

# Tailoring Mentoring to Youth Needs

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Goals



Coaching



Guidance



Training



Motivation



Knowledge



Support



Success

**We know it!** Caring and supportive relationships with adults are central to healthy child and youth development.

**We believe in it!** Program-based mentoring relationships can make a positive difference in the lives of youth. High-quality research studies showcase the benefits of mentoring for youth in a wide range of areas, including behavior, mental health, well-being, and school success.<sup>i,ii</sup> In fact, a recent U.S. Surgeon General’s Advisory has identified mentoring as an effective strategy to protect young people from today’s epidemic of social isolation and loneliness.<sup>iii</sup>

**Yet, there is a challenge.** The average size of youth benefits in these studies is typically small—some youth make big gains while others may not benefit at all in the measured outcomes. This pattern highlights diversity in the young people who participate in mentoring programs (e.g., in their social, emotional, relational, and academic needs) and in the approaches mentors use in their interactions with them.

When mentoring programs use strategies that are intentionally responsive to youth’s specific needs, could they yield stronger positive outcomes? Findings from a recent review indicate programs that “target” recruitment to a specific youth population (e.g., trauma-exposed youth) or specific challenge (e.g., mental health conditions) and implement a mentoring intervention specifically designed to meet these young people’s needs tend to achieve greater program-wide effects than nontargeted programs.<sup>iv</sup> researchers also have suggested that mentoring effects would be more apparent in those nonspecific, nontargeted programs if the measured outcomes were aligned with the actual mentoring activities and those activities were “tailored” to the individual needs of each youth.<sup>v</sup>

There is still much to be understood about tailored approaches to mentoring—particularly in nontargeted programs, which make up a large proportion of programs nationwide.<sup>vi</sup> In this brief, we present findings from a recent study addressing five guiding questions about whether and how this approach might benefit mentoring relationships.

**In this brief,** we review findings from a research study on mentoring in nontargeted programs and how mentors tailored their approaches to address youth behavioral, emotional, or academic needs.

**THE MENTORING ENHANCEMENT DEMONSTRATION PROGRAM (MEDP)** was one of the largest mentoring initiatives to date and was designed to encourage programs to enhance their ongoing practices (i.e., provide focused prematch and ongoing mentor training and support) to foster advocacy or teaching roles for mentors. The study included 30 mentoring programs nationwide that varied in their size, approach, geographic location, and populations served. These programs were not targeted in that they did not focus on serving youth with a particular set of needs, and they did not address youth needs using “tailored” approaches (e.g., a curriculum targeting a specific group of youth).

The MEDP evaluation followed over 2,000 mentoring matches across these programs from 2013 to 2016. The evaluation did not find significant differences in youth outcomes between the group of matches that were offered enhancements and the group that was not. However, the rich data collected from mentors, youth, and caregivers when they enrolled in the program and a year later is valuable for continued research.

With funding from the National Institute of Justice, our research team used survey data from 1,741 of these matches (including those in the enhanced or business-as-usual group) to address five guiding questions, focusing on mentoring provided to the group of youth in this sample with high levels of behavioral, emotional, or academic needs. The matches in this study had been meeting, on average, a little under a year (344 days). Youth were, on average, 12 years old, and more than half (55%) were female. Close to half of the youth were Black (43%) followed by White (31%), Hispanic (28%), Native American (6%), Asian (2%) and other (2%). Mentors were, on average, 30 years old. Most were White (63%) followed by Black (20%), Hispanic (16%), Native American (4%), and Asian (4%).

## Guiding Questions

### To what extent are youth coming to mentoring programs with significant needs?

A substantial proportion of youth who come to nontargeted mentoring programs have needs that put them at high risk for negative outcomes.

At the time of program enrollment, we asked caregivers to share their observations of their children in the previous 6 months using the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire, SDQ (a well-validated set of questions that has been used in many large-scale studies).<sup>1</sup> We found that a substantial proportion of youth in our study were experiencing challenges that met or surpassed “clinical levels” associated with clinical diagnoses.<sup>vii</sup> In the general population, these clinical levels of need are only present in about 10% of young people; in our study one in four youth started their mentoring relationship with clinical levels of

<sup>1</sup> Our study included three domains of the SDQ, each measured with a subscale of five items: (a) Conduct Problems (referred to here as Behavioral Need), (b) Emotional Problems (referred to here as Emotional Need), and (c) Peer Relationship Problems. Our technical report includes details on all three domains. Our analyses did not suggest that peer relationship problems were associated with mentor focus. Therefore, in this Brief, we limited our discussion to Behavioral and Emotional Need.

behavioral (24%) or emotional needs (27%), and 11% met or exceeded clinical levels of need in both areas. These clinical cut-points were the thresholds for youth considered as “high need” throughout this brief.<sup>2</sup>

| Scale distribution              | Behavioral need | Emotional need  | Academic need |
|---------------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|---------------|
| Count (n)                       | 1647            | 1650            | 1683          |
| Scale range                     | 0 –10           | 0 -10           | 0–4           |
| Average (mean)                  | 2.25            | 3.04            | 2.63          |
| Midpoint (median)               | 2.00            | 3.00            | 2.75          |
| Standard deviation              | 2.11            | 2.4             | 0.87          |
| High need (Clinical cut-points) | 4.00 and higher | 5.00 and higher | Below 2.00    |

At the time of enrollment in the mentoring program, we also asked youth to report how well they were doing in math, reading, social studies, and science. We used their responses to estimate their overall self-reported GPA. More than half of the youth (56%) had a self-reported GPA below a B average of 3.0, and 19% had a GPA below 2.0, which is considered “a strong signal of continuing negative academic outcomes”<sup>3</sup> and thus our cut-off for “high academic need.” Of these

youth with a GPA below 2.0, about one third also had high levels of behavioral (31%) or emotional (36%) needs or both (33%).<sup>4</sup>

## What do mentors focus on during their mentoring interactions and do they tailor their activities to youth’s specific needs?

Most mentors do not tailor their interactions to focus on the specific needs we assessed. However, they are more likely to do so when the youth’s needs are high.

About 12 months after the start of the mentor-mentee match, we asked mentors about the extent to which their interactions with their mentees focused on 16 different areas (their responses could range from “not at all” to “most”). Regardless of youth need, mentors primarily focused on activities and interactions to help their mentees feel happier and better about themselves. They were least focused on helping with academics and schoolwork. This is not surprising given that, like most nontargeted programs, the programs in the MEDP evaluation focused primarily on building healthy mentoring relationships.

<sup>2</sup> Example items that assess conduct problems include: “Often loses temper,” “Often fights with other youth or bullies them,” “Generally, well-behaved, usually does what adults request (reverse coded).” Example items that assess emotional problems include: “Often complains of headaches, stomach-aches or sickness”, “Many worries or often seems worried”, “Often unhappy, depressed or tearful.” Response options for each subscale: 0 = Not True; 1= Somewhat True; 2 = Certainly True. Scores for the five items of each subscale were summed to create a total score ranging from 0 to 10.

<sup>3</sup> <https://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=REL2022123>

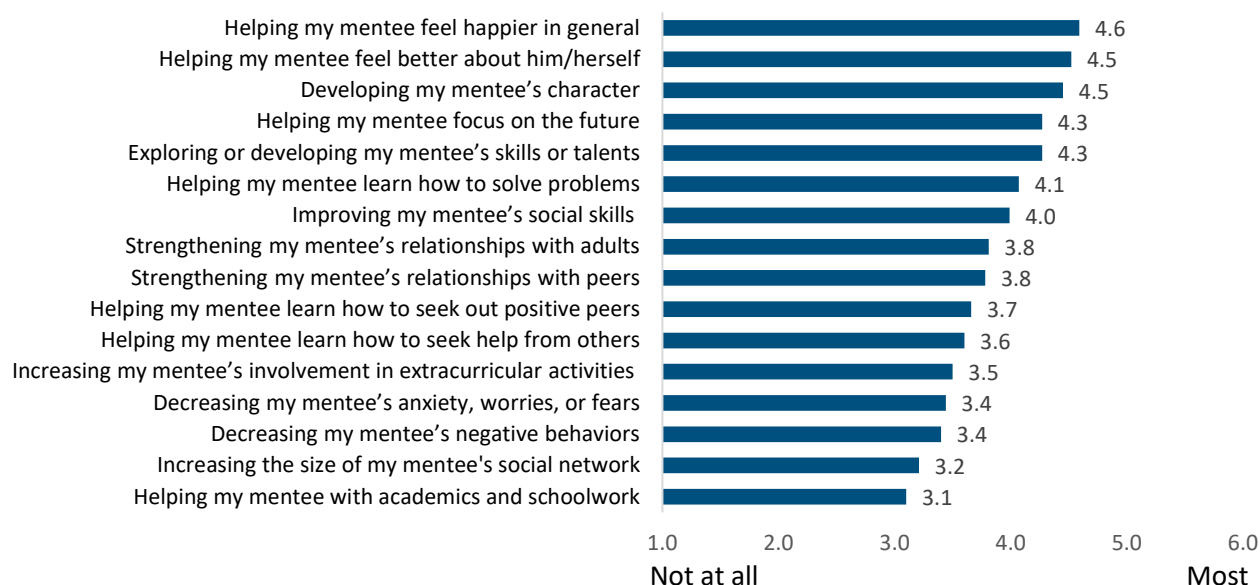
<sup>4</sup> Student self-reported GPA was calculated based on their self-reported grade in math, reading, social studies, and science. Youth were asked to select one of these options for each content area: Not Good At All (F), Not So Good (D), Good (C), Very Good (B), Excellent (A). An overall score was created with a range of 0 to 4.

On average, tailored mentoring (as we defined it) did not happen very frequently. For example, less than one third (29%) of those mentors matched with mentees with high levels of behavioral needs focused “a lot” or “most” on addressing that need (i.e., “high focus”), and 16% of mentors matched with these high-need youth reported focusing on that need “not at all” or “not much” in their typical interactions with their mentee (i.e., “low focus”). Findings were very similar for emotional needs. Mentors were particularly unlikely to focus on academic needs, with only 21% of mentors reporting a high focus in this area, and 38% reporting a low academic focus.

Yet, mentors did seem to be responding to their mentee’s needs—they were *more* likely to focus their activities when their mentee’s needs warranted that approach:

- When mentors were matched with youth who had high levels of behavioral needs (i.e., “high need” in this area), they were more likely to focus on reducing mentee’s negative behaviors than when matched with a mentee with lower levels of behavioral needs.
- Mentors matched with youth with high emotional needs were more likely to focus on decreasing their mentee’s anxiety, worries, and fears than when matched with a mentee with lower levels of emotional needs.
- Mentors matched with youth with high academic needs were more likely to focus on helping their mentee with academics and schoolwork and decreasing negative behaviors than mentors who were matched with youth with lower academic needs.
- In general, the mentors with high levels of focus on youth behavioral, emotional, or academic needs were also more likely to focus on helping their mentee feel better about him/herself and helping the mentee feel happier in general, relative to mentors with a lower focus on youth behavioral, emotional, or academic needs.

### Mentor reports of activities they focused on



There are likely a variety of reasons why mentors did not always focus on specific youth needs. Perhaps many mentors look for the right time to have reflective conversations that focus on the youth's need to avoid pressure and conflict in their relationship, as they are also working on building rapport. Other mentors may have focused on other more pressing needs that were not measured (e.g., family stability, health issues) or may have felt ill-equipped to focus on a given need. Still, others may have felt that focusing on broader aspects of well-being, like “making their mentees feel better about themselves” was the way to address their challenges with behavior or academics. Young people themselves might have encouraged a focus on fun activities—mentors who were attuned to their mentees' wishes would have likely shifted to having fun. These are all examples of “tailored” approaches that may be as responsive as focusing explicitly on the specific needs we measured.

It is also important to note that the matches in this study had been meeting about a year when we assessed these activities. Many mentors may have wanted to focus their first year on developing their relationships instead of responding to specific needs, to serve as a springboard for later growth. In fact, many nontargeted programs may encourage their mentors to put the relationship first. Future research would benefit from exploring tailoring in longer term matches and understanding more about the messages mentors get from their programs and other stakeholders in the match (e.g., caregivers, mentees).

## How do mentors determine whether and how to tailor their activities?

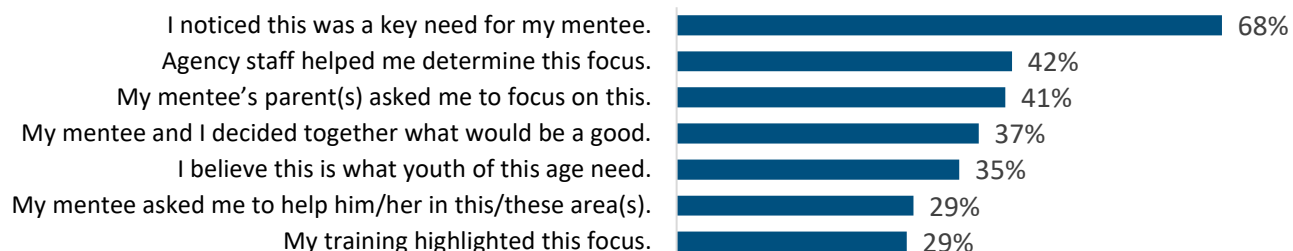
Mentors relied on multiple sources to determine their approach to addressing youth need. They most commonly relied on their own observations; agency staff and caregivers also influenced their focus.

- Mentors matched with youth with high needs relied on a variety of sources to determine their focus on youth behavioral, emotional, or academic needs.<sup>5</sup>
- Two-thirds of the mentors with high focus (68%) reported that they were influenced in their decision of how to focus by their own observations of their mentee.
- Nearly half of the high-focus mentors were influenced by the input of agency staff (42%) and a similar proportion were influenced by the input and requests from caregivers (41%).
- Less than one third of the mentors were influenced by their training (29%).
- Mentors with high focus also relied more on the caregiver's request when they focused on their mentees (41%).
- Input from their mentee seemed to matter to some extent, with 29% of the mentors reporting that they were influenced by youth requests, and more than one-third (37%) reporting that they made decisions in collaboration with their mentee about how to spend time together.

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<sup>5</sup> Mentors were asked to select all that apply: training highlighted this focus, agency staff helped determine the focus, mentee's parent asked to focus on this, mentee and I decided together, my mentee asked, I noticed this was a need, I believe this is what the youth need at this age.

## How Mentors (With High Focus) Determined Focus When Matched With Youth With High Needs<sup>6</sup>



## Is tailored mentoring associated with relationship quality?

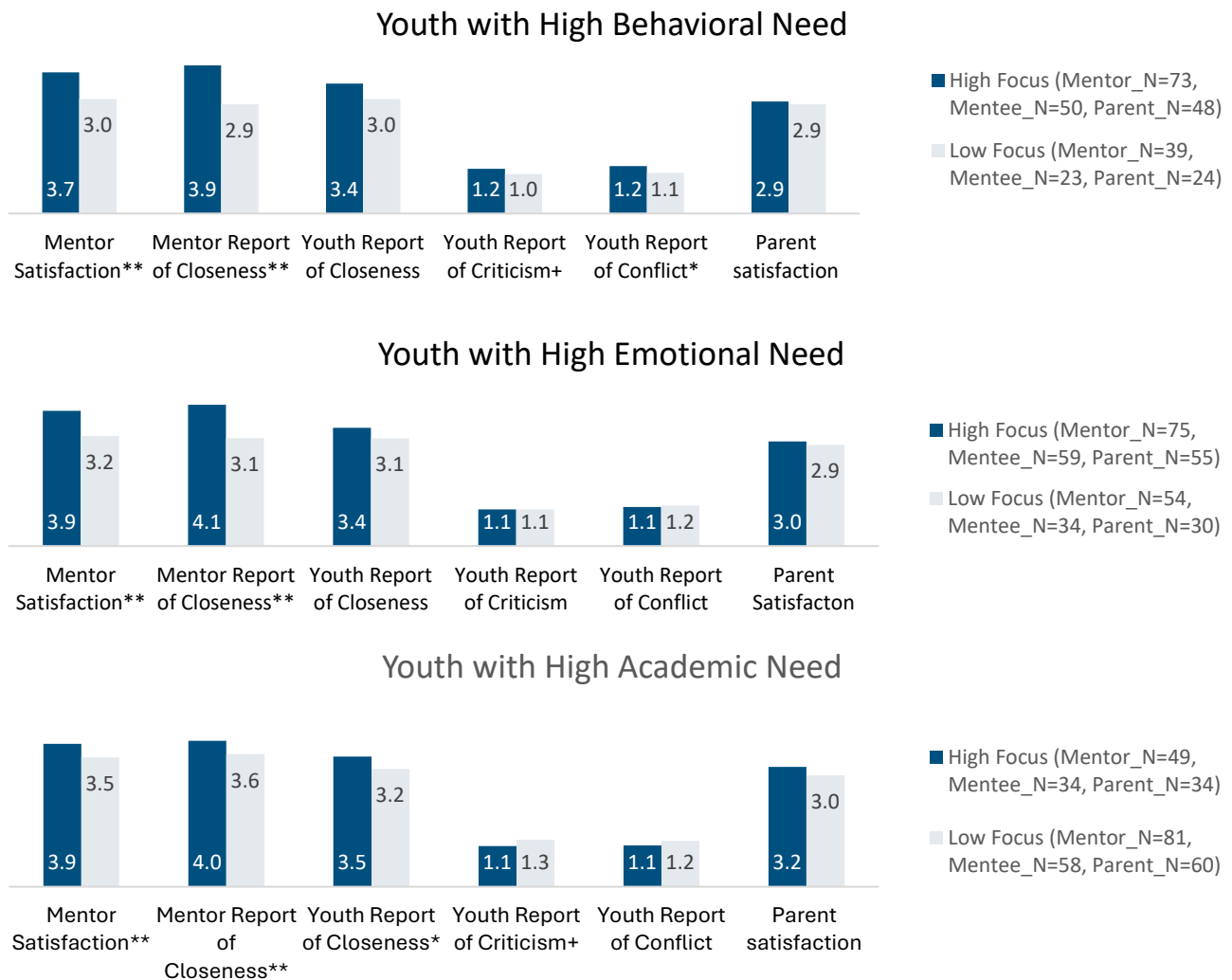
Despite the challenges they encountered when matched with a young person with high behavioral, emotional or academic needs, mentors who focused on those needs felt closer to their mentee than those who were less focused.

- Relative to mentors matched with youth with fewer needs in the areas we assessed, mentors matched with youth who had high emotional, behavioral, or academic needs reported more challenges with (a) managing their mentee's behavior; (b) the mentee's family asking for help; and (c) finding community resources for the mentee or his/her family. Mentors matched with youth who had low self-reported GPA also reported significantly more challenges in getting the mentee interested in the resources the mentor offered.
- Yet, mentors who focused on a particular youth need felt closer to their mentees and were more satisfied with their relationship than mentors who did not tailor their interactions in this way.
- Youth with high levels of emotional and behavioral needs tended to feel somewhat closer to mentors who tried to address their specific needs but this difference was not statistically significant. However, youth with behavioral needs reported significantly more criticism and conflict in their interactions with their mentors when the mentors focused on their behaviors (relative to those youth matched with low-focus mentors). Youth with high levels of behavioral needs may have experienced criticism by many other adults in their lives and may have felt particularly vulnerable (e.g., feeling ashamed) when mentors focused on improving their behavior.
- By contrast, youth with high academic needs reported experiencing *less* criticism in their relationships, and they felt closer to their mentors when their mentor focused on their academic needs. Perhaps youth experienced conversations about schoolwork to be more empathetic and empowering (and less about *themselves*) than those aimed at changing their behavior—a difference that could have implications for relationship quality. Although positive associations between a focus on academic needs and relationship quality are intriguing, they do not indicate

<sup>6</sup> We excluded mentors who reported that their relationship did not have a specific focus.

whether youth asked for help in academics because they felt closer to their mentor or that they felt closer because they received this help. Both possibilities likely contribute to this pattern of findings.

## Mentor, Youth, and Caregiver Reports of Relationship Quality



*Note.* Mentor satisfaction and assessment of closeness are on a scale of 1 to 5. Youth reported measures were on a scale of 1 to 4. Parent satisfaction is a computed scale with a range of .67 to 4. \* The two groups were significantly different at  $p = .05$ , \*\* groups are significantly different at  $p < .001$ , +groups are marginally different at  $p < .10$ .

## Is tailored mentoring linked with more positive outcomes than mentoring that is not tailored to specific needs?

Tailored mentoring was linked with improvements in mentees' academic needs but not their behavioral or emotional needs.



- When mentors tailored activities to their mentee's academic needs, their mentees showed bigger improvements in their self-reported GPA at follow-up than when mentors did not tailor their activities in this way. This suggests that an academic focus—for those whose needs warranted it—may have helped youth improve in this area.
- We did not detect a similar pattern for youth with emotional or behavioral needs. More tailored mentoring for youth with higher levels of behavioral needs initially was linked with more behavioral needs at follow-up. These challenges may have been rooted in other individual and environmental risks that youth may have been experiencing during the 12-month period that were more difficult to address than academic needs. Also, because both youth outcomes and tailored mentoring were measured at the same point in time, our analyses cannot determine the extent to which the use of tailored mentoring caused—or was caused by—changes in youth needs over time. It is also possible that behavioral and emotional needs are more difficult to address within the 12-month window that we focused on in this study, as they are often interrelated with many other experiences and may take more time to show improvement.
- The links between tailored mentoring and relationship quality discussed above suggest that relationship quality may play a role. Namely, we found that high-focus mentors boosted youth's grades more when youth rated their relationship as closer, which supports arguments that a strong relationship combined with tailored mentoring may be a particularly effective combination.<sup>viii</sup>

It is worth noting that the programs in the MEDP sample did not *target* youth with high levels of need but did *serve* many youth with these needs. In this study, we defined “tailored mentoring” as focusing “a lot or most” on specific youth needs during mentoring interactions. Perhaps *effective* tailoring looks different depending on the youth's needs. For example, youth with academic needs may respond well to a consistent supporter in this realm. In contrast, youth with behavioral needs may be more responsive to no focus or very limited discussions on the topic. A mentor, being the one adult who does *not* focus on the youth's behavioral struggles, may be able to establish a bond with the youth and yield benefits at a later time.

It is also important to note that these results are for *mentor-determined* tailoring within nontargeted programs. Mentoring programs that are designed to address very specific needs may yield a very different pattern of findings because (a) mentors are recruited specifically to provide those types of supports; (b) youth join the program understanding that working on those goals is the program's focus; (c) the program is designed around supporting mentors in this very specific work; and (d) outcome evaluations focus on this specific area.<sup>ix</sup>



## Implications for Programs

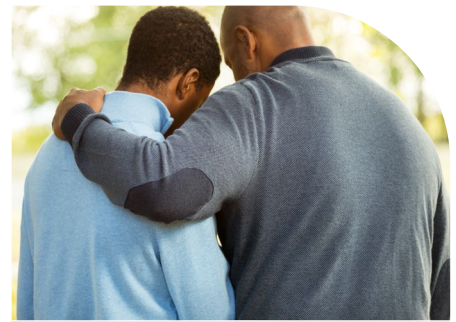
Although studies have supported *programmatic* use of targeted mentoring for serving specific youth populations, our findings were mixed within the context of diversified programs on the value of tailored mentoring being used to address youth needs in individual *matches*. We found some support for using tailored mentoring to address youth's academic needs, especially in the context of strong relationships. Yet, our findings also suggest caution when using tailored mentoring with youth with high behavioral needs. This section discusses key elements of programming that can support and strengthen the use of tailored approaches, for those programs that would like to consider using or strengthening this approach with their mentors.

### Program Design and Theory of Change

Before asking mentors to take a tailored approach, programs should consider the youth they are serving, the mentors who serve them, the goals of their program, and their ability to provide the professional learning required to build mentors' capacity to engage in tailored mentoring practices. What youth needs are your program and mentors best suited to address and which youth might benefit from a tailored approach? How central is developing a strong relationship between mentors and youth in your ability to yield key outcomes? If your program is focused on a specific group of high-need youth, would it be helpful to consider a consistent tailored approach for *all* your mentors? And if you'd like mentors to take a tailored approach, is your program designed to provide the support they need to use that approach effectively? Defining the type of tailored approach you would like your mentors to take is also key. Perhaps you would like your mentors to focus on addressing a specific youth need, but your theory of change suggests that the best way to address that need is to focus on improving the youth's self-esteem or helping them find an activity that brings them joy. Thinking about these issues in the context of your program's theory of change and logic model can help your program determine whether a tailored approach is the best approach to reach your specific goals, and if so, exactly how that approach should be used.

### Youth Recruitment and Enrollment

Our findings suggest that tailored mentoring may be more effective for some youth needs than others. Thus, when recruiting youth, it is important to collect information that outlines youth needs and



### Practice Prompts

What type of youth needs are your program and mentors best suited to address?

Do you consider mentor skills and youth needs when matching?

How do you assess youth needs?  
How do you share this information with your mentors?

How do you tailor your training and support of mentors to meet youth needs in different areas?

Are your mentors willing and able to support youth with high levels of needs without significant supports?

How might you encourage mentors to "balance" a tailored approach with relationship development?

What is the right "blend" and timing of focus versus fun in your program?

strengths to assess whether tailored mentoring might be a good fit. A systematic assessment<sup>x</sup> of youth needs and the supports they have or do not have access to may help determine whether your program can prepare mentors to meet those needs and how tailored mentoring might fit into that picture. For example, a child may have access to multiple resources in each area and would benefit most from having a supportive adult friend who does not focus on that area of need. Understanding youth and caregiver perspectives on what they want the relationship to focus on can also be key in determining whether and how tailored mentoring might be used with a given child.

## Matching

Most of the youth in our sample began their program involvement with typical levels of emotional and behavioral needs. But one in four enrolled with clinical levels of behavioral (27%) or emotional (24%) needs, and one in five (19%) had a GPA below 2.0. Programs may want to consider how they share information about the child's challenges with the mentor during the matching process and whether and how they determine the mentor's willingness and ability to work on those challenges with their mentee.

When sharing information about a youth with their mentor, it may be important to balance providing enough context for the mentor to effectively use tailored mentoring and respecting the youth's privacy. Mentors in one study wished they had had more information about the child they were matched with.<sup>xi</sup> Some programs may believe that providing the mentor with "too much" information up front (e.g., significant needs in a given area) can bias the mentor's impression of the young person. Yet, giving mentors a voice in whether they believe they can provide tailored support for a given need may also be key.

## Training and Ongoing Support

Mentor training and support might include several key topics to help ensure mentors are well-equipped to effectively tailor their activities and discussions with youth:

### *Understanding the context of the youth's needs*

Mentors should be trained to recognize and understand youth needs, which may relate to their developmental stage or a temporary challenge the youth may be experiencing. Building this awareness can help mentors decide when and how to tailor their interactions. In some cases, focusing their activities on something other than the clearest presenting need may be most effective. Program staff are key in helping mentors understand what to focus on, when to shift that focus, and when just having fun may be the best approach.

### *Helping mentors honor youth voice in the relationship*

Giving youth voice and choice in the relationship helps to foster a nurturing environment where youth feel respected for their opinion and interests. In our study, few high-focus mentors reported relying on youth requests in determining that focus. Striking a balance between helping the youth grow in areas where they need support and honoring youth voice may be crucial.<sup>xii</sup> Training mentors to adopt strategies like motivational interviewing can help them build knowledge and skills for effective communication approaches that put *youth's* goals at the forefront.<sup>xiii</sup> Using case studies and role-

playing scenarios in training can help mentors become more aware of the potential pitfalls of tailored mentoring; for example, pressuring youth to pursue goals the mentor sees as important without being attuned to the youth's wishes may create conflict and harm youth well-being.<sup>xiv</sup>

### ***Providing mentors with the right tools at the right time***

Our findings are consistent with other studies reporting mentors' challenges when matched with youth with substantial needs.<sup>xv</sup> Some mentors may not have had experience working with young people; others may not have had training that adequately prepared them for working with youth facing major challenges.<sup>xvi</sup> Programs should give mentors the tools and resources they need to respond effectively to their mentee's needs, at a time that is most helpful. For example, sharing a tool to help mentors set realistic goals with their mentees may be useful earlier in the relationship, while ongoing program support can target how mentors can scaffold their efforts or avoid challenges in achieving these goals.<sup>xvii</sup> Researchers have also emphasized the importance of providing mentors with on-the-spot, practical tips.<sup>xviii</sup> For instance, reading an email or watching a brief video before meeting with their mentee can remind mentors how to address a particular need or the importance of letting youth drive the interaction, even if a pressing need arises. Sharing resources before a program support call may also promote insightful conversations between program support staff and the mentor and continue to help the mentor be mindful of their interactions with the youth when using tailored mentoring.<sup>xix</sup>

### ***Promote mentor well-being as well as youth outcomes***

Mentors in our study who were matched with youth with high needs experienced more challenges than other mentors. Mentors may experience stress when trying to connect with and support youth, especially when the young person is experiencing significant difficulties in their life. Studies suggest that mentors are affected by the mentoring relationship, and program support is associated with mentors' psychological wellness. Programs must help mentors feel supported and connected to avoid burnout, feel appreciated in ways that help them experience their mentoring relationship as rewarding, and have opportunities to provide feedback to improve program processes. For example, helping mentors promote self-care and healthy boundaries in their relationships with the caregiver and the youth may avoid them ending the match due to burnout.

### ***Involving Caregivers***

Our study found that caregivers were more satisfied when mentors focused more on their child's needs. Caregivers are critical partners in the mentoring relationship, not only as "gatekeepers" who can determine whether and how often youth are allowed to meet with their mentor, but also as a partner in achieving positive youth outcomes.<sup>xx</sup> The caregiver's assessment of the youth's needs, skills, and interests early in the mentoring process can help the program and mentor explore potential strategies to support the youth's needs. Caregivers can also share what tailored strategies might work best with the child, what approaches might not be effective, and how they can support mentor strategies in their interactions with their child. In addition, caregivers can provide feedback on the mentee's growth and celebrate that growth in partnership with the mentor and program, which can, in turn, promote caregiver satisfaction with and support for the mentoring relationship.<sup>xxi</sup>

## CONCLUSION

This study examined whether tailored mentoring in the context of nontargeted programs might yield stronger program effects than mentoring that is not tailored to a particular youth need. For academic performance, a tailored approach seemed to boost impacts, especially in the context of a strong relationship, but mentor focus on behavioral needs was not associated with reductions in youth behavioral need. For tailored mentoring in these programs to be effective, the circumstances may need to be right—for example, when academics are the pressing youth need, when the match has had time to establish a strong relationship, and when achieving a given goal is valued by the youth and caregiver. Without these foundational elements, a rigid focus on a given need may not actually be helpful. Future studies should continue to explore these issues.

## Acknowledgments

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*This project was supported by Award No. 15PNIJ-22-GG-01425-MENT, awarded by the National Institute of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice. The opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department of Justice.*

This brief reflects input from a diverse group of researchers and practitioners. We used a three-phased approach to increase its relevance for programs: (1) we presented our findings at the 2024 Summer Institute on Youth Mentoring and gathered feedback on our research findings and potential implications for mentoring practices from a group of 30 practitioners and researchers; (2) we invited one mentor-mentee pair and six practitioners, some of whom had participated in the Summer Institute, to review our draft and share their written feedback; and (3) we facilitated a 60-minute guided discussion with the reviewers to probe further into their feedback and insights.

We share our gratitude for all the individuals who contributed ideas to the development of this brief and extend a special thanks to the individuals who reviewed our draft brief and shared their insights:

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Susan Walsh, Chief Officer of Research and Quality, [Friends of the Children](#), Portland, Oregon

Steven Witt, Youth Mentee, [Friends of the Children](#), Portland, Oregon

## Notes

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- <sup>iii</sup> <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-social-connection-advisory.pdf>
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