



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

Mentoring Resource Center

CASE STUDIES IN YOUTH MENTORING: **Building Lasting Matches Through Quality Training and Support**

Powerhouse Mentoring Program for Foster Youth

June 2009

Introduction: Mentoring Adolescents in Foster Care

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, approximately 500,000 children are in the foster care system in the United States. Many of these youth face significant challenges to success that have their roots in difficult family and environmental circumstances. While in foster care, they frequently live in numerous placements and have an array of caregivers, caseworkers, and other adults who come in and out of their lives. Many come to distrust adults and hesitate to form close relationships with them, fearing they may soon leave. And when these youth transition out of foster care, they frequently lack a single caring adult in their lives who they feel they can turn to for support and advice.

Mentoring is an increasingly popular strategy to help foster youth overcome these many obstacles. Although research on the impact of mentoring for these vulnerable youth is still limited, there is some evidence that a mentor can help youth learn how to develop positive relationships involving trust, support and care. Mentors can nurture the development of basic social skills that help youth improve peer relationships and feel more confident as they begin to navigate the larger world beyond the foster care system. And as foster youth move from adolescence to young adulthood, mentors can offer the kind of ongoing, reliable support so often missing in their lives (Rhodes et al., 1999).

Although foster youth are often distrustful of forming new relationships, they may respond well to volunteer mentors, seeing them as a source of valuable guidance as they move toward independence. Because mentors are volunteers, youth are less likely to view them as “just another staff person” from the foster care system. However, even when foster youth show willingness to have a mentor, developing positive mentoring relationships with older foster youth remains a significant challenge. Without specialized and thorough training and support mentors can become discouraged as those relationships fail to develop and thrive (Rhodes, 2005).

The Powerhouse Mentoring Program in Portland, Oregon, understands that comprehensive training and support can help mentors overcome the challenges of mentoring foster youth and allow them to develop deep and lasting relationships with their mentees. Their success in retaining mentors and sustaining long-term matches is due in large part to their intensive, specialized training program, the ongoing support mentors receive, and the positive working relationship they have developed with the child welfare system in their service area. Though ED mentoring grantees do not typically target foster youth in their school-based programs, this case study offers ideas for providing in-depth training and support for mentors working with any youth facing significant challenges to success.

Powerhouse Mentoring Program: Enhancing Successful Transitions for Foster Youth

In Multnomah County, Oregon approximately 500 teens are served each year by the foster care system, and more than 100 of these youth age out of foster care annually. Historically, as young adults left the foster care system in Oregon, there were few services available to support this difficult transition to independent living.

To help fill this void, Powerhouse Mentoring Program began providing mentoring services to foster care youth aged 13-21 in Multnomah County in October 2000. A program of The Inn Home, which operates a variety of programs for adolescents experiencing difficulties in their lives, the mission of Powerhouse is to provide community-based mentoring to teens in foster care to enhance their successful transitions from adolescence to adulthood. Primary funding for the program is provided by the regional branch of the Oregon Department of Human Services, which oversees the foster care system. Small grants and private donations lend important additional support.

Powerhouse is relatively small, with just two part-time staff members responsible for all phases of the mentoring program. Approximately 25 youth are mentored annually and close to 200 youth have been served since the program began. The average length of matches is 28 months, and a number of matches have lasted many years (this year marks the seventh anniversary of several matches). When matches do end, mentors are often willing to come back and be re-matched because they believe in the program and feel supported in their efforts. Although not all matches are successful, program staff know that mentors are making a huge difference in the lives of many of these vulnerable youth, offering a helping hand as they navigate the difficult road to independent living.

Mentor Training: A Multiphase Process

Over the years, Powerhouse has developed a mentor training program that helps mentors learn about the youth they will be serving and how they can build a meaningful and positive relationship with them. They use a multiphase approach to training that begins during recruitment and screening and continues throughout mentors' service. Maria Hein, Powerhouse Program Manager, says that mentors begin to learn right away that mentoring foster youth is challenging but can reap many rewards for both mentor and mentee.

Training begins during recruitment and screening. Beginning with the first contact with prospective mentors, Hein provides straightforward, realistic information about the mentoring experience at Powerhouse. As part of the application and screening process, all potential mentors receive information about:

- Characteristics of the youth they will mentor
- Goals of the mentoring program and some success stories
- An overview of the foster care system
- The commitment mentors must make (10 hours a month for a minimum of one year)
- Requirements to attend trainings and keep program coordinators informed

Maria is not afraid to let potential mentors know that they will spend considerable time in training, both before the match and throughout their volunteer experience. “It’s really part of the selling point, for mentors to know we are going to provide quality training both initially and ongoing to support them, given the population we are serving and the issues they face. Mentors appreciate it.”

One youth wrote this about his mentor: “Since I was about 4 years old I’ve been in foster care. I’ve moved homes more than most people (change) socks. In all those years I had few people that I could count on. (My mentor) is one of the people that I can. In fact (he) is one of the few people who I can call a true friend.”

Providing thorough information up front allows volunteers to decide early in the process if mentoring foster youth is really a good fit for them and helps remove some of their anxieties about the prospect of mentoring foster youth. By the time they complete the lengthy application process and are accepted by the program, mentors have a good idea of what to expect, both from their prospective mentee and from the program itself. At the same time, Powerhouse staff know each mentor’s areas of strengths and challenges, which allows them to individualize their support right from the start.

Initial training focuses on youth. Once mentors are through the program’s intensive screening process, they are scheduled to attend a four-hour session that is the backbone of Powerhouse’s mentor training program. Training begins by providing mentors with a clear picture of the youth they serve, their history, culture, challenges, and strengths. Information about the role of the mentor, the program’s policies and procedures, and other details come later in the evening so that mentors understand it in the context of the youth. Program staff try to take a youth-focused approach in all the interactions they have with mentors.

Following staff introductions and a brief recap of the program’s mission and goals, the agenda for the first part of the training describes in detail the population of youth served, explains the foster care system, and provides guidelines and tips for handling special issues that may come up. The agenda includes the following topics:

The Culture of Foster Care

- Understanding the foster care system
- The dependency court process
- Youth culture
- Exploring and valuing diversity

Successful Mentoring of Foster Youth

- Developmental characteristics of adolescents
- Qualities of successful mentors
- Stages of the mentoring relationship
- Focusing on strengths
- Giving youth a voice
- Setting boundaries
- Dealing with traumatic issues

After a break for food and conversation, the session focuses on the mentoring role and programmatic information:

- An overview of how and why mentoring works
- Program policies, procedures, and expectations of mentors
- Safety and liability
- How the program supports mentors and mentees

Powerhouse provides each mentor with a comprehensive training manual that covers all information provided during training as well as information on community resources, articles on foster youth, and online links for further reading. Their curriculum draws from the Search Institute, MENTOR's *Elements of Effective Practice Toolkit*; materials from the Mentoring Resource Center, National Mentoring Center and EMT Associates; and local and national experts on foster youth, poverty, culture, and mentoring. "We use whatever we can find to bring home the realities of being a young person in the foster care system and how our volunteers can make a difference to them," says Maria.

Individual meetings extend the training experience. The final step in the mentor screening process is a lengthy personal interview with Powerhouse's Mentor Match Case Manager. This gives both mentors and staff one more chance to ask and answer questions, voice concerns, and learn more about each other. It's also a final opportunity to review any particularly important program information, such as mandatory reporting and confidentiality requirements.

The Department of Human Services (DHS) caseworker also plays an important role in preparing mentors for their experience. When a mentor is ready to be matched and a potential mentee is selected from the waiting list, the caseworker, mentor, and Powerhouse Match Manager meet to discuss the youth's history, strengths, and challenges. The caseworker provides an overview of the services and support available for the youth and the foster family, and mentors learn how they fit into the system of care for that particular child. The caseworker also clarifies how communication between the foster family and the mentor should work and provides contact details. This individualized training time allows mentors to get to know the caseworker, learn more about the system, and ask any remaining questions.

Ongoing training and individual support add value over time. Powerhouse knows that once mentors are matched they require even more training and support as they begin to deal with real-life situations. The program holds three "classroom" training sessions throughout the year that are designed to provide more in-depth information about particular topics. Mentors are expected to attend all three of these formal training sessions. Training content is driven in part by the interests and concerns of mentors, and these sessions often include an outside expert as the presenter. Recent training topics include:

- Using positive youth development approaches with mentees
- Resources available to youth as they age out of foster care
- Mandatory reporting issues and answers
- Conquering conflict: effective communication in times of conflict
- Gang awareness training
- Helping mentors overcome frustrations and disappointments
- Labeling foster youth: what the labels mean, and how labels impact them
- Adolescent brain development
- Understanding Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome

In addition to these sessions, the program offers three informal gatherings known as “pub nights,” where mentors can interact with each other to share ideas and approaches, offer solutions to challenges they face, and receive individualized guidance from the Powerhouse Match Manager, who holds an advanced degree in counseling. These events help build a community of mentors within their program, offering opportunities for mentors to network, problem-solve together, and socialize. While attendance at these gatherings is not required, mentors are encouraged to participate in them as often as possible.

“We use whatever we can find to bring home the realities of being a young person in the foster care system and how our volunteers can make a difference to them.”

Program staff keep in touch personally with each mentor at least monthly. When mentors need help with their foster youth mentee, these experienced staff provide advice based on best practices in the field of counseling, social work, and mentoring. They may refer mentors to additional reading or other resources to help them build skills, and they can help access additional services for the mentee when the need arises. Mentors know that there is a circle of knowledge and support available to both their mentee and themselves—another reason they keep coming back.

To further enhance mentor support, Powerhouse is beginning to develop a new role for mentors who have been with the program for some time. These experienced mentors are being asked to participate in initial trainings to share their experiences, and a new “master mentor” concept is being tried out that will match experienced mentors with new recruits to provide additional advice and support.

Replication

Powerhouse Mentoring Program’s training and support program was developed to train mentors serving a particular population, but the approach they have taken can be applied to all mentoring programs. Most mentoring programs provide services to at-risk youth from a variety of circumstances who face many challenges to success. In many cases, programs identify common characteristics among the youth they plan to serve and base their program’s goals, objectives, design, and expected outcomes on helping youth overcome specific barriers to success. To be successful, mentors must be adequately prepared to fill their role, and the training that is provided to them must be relevant to the issues facing the youth they mentor.

Powerhouse offers several valuable lessons for programs seeking to develop or strengthen their mentor training program, no matter who they are serving:

Be honest from the beginning. Mentors need to have realistic expectations about the mentoring experience, program expectations, and the impact they can have on the youth being served. Begin providing honest, realistic information from the moment you start recruiting and screening your mentors. You are more likely to engage them by providing this information than you are to scare them away.

Advertise your training as a key benefit of mentoring. Powerhouse offers mentors an opportunity to learn and develop new skills that can be applied to their careers and personal lives. It is a wonderful benefit to be able to receive such knowledge, combined with hands-on learning and personalized coaching, at no cost. Be proud of your training program and emphasize the many benefits it provides to prospective mentors.

Provide ongoing training and expect mentors to attend. Establish a regular schedule of ongoing training events that is based on when most mentors are available. If needed, alternate between a daytime and an evening event so that mentors can come to at least a couple of your sessions. If mentors are consistently unable to attend, find out why, and work with them to make their attendance possible. If all else fails, look for alternatives such as an online course they may be able to do on their own time. Remind mentors that ongoing training is an essential part of your program's efforts to make their experience successful.

Customize training to reflect the populations you serve. All mentors need information about how to work effectively with youth, your program's policies and procedures, developing quality match activities, and other mentoring basics. But mentors are usually eager to learn more about the youth with whom they are matched, and knowing more about their cultural, environmental, social, and educational backgrounds can enhance the mentor's ability to relate to the youth and be effective. For example, by teaching their mentors about the culture of poverty that many foster youth have come from, Powerhouse gives mentors a better understanding of their mentee's behaviors and attitudes toward money and helps mentors approach issues relating to money and social status with greater sensitivity.

If your program serves a broad range of youth that includes only a handful of children in foster care or from other difficult situations, consider having individualized or small group sessions for mentors of those children, or include breakout sessions during training to talk about particular youth issues.

Draw from many sources to build a quality training program. There are numerous mentor training guides available online that provide a starting point to mentor training (see the resource list that follows for examples). But to make your training really meaningful, think creatively about how to give mentors the best possible tools for their important work. Involve local experts who are willing to provide materials or in-person sessions on topics relevant to your program. Bring in a panel of former foster youth to share their experiences. Develop relationships with local educators in social work and counseling, bring in the law enforcement agency's gang prevention specialist, or ask the school principal to talk about the school's approach to reducing school violence. Supplement in-person presentations with readings from the many online and print materials available on youth issues.

Develop positive relationships with other agencies working with the youth you serve. Involve these partners in your mentor training and make sure your mentors know who they are and what they provide to your program. This is especially important when working with youth in complex systems of care, where lines of communication and roles are not always clear.

Find ways for mentors to learn from each other. Invite experienced mentors—and their mentees, if appropriate—to come to your new mentor training to talk about their experiences. Build in socializing time during or after a training session so mentors can develop a network of support. Establish regular get-togethers that are designed for mentors to share ideas, problems, and concerns with the help of an expert facilitator. Use a dedicated blog or online forum to facilitate mentor interaction, monitored by a staff person to ensure that the ideas presented fall within the guidelines of your program and mentoring best practice.

Continuously review and improve your training program. Conducting training modules over and over again can result in stale presentations and outdated materials. Seek out new materials and creative ways to deliver quality training, and ask for feedback and ideas from mentors.

Maria Hein describes Powerhouse’s training program as a constant work in progress. Staff are looking forward to working on a series of improvements in the coming months, from updating their training to better reflect the Search Institute’s 40 Developmental Assets to finding new roles for experienced mentors to be involved in training. They know that the efforts they put into training and supporting mentors results in a quality mentoring experience and a brighter future for the foster youth they serve.

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References

Rhodes, J. E., Haight, W. L., & Briggs, E. (1999). The influence of mentoring on the peer relationships of foster youth in relative and nonrelative care. *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, 9, 185 – 201.

Rhodes, J.E. (2005).“Fostering positive outcomes: how mentoring can help children and adolescents in foster care.” MENTOR Research Corner. Retrieved June 23, 2009, from http://www.mentoring.org/access_research/fostering_all/

Resources on Foster Youth Mentoring

- New York City Children’s Services. *Best practice guidelines for foster care youth mentoring*. http://www.nyc.gov/html/acs/html/become_mentor/best_practices_addition.shtml
- North, D. & Ingram, B. *Foster youth mentorship training for program managers. Mentoring Plus Workshop Series 5*. Produced by the EMT Group for the California Department of Alcohol and Drug Programs. <http://www.emt.org/userfiles/FosterYouthSeries5.pdf>
- The National Mentoring Center has an extensive list of links to online resources about working with youth in foster care: http://www.nwrel.org/mentoring/links_foster.php

Mentor Training Resources

- *Preparing Participants for Mentoring: the U.S. Department of Education Mentoring Program’s Guide to Initial Training of Volunteers, Youth, and Parents* (2005). Features agendas and ready-to-use training activities. <http://www.edmentoring.org/pubs/training.pdf>

- *Ongoing Training for Mentors: 12 Interactive Sessions for U.S. Department of Education Mentoring Programs* (2006). Even more ready-to-use activities to teach mentors the nuances of working with their mentees. http://www.edmentoring.org/pubs/ongoing_training.pdf
- *Training New Mentors* (2008). A comprehensive guide to providing mentors with initial training, complete with over a dozen ready-to-use training activities. <http://gwired.gwu.edu/hamfish/merlin-cgi/p/downloadFile/d/20697/n/off/other/1/name/trainingpdf/>
- *How to Build a Successful Mentoring Program Using the Elements of Effective Practice* (2005). MENTOR/National Mentoring Partnership. This comprehensive toolkit has a section on mentor training that is accompanied by a variety of useful training tools developed by the Mass Mentoring partnership. http://www.mentoring.org/find_resources/tool_kit/operations/

For additional resources on mentor training, visit the online resources page of the MRC Web site: http://www.edmentoring.org/online_res3.html

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This publication was funded by the Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools at the U.S. Department of Education under contract number ED04CO0091/0001 with EMT Associates, Inc. The contracting officer's representative was Bryan Williams. The content of this publication does not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the U.S. Department of Education, nor does the mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by the U.S. government. This publication also contains hyperlinks and URLs for information created and maintained by private organizations. This information is provided for the reader's convenience. The U.S. Department of Education is not responsible for controlling or guaranteeing the accuracy, relevance, timeliness, or completeness of this outside information. Further, the inclusion of information or a hyperlink or URL does not reflect the importance of the organization, nor is it intended to endorse any views expressed, or products or services offered.