
Youth and Families with Promise: A Multi-Component Youth Development Program

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Abstract: Integrating mentoring into existing youth programs has been suggested as a promising approach to youth development. This article discusses a theoretical rationale underlying the integration of one-on-one mentoring into established youth development programs. From an ecological perspective, the addition of mentoring into traditional programs should theoretically enhance the youth development experience. Mentoring, in addition to programs like 4-H, enriches the context in which developing youth are supported and encouraged by non-parental adults to develop competencies, to take on leadership responsibilities, and to integrate into positive peer groups (i.e., 4-H clubs). A multi-component program that involves at-risk youth in both mentoring and 4-H activities is highlighted. Results from at-risk youth and their parents indicate that Utah's *4-H/ Mentoring: Youth and Families with Promise* program strengthens the protective factors of academic achievement, social competence, and family bonds.

Introduction

The integration of mentoring with existing youth programs has been suggested as a promising approach to youth development (Kuperminc, et al., 2005). This approach is consistent with conclusions drawn from reviews of youth development programs regarding programmatic characteristics that lead to positive outcomes. Characteristics of effective programs typically include caring adolescent-adult relationships, designs that are long-term, and approaches that incorporate multiple aspects of the youth development framework (e.g., Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak, & Hawkins, 1998; National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 2002).

The youth development framework, as described by Roth, Brooks-Gunn, Murray and Foster (1998), includes:

- (a) program elements that present youth with new roles and responsibilities
- (b) supports for youth
- (c) focus on enhancing internal assets and competencies.

4-H is an example of a well-established youth development program that follows this youth development framework. Through 4-H, youth are afforded opportunities to take on leadership roles and develop competencies via a "*learn by doing*" approach that occurs under the supervision of supportive adult leaders (National 4-H Headquarters, 2005).

Formal one-on-one mentoring with adults, however, is not currently a widely used component of most 4-H programs. This article provides a theoretical rationale for the integration of youth mentoring into structured youth programs like 4-H and highlights a multi-component program in Utah that is currently targeting at-risk youth.

Utah's 4-H/Mentoring: Youth and Families with Promise

The 4-H/Mentoring: Youth and Families with Promise (YFP) program was created by Utah State University Extension to enhance "developmental assets" (Search Institute, 2004) in at-risk youth, ages 10-14, and their families. Specifically, the program seeks to improve academic performance, enhance social competencies, and strengthen family bonds.

To achieve these goals, YFP utilizes a three-pronged approach to youth development that includes: Mentoring, 4-H, and Family Night Out activities. This multi-component approach to youth development is guided by Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory which is distinguished by its focus on:

- (a) developing individuals that influence, and are influenced, by the environment,
- (b) attention to the multiple contexts and interrelationships in which the developing individuals interacts (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998).

In the case of YFP participants, the contexts of interest include the individual, family, school, and community (e.g., peer relationships).

The importance of youth interacting with and being influenced by supportive adults is highlighted in Bronfenbrenner's Hypothesis 46:

"The development of the child is enhanced through her increased involvement, from childhood on, in responsible, task-oriented activities outside the home that bring her into contact with adults other than her parents" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 282).

Consistent with the youth development framework (Roth, et al., 1998), Bronfenbrenner clearly focuses on roles, relationships, and activities as key elements in the developmental process. He also affirms the importance of non-parental adult relationships – an assertion that has support from the empirical literature (i.e., Scales & Gibbons, 1996; Werner, 1993). Consequently, the multi-component approach to YFP was designed to provide youth with opportunities to accept new roles (e.g., leadership roles in 4-H clubs), build new relationships (e.g., with mentors and fellow 4-H club members), and experience new activities that will lead to new competencies (e.g., arts, agriculture, technology, etc); all of which occur under the supervision of supportive and caring non-parental adults.

Each component of the YFP program targets at least one of the program objectives while simultaneously reinforcing the efforts of the other programmatic components (i.e., mentors encourage and facilitate participation in 4-H activities). The three components of the YFP program are summarized in more detail below:

Mentoring

School administrators, officers of the Juvenile Court, or parents may refer youth to the YFP program. Each youth is matched with a volunteer mentor recruited through local universities, the family's religious congregation, or community volunteer organizations. Mentors meet weekly with their mentees for 1-2 hours. During their time together, mentors work directly with youth to build academic and social skills. Additionally, mentors and mentees engage in a variety of academic, athletic, cultural, and recreational activities together. Young adult mentors receive monthly training and are given a curriculum of activities that focus on building the developmental assets outlined in the Search Institute's Developmental Asset model (Benson, 1997; Benson, Galbraith, & Espeland, 1998; Search Institute, 2004). The mentor may adapt the activities to fit the interests, talents, and skills of their assigned youth. The assets include: school engagement, planning and decision making, interpersonal competence, resistance skills, and peaceful conflict resolution.

4-H

Youth in the YFP program also participate in local 4-H clubs. Clubs meet at least 10-12 times a year, although some projects require that youth meet more often. The clubs typically have 6-10 youth per adult. Youth in the clubs elect their own officers, plan their own programs, and participate in a variety of activities. Through these interactions, YFP participants develop friendships with peers their own age and a sense of belonging. Through activities that "foster innovation and shared learning" 4-H programs also provide an opportunity for "youth and adults to learn, grow, and work *together* as catalysts for positive change" (National 4-H Council, 2005, emphasis added). Although the types of 4-H projects may vary (i.e., citizenship, expressive arts, plants or animals, etc.), all projects include "real life experiences that help 4-H members learn the subject matter, gain new knowledge and skills, practice decision-making skills, and develop self-confidence" (Utah 4-H, 2005). As a result of 4-H involvement, it is anticipated that YFP participants will not only form positive social attachments but also gain the confidence and skills needed to contribute to their communities in meaningful ways.

Family Night Out

The design of the YFP program is based on a theoretical foundation that acknowledges the integral role that parents and caregivers have in supporting and sustaining improvements in developmental assets. To reinforce the importance of parental involvement, program youth, their parents/caregivers, and mentors participate in monthly "Family Night Out" (FNO) group activities (Koestler & Betz, 2000).

Family Night Out activities are organized by county YFP site coordinators and are provided so the entire family can participate together in activities that are fun and educational. They are based on principles of experiential education and each activity is followed by a short "debriefing" of the experience. During a FNO, site coordinators and mentors facilitate group activities built around themes such as: building trust, kindness, positive communication, and working together. The objective of the FNO component is to strengthen family bonds, improve parent-youth communication, and enhance cooperation and communication among program participants.

4-H/Mentoring: Youth and Families with Promise Outcomes

During the 2003-2004 and 2004-2005 academic years, 686 and 672 youth and their families respectively participated in YFP. During both academic years, youth were evaluated using a retrospective-pretest method (Klatt & Taylor-Powell, 2005a; Rockwell & Kohn, 1989), with 311 youth and 274 parents completing surveys for the 2003-2004 academic year and 193 youth and 167 parents completing surveys for the 2004-2005 academic year. The relatively low response rate was due, in part, to the fact that not all counties administered the evaluation questionnaires.

Questionnaires included youth's ratings of their own levels of academic achievement, social competency, and family bonds before and after participation in the program (Klatt & Taylor-Powell, 2005b). Parents were also asked to rate their youth on the same variables. Evaluation questions were based on the Search Institute's Developmental Assets Model and their indicators of academic achievement and social competence (Benson, 1997; Search Institute, 2004). Items on family bonding were taken from the Family Profile II (Lee, et al., 1997).

Results for both academic years indicated that youth who participated in YFP experienced significant improvements in all targeted areas (see Table 1). In 2003-2004 and 2004-2005, paired samples t-tests revealed significant improvements in both youth and parent perceptions of youth's academic achievement, social competency, and family bonds ($p < .001$).

Table 1

Paired samples *t*-test results of youth and/or parents' perceptions of youth academic achievement, social competency, and family bonds for the 2004 and 2005 school years

	Retrospective Pretest mean score (<i>SD</i>)	Posttest mean score (<i>SD</i>)	Mean change (<i>SD</i>)	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Academic Achievement					
2004 Youth Report <i>N</i> =304	21.38 (4.78)	23.70 (4.31)	2.32 (3.94)	10.28	.001*
2005 Youth Report <i>N</i> =181	21.67 (5.20)	24.26 (4.16)	2.59 (3.72)	9.36	.001*
2004 Parent Report <i>N</i> =272	19.66 (5.27)	22.74 (4.84)	3.08 (3.91)	12.99	.001*
2005 Parent Report <i>N</i> =160	20.59 (5.38)	23.17 (5.00)	2.58 (3.30)	9.86	.001*
Social Competency					
2004 Youth Report <i>N</i> =299	28.93 (6.24)	31.63 (5.99)	2.70 (4.27)	10.92	.001*
2005 Youth Report <i>N</i> =184	29.30 (6.31)	32.23 (5.60)	2.93 (4.42)	9.00	.001*
2004 Parent Report <i>N</i> =274	25.53 (6.26)	29.27 (6.05)	3.74 (4.43)	13.97	.001*
2005 Parent Report <i>N</i> =159	27.19 (5.84)	30.31 (5.65)	3.12 (4.21)	9.35	.001*
Family Bonds					
2004 Youth Report <i>N</i> =302	41.43 (8.52)	43.77 (8.28)	2.34 (4.74)	8.59	.001*
2005 Youth Report <i>N</i> =172	42.08 (9.15)	44.88 (7.72)	2.80 (4.49)	8.20	.001*
2004 Parent Report <i>N</i> =274	41.52 (7.59)	45.20 (6.28)	3.68 (5.50)	11.08	.001*
2005 Parent Report <i>N</i> =157	42.50 (7.32)	45.32 (6.88)	2.83 (5.23)	6.77	.001*

Discussion and Implications for Youth Development Programming

With the intention of addressing a broader range of outcomes, an increasing number of youth development programs are incorporating mentoring into their existing services (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003). Kuperminc, et al., (2005) report that multi-component youth development programs, in which mentoring is the *primary* component, do result in positive effects on prevention/promotion outcomes. However, other reviews call into question the added effect of multiple components. For example, Dubois, Halloway, Valentine, and Cooper (2002), found few differences in outcomes when comparing multi-component and stand-alone mentoring programs. Although differences in the literature may be explainable (e.g. the Kuperminc, et al. study was more inclusive) the need for additional research is clearly implicated by both the lack of consensus and the increasing popularity of multi-component youth development programs.

The present study supports the effectiveness of multi-component youth development programs by documenting significant increases, across all measured outcomes, in a sample of at-risk youth. Significant improvements ($p < .001$) in academic performance, social competence, and family bonds were reported by both youth and their parents. These results are consistent with Bronfenbrenner's hypotheses (1979) about characteristics of mesosystems (i.e., the system encompassing the multiple environments/settings in which a person develops) that lead to positive development. That is, development is enhanced when

- (a) youth participate in multiple settings with different but compatible role demands,
- (b) at least some of the dyads operate across settings,
- (c) communication occurs between settings (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

The design of YFP provides youth with new roles, relationships, and responsibilities that are encouraged and reinforced across all three programmatic components. Furthermore, the mentor-mentee relationship operates as the "transcontextual dyad" with the mentor encouraging and supporting involvement in mentoring experiences, 4-H projects, and Family Night Out activities. Finally, communication and integration across settings increases the potential for greater youth retention in at least one component of the program. For example, if the mentor moves away, the youth will not feel s/he has been abandoned if the youth has been integrated into a 4-H club.

While this article highlights the design and outcomes of one multi-component program, it does not address the differential effects of each component nor the mechanism by which the components interrelate to produce the demonstrated outcomes. It should be noted that there is a sparse amount of scholarly literature discussing the role of mentoring in existing youth development programs (see Kuperminc, et al., 2005 for one hypothesized model). Although this article provides a theoretical rationale for multi-component programs, additional research is needed to identify the mechanisms through which mentoring produces differential, mediated, or moderated programmatic effects. For example, questions about the degree of integration, family support and involvement, the amount of communication between settings, and compatibility of roles and responsibilities across settings would contribute to the field's understanding of "why" and "under which circumstances" multi-component programs are most effective.

Conclusion

Combining youth mentoring with programs like 4-H affords youth with additional opportunities to build new skills, provides ongoing associations with responsible and caring adults, transitions

youth into roles of leadership, and integrates youth into positive peer groups (e.g., 4-H clubs). Furthermore, for youth development programs with established funding streams and/or fixed budgets, the use of *volunteers* as mentors allows for the expansion of services at little additional cost. Results indicate that Utah's 4-H/Mentoring: Youth and Families with Promise program is a promising way to reach at-risk youth and to strengthen the protective factors of academic achievement, social competence, and family bonds.

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