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Effective Strategies for Mentoring African American Boys

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Introduction

This brief provides a look at the ways that mentoring programs may effectively serve African American boys. First, we present a list of promising programs that have been shown to effectively address the unique needs of African American boys, contributing to positive outcomes. These programs collectively inform our beliefs about how best to serve this population when mentoring is at least one part of the overall strategy. We have organized this information around core principles relevant to the design and implementation of mentoring initiatives for African American boys. The brief also considers the implications for practice, particularly for those youth in the child welfare system.

Promising Programs

There are very few mentoring programs that have been the subject of rigorous scientific evaluations that put them on the published lists of evidence-based practices. Yet, there are programs for which there is empirical evidence that the youth participating in the programs do better as a result: these young people are more likely to stay in school and attain higher levels of educational success; they are less likely to participate in gangs, less likely to be involved in substance abuse, and less likely to be involved in delinquency and the juvenile justice system. For African American boys, a list of promising programs includes:

- As part of the Harlem Children’s Zone, *A Cut Above* is an after-school intervention that provides academic assistance, preparation for high school and college, and leadership development. Students are assigned mentors (called Student Advocates) who are trained to advocate on their behalf with teachers, parents and school administrators. In addition, *Peacemakers’ Boys to Men Leadership* is a gender-specific initiative focusing on civic engagement and community service, and with a goal to prevent substance abuse and reduce involvement in gangs and school violence. (<http://www.hcz.org/index.php>)
- *House of Umoja*, based in Philadelphia, has been providing services to youth for nearly 40 years. Initially founded to prevent youth from becoming gang-involved, this program is based on an African kinship model and has been recognized for its efforts to reduce gang violence in Philadelphia. This is a residential “Boystown” model that includes on-site job training, employment and entrepreneurial programs to residents. (<http://www.houseofumoja.org/>)
- *The Mentoring Center*, based in Oakland, California, offers its developers have coined to be “Transformative Mentoring™”. This program involves a structured curriculum that offers a long-term group mentoring program. Key components of the curriculum focus on character development, cognitive restructuring, spiritual development, life skills training, anger management, and employability skills. The primary audience is youth of color, who are perceived to be “highly at-risk”. The program’s goal is to reduce the involvement of these youth people in violence-related activities. Over the years, the Mentoring Center specialized in providing interventions for youth involved in the juvenile justice and criminal justice system, particularly those in correctional settings with continued support after the youth return to the community. (<http://www.mentor.org/>)

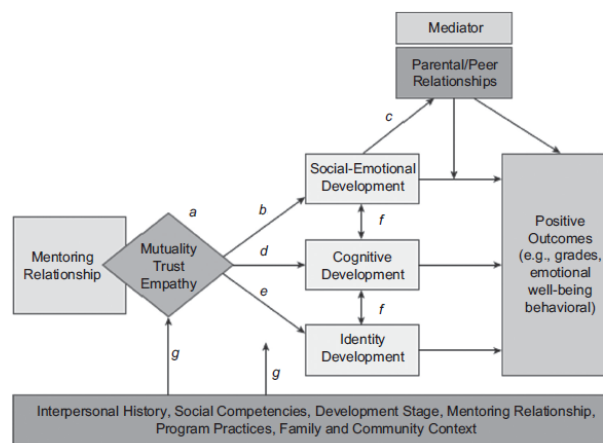
- The *O.K. Program* is a mentoring program that focuses on meeting the needs of African American boys in urban settings. The program typically engages law enforcement officers as mentors working with boys identified as high-risk for failure in the school setting. It involves partnerships between law enforcement agencies and schools. Started in 1990 in California, it was originally designed as a strategy to address the high rates of involvement of African American boys in the criminal justice system. (<http://okprogram.org/>)
- *100 Black Men* is an international association that sponsors local mentoring initiatives geared at preparing African American boys to be productive adult citizens in society. This program offers a range of mentoring options, including 1-on-1 and group mentoring efforts. Focusing on the holistic development of adolescents, attention is paid to educational success, civic responsibility, educational attainment, career exploration, and leadership development. (<http://www.100blackmen.org/home.aspx>)
- *REAL* (Respect, Excellence, Attitude, and Leadership) is a Chicago-based, school-based mentoring program for boys of color that grew out of efforts to find ways to more effectively engage high-risk minority youth in the school setting. The program features a unique strategy that celebrates culture and creates buy-in from the youth for their education and learning. Key components include arts-based activities, reflective writing, conflict resolution, and socially-relevant discussion topics. (<http://www.realprogram.org/>)
- *R.I.S.E.* (Reintegrating Integrity and Success through Empowerment) is a Detroit-based mentoring program for boys involved in the juvenile justice system. Serving primarily African American boys, this program offers an innovation on the typical mentoring initiative by assigning four mentors for each youth. Each mentor has primary responsibility to focus on one particular aspect: employment, education, social/recreation, or “felt needs”. The overall goal is to build a community around each young person. (<http://www.vlcdesigner.com/www.EMPOWEROUTREACH.org/index.html>)
- *The African American Men and Boys Harvest Foundation, Inc.*, based in Texas, typically refers to mentoring relationships as “working partnerships” between African American men and boys. With a goal to reduce delinquent and antisocial behaviors, the program is based in the school setting and focuses on academic achievement and educational success. The program also provides instruction for young people around economic and financial literacy and entrepreneurship and career exploration. (<http://aayhf.org/>)
- *The Ten Point Coalition* is an ecumenical group of Christian clergy and lay leaders working to mobilize the community around issues affecting youth of color. The program began in Boston in the 1990s in response to the unacceptably high rates of homicides of black youth by black youth and has since been replicated in other cities across the U.S. This program is a collaboration among community-based, governmental, and private sector institutions with a strong focus on addressing the violence surrounding high-risk youth and the restoration of families and communities torn apart by violence. This program features neighborhood patrols by adults on weekend nights and advocacy on behalf of youth involved with the juvenile justice and criminal justice systems. (<http://www.bostontenpoint.org/>)
- *Youth Advocate Programs, Inc.* is a national nonprofit organization that operates programs in a number of states. In most cases, YAP is designed to be an intensive alternative to placing youth in correctional and long-term residential settings, with a focus on providing adult advocates trained to address the individual needs of the youth while providing comprehensive services to entire families. In general, the organization seeks to alleviate the obstacles impoverished children face and give families hope. In Chicago, YAP focused on

providing mentoring and advocacy support to 250 youth identified as most at-risk to engage in lethal violence or be the victim of lethal violence. YAP advocates must always come from the community where the youth are living. (<http://www.yapinc.org/>)

Principle 1: Start with a big vision for the ultimate outcome: productively engaged adult citizens

Mentoring programs can sometimes have little, if any, impact, particularly when there is not a clear vision and specific, targeted outcomes intended for the mentoring intervention. We do not simply want to provide mentors for young people because they are lacking positive adult role models. Instead, we provide mentors to enable them to successfully make the transition to adulthood. The ultimate goal is that young people *will* become productively engaged adult citizens—law-abiding, connected to meaningful work, in healthy relationships, and living in healthy environments. African American boys are likely to experience different outcomes as adults. Statistically, they face disproportionately high rates of suspension, expulsion, and drop out from high school, are more likely to go to prison than to go to college, and to father children they will not live with or parent. African American boys growing up in the child welfare system are likely to cycle in and out of the criminal justice system, to struggle with substance abuse and mental illness.

The research is pretty clear—when done well, mentoring can be transformative. It can inspire and guide people to pursue successful and productive futures, reaching their potential through positive relationships and utilization of community resources. It is incumbent on programs that provide mentors for youth to consider the best ways to structure their programs to maximize the likelihood that the relationship between the mentor and mentee will be transformative. Let’s consider in what ways mentoring is thought to make a difference:



In this model, Jean Rhodes (2002) is suggesting that there are certain characteristics of effective mentoring relationships—they are characterized by mutuality, trust, and empathy—and that the mentoring relationships are more likely to contribute to positive youth outcomes if the relationships contribute to social-emotional development, cognitive development, and identity development of the youth. Thus, based on this model, mentoring programs should be deliberate in recruiting and training mentors and in shaping the mentor-mentee relationship so it will make

a difference (i.e., through training and ongoing support of the mentors) and in guiding the mentor to address the developmental accomplishments that are critical.

Principle 2: Effective Mentoring is all about relationships, but context is also important

As suggested by the Rhodes Model, meaningful mentoring relationships are characterized by mutuality, trust, and empathy. This is an important point. Often, mentoring programs focus on matching mentors to youth based on interests or common characteristics. It is very common, for instance, for programs to have a policy that boys are always paired with adult male mentors and/or that mentors will be the same race as the youth. The evidence, however, on whether matching on the basis of race or gender in the absence of other matching criteria is equivocal on whether those relationships lead to more positive outcomes. In fact, the research shows that it is more important to consider the racial identity of the youth and the cultural competency of the mentor (Sanchez, 2011).

Racial identity is a reflection of how a person has internalized their socialization experiences surrounding race (Sanchez, 2011). For African American boys, experiences in school while they are growing up lead to the internalization of many negative messages about boys like them (Hall 2006; Kunjufu, 2006)—negative expectations, such as: kids like them are not usually found in advanced placement and honors courses; people like them are not found to be the heroes in the textbooks that they read; and administrators and teachers are not tolerant of the behavior of kids like them. Schools are often seen as “sites of intolerance, oppression, and dehumanization”, as is true of other social institutions and settings (Hall, 2006).

Ethnic identity is a “sense of belonging” to a cultural group which typically involves the participation in the cultural practices of that group (Sanchez, 2011). Research shows that when minority youth have developed a healthy ethnic identity, they are more likely to achieve more positive academic, psychological, and social outcomes (Wakefield & Hudley, 2007). As these are the same outcomes that we hope mentoring will achieve, this finding suggests that a critical emphasis for the mentoring of minority youth is to encourage or celebrate the development of a healthy ethnic identity. In fact, a stronger ethnic identity is found more often among minority youth when they can identify a person in their life that is a role model (Yancey, Siegel & McDaniel, 2002).

It is noteworthy that mentoring programs that have been shown to be particularly effective for African American boys are more likely to involve a structured curriculum that celebrates African American culture and effective roles for men within the context of such an ethnic culture (i.e., the Mentoring Center, House of Umoja)

Principle 3: Trauma experiences and exposure to violence complicate adolescent development and must be addressed

African American boys growing up in the child welfare system tend to come predominantly from a larger population of young people growing up in poverty. These youth are likely to have been raised in neighborhoods and homes where violence is prevalent. When youth experience trauma during childhood or have been exposed to serious forms of violence, there are consequences for

how they accomplish normal adolescent developmental milestones (Griffin et al., 2009). Most commonly, it will appear as if they are delayed in achieving the milestones.

As adolescents, young people that have been exposed to violence and trauma (including victimization experiences) are likely to manifest certain traits. They tend to have higher rates of learning disabilities. They have difficulties with problem solving and decision making. They are more impulsive than normal adolescents and engage in a range of problem behaviors at higher than average rates. These youth also tend to struggle with interpersonal relationships and their emotional intelligence appears under-developed.

Effective strengths-based mentoring programs can build the skills of youth in each of these areas. Many of the mentoring programs highlighted in this brief provide structured group experiences that are designed to build emotional intelligence, particularly in the context of interpersonal relationships. These programs provide opportunities to practice and reflect on problem solving, decision making, and goal setting. These programs provide structured activities that occupy the time of the youth who might otherwise drift into problem behaviors. Finally, these programs create opportunities for boys to connect with men in ways that allow them to discuss common experiences around violence and trauma—a process that allows for healing and growth. The extent to which mentors can be trained in or know the features of trauma-informed care can be an asset to healing and secondary prevention.

Principle 4: Model mentoring programs for African American boys tend not to be traditional one-on-one mentoring programs

It should be noted that when we examine the various promising programs that feature mentoring geared to African American boys, they tend not to look like the traditional model of Big Brothers Big Sisters. These programs often differ from that model in three key ways: the mentoring model is not usually a one-on-one mentoring strategy; the focus is more deliberately on pointing the youth toward a more positive and productive future rather than simply on being a “buddy”; and there is more attention to the training and preparation of mentors so that they are more culturally competent.

These programs often feature alternatives to the one-on-one model of mentoring. The programs identified as promising models are more likely to provide group mentoring structures where one adult or a small number of adults work together with a group of boys. These programs are also likely to be connected deliberately or strategically with schools. The programs often involve partnerships among community agencies and even appear to have more focus on building and revitalizing communities.

Traditional mentoring programs look to affect positive changes in young people through meaningful relationships with adults. Programs shown to be effective in working with African American boys tend to focus more deliberately, changing the trajectory of the futures of the youth they serve. The structure of the programs and the training and support offered to mentors are geared toward educational success, career development, civic engagement, and building character and leadership among the youth served by the program. While they strive to reduce the involvement of boys in troubling behaviors, these programs are intentional at setting high expectations for the boys they are developing into men.

These programs also pay particular attention to ethnic identity, cultural values, and gender roles in our society. The curriculum they provide and the expected roles of the mentors in the program are targeted around these themes. Ethnicity and race are celebrated and addressed from a strengths perspective. The programs themselves identify and celebrate the focus on effective outcomes for African American males.

Principle 5: A hallmark of effective mentoring programs for African American boys is advocacy

Recent research suggests that mentoring programs have greater impact on positive youth outcomes when mentors provide teaching and advocacy as part of their role (DuBois et al, 2011). Indeed, many of the programs on the list of promising interventions are geared strongly around advocacy. Youth Advocate Programs trains their mentors intensively to be advocates. Another program where the mentors are actually called advocates is the *A Cut Above* project of the Harlem Children's Zone. One of the key aspects of the services provided by the Ten Point Coalition and the Mentoring Center involve strong advocacy on behalf of African American boys with juvenile justice system agencies.

Principle 6: Access to model programs is complicated

Many of the programs described in this brief were designed and led initially by visionary founders. These leaders were able to take their vision and build a program. They were able to build the types of collaborations and partnerships that went beyond the simple provision of mentoring to a more holistic focus on the socialization of healthy, principled, successful, and engaged citizens. Funding for these programs tends to be innovative and enterprising and the most successful of these programs find ways to sustain what they do without public funds.

Despite empirical evidence to support their approach, many of the programs identified in this brief struggle to secure the level of funding from public sources to sustain their programs. Some of the programs identified here as promising have struggled to sustain their efforts when funding from public sources has been reduced. Funding has rarely been made available to replicate these model programs and so we find that they often thrive in one setting only. Given the comprehensive nature of these programs, they tend to need more resources than traditional mentoring programs, and as such, are not easily funded by the types of solicitations that appear from governmental agencies and local foundations. As a result, the most impressive types of programs described in this brief are unlikely to be available on a large enough scale to meet the vast needs of the underserved poor, racially and ethnically diverse youth across the U.S.

Principle 7: When you are inclined to look for role models among relatives, youth in the child welfare system are at a particular disadvantage

We think about providing mentors to youth when they have not formed natural mentoring relationships with adults in their local settings. Yet, we know from the research that minority youth are less likely to report having a natural mentor compared to White youth (Munson & McMillen, 2008). When African American boys report having natural mentors who that are active in the African American community, this is a predictor of a stronger ethnic identity (Blash

& Unger, 1995), which in turn predicts better academic, psychological, and social outcomes (Sanchez, 2011; Wakefield & Hudley, 2007). It is also interesting to note that African American youth are more likely to report natural mentoring relationships with relatives than nonrelatives and are more likely to report their role models as coming from their (extended) family (Sanchez and Colon, 2005).

What are the implications of this research for African American boys in the child welfare system? It would seem to be important to connect these boys with the kinds of programs that provide strong programming around celebrating African American culture and programs that specialize in providing culturally competent African American mentors and role models. It may also be important to learn from the National Guard model of asking young people to identify adults from their local settings (i.e., the neighborhood, their schools) that they believe would be effective mentors (Perez-Arce et al., 2012). We learned from the National Guard program that youth will often identify effective adult mentors that are willing to accept the invitation to be trained to mentor the nominating youth. Finally, given the important role that extended family members play in mentoring African American boys, we should be sure to explore the opportunities for family reunification for those boys in the child welfare system.

Principle 8: To have hope for the future, it helps to see how it will turn out

As noted earlier, African American boys are often targeted for mentoring initiatives because they are at such high risk for school failure, school exclusion, low educational attainment, gang involvement, substance abuse, and criminal justice involvement. The youth most at risk are growing up in settings where there is limited access to positive adult male role models and the stresses of poverty and exposure to violence. One challenge for these youth is that their future appears to be one in which they are more likely to go to prison than they are to go to college, where they are more likely to support themselves and their families with criminal activities than with employment, and where they are more likely to die from violence than they are to live past their 21st birthday. When they look at the adult males in their communities and families, they have a hard time finding hope for their own future.

Part of the powerful nature of mentoring initiatives is that, when they are done well, youth are exposed to inspiring adult role models who give the youth hope for their own futures. When a young person can meet an adult who was like them in many ways as teenagers and has grown into a successful productive citizen, it becomes evident to the young person that he/she might also have the potential to do well as an adult. Once young people believe that there is hope for a better future, they are more likely to be open to the kinds of things they might be asked to do as part of a mentoring program. The programs identified in this brief are all great examples of initiatives that expose African American boys to the right kinds of adult role models.

Conclusions

When we consider the needs of at-risk African American boys, mentoring is a strategy that makes sense. Mentoring is a strengths-based approach that can point young people in the direction of a more positive future. It is an approach that can be sensitive to culture, context, and

prior experiences. With culturally-competent mentors and a structure that celebrates and inspires the development of a positive ethnic identity, mentoring programs can be effective interventions for these youth. It is critical that we consider ways to make these programs available on a larger scale.

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