



# MENTORING FACT SHEET

U.S. Department of Education ■ Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools

Mentoring Resource Center

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## Involving Parents in Mentoring Programs

Involving parents in mentoring services is one of the best things a program can do to ensure its success. Programs whose parents, guardians, and other caregivers work in concert with mentors and program staff are more likely to see positive changes in youth and improved program outcomes. There are some aspects of involving parents that can be challenging. Today's parents are busy and your program's competing for their time and energy with other school and community obligations. Sometimes parents have conflicting feelings about the role of the mentor, concerns about safety, and specific values or beliefs that can make their, and their child's, participation in a mentoring program difficult or unlikely. Fortunately, there are several simple strategies mentoring programs can employ to get parents on board and actively involved in your program's work.

### Why Parental Involvement Matters

There is a long history of research into the impact parental involvement has on academic achievement, child and adolescent development, and the socialization of young people that makes it clear no one has the ability to influence children's development more than parents (or other adult primary care providers).

Research into the relationship between parents and mentoring outcomes suggests that much of the impact on mentoring programs may be due to the role the parent plays. In Jean Rhodes' groundbreaking research of mentoring relationships (Rhodes, Grossman, and Resch, 2000), she determined that improved parental relationships for mentored youth acted as a mediator of the youth outcomes:

... mentoring relationships led to increases in the levels of intimacy, communication, and trust adolescents felt towards their parents. These improvements, in turn, led to positive changes in a wide array of areas, such as the adolescents' sense of self-worth and scholastic achievement. (Rhodes, 2002, pp. 40–41)

Just how this mentoring-generated improvement in parent relations happens is unclear. Rhodes speculates that it may simply be the result of improved communication and "reduced tension" between parent and youth due to the mentor's influence. Or, it could be the result of mentoring leading to significant improvements in the youth's self-perception and ability to form meaningful relationships. Regardless, an improvement in mentees' connectedness to parents appears to be an indicator of other successful outcomes.

At a more practical level, parental involvement also impacts youth participation. Research by David DuBois found that mentoring relationships were more likely to succeed in programs that reached out to parents as the match progressed, soliciting their feedback and addressing their concerns (DuBois et al., 2002). Getting "buy-in" from parents can provide relationships with the stability and support they need to flourish. Thus, mentoring programs that can get parents involved in the goals and support of the mentoring relationship are connecting to the most important resource they can.

While the real magic of mentoring happens in the mentor-mentee relationship, there are several easy things mentoring programs can do to increase parental involvement in the program itself. These activities, both pre- and post-match, calm fears,

clarify expectations, and set the table for those improved parent relations and youth outcomes.

### Initial Involvement

The first half of the battle with parental involvement is getting their kids enrolled in your program. Sometimes simply getting a signed permission slip can be a struggle. The following ideas can help get parents comfortable with your program and foster a sense of partnership with them from day one:

- **Conduct orientation sessions.** A good orientation can address many of the concerns parents have about their child's participation. Your orientation for parents should always include:
  - *The goals of the program.* Parents need to know why your program exists and what it hopes to achieve. Tying these goals to educational or community goals can further clarify the good intentions behind your program's mission.
  - *The role of the mentor—and how it differs from the role of a parent.* Explain how a mentor can reinforce the goals, values, and actions of parents. Mentoring is not about subverting the parent's role, but rather supplementing it with further wisdom and guidance.
  - *An explanation of why their child is participating.* This is especially important in programs where teachers, counselors, and other non-parental adults refer youth. Parents may have some anxiety around why their child has been chosen to receive mentoring. They should understand that everyone needs a mentor and that your program is designed to help their child achieve personal goals.
  - *An explanation of who your mentors are.* This includes the types of people you recruit (caring, educated, committed, safe) and where you find them. Having current or past mentors at the orientation session puts a face on your program's volunteers.
- *Program rules, guidelines, and policies.* Parents are likely to have lots of questions about the logistics of participating—When, where, and how often do matches meet? What can matches do and not do? How are matches supervised? Be prepared to talk about every aspect of your program's operations. An unanswered or poorly answered question on policies can shake a parent's confidence in a program.
- *Opportunities to address safety concerns.* Parents likely have a number of questions regarding the safety of your program. Reiterate program policies (screening, supervision, etc.) and how they work to make the program safe. Provide Q & A time for addressing safety concerns.
- *An overview of the mentoring cycle.* Walk parents through a "typical" mentoring relationship, from first meeting to eventual match closure. This will let parents know what to expect and keep them from being surprised if the relationship struggles early on.
- *Clarification of the parents' roles and responsibilities.* This will differ from program to program, but for the most part, parents will need to interact with the mentor, check in with staff, grant permission for participation in the program (and special events), and provide evaluation data. Your program may also have "rules for parents" that govern what they can and can't do in the context of your program. Clarify all these things so that parents know what is expected of them.
- *Participation in the program should not be used as a reward or punishment.* Parents shouldn't forbid their child from seeing the mentor as a punishment ("If you don't behave, you can't see your mentor") or,

conversely, allow being with the mentor as a reward for something.

- *Appropriate languages.* If at all possible, provide orientation and related print materials in other languages to accommodate non-English-speaking parents.
- **Follow-up after orientations and provide print materials.** A good orientation session is just the beginning of parental involvement. Program staff should check in with parents several times leading up to the matching of their child. This can facilitate the gathering of necessary paperwork and helps build a trusting relationship. It can also provide insight into the parent's values and beliefs that can be instrumental in matching their child with an appropriate volunteer.
- **Providing a program “handbook” can also get parents on board.** The handbook can explain program operations and policies in further detail. It can answer questions that the orientation did not and can assure a parent that your program is well-run and safety-conscious. The handbook should be available in multiple languages to ensure the participation of children from non-English-speaking households.
- **Give parents a prominent role in finalizing the match.** You may think that your program has found the perfect match for a child, but unless the parent agrees, your match may have little chance for success. Parents should always have the right to reject a proposed match. Most programs facilitate this by having a “getting to know you” meeting of volunteer, youth, and parent prior to finalizing the match. This empowers parents and establishes a relationship of cooperation with the mentor.
- **Check in frequently.** Parents should have a formal voice in the supervision and monitoring of matches. Their opinions should be solicited as frequently as those of volunteers and youth. Making parents part of your scheduled match check-ins lets them know that you are diligent about safety and are interested in their opinions about the match. This can provide your staff with valuable information that can head off parent-mentor or mentor-mentee conflicts. Soliciting their feedback and acting on their concerns and observations is also a wonderful way to build trust.
- **Communicate in a variety of ways.** A program newsletter is a great way to reach the parents of participating youth. E-mail or a Web site can also be effective in reaching out to parents. And, above all else, make sure they know that they can always call with any question they may have.
- **Provide “wraparound services” or referrals and access to other support.** Many mentoring programs offer services to parents or even whole families as part of creating buy-in and maximizing impact. Your program's ability to provide things like adult education classes, counseling, or career guidance will be influenced by your program's structure and resources. But even the smallest program can build a support network of other service providers in the community that a parent or family can access. This type of grassroots coordination of services can truly impact a family in need. So work with community partners to help the whole family benefit from its connection to your program.
- **Host group outings and family events.** Again, this is somewhat dependent on program structure, but simple things like parent-mentor picnics or group trips to museums or ball games can be a nice way of cultivating the program-parent relationship. (Be sure to follow the rules of your grant when providing these.)

### Ongoing Involvement

Once the match is made, the relationship between program and parents needs to be nurtured further. The following strategies can help:

- **Provide parent recognition.** Thank involved parents the way you thank your volunteers and participating youth. As with those groups, recognition can run from a fancy banquet honoring them to a simple “thank-you” note dropped in the mail. Be creative, and let them know you appreciate their efforts.
- **Enlist parents as volunteers.** Perhaps the ultimate form of parental involvement is for parents to become involved as volunteers themselves. They may decide they want to serve as a mentor, or they may be able to provide skills that can help with your marketing, recruitment, resource development, or evaluation. You may find that these efforts to involve parents are also building your network of program support.

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At the most basic level, parental involvement is the result of intentional relationship building. It involves a lot of listening, a lot of clarification of concepts, and a lot of heartfelt personal interaction. Get tips from teachers, administrators, community leaders, and others who work directly with parents on how they get buy-in and deal with challenges. Not every parent will be intensely involved in your mentoring efforts, but the more you can get them engaged in the work you are doing with their children, the closer you will be to finding success.

### Additional Reading and Resources

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