



Mentoring Resource Center

FACT SHEET

In This Issue . . .

...we explore ways mentoring programs, and mentors themselves, can help mentees with the transition from elementary to middle school.

The Pub Hub (beginning on page 8) features many resources from the MRC Lending Library that can help you prepare your mentees for the middle school transition and train your mentors to be effective forms of support during this often difficult time.



Making the Transition to Middle School:

How Mentoring Can Help

Every year, millions of elementary school students across the country take the big leap to middle school. Students look forward to this transition as a stepping-stone toward adulthood, a move to increasing independence, and an opportunity to redefine themselves in new surroundings. At the same time, many are apprehensive about this step into the unknown, to new and more complicated social situations, increased academic pressure and more teachers to deal with, and a seemingly vast array of opportunities to succeed or fail.

These worries are very real. Most elementary school students are leaving a school structure in which they have only one or two teachers each year, where they are the oldest students in the school, and where they may know many teachers and students well. By contrast, middle school may appear huge and complex, full of unknown hazards and new responsibilities. Students preparing to enter middle school voice such concerns as having too much homework, not being able to keep grades up, getting lost in the school, being around older kids who might bully them, being tardy to class, having to make new friends, and not knowing the rules.

Developmentally, these young adolescents are experiencing a rapid series of changes in all areas: physical, intellectual, social, emotional, and moral (see sidebar, page 3). They increasingly rely on their peers for support and advice but often lack the ability to use sound judgment in making moral and social choices. They are highly sensitive to criticism and are easily embarrassed. While they are generally eager for more independence and autonomy, and look forward to middle school as an opportunity to spread their wings, they may not be ready to navigate its more complex environment.

This fact sheet summarizes some of the issues facing students moving from elementary to middle school and describes how maintaining a mentoring relationship during this critical time can provide significant support. It also offers suggestions for program staff on how to maintain and support matches during these transitions and tips for mentors on how to help mentees move into middle school with confidence.

Background: The rocky road to successful school transition

The transition from elementary to middle school has been the subject of much research during the last 30 years, especially in the area of academic performance. Although middle schools were developed to provide an academic and social environment that would meet the developmental needs of younger adolescents, there is considerable evidence that student outcomes in a variety of areas decline as they enter middle school, and that the transition itself can have negative consequences. For example:

- Studies consistently indicate that students tend to experience a decline in grades between their last year in elementary school and their first year in middle school. As a recent example, in 2005–2006 the share of students in New York State who were reading and writing at grade level dropped sharply between the fifth and sixth grades, according to results from a new state testing system for tracking year-to-year progress (Herszenhorn, 2006).
- Student motivation and attitudes toward school tend to decline during the transition to middle school, as students begin dealing with the rapid physical, cognitive, and social trans-

formations associated with early adolescence (Urda & Klein, 1998).

- Self-esteem and self-perception of academic competence also may decline when students transition to middle school, especially for girls. One study found that girls who remained in a K-8 setting rather than transitioning to a middle school had higher self-esteem ratings than girls who had made a school transition (Crockett, Peterson, Graber, Schulenberg, & Ebata, 1989).
- Parents are less likely to be involved in middle schools than they were in earlier grades. Students in middle school usually have multiple teachers, which makes it harder for parents to make connections with each teacher and get involved in classrooms. Students themselves may say they don't want their parents to participate in school activities, leaving parents to conclude that they should stay away at a time when their child may actually need additional parental support (Newman, 1997).

These are but a few of the issues that fuel ongoing discussions among educators and community members about how best to educate young adolescents. Many school districts around the country are testing a variety of alternative models within the middle school setting to help students transition more successfully. These include flexible schedules, mixed-age classes, fewer room changes, and other strategies designed to address the developmental needs of adolescents. Many schools also have activities that help prepare elementary students for middle school, such as spring tours and orientations, assigning peer "buddies," creating parent and student handbooks, and encouraging elementary and middle school teacher interactions to help ensure children are prepared academically. Some school districts are even experimenting with a return to the K-8 school model.

Mentoring can be particularly effective in supporting students as they move into middle school. The U.S. Department of Education, recognizing the need to support students through this period, targets fourth-through eighth-graders for its school-based mentoring initiatives, emphasizes match longevity as a key programmatic outcome, and encourages continuation of services beyond middle school. While some ED mentor-

Development during early adolescence

- **Physical:** During early adolescence, the body undergoes more development than at any other time, except the first two years of life. Developmental growth includes significant increases in height, weight, and internal organ size as well as changes in skeletal and muscular systems, and the onset of puberty. Physical growth is often rapid and uneven, causing many adolescents to lack coordination and literally have growing pains.
- **Intellectual:** During early adolescence, youth are most interested in real-life experiences and authentic learning opportunities; they are often less interested in conventional academic subjects. They are deeply curious about the world around them but may lose interest quickly if information is not presented dynamically with plenty of interaction and peer-to-peer involvement. Young adolescents develop the capacity for abstract thinking, and they are able to think about their future, anticipate needs, and develop personal goals.
- **Moral/ethical:** Young adolescents tend to be idealistic and possess a strong sense of fairness. They are moving from being self-centered to considering the rights and feelings of others. They begin to realize that moral issues are not strictly black and white. They are able to consider ethical and moral questions but lack experience and reasoning skills to make sound moral and ethical choices, which can put them at risk.
- **Emotional and psychological:** Young adolescents begin to seek independence and to develop a strong sense of individuality and uniqueness. At the same time, they are highly sensitive to criticism, want to fit in with their peers, and are likely to have low self-esteem. They may be moody, restless, self-conscious, and unpredictable as they experience intense emotions and stress.
- **Social:** Young adolescents have a strong need to belong to a group. Peer approval becomes more important and they are likely to turn to friends first when experiencing a problem. As they mature socially, they often have opposing loyalties to peer group and family. Though young adolescents may be rebellious toward parents and adults, they still depend on them and desire their approval. They tend to test limits and challenge adult authority figures. (Adapted from Caskey & Anfar, 2007)

ing programs only serve elementary school youth and others only work in middle school settings, helping mentees make successful transitions to middle school is an important goal for all programs. The following suggestions and tips can help program staff and mentors maximize this opportunity to help mentees transition successfully.

Mentoring as a means of support during school transitions

Students typically served by ED-funded school-based mentoring programs may be especially likely to experience difficulties in transitioning to middle school. These youth may have been identified as needing

mentors because they have lower self-esteem than their peers, lack strong support at home, have experienced academic failure, or have behavioral or social problems. In addition, their families may be struggling financially, so they may worry about how to pay for new school supplies, clothes, and transportation.

Mentors can provide a stable and nonjudgmental source of reassurance for mentees, and in turn, mentees can feel safe expressing hopes and fears about the new school to their mentors. If the mentoring relationship is well established, mentees may talk more openly than they would to a parent or school counselor and will be more likely to ask for—and listen to—their advice. Through conversations and actions, mentors can help mentees deal with their fears and identify the

positive aspects of the move to middle school. The “Tips for Mentors” handout at the end of this article offers specific ways mentors can provide support to mentees during this time.



ED-funded mentoring programs typically operate in one of three ways: providing services only in elementary school settings, only in middle schools, or at both elementary and middle schools. In each of these cases, programs can develop or enhance services and systems to help mentees make smooth and successful transitions into their new middle school. The way your program provides this support will be determined in part by the unique opportunities and barriers your program faces, such as the partnerships you have in place, geographic considerations, and your staffing capacity.

Below are several programmatic options that can help mentors support their mentees through this important developmental phase.

Option 1: Build program capacity to continue matches into middle school.

Ensuring that matches made in elementary school can continue into the middle school years is probably the most effective way to support mentees in their transition. Mentors can spend time preparing mentees for the change during their last year of elementary school and support them as new issues arise once they have entered middle school. Mentees who are worried about leaving everything that is familiar behind will

appreciate having their mentor as a stable source of support.

If your program already has strong working agreements with the elementary and middle schools you serve, continuing these matches may not be difficult. You may have an established mentoring program at the middle school or have plans to add mentoring services there as matches “graduate.” In these cases, your job is to ensure that partnership agreements and internal procedures address the specifics of how elementary school matches will be accommodated at the middle school.

However, not all programs can provide a seamless transition for their matches. There may be logistical, fiscal, or geographic roadblocks that make it harder to continue matches at the middle school sites. In these cases, develop a match continuation plan with the help of your partners. The possibilities will vary greatly from program to program; some options include:

- Develop “satellite” mentoring sites at the middle schools that serve your elementary students, negotiating agreements with the middle school about on-site supervision and use of space.
- Have matches continue to meet at the elementary school sites after school, and find ways to transport youth to the site from their middle school (this may not be popular with mentees who might resist being back at the elementary school site).
- Develop a partnership with a local community organization that allows you to house your middle school program at its site, with your staff providing supervision.

Whatever plans you develop for match transition, be sure to review your partnership agreements and clarify them as needed. At minimum, they should address the following:

- Adequate space for matches to meet
- Availability of school or community center facilities, such as libraries and recreation areas, during scheduled meeting times
- Clearly established match meeting times

- Supervision during match meeting times (either by your staff or staff at the school or community site)
- Transportation for mentees (if match meetings are after school)
- Clear staff roles for everyone involved in the agreement

Review policies and procedures to make sure they cover special issues that will come up when matches are being served at another site. For example, if mentees need transportation home once they begin meeting at the middle school or a community program, are parent permission forms and transportation policies in place? Will you rematch students once they are in middle school if mentors are no longer able to serve? Will your program take on new middle school youth who were not involved as elementary students?

Option 2: Continue matches outside your school-based program.

If you are unable to continue matches into the middle school years as part of your own program, you may be able to develop other strategies that make it possible for mentors and mentees to continue their relationships. Ideas include:

- If your organization also operates a community-based mentoring program, move matches to this component if mentors, mentees, and parents are willing.
- If another agency in your area has a community-based mentoring program, see if you can develop an agreement that they will take on some of your matches.
- Have monthly group activities at the elementary school or other location for matches that have “graduated,” to keep matches engaged with each other for the first year of middle school.
- Investigate other kinds of youth activities in your area and see if your matches can get involved. For example, local parks and recreation agencies may offer field trips, arts classes, sports, or volunteer projects that are well supervised and can provide a way for

matches to see each other beyond the school setting. *(NOTE: Be sure to develop new agreements with mentor, mentee, and parent before developing this more informal structure and determine how you will continue to monitor these matches.)*

Option 3: Close matches at the end of elementary school and provide resources for ongoing support.

Sometimes, despite best efforts, matches will be unable to continue or they may simply feel that the end of elementary school is a natural time to end their relationship. If this is the case, take steps to make the match closure a positive experience for mentor and mentee. (See the sidebar below for an excellent resource on match termination.)

- Have a formal process in place for closing the match so that both mentor and mentee can acknowledge what the match has meant for them. This is a good time for matches to reflect on the achievements mentees have made in elementary school and talk about hopes and goals for the middle school years and beyond.

Termination ritual resource

Dr. Michael Karcher and Kimberly Lakes have developed a Mentee-Mentor Termination Ritual as part of their work with the Children with Adolescent Mentors Program (CAMP). It discusses reasons why matches terminate and offers guidance on how mentors and mentees can end their relationship positively and reflect on what they have each gained. Download this guide at:

<http://www.michaelkarcher.com/survey/pdf/TerminationGuidelines.pdf>

- Help all parties to the match come to an agreement about whether they want to continue their relationship beyond the end of the formal match. Clarify that your program will no longer be involved in any way, and have parents sign a written statement that they

understand your program is not liable for any incidents that may occur after oversight of the relationship ends.

- Make sure that mentees and their parents know about support programs available at the middle school, such as peer-to-peer programs, tutoring, counseling, group activities, clubs, and sports. Mentors can be instrumental in encouraging mentees to get involved.

Mentors also need additional support during transitions

Regardless of how your program helps mentees transition to middle school, mentors may need additional training on how to prepare their mentees and how to deal with issues that may come up both before and after they enter the new school. Mentors that are just starting their relationships with new middle school students will also benefit from understanding how this transition can affect their mentees. Some areas to cover in your training include:

- Understanding early adolescent development and behavior changes
- Helping mentees deal with stress
- Differences in mentoring older students
- Encouraging mentees to express their feelings about middle school
- Nurturing self-confidence in mentees
- Communicating with parents about middle school
- Academic opportunities and challenges students may have in middle school
- Details about school services, activities, and support available at the middle school

In addition to providing ongoing training, find out if mentors can attend middle school open houses or other events planned for students and families. If not, consider offering a special event of your own for mentors and mentees to learn more about middle school. The more mentors know about the reality of life in middle school, the better prepared they will be to support mentees if problems arise.

References

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Online middle school resources

The National Middle School Association (NMSA) is the only national education association dedicated exclusively to those in the middle level grades. Its Web site has a wide variety of resources and links on topics ranging from middle school philosophy and structure to adolescent development and tips for parents. <http://www.nmsa.org/>

PBSKids.org has a page for kids on moving up to middle school, with questions posted from kids, advice from older youth, principals and mentors, and online activities. <http://pbskids.org/itsmylife/school/middleschool/>

Scholastic.com has several pages of articles geared to parents of middle schoolers that offer information and advice. <http://www2.scholastic.com/browse/collection.jsp?id=84>. Especially helpful is *Making the transition: Help your child navigate these typical middle school challenges*, which could easily be adapted by mentors. <http://www2.scholastic.com/browse/article.jsp?id=2157>

Tips for Mentors:

Preparing Mentees for Middle School

Students entering middle school often experience a variety of fears, from how to find their classrooms to worrying about bullies. Here are some strategies for helping your mentee work through those fears.

Give your mentee opportunities to express his feelings about middle school. If your mentee isn't bringing up the topic but you notice that he is more distracted or stressed out than usual, initiate a conversation. Acknowledge the change that is coming and ask open-ended questions to see if anything is worrying him.

Don't minimize his fears and concerns. It's tempting to try to downplay them or respond with a blanket statement like "You'll be fine." Sometimes just listening and empathizing is enough. Listen to what he has to say and offer practical suggestions if it appears he wants your advice.

Help your mentee overcome fears of the unknown. If she's worried about opening a combination lock, bring one for her to practice on. If getting between classes sounds impossible, get a stopwatch and create a course so she can see how long it takes to get from one place to another. If homework sounds scary, ask her teacher or counselor to provide some guidance. Make sure she knows where the bus stop is.

Talk about your own transitions, during middle school or any time in your life. Strategic self-disclosure may be a useful tool to help your mentee see that his worries are normal and expected. You may even get a laugh or two as you describe your own experiences and how you handled them.

Help your mentee get organized. Middle school means more homework and a greater need to stay organized to keep up with assignments from multiple teachers. You can relieve your mentee's worries about schoolwork by helping him develop his organizational skills. Look at how his work is currently organized and offer tips for improvements, and talk about how he can organize his free time to get homework done.

Help your mentee set goals for getting involved in new things. Look at elective class offerings together and check out extracurricular activities. Talk about how an after-school activity can help her make new friends, and how elective classes allow her to follow her own interests with students who share them.

Point out your mentee's strengths and abilities. Early adolescence is a time of plummeting self-esteem and self-confidence. Find ways to remind your mentee about her abilities and how they will help her be successful in her new school. Be specific in your praise. For example, "You've really gotten organized with your schoolwork this year. That will help a lot when you start middle school."

Talk about friendships. Changing schools doesn't have to mean losing friendships. See if your mentee can name some students he wants to get to know better who are going to the new school. Talk about how he has made new friends in the past. Remind him he has friends in other settings, too—in the neighborhood, place of worship, or sports activities. And let him know you will be there for him in the coming year also.

Support your mentee throughout the first year of middle school. Your mentee's worries won't disappear when she enters the middle school for the first time. Adjusting to the new school and finding her place there will take time, and she is bound to feel discouraged at times. As she comes to you with problems and concerns, listen and use open questions to help her problem-solve on her own. You can't fix her problems for her, but you can offer your own perspectives.

Seek out help for your mentee if problems persist. Mentors sometimes see academic struggles, changes in behavior, or signs of emotional stress before teachers and other school staff. If you believe your mentee needs additional help, alert your program coordinator. Middle schools usually have more resources than elementary schools to help students through a difficult period. Your role is to help your mentee and his family learn about these resources and encourage your mentee to access them when needed.

The Pub Hub

A Look at Publications and Tools You Can Use!

With the exception of the first 18 months of life, children experience more developmental changes and pass more milestones toward maturity between the ages of 10 and 14 than at any other time in their lives. These resources from our MRC Lending Library can help program staff and mentors address mentees' concerns, whether logistical, social, or academic, as they transition into adolescence and middle school.

Please contact library coordinators Michael Garringer (garringm@nwrel.org) or Kay Logan (logank@nwrel.org) if you have any questions about searching or using the collection.

Promoting a Successful Transition to Middle School, by Patrick Akos, J. Allen Queen, and Christopher Lineberry, 2005, Eye on Education.



This book, written by key researchers on middle school transition, is a great example of effectively translating research into practice. It was written primarily for school personnel to develop school-wide transition plans, but is a great resource for anyone working with youth in this age group. The first part of the book provides insight into adolescent development at various stages of their

schooling, with helpful discussions of the concerns kids themselves feel as they make the transition. The second half focuses on developing and implementing strategies to help students transition into middle school successfully. Numerous examples of transition strategies from middle school programs across the country are included.

<http://www.nwrel.org/resource/singleresource.asp?id=17848&DB=res>

Getting Along: Teaching Social Skills to Children and Youth, by Jim Ollhoff and Laurie Ollhoff, 2004, Sparrow Media Group.

Mentees entering middle school are at a stage where they increasingly rely on the support and opinion of their peers, so it is not surprising that finding new friends in the new school is paramount. This insightful and accessible resource provides a framework for working with kids in out-of-school-time settings to help them develop social skills. The book begins by establishing a framework for understanding the development of social skills, using seven broad skill areas the authors call "the seven Cs." Each chapter describes these areas in detail and offers tools and strategies for helping adolescents develop competence in each area. There is a strong emphasis on positive youth

development and helping kids learn to cope and manage their own behavior. Much of the material is easily adapted for mentor training.

<http://www.nwrel.org/resource/singleresource.asp?id=17851&DB=res>

Programs interested in this resource may want to pair it with these additional library resources that contain lesson plans and curriculum modules for teaching social skills to kids. Although designed for classroom settings, portions could be adapted for use in mentoring settings:

Making & Keeping Friends: Ready-to-Use Lessons: Stories and Activities for Building Relationships, Grades 4–8, by John J. Schmidt, 1997, Jossey-Bass.

<http://www.nwrel.org/resource/singleresource.asp?id=17721&DB=res>

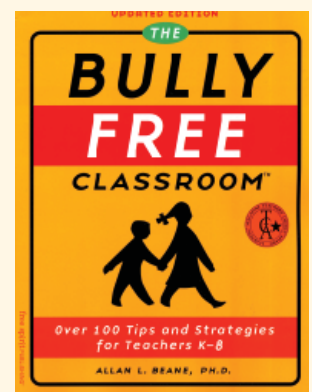
Tools for Teaching Social Skills in School: Lesson Plans, Activities, and Blended Teaching Techniques to Help Your Students Succeed, by Michele Hensley, Jo C. Dillon, Denise Pratt, Jacqueline Ford, and Ray Burke, 2005, Boys Town Press.

<http://www.nwrel.org/resource/singleresource.asp?id=16186&DB=res>

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The Bully Free Classroom: Over 100 Tips and Strategies for Teachers K–8, by Allan L. Beane, 2004, Free Spirit Publishing.

Most youth will experience bullying—as victim, bully, or bystander—at some point in their lives. Mentors, parents, children, and youth work professionals all have preconceptions about bullying, and there



is no shortage of advice in the media, sadly often misinformed. Kids are alternately told to stand up for themselves and to avoid the bully at all costs. Youth workers are often told that bullies are loners with low self-esteem, when research shows that many bullies are popular and filled with self-confidence. This useful resource addresses some of the misinformation, myths, and stereotypes about bullying. It offers useful handouts and tip sheets that will help you train mentors and mentees about this hot-button issue. <http://www.nwrel.org/resource/singleresource.asp?id=17856&DB=res>

Programs can find more guidance on the topic of bullying from these additional resources:

Bully-Proofing Children: A Practical, Hands-On Guide to Stop Bullying, by Joanne Scaglione and Arrica Rose Scaglione, 2006, Rowman & Littlefield Education. <http://www.nwrel.org/resource/singleresource.asp?id=17858&DB=res>

The Bully, the Bullied, and the Bystander: From Preschool to High School: How Parents and Teachers Can Help Break the Cycle of Violence, by Barbara Coloroso, 2004, Collins Living. <http://www.nwrel.org/resource/singleresource.asp?id=17857&DB=res>

Bullying Prevention and Intervention: Teammates Mentoring Program, Lincoln Public Schools, 2008, Mentoring Resource Center case study. Available on the MRC Website: http://www.edmentoring.org/pubs/teammates_study.pdf

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Not Much, Just Chillin': The Hidden Lives of Middle Schoolers, by Linda Perlstein, 2004, Random House. The author, an award-winning journalist, catches a kids-eye view of transition to middle school by embedding herself with a group of students as they make the transition. The book follows the odyssey, starting with the confusing orientation for matriculating fifth-graders, and continuing through a frenzy of academic and social ups and downs as the kids brave their first year. The resulting report is chaotic, scary, crazy, frenetic, endearing, overwhelming, and insightful. The book does a great job of showing how challenging the transition can be for all kids. <http://www.nwrel.org/resource/singleresource.asp?id=16089&DB=res>

Mentoring in the Middle: A Training and Resource Guide for Mentoring Middle School Students, by Creative Mentoring, 2004. This comprehensive manual, developed by the Delaware Mentoring Council, offers information, resources, and ac-

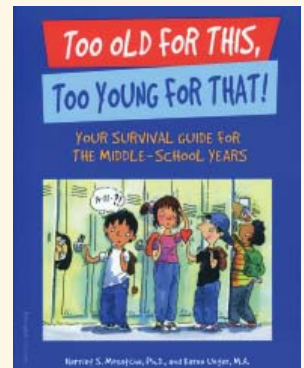
tivities that will help mentors and mentoring programs working specifically with middle school youth. It has detailed information on adolescent development, what to expect from the middle school transition, dealing with peer pressure, bullying, risky behavior, and all sorts of other issues that can arise in matches. Practical tips for mentors are offered on topics such as effective communication, setting boundaries, and encouraging positive development. <http://www.nwrel.org/resource/singleresource.asp?id=17096&DB=res>

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Resources for Mentees

The following resources are written for a youth audience but could also be great tools for matches to use together to generate conversations on a variety of topics. Program staff may also be able to draw on these resources when developing mentor or mentee training.

Too Old for This, Too Young for That! Your Survival Guide for the Middle-School Years, by Harriet S. Mosatche and Karen Unger, 2000, Free Spirit Publishing.



This down-to-earth guide was written for youth to help them prepare for entering early adolescence, including physical, emotional, and developmental changes, coping with new schools, and making new friends. It stands apart from other books on the subject in that it neither minimizes nor sensationalizes the fears all kids feel at this age. It gives straightforward tips and advice on pretty much everything, with plenty of self-reflection worksheets and questionnaires. Mentors may also find it useful for sparking conversation with mentees. Web sites, hotlines, and other resources are included throughout. <http://www.nwrel.org/resource/singleresource.asp?id=17849&DB=res>

Middle School Confidential: Be Confident in Who You Are, by Annie Fox, 2008, Free Spirit Publishing. This book for adolescents uses a comic-book format to illustrate the challenges (both negative and positive) facing middle schoolers. Each chapter begins with a vignette illustrating a particular situation, followed by tips, inspirational quotes and Web sites for kids to explore the topic and get help if needed. The author also runs an advice Web site for youth and uses many of their observations and questions to enliven her book. <http://www.nwrel.org/resource/singleresource.asp?id=17850&DB=res>

News and Notes

Registration open for 2008 and 2007 Cohort Trainings

The MRC will be offering one national training each for the 2008 and 2007 cohorts of ED-funded mentoring programs. 2008 grantees will meet December 2–4 in San Diego, CA, for a training event on initial program design and implementation that will strengthen mentoring services and staff skills during the first year of operation.

2007 grantees will convene January 28–29 in New Orleans, LA for a training focused on program sustainability, partnerships, and resource development that can help them keep their mentoring services thriving after their grants have ended.

Programs from these two cohorts can register for their event and reserve hotel space on the MRC Event Calendar at: http://www.edmentoring.org/grantee/event_calendar.html. If you have questions about these two events, contact Kari Heard at 916.983.6680 or by email at kari@emt.org.

MRC Releases New Publication on Peer Mentoring

ED grantees who are doing a full or partial peer mentoring program have a new resource that can help them recruit, train, and provide activities for matches pairing an older youth with a younger mentee. Featuring a wealth of useful advice, as well as annotated lists of training and activity resources, this guide can help strengthen any peer mentoring program. The full 50 page guide can be downloaded from the MRC Web site at: http://www.edmentoring.org/pubs/peer_book.pdf.

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