay out of family arguments and distance themselves from discussing things with the parents so that the youth would not think or sense that they were "telling on" them. These elders were also more likely to select interactions with the youth's family carefully, and to not allow a parent to shape the relationship.

When mentors did extend their helping role to other members of the youth's family, they put their relationship with the youth at risk. One youth, for example, ran into a problem when her mentor revealed a confidence to the youth's guardian--a confidence that actually concerned the guardian. The mentor's attempt to aid the youth had the exact opposite result.

PROGRAM PRACTICES THAT APPEAR TO PROMOTE EFFECTIVENESS

The fact that two-thirds of the matches were found to be effective is significant--it, in fact, leads us to believe that mentoring can be practiced not only by a few gifted adults, but by the majority of adults who come forward. However, given the difficulties programs encounter in recruiting volunteers (see Freedman, 1991), improvements in screening and training practices may improve this rate, thereby reducing the number of matches that fail and the risk of negative consequences for both youth and adults.

This report includes several recommendations for mentoring programs. While these recommendations are by no means definitive, they are based on participant interviews and conversations with program coordinators--in essence, the cumulative experiences of the four programs studied here.

The most important recommendations concern helping adults to establish youth-driven relationships. Since the majority of youth interviewed reported that they were interested in participating in the program to "go places," mentors could be encouraged initially to do just that, understanding the affective importance youth place on that activity. And since the goal of pairs experiencing effective interactions was for the adult to help the youth accomplish whatever they were interested in--going places, finding employment,

learning life skills, learning to problem-solve, etc.--each volunteer could be told that following the youth's interests actually builds trust. Building trust is an important program goal, particularly since the adult volunteer may be the first person outside the youth's family that the youth will come to trust.

Volunteers could also receive training on active listening, a skill needed to understand the needs of the youth assigned to them, as well as problem-solving skills that the adults in turn could teach to the youth. Finally, the findings indicate that adults could benefit from ongoing training--throughout the course of the relationship--on setting expectations for the match and on establishing realistic expectations concerning how the relationship will progress. They should know that they will likely be frustrated initially, that the youth will be noncommunicative, and that they have support from program staff and other mentors to get through the initial and subsequent stages.

FINAL THOUGHTS

It remains to be seen whether or not effective relationships can produce positive outcomes in youth's lives. Based on our initial observations, we have been impressed with the potential for the development of programmatic, constructive relationships between adult volunteers and youth. There is ample evidence, however, that such modest interventions as mentoring are unlikely in and of themselves to produce long-term outcomes for youth. (See Walker and Vilella-Velez, 1992.)

But given the universal need youth have for developing caring and consistent relationships with adults, and the scarcity of such relationships in the lives of at-risk youth, interventions like mentoring can fill a significant need. We believe that well-implemented, programmatic relationships designed to address such a need play an important role in any broader strategy designed to serve the needs of at-risk youth.