



Natural Mentoring is Good for ALL Youth

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Mentoring adolescents is an important way in which communities seek to promote prosocial behavior among youth. Mentoring programs address a number of social issues including encouraging youth to finish high school, break the cycle of poverty, and avoid or delay drug and alcohol use. Perhaps



Figure 1. Photo by RaphiD. Used under CCO.

the best-known mentorship strategies are formalized relationships initiated by nonprofit organizations. In these formal mentorship programs, mentees and mentors volunteer to participate and are given explicit program-related expectations regarding the frequency, duration, and content of their interactions. In many cases, the “fit” between mentors and mentees is measured as well as the youth outcomes are evaluated and reported.

There is general agreement in the scientific literature of the value of mentoring with youth. Yet, not all youth have equal access to formal mentoring. Work by Erickson, McDonald, and Elder (2009)¹ and Raposa, Dietz, and Rhodes (2017)² suggests that only 5% of youth have formal mentors.

Highlights

Natural mentors can promote a sense of belonging and prosocial behavior in youth.

The background of the mentor and the amount of time spent in the relationship impacts the outcome.

Natural mentors are associated with positive outcomes for all youth.

Natural mentorship relationships may be more easily implementable than formalized mentorships.

¹ Erickson, L. D., McDonald, S., & Elder, G. H. (2009). Informal mentors and education: Complementary or compensatory resources? *Sociology of Education*, 82, 344–367.

² Raposa, E. B., Dietz, N., & Rhodes, J. E. (2017). Trends in volunteer mentoring in the United States: Analysis of a decade of census survey data. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 1, 1–12.

How can we ensure that more youth have access to mentorship? Is formalized mentorship the only way to provide the benefits of mentorship for youth? In “Does Natural Mentoring Matter? A Multilevel Meta-analysis on the Association Between Natural Mentoring and Youth Outcomes,” Van Dam et. al review the literature on informal, or “natural mentors.”

What is a natural mentor?

Natural mentorships are relationships that form organically between youth and older individuals within their existing communities. Extended family members, teachers, coaches, neighbors, friends, and other adults

Natural Mentors are nonparent adults who listen, advise, and advocate for a youth.

often serve as “natural” mentors. In fact, researchers estimate that 75% of youth identify at least one trusted nonparental adult with whom they share this kind of relationship.^{1,2}

Connections between youth and caring non-parent/guardian adults can develop into natural mentoring relationships that foster positive outcomes for youth by buffering risks associated with adolescence. Van Dam et al.’s research suggest that natural mentors:

- Enhance a sense of belonging,
- Serve as an informational resource, giving advice on school and job-related issues, and
- Provide emotional support.

Additionally, Van Dam et al. found that that for at-risk youth, natural mentors challenge prior negative experiences with adults and thus provide examples of satisfying relationships. For youth with relatively strong parental and social units, natural mentoring provides companionship and additional perspectives to adolescent concerns. Van Dam et al. suggest that natural mentors are especially needed as adolescents slowly gain independence from their parents and other initial caregivers.

Natural mentoring requires fewer resources, and is far more accessible to a broader range of youth than formal youth mentoring.

Methods

Van Dam et. al reviewed all English-language studies on youth mentoring published from 1992-October 2017. Youth were defined as individuals between 13-24 years of age. “Natural mentors” were defined as relationships between youth and nonparental adults that existed before the evaluation. Van Dam et. al reviewed thirty studies and coded for youth outcomes such as academic and vocational success, social-emotional development, physical health, and psychosocial problems. The authors took special care to account for “publication bias” or the tendency for studies with larger effect sizes to be published relative to studies that had no significant or small findings by seeking out unpublished studies.

Results

Van Dam et. al. found the following:

- There were small, but positive overall effects for the presence of a natural mentor and quality of the natural mentoring relationship.
- Mentors with a background in a “helping profession” (such as teacher, social worker, etc.) were associated with larger positive outcomes on youth mentees.
- More frequent interaction was associated with a more satisfying relationship between the mentor and mentee.
- Small-to-medium effect sizes were found for the association between quality of the natural mentoring relationship and social-emotional development, academic and vocational functioning, and psychosocial problems.
- Natural mentors were associated with positive impacts regardless of risk status of the youth. For those youth with good existing social relationships, natural mentors complement and promote resilience. For at-risk youth, mentors can offset individual and contextual risks.
- Natural mentorships may be even more beneficial than formal ones and certainly require less infrastructure and investment.

“Taken together, these findings highlight the importance of ensuring that all youth, not just those who have access to networks with high social capital, have access to caring teachers, employers, and other adults who can serve as role models and have the relationship skills to provide developmental opportunities.”

What Does This Mean For?

Practitioners—Natural mentoring has value and should be encouraged and supported within communities. Relative to formalized mentoring programs, natural mentorship requires less infrastructure and public investment. This makes them a good value in public health.

Public Policy—Formal mentoring programs are a popular way to promote prosocial outcomes for youth. Informal or natural mentoring is potentially underutilized as a strategy to increase feelings of belonging within a community. In many cases, natural mentorships may require less public investment and can be applied and evaluated in a way which is equivalent to that of more formalized mentoring. Encouraging natural mentoring makes the benefits of mentorship more accessible to all. Van Dam et. al.’s work suggests that all youth benefit from mentorship.



The authors created a video for practitioners here: <https://vimeo.com/267403918>

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