

EYE ON RESEARCH

Rise of Youth Mentoring Outpaces Knowledge Base

Scholars seek to improve quality of programs, which are proliferating in schools

BY DEBRA VIADERO

Every so often, a piece of research comes along that spurs people to action. Such was the case, scholars say, with a 1995 study of the Big Brothers Big Sisters youth-mentoring program.

After 18 months in the program, the study found, the "little brothers and sisters" were half as likely as their nonparticipant peers to try drugs or skip classes, and only one-third as likely to use alcohol.

The results, which were embraced by a legion of philanthropists and politicians, helped jump-start a nationwide movement to recruit volunteer mentors for troubled children. Experts estimate that 3 million young people in the United States are now involved in a formal one-to-one mentoring relationship—a threefold increase since 1995.

Now, however, a pair of researchers contends the enthusiasm for youth mentoring is outpacing the research base on how best to nurture productive, lasting bonds between mentors and the young people they're matched with.

"Overall, the field has been devoting more attention to quantity than quality," said one of the researchers, David L. DuBois, who has criticized the emphasis on rapidly expanding the number of mentorships. "This is not to blame the practitioners in the field, because funders and policymakers are putting pressure on them by saying: 'Here's finally something that works, so we're going to fund it. But we want you to do it on a large scale, because we care about reaching large numbers of young people.'"

The trend is worrisome, experts say, because studies show that more than half of mentoring matches fizzle within six months.

Failed Pairings Can Cause Harm

When that happens, studies show, the children can end up feeling worse than if they had never had a mentor, said Jean E. Rhodes, a psychology professor at the University of Massachusetts Boston who has studied those aftereffects. With Mr. DuBois, a professor of community-health sciences at the University of Illinois at Chicago, she wrote a research review this past summer that voiced concern about the proliferating programs.

Robert C. Granger, the president of the William T. Grant Foundation, a New York City-based philanthropy that supports research aimed at improving young people's lives, said the idea that such collapsed relationships can actually harm children is relatively new. "I think people believed for a long time if a relationship didn't

last very long, it was unlikely to have an effect," he said.

What Ms. Rhodes, Mr. DuBois, and other scholars fear is that the push to increase mentors' ranks has caused programs to lower their requirements for volunteers and spawned new kinds of mentoring configurations about which researchers know very little—school-based programs, for example, or group mentoring, workplace programs, and so-called e-mentoring, which occurs online.

The greatest expansion is occurring among school-based programs. Once rare, such relationships now account for around half of all mentoring matches nationwide and half of those that the Philadelphia-based Big Brothers Big Sisters organization sponsors.

"In some respects, it's easier to go to an organizational partner like a high school, so they can cooperate with us in getting volunteers," said Joseph Radelet, the vice president for mentoring programs at BBBS. Adding to that advantage, experts said, schools offer safe, neutral, structured environments where mentors and young people can meet.

The problem is that such relationships rarely last as long as research indicates they should. Michael J. Karcher, a researcher at the University of Texas at San Antonio who has been studying school-based mentoring programs in that area, has found that only 5 percent to 10 percent of participants in school-based partnerships

pair up again for a second school year.

For instance, Mr. Karcher recalled that the students whom he himself mentored were sometimes nowhere to be found.

"In school-based mentoring, mentors show up at school, and the kid is skipping class," he said. "With community-based programs, you can call the parent, and that parent will make sure the kid is there."

Studies of traditional community-based mentoring programs suggest that the biggest gains for young people don't come until they've been involved in a one-to-one mentorship for at least a year. At Big Brothers Big Sisters, Mr. Radelet said, the community-based matches endure an average of 22 months, while the school-based matches typically last just 10 months.

"We're focusing quite a bit now on how we can increase the length of the school-based matches," said Mr. Radelet.

He said his organization also relies on research to match children with appropriate mentors, choosing adults, for instance, who are confident they can be effective and who are sensitive to the economic challenges their young partners face at home.

Ms. Rhodes said she is also skeptical of the rise in school-based programs because it comes as schools are



Robert J. LeBlanc, an engineer who volunteers as a mentor through Communities in Schools of San Antonio, waves goodbye on Dec. 7 to 10th grader Chris Osorio after their weekly meeting at John Jay High School.

Alicia Wegner/Citizetel for Education Week

'Seven C's' of Success

From his own analyses of the research on youth-mentoring programs, David L. DuBois has identified seven features—the “seven C’s”—of effective youth-mentoring relationships.

- ◆ **Compatibility:** Mentors and young people ought to be compatible in basic personality, but they need neither be close in age nor matched by race or ethnicity.
- ◆ **Capability:** Mentors are most effective when they already have experience working with young people and are sensitive to the socioeconomic challenges students face at home.
- ◆ **Consistency:** It's important for mentorship pairs to meet regularly.
- ◆ **Continuity:** Mentorships must be long-lasting—at least a year, according to some studies.
- ◆ **Closeness:** Forming an emotional bond is critical to the success of the relationship.
- ◆ **Centeredness:** Though they require some structure, relationships should be centered on the young person's developmental needs.
- ◆ **Connectedness:** Mentors are more successful when they connect with parents or other key figures in a young person's life.

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being pressed to raise students' academic scores. She fears that educators see the volunteers as “adjunct tutors” for struggling students. “Then you've changed the intervention from something sort of aimed at psychosocial development to academic development,” she said.

Mr. Karcher's studies of San Antonio-area schoolchildren show that mentor matches are most successful when the volunteers spend less time on academics and more time playing games or talking to students about their families and friends.

Just Showing Up

That's been the experience, too, of Robert J. LeBlanc, who has mentored boys in the San Antonio area for 11 years through the nonprofit Communities in Schools program there.

“I always ask, ‘How are your grades? Do you need help with homework?’” said Mr. LeBlanc, an electronics engineer. “If he says no, that's the end of the discussion. For some of these kids, the most important thing is having somebody show up.”

Yet Mr. Karcher, an associate professor of education, is more optimistic about school-based programs than other researchers are. He said that's because many such programs pair high school students with younger children, leading to gains in self-esteem and more connectedness to school for both participants.

“How often do high school students get to have somebody idealize them?” he said. The trick, he added, is to avoid overcommitted “cheerleader types” and select volunteers who are involved in fewer school activities and stand to benefit more

from the arrangement.

Mr. Karcher's study is a three-year project involving 300 students in grades 5-12, half of whom were randomly assigned to the Communities in Schools mentoring program.

Another group of researchers from Public/Private Ventures, a nonprofit organization based in Philadelphia, is wrapping up a randomized study involving school-based mentoring efforts run by Big Brothers Big Sisters in 10 cities. Other studies are analyzing the informal connections that young people in rural areas strike up with adults.

And the federal government, which has spent \$100 million a year since 2004 to underwrite much of the growth in youth-mentoring programs, has launched a study of a wide variety of mentoring programs across the country.

Mr. Granger of the W.T. Grant Foundation, which currently has a \$2.25 million portfolio of research grants examining various aspects of mentoring, predicted that the results of those studies could help reverse the disjunction between knowledge and practice in mentoring.

“I think that five years from now,” he said, “we'll have a much better understanding of how to choose and support mentors who will actually create close, consistent, and enduring relationships with kids.”

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edweek.org: A link to Ms. Rhodes and Mr. DuBois' research review, “Understanding and Facilitating the Youth Mentoring Movement,” is online at www.edweek.org/links.