



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

Mentoring Resource Center

CASE STUDIES IN YOUTH MENTORING

One-on-One and Group Mentoring: An Integrated Approach

Young Women Leaders Program,
University of Virginia
ywlp.virginia.edu

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Introduction

Research suggests that individual mentoring may be optimal for developing one-on-one relationships between mentoring pairs, while a group format may be better for promoting positive peer interactions (Herrera, Vang, & Gale, 2002). The Young Women Leaders Program (YWLP) at the University of Virginia incorporates both. School personnel at four area schools nominate seventh-grade girls they determine to be at risk for making poor academic, social, or emotional decisions, but who have shown potential to become leaders. The girls are then matched with college women mentors who have undergone a thorough screening process and are enrolled in a two-part service-learning course at the university: Issues Facing Adolescent Girls and Issues Facing College Women. The program makes one-to-one matches and also assigns each mentor-mentee pair to a group. Groups meet weekly after school with a group facilitator for two-hour, curriculum-based sessions.

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While mentoring has great promise for improving healthy decision making on the part of youth, inconsistent or problematic mentoring relationships are likely to do more harm than good (Rhodes, 2005). Mentoring early adolescent girls deemed at risk can be challenging since they often feel overwhelmed with relationship issues among their family and friends. The Young Women Leaders Program at the University of Virginia offers a promising model for providing middle school girls the support they need through a combination of one-on-one and group time that includes both

relationship development and skill building. The service-learning component for mentors, with its focus on adolescent development and best practices in mentoring, makes for an intensive, highly supportive approach to mentoring for both mentees and mentors and helps the pairs maintain and deepen their relationships.

Program Description

Founded in 1997, the Young Women Leaders Program (YWLP) aims to empower at-risk middle school girls to become leaders by combining the benefits of one-on-one mentoring with targeted group activities for one year. During the year, middle school girls participate in twice-weekly group meetings with “big sisters” to address issues related to girls’ sense of self, scholastic achievement, body image, social aggression, and healthy decision making. Each pair also meets individually for an additional hour each week to develop their personal relationship.

Since the program’s inception, 969 undergraduate women, 55 graduate women, and 944 middle school girls have participated. The YWLP curriculum was developed and based on research in interdisciplinary areas by faculty members and graduate students from the University of Virginia’s Curry School of Education and Women’s Center.

One-on-One Mentoring Time

As part of the course requirement, the pairs spend on average at least an hour each week in one-on-one time focused on personal issues. Pairs also communicate weekly by phone, e-mail, text message, and online chat. During one-on-one time they participate in mutually agreed-upon activities such as studying, trips to the mall, and attending cultural events at the University of Virginia. In a mid-year focus group with mentees, one girl said that the best part of being with her mentor was “just getting to spend time outside of group because you get to do all sorts of things you wouldn’t get to do.” Another touted her mentor as the perfect role model who helped her organize her schoolwork.

After-School Two-Hour Group Meetings

In addition to one-on-one time, the middle school girls and their mentors meet weekly in groups in a more structured format. The research-based curriculum used for the group component, developed by Edith “Winx” Lawrence, a professor of clinical psychology in the university’s school of education, focuses on problem solving, decision making, and leadership skill development. Discussion prompts, cognitive tools, and experiential activities help facilitate the group’s exploration of healthful alternatives to the risks facing girls this age. To ensure the program meets the specific needs of participating girls, “big sisters” meet together for an additional hour each week to modify the curriculum to best address their group’s issues.

Promising Practices

In addition to supporting strong one-to-one mentoring relationships, YWLP features three unique components that distinguish it from other programs: 1) enrolling all mentors in a yearlong service-learning course; 2) engaging pairs in structured group meetings; and 3) systematically exposing middle school girls to college life.

The Mentor Course

Enrollment in a yearlong service learning course at the University of Virginia provides the mentors with extensive support for mentoring and fosters a sense of community among YWLP participants. Not only does the course solidify connection to the program, but it provides mentors with theoretical and practical knowledge about adolescent girls and best practices in mentoring.

In the first semester, the three-credit class covers the principles of mentoring relevant to the population served, including:

- Engaging adolescent girls

- Race and ethnic identity development
- Class issues during adolescence

Course content also explores principles of adolescent development with topics such as:

- The teenage brain
- Girls' development and the school setting
- Peer relationships and adolescent risky choices

The one-credit second semester class focuses on mentoring as leadership development for the college women.

During both semesters, considerable class time is devoted to providing supervision on specific issues affecting mentor/mentee relationships. For example, participants brainstorm strategies for engaging mentees who don't return calls or respond to attempts to get together, among other common scenarios.

In addition to spending time with mentees, the college women are required to write weekly reflection journals about course readings and their mentoring experiences, and complete a cumulative leadership project. According to survey data, the undergraduate women benefit from the leadership training provided by the course at least in equal measure with the middle school girls they mentor.

Structured Group Meetings

A typical two-hour group meeting includes: time for pair connection and homework; introduction of a YWLP skill (e.g., ABCs of problem solving, gossip guard, leadership secrets); work on a community service or school legacy project (e.g., AIDS Walk, food drive, tree planting); and group discussion of a problematic topic. For a week-by-week overview of the curriculum, visit: <http://www.ywlp.virginia.edu/adults-curriculum-mentoring.html>

A significant amount of group time is devoted to promoting prosocial norms and behaviors by exploring the ways in which middle school girls can become leaders and successfully handle "sticky situations" regarding bullying, substance use, body dissatisfaction, and sexual decision making. Through each group's leadership projects in their school and community, they are able to develop and showcase their leadership skills.

Surveys indicate that the after-school group meeting is the favorite component of YWLP for some participants. As one "little sister" reported, "The best part of the whole thing is you come from school [where you had] a really bad day and then people cheer you up."

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Exposure to the College Campus

Twice a year, YWLP organizes programwide events that bring the mentees to the university campus for several hours. Participation in these semester-culminating events solidifies both mentees' and mentors' connection to their school group and to the larger group. During both events, members of each mentoring group showcase what they have learned through the semester for the other mentees, mentors, parents, and invited guests.

In addition to providing an important opportunity for reflection and celebration, bringing the middle school girls to the university campus adds a new level of college exposure for girls who may not automatically think of college as part of their future. Mentee and mentor pairs come to the university for other occasions as well, including Black Voices concerts, charity fundraisers, and to study at the library. Together with the programwide events, these activities help increase the middle school girls' sense of themselves as members of the university community. One college student reported that her mentee peppered her with questions about college on the ride home from UVa Day. She related that while she hadn't given it much thought before, now she couldn't wait to go to college.

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Evidence of Success and Replicability

Data collected by YWLP indicate that the combined one-on-one and group mentoring approach contributes to participant retention. Seventy-five percent of YWLP mentoring pairs maintained their relationship for the full 2006–2007 academic year and, on average, spent 3.1 hours together per week. Having multiple options within each group for connection and support for both mentees and mentors increases the likelihood that a given participant—whether middle school girl or college woman mentor—will find a meaningful, growth-inspiring relationship within YWLP. In 2007 end-of-year evaluations, for example, 91 percent of the girls indicated that their mentors were “very good” or “excellent.” Just as important, over the last three program years, more than 70 percent of girls indicated that participating in YWLP had helped them improve the way they listened to people with views different from their own, supported a friend, dealt with problems, and thought about their future.

In 2007, YWLP was awarded a U.S. Department of Education mentoring grant. The program will expand from one to three years under the new grant, giving girls two years with the same mentor; in the third year, a YWLP alumnae club will help ease the transition to high school.

YWLP has attracted interest from universities, schools, and communities across the nation. In 2004–2005, the program began a national outreach initiative to develop YWLP Sister Sites in other communities. YWLP Sister Sites now exist throughout Virginia, as well as in New Jersey, Alabama, and even Mozambique. Each qualifying site receives program materials, and grant and research support, in addition to program consultation. Readers interested in starting a Sister Site can visit: <http://www.ywlp.virginia.edu/sister-sites-how-to-start.html> for more information.

References

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