

Life Coaching and Credible Messenger Mentoring With Young People



American Institutes for Research

Life Coaching and Credible Messenger Mentoring With Young People, Including Those Involved with Justice Systems

To create and expand more equitable pathways to thriving, agencies and organizations are using approaches like life coaching and credible messenger mentoring that draw on the social ecology of young people's connections to build promotive relationships and increase meaningful development opportunities (Dahlberg & Krug, 2006; NASEM, 2019). Inequitable and inadequate access to social, educational, and economic opportunities, including a lack of consistent, supportive relationships, may contribute to inequities more broadly, such as disproportionate system involvement for Black and Latinx youth (NASEM, 2019). This brief describes how organizations and agencies can implement life coaching and credible messenger mentoring to support youth thriving.

A Central Purpose for Life Coaches and Credible Messenger Mentors: Building Relationships

Life coaching approaches, including credible messenger mentoring, provide opportunities for young people to connect and have meaningful relationships with adults. Life coaches and credible messenger mentors (hereafter, coaches and mentors) help create a positive social environment for young people (Austria & Peterson, 2017). They play a vital role that is distinct from that of case managers. Coaching and mentoring are designed to cultivate transformative relationships that can support young people in meaningful ways, changing their developmental trajectories.

Prior research suggests that life coaching benefits young people by:

- building trusting relationships with adults (Spencer et al., 2019);
- providing support in identifying and working toward positive goals (Hawkins et al., 2020); and

Building Relationships

Life Coaching

Life coaches are mentors who work with young people to provide guidance, connection, and support to meet identified personal goals.

Credible Messenger Mentors

Credible messenger mentoring recruits people who have relevant lived experience (e.g. prior justice system involvement) and have transformed their own lives to engage young people in life coaching.

- reinforcing connections to resources and opportunities in housing, workforce, education, health (Acland & Cavanagh, 2022; Anoshiravani, 2020; Britton & Pilnik, 2018; Courtney et al., 2019).

The Purpose for Life Coaches and Credible Messenger Mentors

Young people need different types of developmental opportunities or relationships, depending on their level of contact with the criminal/legal system and the kinds of social and structural risk factors for system involvement that they face (Cantor & Osher, 2021; Lipsey et al., 2010). Organizations should consider whether their purpose for implementing life coaching or credible messenger mentoring is prevention, intervention, or reengagement (that is, providing support at reentry; Exhibit 1).

Exhibit 1. The Three Phases Associated With Supporting Young People Across the Justice Involvement Continuum



Prevention provides culturally and developmentally appropriate pathways to enable equitable engagement in school and work to reduce not only the likelihood of justice system contact overall but also racial or ethnic disparities in the event of such contact.

Example: life coaching to prevent escalation of violence in schools and communities

Intervention establishes police accountability to young people and families, and diverts individuals from deeper in the legal and justice system, and to broad resources that address harm and attend to unmet needs.

Example: credible messenger mentoring with young people during their justice system involvement

Reengagement following juvenile and criminal legal system participation recognizes youth strengths; it also adheres to principles that prioritize positive opportunities, resources, and relationships to promote youth and young adult leadership, belonging, and agency in a developmentally appropriate manner while attending to cultural relevance and responsiveness (Berk et al., 2018).

Example: life coaching to support of young people in when they leave locked juvenile facilities and re-enter family and community life

Implementing Life Coaching and Credible Messenger Mentoring

Once organizations and agencies have defined their purpose along the justice involvement continuum, they will also have to consider how to implement coaching and mentoring implementation at three intersecting levels of practice: young people, staffing, and organization (Exhibit 2).

Young People: Strategizing for Engagement

Optimal coaching and mentoring relationships are authentic and build positive youth development in a broad sense; this includes **supporting young people to develop personal skills and assets** (Hawkins et al., 2020). For example, authentic relationships can occur when coaches and mentors get to know young people (including their skills and strengths) and foster **a dynamic in which young people believe they matter** to coaches (Hawkins et al., 2020). Coaches and mentors who take an interest in **learning about young people and their interests** may better support positive outcomes for young people (Hawkins et al., 2020). In fact, coaches and mentors may be most successful when young people perceive them as nonjudgmental, trustworthy, and dedicated (Gonzalez et al., 2021; Spencer et al., 2019). Because of the shared lived experiences, credible messengers may more effectively build trust and deliver messages to young people than other adults and institutions (Austria & Peterson, 2017). Finally, coaching and mentoring time that includes playful interactions may support broader efforts to establish trust (Hawkins et al., 2020).

Staffing: Identifying and Preparing Coaches

When recruiting and training coaches and mentors, agencies should be intentional about specific needs and considerations of the coaches and mentors (Austria & Peterson, 2017). All coaches and mentors need adequate training and support to do their job well, but it may look different depending on prior lived experiences and training. Agencies may wish to hire life coaches and mentors who have **lived experience to that of the young people involved** (e.g., prior system involvement, members of the same geographic and/or cultural community) and who can offer a “credible” example for young people of what their own success can look like. Given their background, coaches and mentors with lived experience might need less training on cultural responsiveness if they share the same background or community as the youth. However, they will still need training on working with youth. Further, because coaches and mentors are themselves role models, organizations may need to work with them to ensure congruence between the organizational mission and how coaches and mentors view and talk about their own trajectories. At the same time, those without lived experiences need to be trained on how to relate to youth with different experiences. Particularly for this group, organizations and agencies should prepare to provide adequate training in culturally responsive approaches to youth work.

Exhibit 2. Three Intersecting Areas for Implementation Considerations for Life Coaching and Credible Messenger Mentoring



In all cases, coaches and mentors will need **training and specialized skills to support mentorship and relationship building**, such as training in group facilitation skills (Lynch et al., 2018; Austria & Peterson, 2017) and evidence-based practices, particularly concerning youth development, conflict management, and staff self-care (Cramer et al., 2018). Although coaches and mentors with teaching experience or advanced levels of education can be beneficial, coaches and mentors with such training should be flexible and willing to employ strategies and approaches that differ from traditional educational activities (Hawkins et al., 2020).

In hiring and training, it also may be important to account for the fact that coaches and mentors may need to be **available for a sufficient number of months** to build and sustain relationships that meet program goals (Cramer et al., 2018). They also may need flexible daytime and evening availability to be responsive to mentees' needs and schedules (Lynch et al., 2018). Prior evidence from the broader youth mentoring field has shown that when mentoring relationships end unexpectedly early, it can be harmful for the young people involved. At the same time, other research shows that higher dosage (the intensity of the relationship) can lead to a meaningful relationship as much as longevity.

Organization: Building Trust, Transforming Culture

Coaching and mentoring present an opportunity for organizations or agencies to reframe and enhance existing services. The explicit **focus on trusting relationships** inherent in well-designed coaching and mentoring programs can transform organizational culture by humanizing clients and expanding the ways in which staff understand young people, and vice versa (Austria & Peterson, 2017). That is, having programming dedicated to fostering authentic relationships with young people may also reframe how other staff who are not coaches or mentors view young people, and contribute to a shift in climate. However, to honor the focus on relationships, coaching and mentoring should *supplement* rather than *replace* other existing necessary resources and services, like case management.

Law enforcement agencies and community-based organizations have unique considerations for implementing life coaching or credible messenger mentoring. In the case of law enforcement or justice agencies, community distrust may undermine the capacity of the coaches and mentors to build a trusting relationship with young people (Gonzalez et al., 2019; Nadal et al., 2017). In part, this may be due to imbalanced power dynamics between police, on the one hand, and young people and their families. This context makes it difficult to foster trusting relationships. At the same time, community-based organizations do often foster trusting relationships with young people and communities, and can provide gateways to connections to the community that police cannot. For this reason, coaches and mentors may be more effective if **situated in community-based organizations**, either delivered separately or in partnership with policing and justice agencies. Consistently, capacity and communication barriers—including a lack of coordination across agencies—may undermine implementation within and outside the justice system (Hawkins et al., 2020; Lynch et al., 2018).

YOUTH LIFE COACHING EXAMPLE: OAKLAND UNITE YOUTH LIFE COACHING PROGRAM (GONZALEZ ET AL., 2021)

Who was targeted or served? Youth ages 14–18 at risk of justice system involvement in Oakland

What did they do? Community-based organizations including Community and Youth Outreach delivered life coaching services in partnership with with Oakland Unite, Alameda County Probation Department, Oakland Unified School District, Alameda County Office of Education, and Alameda County Health Care Services. Coaches were selected through a competitive process, and had shared lived experiences with youth, low caseloads and long duration of service (greater than 1 year).

What is the evidence of success? Staff, youth, and families reported that a youth's success was linked with the degree of involvement the life coaches had with participants and their families. In addition, youth participants felt that life coaches helped them set and achieve goals.

What challenges were encountered? Participants reported feeling stigma or apprehension when referrals to life coaching came from law enforcement. Staff reported wide variation on duration and intensity of youth engagement with life coaches. Staff used financial incentives to motivate greater involvement, but reported that these were insufficient to sustain involvement. Finally, substance use was reported as a challenge, not only for life coaches with prior substance use themselves, but also in implementing a harm-reduction approach.

CREDIBLE MESSENGER EXAMPLE: NEW YORK CITY'S ADVOCATE, INTERVENE, MENTOR (AIM) PROGRAM (CRAMER ET AL., 2018)

Who was targeted or served? Probation clients ages 13–18 years with high criminogenic risk in New York City, placed in a court-mandated juvenile alternative-to-placement program.

What did they do? Local service providers implemented the program in New York City with customized and core components, including advocate-mentors (credible messenger), individual service plans, mentorship, and family team meetings.

What is the evidence of success? AIM participants, alumni, families, staff, and other stakeholders had positive perceptions of the program, especially the mentoring components. Specifically, participants reported positive experiences and interactions with mentors, while family members reported positive perceptions of the family team meetings and how mentors responded to young people's needs.

What challenges were encountered? Staff reported difficulties creating developmentally appropriate activities across such a wide range of ages (13–18); staff also perceived challenges due to geographic limitations in availability of program activities (e.g., not always able to serve youth in their home communities); staff did not perceive the 6- to 9-month program duration to be enough time to meet program objectives; and staff reported lack of formal aftercare services and concerns about cross-agency coordination.



Promising Life Coaching and Credible Messenger Model Resources

The Incarcerated Nation Credible Messenger Institute

<https://www.incarceratednationnetwork.org/incrediblemessengerinstitute>

The Incarcerated Nation Network INC is a collective of post-incarcerated leaders and human rights defenders who operate projects to support youth impacted by the justice system through mentoring and advocacy. The institute offers a multilevel course that trains youth to be trainers and work within the community as Young Adult Peer Providers.

Community and Youth Outreach

<https://www.cyoinc.org/>

<https://nicjr.org/hww/>

In partnership with leadership of the National Institute on Criminal Justice Reform (NICJR), Community and Youth Outreach (CYO) developed and implemented the Healthy, Wealthy, and Wise Curriculum. This curriculum is a credible messenger mentoring program. NICJR published a report describing the curriculum in more detail.

Credible Messenger Youth and Family Services (CMYFS)

<https://www.cmyfsvirginia.com/support-for-communities>

CMYFS works to provide financial literacy training, business skill development, and credible messenger mentoring to transform the thinking, attitudes, and behavior of youth at risk of system involvement.

The Credible Messenger Mentoring Movement (CM3)

<https://cm3.splashthat.com/>

CM3 is a nonprofit organization founded to help youth and families break the cycle and long-term impact of justice system involvement by supporting and advancing credible messenger initiatives in communities across the nation most affected by the justice system.

A New & Innovative Approach to Justice: The Credible Messenger Movement

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fi_1rmxzeYM

The Fortune Society, a nonprofit that supports successful reentry from incarceration, promotes alternatives to incarceration. This Fortune Society video, an episode of its monthly public access television program "Both Sides of the Bars," explains the credible messenger movement.

Annie E. Casey Foundation and Credible Messenger Mentoring Nationally

<https://www.aecf.org/blog/casey-supports-national-effort-to-grow-credible-messenger-mentoring>

This blog post from the Annie E. Casey Foundation, an early supporter of CM3, provides an overview of the credible messenger approach to mentoring young people.

Roca

<https://rocainc.org/>

ROCA is a nonprofit that seeks to “disrupt[] incarceration, poverty, and racism by engaging young adults, police, and systems at the center of urban violence in relationships to address trauma, find hope, and drive change.”

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