Managing Risk After the Match Is Made

Developing and implementing a comprehensive, written plan to respond to risk is a critical responsibility of any mentoring program. Programs must exercise reasonable care that their activities do not result in harm, whether to mentees, board members, staff, or volunteers. While all agencies must protect themselves against risks in such areas as fiscal management, working conditions, and employment practices, mentoring programs face the added responsibility of ensuring that the mentors they select are safe and qualified to fulfill the role of being a trusted friend to a young person. (See sidebar: **What is Risk?**) This responsibility only begins with initial mentor screening; it does not end until the match is closed.

This fact sheet offers guidance on managing risk once your mentors have gone through your program's screening, orientation, and training process, and have been matched with a child. It examines relevant policies and procedures that need to be in place, discusses common problems that may pose a risk and strategies for handling them, and offers tips for assessing and resolving risks that may come up as the match develops. By following best practices in match supervision, providing ongoing training and support, and adhering to written policies, your program can minimize risk and enhance the experiences of mentors and mentees.

What *Is* Risk?

The Nonprofit Risk Management Center defines risk as "any uncertainty about a future event that threatens your organization's ability to accomplish its mission." Risk is about the potential for harm, and mentoring programs are especially exposed to risk because of their reliance on volunteers who develop close, personal relationships with children in minimally supervised settings.

What is risk management? Risk management is the practice of minimizing both the potential for risk and the impact of actual incidents through sound policy and responsible management. To set up a comprehensive risk management plan, you need to ask "What could go wrong?" and "What can we do to prevent it?"

Once developed, your plan should become part of your agency's operations manual as a road map for managing and preventing risk.

From White, Patterson, and Herman, 1998, pp. 3–6.

of Mentor Screening.) Your program leadership, board of directors, and legal counsel should be involved in this review as well. Risk management is everyone's business, and a potential risk from an inappropriate mentor affects not just the child but the entire organization.

The First Step: Develop a Thorough Screening and Selection Process

A quality screening and selection process goes a long way toward ensuring that services are safe for your youth participants. If you have not recently reviewed your mentor screening process, check to ensure that it is complete and adheres to mentoring best practice (See sidebar: **Essential Components**

An Ounce of Prevention: Preventing Risk Through Match Management

The first and best defense against risk is having a clear and effective plan in place for monitoring and supervising matches and adequate staffing to implement the procedures you develop. Your plan should include:

- **Clear policies and procedures about all match-related activities** that cover such issues as offsite meetings, overnight visits, transporting mentees, parent/family involvement, money and gifts, confidentiality, and mandatory reporting of abuse or neglect.

- **Written materials for mentors, mentees, and parents or guardians** that clearly explain your policies and procedures and are reviewed in orientation sessions.

- **Systems for tracking and documenting match activities** and other contacts that are made between mentors and mentees. These can be as simple as using sign-in sheets and report logs and developing a basic spreadsheet to keep track of your matches. It's important that the tools you develop are easy to use and kept up to date.

- **Regular staff check-ins with all parties to the match**: parents, mentors, and mentees, as well as any other check-ins that might be appropriate for your program, such as teacher or counselor check-ins. Written records of all check-ins should be maintained in confidential files.

- **Adequate mentor supervision and evaluation**, including regular times to provide feedback to each mentor individually and quick responses to questions or concerns from mentors, mentees, and parents. Most volunteers appreciate getting constructive advice and being held accountable, because it shows you really value their work.

- **Policies for rematching mentors**, including when, why, and how often to rematch a mentor, and whether new background checks or references should be obtained.

By developing and enforcing clear policies and procedures, you are helping your mentors do their best and avoid making mistakes that could put both them and your program at risk.

Essential Components of Mentor Screening

All mentoring programs should include the following components in their volunteer screening process:

- Initial orientation of potential volunteers

- Comprehensive application packet to gather information

- Formal interview and reference checks

- Criminal history record check (may include several different kinds)

- Use of other screening mechanisms as needed (such as driving records)

- Evaluation of all information using a standard method

- Pre-match training for selected volunteers

All procedures should be in writing and included in your operations manual.

Ongoing Training as a Risk Prevention Strategy

As mentors move through the match life cycle they will need to learn how to handle situations that come up and will have many new questions. Develop regular, ongoing training sessions that cover the challenges of working with youth, and include time for mentors to share ideas and solutions with each other. Relevant topics include communication skills, handling problem behaviors of mentees, dealing with parents, and maintaining appropriate boundaries. Invite outside experts to your sessions to talk about physical and mental health and safety issues of adolescents.

Training activities not only enhance the skills of your mentors, but also provide another chance for you to get to know their strengths and challenges. As mentors become more comfortable with you and with their role, you will learn more about their personalities, abilities, and limitations. When providing training, pay attention to the questions that are raised by mentors, how they respond to

issues that come up, who pushes the rules, and more. You may identify new abilities in your mentors that you didn't see during the screening process, but you may also find areas of concern that should be addressed before they get out of hand. After training sessions, touch base with mentors that you are concerned about and schedule a time to talk.

Ongoing training sessions for youth and parents can also be beneficial. Interactive group sessions with youth on such topics as healthful lifestyles, personal safety, and identifying dangerous situations can help youth gain a sense of empowerment and avoid risk. You can also use these sessions to review their responsibilities as mentees and to be sure they know who to call if they have a problem or question. Parent training sessions can help ensure that parents know what your program is all about while offering them practical tools to help improve their effectiveness as parents. In both cases, these sessions give you another opportunity to check in and listen for any potential areas of concern.

Identifying Mentor Behaviors That Pose a Risk

Your mentors may occasionally exhibit behaviors that concern you, whether they represent a deliberate breach of policy, an inappropriate interaction with a mentee or parent, or simply a lack of skills to handle difficult situations. Over time, an occasional problem can turn into a pattern that indicates the potential for serious risk. For example, if a mentor fails to report that he had dinner with the mentee's family, a simple reminder of your policy may be all it takes to resolve the problem. But if the mentor repeatedly "bends the rules"—with a different excuse each time—or continues to exhibit inappropriate judgment, the risks involved require that stronger action be taken.

While you want to think the best of your mentors, it's important to maintain objectivity when monitoring and reviewing their performance. Even though you may have formed a strong bond with your mentors, as their supervisor you need to step back and assess their behaviors to determine if they

present a risk to mentees and your program. Common areas of concern include:

Ignoring or subverting program policies on allowable activities. A mentor who decides that he or she knows more than you do about what activities are appropriate, bends or breaks the rules on allowable activities, or is having trouble saying "no" to the mentee poses a serious potential risk to your program. Your program is liable for the actions of your mentors, so you need to ensure that they are staying within the guidelines your program has established.

Failing to keep in touch with program staff. It's not always easy for mentors to maintain contact with their match coordinator, but a pattern of avoiding staff contact can be a sign that the mentor has something to hide. Mentors who fail to show up for training sessions, don't turn in their contact logs, and are hard to reach for check-ins are either avoiding you for a reason or are simply irresponsible. In either case, their behavior poses a risk.

Evidence of inappropriate, irresponsible, or illegal personal behavior. Clearly, mentors must conform to strict standards of behavior when they are with their mentee. But what about at other times? Significant problem behaviors by mentors outside the mentoring time can indicate poor judgment and can have an impact on the mentoring relationship if illegal or unsafe activities are involved. The phrase "What I do on my own time is my own business" doesn't apply if the safety of your participants is at stake.

Using poor judgment that could lead to unsafe situations. Although mentors have some leeway in making decisions about activities they do with their mentee, it's important for program staff to monitor these activities for safety and appropriateness. Mentors who choose activities that involve risk—whether it's a plan to go skydiving or taking their mentee to an event where alcohol is being served—are exercising poor judgment.

Becoming overly involved with mentees and/or their family. Mentors are naturally invested in making a difference in the lives of their mentee. However, despite your best efforts to explain the

need for boundaries in the relationship, mentors may become too involved in the life of the mentee and his or her family. Mentors who regularly visit the child's home, take siblings with them on outings, or try to solve family problems are putting your program—and themselves—at risk.

While the focus of this discussion is on the behavior of mentors, the behaviors of others involved in the match may also pose a risk. A parent who is consistently not at home when the child is dropped off puts both child and mentor in a risky situation. A youth who repeatedly fails to show up for meetings may be involved in dangerous situations, using the program to cover his or her actions. A staff member who allows mentors to "bend" the rules about overnight visits is placing the entire program at risk. These situations are rare, but maintaining a watchful eye is essential. Remember the basic questions of risk management: "What could go wrong?" and "What can we do to prevent it?"

Tips for Assessing Risk and Resolving Risky Situations

When a situation arises that presents a risk, you and your staff need to be prepared. Having a clear set of protocols to assess and resolve any situation will give you a firm anchor when an actual risk situation arises and will help you approach the problem with a cool head. These protocols should be reviewed and approved by your agency leadership, board members, and legal counsel, and should be an integral part of your entire agency's response to risk. Staff should know who in the agency needs to be notified when a risk situation occurs and who is responsible for each part of your risk management response.

Many potential risks can be resolved through a meeting with the mentor. When preparing for your meeting, be sure that:

- You understand the problem and its potential consequences so you can discuss these with your mentor

- You have reviewed your policies and procedures (and those of a partnering organization if relevant) to be sure your policy is clear

- You are aware if similar situations have happened in the past and how they were dealt with

- You have a tentative plan of action in mind (this may change after you have met)

- You have informed your supervisor and any other staff members who need to know, and have received their guidance

Following the meeting, document your conversation and write down the plan of action to be taken. Be sure that your mentor agrees to follow the plan and receives a copy, as well as copies of relevant policies or procedures. A subsequent meeting with the mentee or parent present may also be needed. Offer encouragement and support to your mentor as well, and check in more frequently for a while to see how things are going.

Other situations may not be so easily resolved. You may need to talk to others, such as a school counselor, to determine the extent of the problem, or to seek the advice of your board or legal counsel. If your assessment ends with a decision to terminate the volunteer mentor from your service, be sure you have a match closure plan in place. Because research indicates that terminating matches early can have a negative effect on mentees (Grossman and Rhodes, 2002), providing ongoing support is important. Let the mentee know that he or she is not responsible for the match ending early and offer a chance to be matched with a new mentor.

You may also find as you deal with a particular situation that your policies on the issue are either unclear or nonexistent. In these cases, don't back away from the problem at hand. Even when policies are lacking you will need to make a determination about the situation, especially if it poses a clear risk. Once the matter is dealt with, amend your policies and procedures accordingly, and inform current and new mentors, staff, parents, and mentees about the new policy.

Scenario Planning

Thinking about situations that may arise and how you would respond to them can help you and your staff assess your level of preparedness and identify areas where policy changes or staff training are needed. Use the information in this fact sheet and from your operations manual to brainstorm responses to the scenarios you come up with. Some examples are provided here to get you started.

Scenario 1: Honoring Program Policies

Jamie and her mentee, Sara, have been meeting at Sara's school for about seven months. Sara complains to Jamie that meeting at the school all the time is boring. Sara has been bugging Jamie for weeks to go see the new movie at the metroplex. Jamie was told that off-campus activities are prohibited by the mentoring program. However, she thought if she got permission from Sara's mom it would be okay to go to the movies next Saturday.

Analysis: Jamie feels bad that she can't offer more interesting activities for her mentee, so she is trying to get around program policy to please Sara. The program coordinator needs to be firm with this match about not allowing offsite activities, and should remind Jamie that the policies are in place to protect both the mentee and the mentor. While going to a movie is not an unsafe activity in itself, it creates opportunities for potential risk. The coordinator should help this match come up with some new ideas for allowable activities.

Scenario 2: Holding Mentors Accountable for Program Expectations

Curt is a mentor who was recruited from the local university psychology department. The mentoring program is happy to have him because he is an excellent match for Terrance, a high-risk student who needs a mentor with experience and dedication. Curt always makes his meetings each week with Terrance, but his track record on attending ongoing mentor training sessions and turning in report logs is bleak. He has only made one of the

four mandatory mentor trainings so far, and his report logs are often missing vital information.

Analysis: Mandatory trainings are just that, and no mentor should be exempt from them, no matter how skilled he or she is. Review your policy to be sure it's clear on the mentor's responsibilities to attend training and complete paperwork. Then find out why Curt is missing the trainings and not turning in reports, and work with him to come up with an action plan to get him on track. Mentors who avoid training may have something to hide or they just may be very busy people. Although you don't want to end this match, Curt needs to know that fulfilling all the obligations of a mentor is important.

Scenario 3: Promoting Safety and Common Sense for Match Activities

Kelly and her mentee, Ashley, have been matched in a community-based program for about five months. Kelly, an avid hiker and outdoors enthusiast, has introduced Ashley to the joy of the outdoors. Until now Ashley had never even been out of the city to enjoy the mountains and forests. Since introducing your mentee to new experiences is one of the goals of the program, Kelly wants to take Ashley snowboarding over the holiday break.

Analysis: Your agency must accept liability for any accidents that happen when mentees are

engaged in activities with their mentors. The activity Kelly has proposed involves a potentially dangerous sport as well as transportation out of the immediate area. The risks inherent in this activity outweigh the benefits. Kelly should consider other ways to introduce her mentee to outdoor fun, such as a nearby hike. Find out if your insurance coverage will extend to activities that are out of the area, transporting mentees, or engaging in sports or games that have high potential for injuries.

Scenario 4: Determining Consequences for Unacceptable Behaviors

Michele is a high school peer mentor to Brandy, a fourth grader. So far, Michele has been a great mentor, someone Brandy can really look up to. The program coordinator was informed by the vice principal that last week during an away football game, Michele and some other high school students were caught drinking in a parked car outside the stadium.

Analysis: What would you do?

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Additional Reading and Resources

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