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# research in action

Mentoring: A Key Resource for Promoting  
Positive Youth Development



## About the Research in Action Series

### Overview

Last year, MENTOR released the *National Agenda for Action: How to Close America's Mentoring Gap*. Representing the collective wisdom of the mentoring field, the *Agenda* articulates five key strategies and action items necessary to move the field forward and truly close the mentoring gap. In an effort to address one of these critical strategies—elevating the role of research—MENTOR created the Research and Policy Council, an advisory group composed of the nation's leading mentoring researchers, policymakers, and practitioners.

In September 2006, MENTOR convened the first meeting of the Research and Policy Council with the goal of increasing the connection and exchange of ideas among practitioners, policymakers, and researchers to strengthen the practice of youth mentoring. The *Research in Action* series is the first product to evolve from the work of the Council—taking current mentoring research and translating it into useful, user-friendly materials for mentoring practitioners.

With research articles written by leading scholars, the series includes ten issues on some of the most pressing topics facing the youth mentoring field:

**Issue 1: Mentoring: A Key Resource for Promoting Positive Youth Development**

Issue 2: Effectiveness of Mentoring Program Practices

Issue 3: Program Staff in Youth Mentoring Programs: Qualifications, Training, and Retention

Issue 4: Fostering Close and Effective Relationships in Youth Mentoring Programs

Issue 5: Why Youth Mentoring Relationships End

Issue 6: School-Based Mentoring

Issue 7: Cross-Age Peer Mentoring

Issue 8: Mentoring Across Generations: Engaging Age 50+ Adults as Mentors

Issue 9: Youth Mentoring: Do Race and Ethnicity Really Matter?

Issue 10: Mentoring: A Promising Intervention for Children of Prisoners

## Using the Series

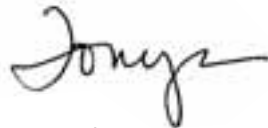
Each issue in the series is designed to make the scholarly research accessible to and relevant for practitioners and is composed of three sections:

1. **Research:** a peer-reviewed article, written by a leading researcher, summarizing the latest research available on the topic and its implications for the field;
2. **Action:** a tool, activity, template, or resource, created by MENTOR, with concrete suggestions on how practitioners can incorporate the research findings into mentoring programs; and
3. **Resources:** a list of additional resources on the topic for further research.


As you read the series, we invite you to study each section and consider what you can do to effectively link mentoring research with program practice. Please join us in thanking the executive editor, Dr. Jean Rhodes, and the authors of this issue, Dr. Richard Lerner, Aerika Brittan, and Kristen Fay, for graciously contributing their time and expertise to this project.



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## Mentoring: A Key Resource for Promoting Positive Youth Development

Richard M. Lerner, Ph.D., Aerika S. Brittian, and Kristen E. Fay, *Tufts University*

Parents hope that their children will grow up healthy, happy, and productive. They aspire to have children who have the skills to contribute to their own well-being and, as well, to the well-being of their families, communities, and nation. There is no magic bullet for developing these capacities in children. Literally thousands of in-school and out-of-school-time programs have developed curricula to support families in their efforts to help children develop positively, to become happy, competent, confident, and caring young people who have positive social connections, good characters, and—through being civically engaged—contribute to the betterment of their communities and society.

Some programs to enhance positive development and civic engagement succeed better than others. In this article, we discuss the features of programs that are most associated with healthy and positive youth development. These programs are linked to a new theoretical perspective about the nature of youth development.

### The Positive Youth Development Perspective

Young people are not problems to be managed (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003). All youth possess strengths, such as the capacity to change their behavior, to develop new cognitive abilities, cultivate different interests, acquire new behavioral skills, and establish new social relationships. If the strengths of youth can be aligned with the strengths of families, schools, and communities—for instance, the capacities of adults to provide for young people a nurturing, positive milieu in which their strengths may be honed and enhanced—then young people may be resources for the healthy development of themselves and of others (Lerner, 2004). The Positive Youth Development (PYD) perspective integrates two key ideas. First, there is the belief that all young people possess strengths. Second, there is the “hypothesis” that PYD may be promoted when youth strengths are aligned with the strengths, or “developmental assets,” (Benson, Scales, Hamilton, & Sesma, 2006) for healthy development present in their ecologies.

Theokas and Lerner (2006) have identified several facets of the ecology of youth that constitute key developmental assets promoting PYD. These are:

1. The individuals in young people’s lives (e.g., parents, teachers, coaches, and mentors);
2. The institutions present in their community (e.g., structured, out-of-school-time [OST] activities, libraries, or skateboard parks);

3. Opportunities for youth and adults to work together in valued community activities (e.g., on school boards, on the chamber of commerce); and
4. Access to these people and institutions (e.g., due to adequate transportation, maintaining a safe setting for youth, or low financial costs).

These assets can be identified in any setting within which youth live and develop—families, schools, and communities.

However, in all settings, other people—caring, capable, and committed adults invested in the lives of young people—are the most important developmental asset associated with higher levels of PYD and, as well, with lower levels of problem/risk behaviors (e.g., substance use or bullying) (Theokas & Lerner, 2006). For instance, the presence of mentors is the most important asset for PYD that exists in communities (Theokas & Lerner, 2006; Larson, 2006).

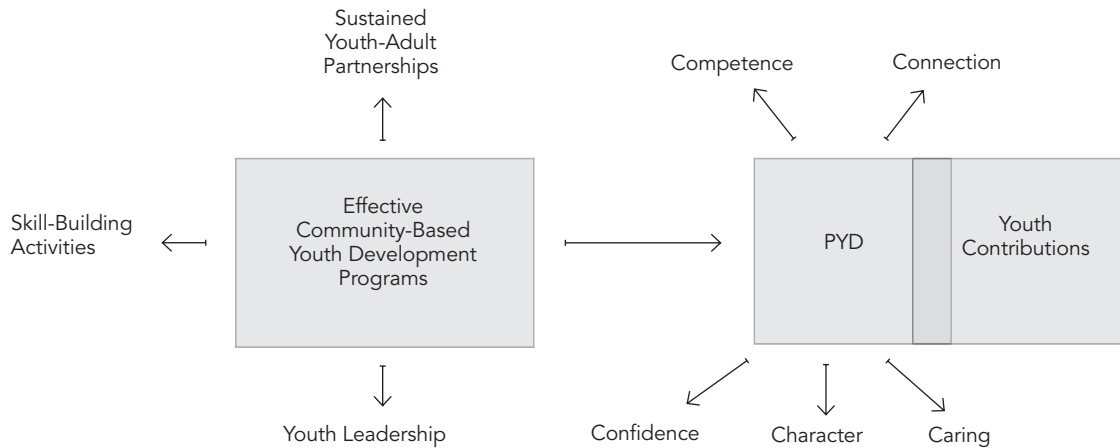
While not discounting the importance of natural mentoring relationships, mentoring that occurs within the context of youth development (YD) programs may be particularly beneficial in the promotion of PYD (DuBois, Holloway, Valentine, & Cooper, 2002). For instance, effective, high-quality and enduring mentoring is associated with the capacity for youth to engage in high-quality social relationships, to have greater academic achievement, school engagement, school adjustment, and to view their futures more positively (Rhodes, Spencer, Keller, Liang, & Noam, 2006).

YD programs are marked by the integration of three characteristics which, when offered simultaneously to young people, provide the four developmental assets associated with PYD (Lerner, 2004; in press). These “Big 3” features of YD programs are:

1. Sustained, positive adult-youth relations;
2. Youth life-skill building activities; and
3. Youth participation and leadership of valued community activities.

Examples of YD programs are 4-H, Boys & Girls Clubs, Boy Scouts/Girl Scouts, Big Brothers/Big Sisters, YMCA, or Girls, Inc. For instance, the 4-H Web site indicates that the vision of 4-H is “A world in which youth and adults learn, grow, and work together as catalysts for positive change” (4-H Web site, 2006). Similarly, the Boys & Girls Clubs Web site indicates that their “club programs and services promote and enhance the development of boys and girls by instilling a sense of competence, usefulness, belonging, and influence” (Boys & Girls Clubs Web site, 2006).

Figure 1



Thus, YD programs offer young people the opportunity to capitalize on their potential for positive growth by providing the chance to gain life skills through having access to mentors who collaborate with young people and who enable them to participate in and lead valued community activities. The context of such YD programs (i.e., the adult mentor-youth protégé relationship) and the content of such programs (skill development and leadership opportunities) combine to promote one or more of the key indicators of PYD, i.e., competence, confidence, positive social connection, character, and caring (Lerner, et al., 2005), and of youth contributions to their communities (Blum, 2003; Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003). Figure 1 depicts the “Big 3” features of effective YD programs and their association with both the “Five Cs” and with youth contributions.

### Implications for Mentors

Mentoring clearly has the potential to constitute a set of relations between youth and their social world that enhances their life skills, provides opportunities for their making valued contributions to self and society, and that promotes PYD. To foster both the characteristics of PYD and Contribution, mentors must be certain that their interactions with protégés reflect the Big 3. Through the enactment of the features of effective YD programs, mentors can assure that youth gain access to the four key ecological assets present in their communities and, as such, develop each of the Cs of PYD. Based on research in the study of youth development (Lerner, 2005, in press), some specific actions that mentors may take to foster these Cs and, as well, Contribution include:

#### Competence

- Find things your protégé likes and support these passions and activities without taking over.

- Find things that your protégé does well and encourage him to pursue interests, activities, or hobbies that emphasize these skills.
- Help your protégé see that the skills she has are portable, that they can be transferred into other areas where she feels not-so-skilled.
- Actively involve your protégé in making decisions that impact the completion of family tasks.
- Turn mistakes—whether trivial or serious—into teachable moments.

### *Confidence*

- Make sure your protégé has a convoy of support so he feels loved and valued everyday and everywhere.
- Share your own life woes and lapses in confidence and ask your protégé for help when you can.
- Be especially attentive to obstacles that may challenge your female protégé's confidence: Confidence is likely to dip more for girls than for boys during early and middle adolescence.
- Increase youth social capital by connecting her to institutions and people to whom she might not otherwise have access.

### *Connection*

- Respect your protégé's privacy but appreciate that privacy can be perilous. Be respectful but vigilant.
- Create opportunities in your community so your protégé feels her voice is being heard. All youth want to feel that they matter.

### *Character*

- If you don't approve of a friend, relationship or activity, speak out! Let your protégé know your values and explain why some behaviors aren't acceptable.
- Make sure your actions align with your words—you are, after all, a key model for your protégé.
- Keep a sense of perspective—and sometimes a sense of humor—about minor infractions in character.
- Provide opportunities for your protégé to make his own decisions—and, when you give him this opportunity, live with the decisions he makes.



### *Caring*

- The times when our protégés treat us as if we're disposable may be when they need us the most. Hang back, wait for an opening to talk, and respond.
- Caring is contagious: caring mentors help develop caring teens. Model caring in your interactions with your protégé and in your community.
- Encourage protégés to join school boards, civic organizations, or faith-based institutions to promote caring and social justice in the world around them.

### *Contribution*

- Encourage your protégé to participate in causes that align with her interests.
- Encourage people and institutions to welcome youth participation.
- Help youth marshal the resources they need so their contributing efforts have a good chance of succeeding.
- Don't overprotect your protégés from failure; they need to understand that even the most worthwhile efforts sometimes meet with disappointment.

### **Conclusions**

Effective mentoring—sustained, high-quality relationships with youth—serves as an important, and perhaps even necessary, developmental asset in the lives of youth. Practitioners that are engaged in effective mentoring and providing youth with opportunities to build life skills and to undertake leadership of valued community activities can facilitate the development among young people of the several key indicators of positive youth development: the Five Cs of competence, confidence, connection, character, and caring and, as well, the “sixth C” of contribution to self and society. Within the context of the “Big 3” features of effective youth development programs, practitioners have available to them a rich array of actions they may take to foster positive development among adolescents.

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## Notes

## Mentoring: A Key Resource for Promoting Positive Youth Development

Positive youth development (PYD) advocates believe that all young people have strengths, assets, and abilities. The role of youth programming, including mentoring, is not to “fix” young people but rather to help them achieve their potential. While many mentoring programs encourage mentors to incorporate the principles of positive youth development in their work with mentees, they often struggle to translate these ideas into the practical advice and resources mentors need. In their article, Dr. Lerner et al. discuss six key indicators that should be fostered in youth to promote positive youth development: competence, confidence, connection, character, caring and contribution. This action section offers two tools to help mentors identify and track their efforts to cultivate these important assets—a set of activity cards and a reflection sheet.

### Mentor Activity Cards: Promoting Positive Youth Development

The activity cards on pages 12-14 can be photocopied and passed out to your mentors. These cards offer suggestions for shared conversations and activities that mentors can use to enhance the six “Cs” that help promote positive youth development among young people: competence, confidence, connection, character, caring, and contribution.

Encourage your mentors to mix and match activities from these cards. These activities will expose mentees to a variety of positive youth development experiences, ultimately leading to a more healthy adolescence.

## Competence

- Ask your mentee about her interests. Engage in active listening and ask follow-up questions that demonstrate your understanding of and interest in the things about which she is excited.
- Ask your mentee to discuss or list her strengths. Does she excel at math? Is she good at basketball? Is she a loyal friend or sister? Think about what skills your mentee uses for these activities. Talk about ways to connect these strengths to other tasks about which she may feel less confident.
- Engage your mentee in decision-making activities. Let him choose the activity you will do during your time together.
- Talk to your mentee about his mistakes. Ask him what he would now do differently in the same situation. Suggest that he and you generate a list of ways to act differently in problem situations.

## Confidence

- Be supportive of your mentee, recognizing the difference between his behavior and the person he is. Let him know that you may not always like the decisions he makes, but you still like him as a person.
- Disclose any appropriate issues or challenges that have happened in your life and give your mentee an opportunity to share her thoughts with you. She will appreciate your openness!
- Engage in activities that your mentee likes to do. Ask him to show you how to do something that you have never done before.
- Be perceptive about any obstacles your mentee faces in her confidence such as body image or intelligence. Let her know she is not alone in feeling this way and remind her that these features do not define her as a person. Ask her to list and discuss how these obstacles discourage her from reaching her goals or keep her from having solid relationships.

## Connection

- Be respectful of your mentee's privacy. However, be sure that he is safe and remind him that you are there for him if he needs you.
- Ask your mentee about his friends, relationships, or what he likes to do outside of your time together.
- Let your mentee know if she has done something you don't agree with. Make sure to do this in a constructive way—offering your explanation for how this behavior may be in conflict with some important values.
- Give your mentee an opportunity to be heard and to express herself freely and appropriately. Make sure she has the chance to tell you what she values and what is bothering her.

## Character

- Practice what you preach. Be sure to role model the importance of character for your mentee. For example, ask your mentee about her experience with issues of peer or family pressure. Discuss with her how she makes her own decisions based on her own values and beliefs.
- Keep a sense of humor when your mentee does something you may not agree with.
- Let your mentee make decisions for your time together. Respect these decisions.
- Discuss the importance of respect for yourself and respect for others with your mentee.

## Caring

- Remember that when your mentee treats you badly, she may need you the most. Be clear that her behavior or words are hurtful and that she needs to develop constructive ways to express her emotions. Continue to support her and make sure she knows you are there for her if she needs to talk about anything.
- Model caring behavior. Show your mentee that you treat others with respect. Because of your actions, your mentee will be more likely to do the same. Practice “random acts of kindness” with your mentee when you are out. For example, plan a visit to a nursing home or cook a treat for a sick relative.
- Encourage your mentee to demonstrate that he cares about the welfare of his community. This could mean helping him get involved at his church, or starting a recycling campaign.

## Contribution

- Encourage your mentee to get involved in a service club at her school or in the community. Discuss with your mentee the strengths she has that she can use to make positive contributions in her school or community. Allow her to think about where her skills may be best put to use.
- Write a letter together to an organization to encourage them to welcome participation from youth. You and your mentee can brainstorm together about the specific strengths and skills youths like him could bring to the organization.
- Allow your mentee to experience failure and be sure to talk with her about how her failure can ultimately lead to success.
- Act as a champion for your mentee, advocating for his involvement in community service and social change organizations. Discuss with him how small contributions of time and skills can promote positive change.



## Mentor Reflection Sheet: Building Positive Youth Development

As a mentor, you play an essential role in supporting the positive development of your mentee. You can use this worksheet to write down all the activities and conversations you have had with your mentee that fostered competence, confidence, connection, character, caring, and contribution. An important thing for you to remember—each activity you write down gives your mentee access to a healthier adolescence.

You may be surprised at how much you and your mentee have done together!

Competence
1.
2.
3.

Confidence
1.
2.
3.

Connection
1.
2.
3.

Character
1.
2.
3.

Caring
1.
2.
3.

Contribution
1.
2.
3.

## Notes

## Mentoring: A Key Resource for Promoting Positive Youth Development

**America's Promise.** National organization that focuses on forging a strong and effective partnership alliance committed to seeing that children experience the fundamental resources they need to succeed—the Five Promises (caring adults, safe places, a healthy start, an effective education and opportunities to help others)—at home, in school, and out in the community. [www.americaspromise.org](http://www.americaspromise.org)

**National Clearinghouse on Families and Youth (NCFY).** A free information service for communities, organizations, and individuals interested in developing new and effective strategies for supporting young people and their families established by the Family and Youth Services Bureau (FYSB), U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. [www.ncfy.com](http://www.ncfy.com)

- Positive Youth Development Fact Sheet  
[www.ncfy.com/publications/ydfactsh.htm](http://www.ncfy.com/publications/ydfactsh.htm)

**Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory - National Mentoring Center.** National organization that provides training and technical assistance to youth mentoring programs. [www.nwrel.org/mentoring](http://www.nwrel.org/mentoring)

- A Mentor's Guide to Youth Development  
[www.edmentoring.org/pubs/factsheet15.pdf](http://www.edmentoring.org/pubs/factsheet15.pdf)
- Putting Youth Development Principles to Work in Mentoring Programs  
[www.edmentoring.org/pubs/factsheet14.pdf](http://www.edmentoring.org/pubs/factsheet14.pdf)
- Understanding the Youth Development Model  
[www.edmentoring.org/pubs/factsheet13.pdf](http://www.edmentoring.org/pubs/factsheet13.pdf)

**National Youth Development Information Center.** Offers current news, resources, and information about the importance of positive youth development. [www.nydic.org](http://www.nydic.org)

**Search Institute.** Provides leadership, information, and resources to promote positive healthy development of youth. [www.search-institute.org](http://www.search-institute.org)

- The 40 Developmental Assets for Youth  
[www.search-institute.org/assets/](http://www.search-institute.org/assets/)

## Notes

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MENTOR is leading the national movement to connect young Americans to the power of mentoring. As a national advocate and expert resource for mentoring, in concert with a nationwide network of state and local *Mentoring Partnerships*, MENTOR delivers the research, policy recommendations, and practical performance tools needed to help make quality mentoring a reality for more of America's youth.

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