

STARTING A MENTORING PROGRAM

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*Congratulations on your interest
in creating a mentoring program for the
youth in your community!*

*Many organizations like yours have recognized
the value in mentoring, and thousands of children
across the state have benefited from their
participation in mentoring programs. But what
distinguishes a mentoring program from other youth
programs, and what exactly is involved in
launching one?*

WHAT IS MENTORING?

Mentoring occurs when an older individual engages in building a healthy, trusting relationship with a younger person. Mentors provide support, guidance, friendship, role modeling, assistance, and an attentive ear. Informal (or non-structured) mentoring takes place in all types of youth programs and services. Teachers, coaches, tutors, counselors, scout leaders, other professionals, and even family members all regularly provide mentoring to young people. Such contact may be valuable and it may be “mentoring” but it is not always a “mentoring program.”

WHAT IS A MENTORING PROGRAM?

A formal or structured mentoring program strives to match older volunteers with younger participants for the specific purpose of building a relationship of trust and respect. At the same time, mentors and program staff often provide support and guidance to the mentee, and this is sometimes accomplished by integrating a variety of program themes such as conflict resolution, pregnancy prevention, goal setting, tutoring, career development, involvement in sports, computers, camping or a number of other areas.

Although these themes may be important elements to mentoring programs, it's good to remember that the main goal of a formal mentoring program is *the development of the relationship*. In service of supporting these relationships, well-managed mentoring programs have expert staff who screen and train their volunteer mentors, and they also consistently monitor each match throughout the mentoring cycle.

Considerations before you start

Starting a youth mentoring program for your community or agency is one of the best things you can do to support children, and it is one of the few cost-effective means of providing *individualized* support to youth. However, *mentor program development also comes with three important warnings!*

◆ Programs need planning and structure.

Safe and effective mentoring has quite a bit more to it than simply matching any adult with any child. Quality mentoring programs need a carefully conceived structure, which includes clear and comprehensive program guidelines. You can't start a program with little structure, thinking you'll add guidelines later on; participants will likely reject your attempts at “reeling them in” by adding new rules and procedures.

◆ Programs need resources and support.

It is not possible to operate a successful mentoring program without proper resources. To begin with, funding is needed to hire one or more professional program staff. In addition, if you are part of a larger agency, your mentoring program will need the support and endorsement of your organization.

◆ Many programs take on too much, too soon.

The lack of experienced staff combined with the difficulties (and the expense) of designing an effective program structure and of recruiting, screening, training and monitoring program participants, often requires agencies to begin by developing a smaller “pilot” mentoring program.

A change in thinking is often needed in both funders and program staff to avoid unrealistic expectations of a new mentoring program. In fact, before you consider implementing a mentoring program within your organization, it is best to check out what mentoring programs already exist in your neighborhood. Perhaps a partnership with an already established and successful program will prove to be a better option than starting from scratch.

Finally, program managers of new programs often need to inform their directors, administrators and staff of the resources, program structures and processes needed to implement a safe and effective, quality mentoring program. The following FAQs will help you to do so.

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Frequently Asked Questions about mentoring

Here are answers to some of the questions most frequently asked by new program managers.

◆ What TYPES of mentoring program models exist?

Several models of mentoring exist among current programs. Some match only one-on-one, others do group, team, or peer mentoring. There are even programs that use the Internet as a means for mentors and mentees to connect. Different program models vary in the level of risk and thus, the level of required supervision. For example, programs in which volunteers have unsupervised contact with mentees require more training and screening than those that only have mentors and mentees meet under constant supervision.

◆ What is a reasonable NUMBER OF MENTOR/ MENTEE MATCHES that one supervisor can adequately monitor and support in order for mentoring to be safe and effective?

The number of matches one supervisor can manage will depend on the expertise of the supervisor(s), the time commitment mentors can give, whether or not mentors have unsupervised contact with their mentees, the type of mentoring model used, and the level of "at-risk factors" of the mentee population. It is extremely important that mentors receive strong training and support and that the matches are properly monitored.

A good rule of thumb for traditional (one-to-one) mentoring is that there should be no more than 20-25 matches per supervisor. For group mentoring, it is likely that a single program manager can effectively support 5-8 groups (serving 50-80 mentees and 15-25 volunteers). The key here is that a supervisor needs to be familiar with and understand the needs of each one of his or her mentees. A supervisor begins to become less effective when numbers in a one-to-one program approach 30 or 35 matches.

In addition to the mentee, the supervisor needs to develop a relationship with each mentor, and with the mentee's parents. One can see that if a program has 25 matches, the supervisor could be in contact with up to 100 individuals.

◆ How MANY mentors can I expect to recruit, train, and supervise in a NEW program?

As there are so many unknowns when starting up a new mentoring program, when possible, the first cycle should be treated as a pilot program. A pilot program should start with no more than five to fifteen matches. Starting small makes it much easier to manage any problems that may arise and to keep the program responsive to its participants as issues are addressed. Once the first group of matches are completed, staff will have a much clearer picture of what it takes to run their program, and they can then decide on how many matches to make during the next cycle. As the program begins to expand, it will be important to hire additional staff to maintain a reasonable match-to-supervisor ratio.

◆ What are the INITIAL COSTS needed to get a program off the ground?

The resources needed to start a new program would ideally include one full-time staff person to undertake the majority of planning and implementation of tasks. Typically called a "program coordinator" or "program manager," this individual's salary is often the single largest expenditure in any mentoring effort.

The program manager should be supported by an operational and governance structure that provides credibility and organizational support. The organization needs to help the mentoring program obtain insurance, office and meeting space, supplies, clerical assistance, communications equipment, refreshments, program incentives, event support, etc. Funding for these expenses, added to the costs of recruitment, fingerprinting and criminal background checks, and access to human relations expertise to help train and support mentors can cost between \$400-\$2,000 per match per year.

Generally the higher the at-risk factors that a mentee population has, the more money it takes to run the program. Efforts for high-risk youths need more thorough screening procedures, more comprehensive mentor training, and more intensive monitoring.

Programs commonly seek about \$100,000 per year for a first-time mentoring grant; however, less may be needed if the program is being implemented in an already-established agency, or if program personnel (for example, counselors) can be "borrowed" from a school site. It is also possible to acquire other necessary resources and services on an in-kind or pro bono basis; however, locating such resources also takes time and energy.

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◆ Can a program be OPERATED BY A VOLUNTEER or a minimally paid program manager?

Many programs are run by program managers or coordinators that either volunteer or agree to a minimal salary. In either case, those who are considering becoming program managers need to be very careful — what may appear to a newcomer to be a three-hour-per-week commitment can actually turn into a 50+ hour-per-week job. Unpaid or low paid staff can quickly become burned out, and the program will suffer; frequent turnover in the program manager position can create turmoil within the program.

◆ How do I utilize “BEST PRACTICES” for youth mentoring programs?

Before major time and resources are invested in creating a new program, you should familiarize yourself with the industry’s “best practices.” A key tool for learning these practices is the ten Quality Assurance Standards (QAS) for youth mentoring programs. These standards were developed in 1989 by the National Mentoring Partnership, and they serve as a framework for developing safe and effective programs. In fact, the standards cover every major aspect that should be integrated into your program.

The Quality Assurance Standards focus on 10 areas that must be carefully developed for a mentoring program to be effective. After working with this tool for any period of time you will begin to understand that each and every standard is useful in promoting the *safety* and the *personal growth* of the mentee population. The standards are as follows:

1. A statement of purpose and a long range plan
2. A recruitment plan for mentors and mentees
3. An orientation for mentors and mentees
4. Eligibility screening for mentors and mentees
5. A readiness and training curriculum for all mentors and mentees
6. A matching strategy
7. A monitoring process
8. A support, recognition and retention component
9. Closure steps
10. An evaluation process

Quality Assurance Standards, along with a detailed explanation of each point, can be downloaded by visiting EMT Group’s website at www.emt.org.

To implement the QAS, it is important that clearly written policies and procedures be established for mentors, mentees and their families, referral sources and program staff. To this end, many new programs begin the design process by focusing on a mentor training manual. It’s much easier for a new program during the initial design process to develop their program by taking excerpts from manuals of one or more existing quality mentoring programs. (Of course, you must obtain permission from each program before doing so.)

◆ How LONG will it take to develop the program? How SOON can my first group of youths be matched with mentors?

A good estimate of time needed to design a program, establish a training system, recruit and screen the first group of volunteers, and train them is about six months. This process could take longer if staff needs to be hired or funding needs to be acquired. Again, programs that don’t allow for sufficient planning in this area often fail. The implementation of the program should be synchronized with the organization’s calendar of operation. For instance, school-based programs often determine their matches in September and then have their formal kick-off in early October.

◆ How much and what kind of TRAINING do volunteers need?

The level of volunteer training depends on the at-risk factors of the mentee population being served, what mentors will be doing with their youth, and the level of support and supervision mentors will receive once they’ve been matched. Typical mentor programs that have mentees with a moderate level of at-risk factors usually have trainings that range from three to six hours in length. Many professionals recommended that mentors receive at least six hours of training if they are to have unsupervised contact with youth.

Mentor trainings typically include subjects such as: background and history of mentoring, mentoring concepts and practices, program policies and procedures, confidentiality and child abuse reporting, crisis management, communication skills, beginning the match, enrichment activities, plus modules of training that focus on understanding the specific population being served. For example, mentors who will work with youth in foster care should be educated to work within that system in addition to working with youth in general. Any program working with specialized populations, such as children in foster

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care, on probation, or with disabilities, require much more extensive training. Trainings for programs such as these tend to range from 10 to 25 hours.

◆ How much SUPPORT do participants need from program staff during the course of the mentoring relationship?

To ensure safe and effective matches, programs need to provide *regular* supervision and monitoring.

MENTORS: Mentors need to be able to talk about their mentees with program staff and other mentors in order to receive support and guidance; this can occur during ongoing training sessions, in mentor roundtables, or by phone or face-to-face supervision with program staff. Ideally, program staff should be meeting with mentors at least once a month, especially during the early phase of the relationship.

MENTEES: In well-run programs, supervisors also check in with mentees regularly to ensure their safety and to respond to any questions and concerns that they may be having. This can be done over the phone, face-to-face, or during group activities.

PARENTS: Programs should keep in frequent contact with the mentees' parents; not only should they make themselves available to answer questions or to find resources, but program staff needs to be ready to step in and mediate should conflicts arise between the mentor and the family.

REFERRAL SOURCES: Some programs are able to enhance their support and monitoring processes by exchanging information with therapists, school counselors, teachers, etc.

DOCUMENTATION: It's imperative that programs document the progress of each relationship in detail. Every match should have a file of its own, and files should be kept under lock and key. The documentation process is accomplished in various ways, including observing and/or writing down any contact that was listed above. In addition, staff can gain valuable information by utilizing mentor/mentee logs, and by having all participants (mentors, mentees, parents and referral sources) turn in "satisfaction surveys" at various intervals during the program.

NOTE: Don't forget that all participants need to know what to do and who to call during crisis situations. These procedures should be covered during the initial trainings.

◆ What is the minimum TIME COMMITMENT for mentors in terms of hours per month and length of the match?

As a general rule, the more time a mentor can spend with his mentee, the better it is for the young person. But, as most mentors are extremely busy with their jobs and families, the needs of the mentee have to be balanced against the availability of the mentor. Most programs ask mentors to spend one to two hours per week with their mentees and this is a sufficient amount of time for the relationship to develop. It usually much less effective if the match meets, say, once a month.

Length of mentor commitment can vary greatly. Some programs with high-risk populations (such as minors who have had court contact) require only a six-month commitment, as they know the relationship may be a relatively intense experience for the mentor. While most school-based programs have a mentoring cycle of anywhere from 7 to 9 months, many other programs ask their mentors for a 12-month commitment. No matter the length of the mentoring relationship, most programs encourage the match to continue on beyond the minimum time frame. If the relationship continues on beyond the initial cycle without being supervised by the program, for safety and liability reasons staff should develop an official process for "signing off" on the match.

◆ Are mentors ever PAID?

A few programs offer stipends or other forms of compensation for their mentors. They may do this to facilitate the recruitment of quality mentors, or because they recognize that community members are sacrificing valuable time to be with their mentees. However, there is still a distinction between a mentor and, say, a paid case manager or counselor. Regardless of stipends and other compensation, mentors generally do not make their living via mentoring; therefore, mentoring is considered a volunteer-driven intervention for youth.

◆ What RESOURCES are available to assist in the process of creating a mentoring program?

EMT Group is funded by the California Department of Alcohol and Drug Programs to provide technical assistance for new and existing mentoring programs in the state of California. Programs and individuals interested in receiving no-cost technical assistance in mentoring program development may contact: The EMT Group, 391 South Lexington Drive, Suite 110, Folsom, CA 95630 (916) 983-9506 www.emt.org