Group Mentoring

Kenneth R. Jones, Community and Leadership Development

Mentoring serves an invaluable purpose, offering youth the resources they need for positive development. Meaningful relationships are the foundation for building strong connections and community ties, and caring adults can serve as allies to help foster youth development.

Scholars have documented the importance of positive youth-adult relationships. Adults can refute negative behavior by serving as role models providing good examples to follow. Mentors can provide a young person with someone to celebrate and to help them maneuver through the challenges of life. A mentor can also aid a child in gaining access to all the essential elements afforded through 4-H. Adults can help perpetuate positive behaviors by providing the encouragement and support a young person needs not just to survive but to thrive. Affirming figures in the lives of youth can place them on the path to a productive adulthood. Youth-adult relationships must provide these and other worthwhile experiences for the adults as well as the youth.

The challenge with building relationships is often finding adults who are willing and able to serve as mentors. Potential 4-H volunteers may be hesitant to go through the background checks and paperwork required. Others may be so engulfed by the demands of their own lives that they hesitate to add additional responsibilities, especially an obligation that may last a year or more.

Despite 4-H's ability to capitalize on volunteer leadership, more meaningful youth-adult interactions are needed. Mentoring has been utilized by Extension professionals as a means to strengthen relationships, both formally and informally. Even with the past successes of this practice, the National Mentoring Partnership reports that two out of three young people will grow up without a mentor. Although 4-H and other youth organizations have incorporated adaptations to traditional mentoring, the model held

in highest regard is the one-on-one match. In this format a mentee receives the attention and guidance of a mentor who focuses on nurturing the relationship by considering individual needs and specific interests. The one-on-one match allows for careful monitoring of the relationship between the mentor and mentee and provides a young person with the individualized attention that is critical at an early age.

One major issue with one-on-one matches in 4-H programs is the availability of a mentor for every child. It is rare to have a 1:1 ratio of volunteers to youth in school- and community-based 4-H program settings. As a result, many youth service providers who value mentoring get discouraged because they cannot identify and provide enough adults for each child to have an individual mentor.

Instead of viewing the lack of sufficient adult volunteers as a hindrance, 4-H should consider redirecting its focus for certain programs and learning ways to take advantage of the promise of group mentoring models. They can quickly fill the void if a one-on-one relationship disintegrates. They offer youth the option to choose from several caring adults with whom to connect. They not only address the often-insufficient number of volunteers in programs that rely on one-on-one matches but can reduce the cost of recruitment, retention, and replacement of mentors.

Relationships within group mentoring models may not be as strong as those formed in a one-on-one match, and the closeness of the relationship should not be the sole determining factor as to whether the program is successful. Having access to various relationships can offer nurturing environments for youth who need help developing critical life skills. Placing youth in 4-H settings where they may select from a number of positive mentors and peers can positively affect the way youth see relationship building. They may learn to trust adults and will find

opportunities to create social ties with peers, giving them a chance to engage in teamwork and learn self-motivation.

Table 1 offers a comparison between the more traditional one-on-one match and the group mentoring models. 4-H youth development professionals should constantly look for ways to enhance programming and to maximize opportunities that employ adult support for youth. Group mentoring can offer a strategy that provides young people with access to adults who genuinely care about them. As with any youth program, group mentoring is a deliberate approach offering high-quality experiences designed to obtain high-level outcomes.

Incorporating Group Mentoring

The most important function of group mentoring is to provide more youth with access to caring adults. Some adults may have to mentor more youth than others because of the large number of youth in the program or because the youth prefer certain adult mentors over others.

Group mentoring should employ the same level of rigor in recruitment, screening, and training as is used in one-on-one matches. An orientation for parents and mentors is helpful to cover the guidelines and expectations for group mentoring. Components of successful group mentoring include:

- Adults who are committed to attending events and meeting with youth as often as possible to nurture and maintain trusting relationships

- Community engagement efforts and/or academic programs in which adults tutor or provide motivation for academic excellence that allow youth and adults to work together

- Opportunities to interact with youth and their parents, guardians, and families so that mentors may get to know the family well enough to adequately incorporate family values within the mentoring relationship

- Careful monitoring of the relationship between the mentor and mentee for the well-being of the child as well as to determine if any changes are needed to improve situations for both youth and adult

- Evaluation of the mentoring process and feedback from participants during and at the end of the program to give youth and adults a sense of ownership and to demonstrate to them that their opinions are important

Table 1. Comparison of traditional one-on-one and group mentoring models

Component	Traditional (one-on-one match)	Group Mentoring
Youth-adult ratio	One adult per child/mentee	One adult serves multiple youth (ideally no more than 5)
Matching	Careful pre-matching to closely align interests and backgrounds	Youth self-select adult mentors and associate with multiple mentors with interests/backgrounds similar to their own
Settings	Determined by youth and adult	Usually school- or community-based meeting site
Youth-adult interaction	One youth has one assigned mentor	Youth have multiple positive adults with whom they may interact
Turnover of mentors	High; may increase cost for recruiting and training	Low; may cost less because mentors are always available, even when a specific adult is not available
Youth-adult relationship	If there is a disconnect, youth must be reassigned to another mentor; time must be spent to find a good match	If there is a disconnect, youth can select and form a relationship with another adult that is currently serving as a mentor within the program
Youth-adult engagement	Decide on activities together	Work together within the scope of an existing program that incorporates a group mentoring model

When determining what mentoring model is best, the most critical factor is to keep in mind the needs of the youth being served. This publication does not aim to discredit the effectiveness of traditional one-on-one mentoring. For many youth in 4-H, as well as those in other youth programs, the one-on-one relationship is the ideal model. However, not all youth have access to such situations or programs. A group mentoring model can offer a positive alternative that also nurtures young people through connections with caring adults. Meaningful relationships are the goal that can make all the difference.

References

Dubois, D.L., and N. Silverthorn (2005). Natural mentoring relationships and adolescent health: Evidence from a national study. American Journal of Public Health 95(3): 518-524.

Jones, K.R., and D.F. Perkins (2006). Youth and adult perceptions of their relationships within community-based youth programs. Youth and Society 38(1): 90-109.

Martin, S.M., and S.K. Sifers (2012). An evaluation of factors leading to mentor satisfaction with the mentoring relationship. Children and Youth Services Review 34(5): 940-945.

Martz, J., C. Mincemoyer, and N.N. McNeely (2009). Essential elements of 4-H youth development programs. http://www.4-h.org/resource-library/ professional-development-learning/national-learning-priorities/essential-elements.html.

Murphy, D., T. Bandy, H. Schmitz, and K. Moore (2013). Caring adults: Important for positive child well-being. Child Trends, Pub # 2013-54. http://www.childtrends.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/2013-54CaringAdults.pdf.

National Mentoring Partnership (2015). Elements of effective practice for mentoring, 4th ed. http://www.mentoring.org/images/uploads/Final_Elements_Publication_Fourth.pdf.

Rhodes, J. (2002). Group mentoring. Research Corner, National Mentoring Partnership. http://www.mentoring.org/old-downloads/mentoring_1323.pdf.