

Youth Offending Teams

e-flash 26

Best Practice when Mentoring Young Offenders

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Summary

- 'Mentoring' refers to a relationship over a prolonged period of time between two people where the older, more experienced person provides help and support to the younger person.
- A mentoring relationship can be formed naturally, or the pair can be matched through a formal programme.
- Similar personalities and shared interests and experiences have been shown as key to a successful mentoring relationship, rather than shared age, faith, race or gender.
- Mentoring promotes healthy positive relationships between like-minded youth and adults
- Reports on the long term benefits of mentoring are mixed, and research is ongoing.
- For young offenders, mentoring is more likely to be helpful if it is part of a wider programme addressing the young person's offending needs.

What is mentoring?

Mentoring is an intervention tool that matches young people with a suitable adult for friendship, advice and support. The practice addresses the need for positive adult interaction, and seeks to reduce risk factors and enhance protective factors and positive behaviour. The setting for mentoring sessions can be in school, at home, in a social setting or at a specified facility. Mentoring sessions can involve activities such as talking, emailing, exercising, going to the movies or assisting with homework. Activities can also vary according to gender¹. Generally young people in their early teenage years respond best to mentoring, so many programmes are specifically aimed at youths aged 10 to 17 years. Many mentoring programmes target at-risk youth or young offenders.

Worldwide, mentoring is recognised as being provided in two different ways-natural and structured². Natural mentoring is where young people have exposure to positive role models in their normal social networks – school, sport, church, hobbies, etc. Where these natural networks do not exist, structured mentoring programs have been established to compensate for the lack of positive influences or protective factors. Structured programmes may have set activities and, in the case of young offenders may often involve completing the requirements of Youth Court imposed orders.

¹ Sipe, C L. (2002)

² Hartley, R. (2004)

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What does mentoring aim to achieve?

Mentoring aims to decrease the youth's dynamic risk factors, increase protective factors and therefore increase their positive behaviours, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1

↓ Risk Factors	↑ Protective Factors	↑ Positive Behaviour
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Early and persistent antisocial behaviour • Association with antisocial peers • Alienation • Homes characterised by violence • Poor family / whānau relationships • Low socioeconomic background • Criminal activity • Alcohol abuse • Lack of commitment to school 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Healthy beliefs • Opportunities for involvement • Pro-social attitudes • Skills development for appropriate behaviour 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improved grades and attendance at school • Develop and maintain meaningful relationships • Decision making abilities³

What works?

The key to creating effective mentoring relationships lies in the development of trust between two strangers⁴. Table 2 illustrates effective best practice in a mentoring programme structure.

Table 2

Effective best practice: Mentoring programme structure ⁵	
Good practice components	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A programme structure that screens volunteer mentors, provides orientation, and ongoing training, supervision and support • Engaging young people voluntarily and providing needs-based and developmentally appropriate activities • Involving all parties in forming the mentoring relationship, including caregivers • Mentor is defined as a friend who shares common interests rather than an authoritarian figure • A link with an established community group to identify potential mentors willing to be involved with young offender • A carefully conducted closure process.

³ Jekielek, Susan, Kristin A. Moore, and Elizabeth C. (January 2002)

⁴ Sipe, C. L. (2002)

⁵ Jekielek, Susan, Kristin A. Moore, and Elizabeth C. (January 2002)

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Additional good practice components identified for indigenous youth	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Strong links with indigenous communities and services with adequate consultation with, and promotion in, indigenous communities• An understanding of the historical, cultural and social factors that affect indigenous peoples' lives• Sensitivity to cultural requirements in matching mentors.
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There is debate about whether matching youth and adult gender and race/ethnicity has significant measurable effects on the success of the relationship. Shared interests and experiences have been shown as key to a successful mentoring relationship, rather than shared age, faith, race or gender⁶. In fact it has been found that exposing the young person to a culture and/or beliefs different from their own can have a beneficial effect⁷. A few studies, however, claim that matching race and gender is highly important in creating a 'performing match', so the question is greatly debated and research is ongoing⁸. It is clear, however, that a match based on similar personality types and similar interests is highly likely to succeed.

Achieving a suitable match for any young person can take a long time as finding similarities that both the mentor and young person share can be difficult. It is important, for a programme to persevere in order to achieve good outcomes for the young person.

The length of time that a mentor and young person spend together can affect re-offending, both in terms of overall duration of the relationship and frequency and duration of each contact. The research results vary, but most programmes recommend that the pair should meet for at least two hours per week for at least one year in order for the partnership to be most effective⁹.

What doesn't work?

The most common cause for the failure of a match is a lack of commitment from one or both parties or a personality clash – if the mentor and young person do not 'connect' then the match is not going to be effective. Other factors that can negatively impact on the mentoring process include:

- Unclear boundaries
- Non-compliance not addressed
- Not enough time given to the development of trust
- Too much focus on behavioural changes rather than building the relationship
- Inadequate support for mentors and young people
- A short time limit on the relationship

⁶ Grossman (2002), quoted in Center for Prevention Research and Development. (2005)

⁷ Delaney, M. & Milne, C. 12-13 (September 2002)

⁸ Sipe, C L. (2002)

⁹ Wilczynski, A. et al (September, 2003)

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What are the potential benefits?

The potential benefits of mentoring can be both short and long term. Short term outcomes from mentoring include possible reductions in offending behaviour, completion of Youth Court imposed orders, reductions in substance misuse, and increased participation in education, training and employment. Long term benefits, greater than six months, have shown that youths have increased community involvement, improved self esteem/confidence, improved communication skills and more motivation¹⁰.

New Zealand research with at-risk youth has shown that mentoring can help a young person set positive goals, improve school performance, enhance their feelings of identity and wellbeing, improve peer and family/whānau relationships and decision-making, and show a decrease in drug and alcohol use¹¹.

What are the potential risks?

Although the potential benefits of mentoring make for encouraging reading, much of the research has shown conflicting results, especially on the long-term benefits of mentoring. Some studies have shown that the benefits of being mentored are ongoing, others show that the positive benefits of mentoring last only as long as the programme itself. Because there has been little follow-up research, it is impossible to make a definitive statement on the long-term benefits or downfalls of mentoring. There are, however some cautions identified in the literature:

- Poorly implemented programmes can result in adverse effects on young people, and may even fuel recidivism
- In some areas mentors may need to be recompensed for travel and time, for example in rural areas
- Mentoring with young offenders is not a sufficient intervention in itself, it needs to be part of a wider programme
- Getting a commitment for at least 12 months engagement by a mentor with a specific young person can be difficult

Mentoring in the youth justice sector

Mentoring appears to be most valuable for young people at risk rather than those need intensive professional services. Within the youth justice sector, the aim of mentoring is to provide the young person with a positive role model, to get them involved in the community and back into education; with the overall goal being to reduce the risk of offending or reduce serious youth offending.

In a crime prevention context, mentoring is an intervention directed towards young people already involved in the criminal justice system or 'at-risk' of engaging in criminal activity. In New Zealand, young people are generally referred to mentoring

¹⁰ Wilczynski, A. et al (September, 2003)

¹¹ Sipe, C L. (2002)

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programmes through Police Youth Aid, Child Youth and Family social workers, schools, community agencies, or family/ whānau¹².

Mentoring programmes with young offenders have been shown to be most effective where they are part of a wider coordinated response addressing the needs of the young person. Programmes in which mentoring was the only intervention were less successful than programmes that included mentoring as a part of a multi-modal treatment programme. Significant reductions in re-offending occurred when mentoring was part of a programme which also included elements such as behaviour modification, supplementary education and employment programmes¹³.

Mentoring in NZ

The government funds several programmes that involve mentoring. The Ministry of Social Development funds programmes including Youth Transitions Services (YTS) for at-risk young people, Turn Your Life Around (TYLA) and Project K. The Crime Prevention Unit, within the Ministry of Justice, and NZ Police fund mentoring programmes across New Zealand, and the Ministry of Youth Development funds mentoring programmes such as the Conservations Corps, Youth Service Corps and Young New Zealander's Challenge. The Ministry of Youth Development is currently supporting the mentoring sector to develop service guidelines to standardise best practice in the area.

The Big Brother Big Sister programme (BBBS) is the largest mentoring organisation in the United States and is now available throughout New Zealand; specifically in Nelson, Hamilton, Christchurch, Greymouth, Westport, North Canterbury, Hokitika, Whakatāne, Napier, Dannevirke and most recently Taranaki¹⁴.

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<sup>12</sup> *Youth mentors build bridges*. Ten One: Community Edition. (March, 2008)

<sup>13</sup> Jolliffe, D. & Farrington, D. P. (November, 2007)

<sup>14</sup> *Youth mentors build bridges*. Ten One: Community Edition. (March, 2008)

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