australian YOUTH MENTORING NETWORK

Youth Mentoring Relationships in Context: Mentor Perceptions of Youth, Environment, and the Mentor Role

Introduction: Youth mentoring is generally considered to be a structured and trusting relationship that brings young people together with a caring individual. The relationship, however, often sees mentors interact with their mentee in a range of different environments such as home, school, and other community settings associated with young people. Understanding how and why mentors negotiate their role in these various settings remains underexplored, thus the authors of this paper examined how mentors' perceptions of their mentees and mentee environments informed their sense of how they fulfilled the mentoring role.

Methodology: The qualitative study drew on structured interviews conducted with nine professional mentors serving youth at risk for adjustment problems. Mentors selected

for the study had been in the role of mentor for at least one year. This cut-off was used in order to assess the perceptions of mentors who had a range of mentoring experiences and who had already spent months working to build relationships with young people and families, and therefore had developed some sense of what their role comprised week-to-week and how it changed over time. The researchers then organised their findings into a number of theme categories and evaluated the results.

Results: There was unanimous consensus among the mentors of the necessity to work closely with other closely related individuals toward the goals of best serving their mentees need, even if these were people who were unable to support them, exerted a negative influence, or undermined the efforts the mentors put forth. There was also complete agreement from mentors when they all described the challenge of identifying and maintaining appropriate boundaries and role definition given the flexible, individualized nature of mentoring. However mentors' descriptions of the limits around their

engagement with families varied, as did their rationale for setting particular limits. Some described the importance of setting boundaries and limiting their involvement with families for their own well-being. Others said extensive involvement with families had to be limited in order to preserve the amount and quality of time mentors focused on their mentees.

Implications for practice: There are a number of limitations to the study, such as small sample size, single program focus and a selected group of young people all drawn from a similar background, however, mentoring organisations may be well-served by acknowledging, structuring and supporting the relationships mentors form with individuals besides mentees. Programs can provide training and ongoing support aimed at fostering an understanding of young people and their environments that may be more conducive to partnering effectively with all individuals involved in a young person's development. When this sort of support and training is absent, some mentors may maintain or develop perceptions of young people and/or their environments that create barriers to effective collaboration and the ultimate achievement of positive youth outcomes.

Additionally, mentoring also represents a unique opportunity to engage with families unlikely to seek services, and who can benefit greatly from the supportive relationship offered via a child's mentor. Given the inevitability of engaging with families, the potential transformative value in working closely with them, and the significant and unique challenges that accompany this more expansive approach, this study highlights the need for explicit support for mentors in enhancing the facets of their role that extend beyond their prescribed relationships and to consider the many different roles focusing on both mentees and on other individuals that mentors engages in the course of their role.

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