

## **Implementing a School-Based Mentoring Program**

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### **ABSTRACT**

**The effect of a mentoring program on the social development of at-risk students was investigated. The program targeted the attributes of responsibility, citizenship, fairness, trustworthiness, respect, and caring using the model developed by the *Character Counts* program of the Josephson Institute of Ethics. Data were collected from 38 at-risk third grade students from an inner city school. Mentors volunteered to complete a minimum of 12 visits with their students over a six month period and kept journals. Comparison of the pretest and post-test scores on the School Social Behavior Scales indicated that students appeared to improve in interpersonal skills, in hostility-irritability, and in antisocial-aggressiveness.**

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It has long been accepted that for appropriate development, a child must feel cared for and loved. These feelings may be the outgrowth of relationships that develop in different areas of life – in both the home and the school (Broussard, Mosley-Howard, & Roychoudhury, 2006). Noddings (1998) states that “care” in the realm of education is necessary. Many school personnel find that the bulk of their time is spent on accountability measures. Their efforts toward compliance to state and federal mandates

can be all-consuming, leaving little time to establish a caring environment for their students. Many youngsters are neglected or exposed to trauma or negative influences in their homes and/or community. Combined with emotional neglect that can occur at home, the reality is that students may attend school feeling disconnected from any type of caring relationship.

At-risk factors include single parent homes, poverty, or homes where there are other conditions that make the student “at risk” for failure. If students are to overcome the negative forces in their environment, they must maintain a positive outlook. Matching a youth with a caring adult who is able to serve as an appropriate role model offers a positive influence and support that may be lacking in a child’s life (Herrera, 2004; Kenny, Gallagher, Alvarez-Salvat, & Silsby, 2002;).

A positive role model is often a major factor in the development of a child’s resilience. Research has shown that resilience, the ability to readily recover from negative situations, is an important attribute for at-risk students to possess (Broussard, et al., 2006). A good role model is able to demonstrate to the student positive alternatives for response to situations in his/her environment. For students who do not have a supportive role model at home, mentoring provides a necessary element to assist the student in developing a positive attitude and remaining focused on successful behavior.

The development of a mentoring program may be considered a daunting task. Elements needed include not just students and mentors, but a place to mentor, a scheduled time for the mentoring to occur, and appropriate topics/materials to be covered. These items are more easily attained if a school-based mentoring program is implemented with the support of the staff. Besides having direct access to students, often it is easier to secure volunteers for work in a school setting (Herrera, 2004). Additionally, the possibility of businesses allowing release time for employees to serve as mentors during the school day serves as an added incentive for those volunteers (National Mentoring Center Bulletin, 2000). A supportive school will identify students in need of mentoring services and will arrange for those meetings to take place. The use of a standard curriculum as the basis for the mentoring must be uncomplicated so that it can be delivered by volunteers after appropriate training.

The goal of this study was to implement a program which would be simple to duplicate yet have a positive impact on the behavior of the students involved. A program was selected that required a minimal budget and had a straightforward delivery. The focus of the lessons was to assist the student with the development of decision-making skills and the shaping of a good self-concept. For this purpose, the *Character Counts* (Nish, Katzberd, & McNeill, 2002) program was adapted. *Character Counts* is widely used by the 4-H Clubs and other organizations to teach six attributes: responsibility, citizenship, fairness, trustworthiness, respect, and caring. Permission was granted from the Josephson Institute of Ethics to adapt lessons from their program to fit the needs of this study.

The pool of mentors was obtained from the local university, church groups, and local businesses. Following an orientation and training, mentors were given the times and dates for scheduled visits. The highly structured visits were held on site at the time and place designated by the school. Visits were monitored and mentors were asked to complete journal entries following each visit.

The questions addressed by this study were: Can this mentoring program positively affect the social development of at-risk students? Can the mentoring program provide content that can be easily delivered by trained volunteers? The researchers believed there would be a positive finding for both of these questions.

## Method

### Participants

The selected school was located in a southern state in a metropolitan region with approximately 250,000 residents. The third grade was selected by the principal because of the discipline problems created by these students. Originally, there were 20 females and 24 males. All were African American. The students were paired with 44 mentors who volunteered from the community. Most of the volunteers were from a local university. They consisted of graduate and undergraduate students, university staff, and a department chair. Six mentors were from the staff of a local cardiologist who was a longtime supporter of public education. The majority of the mentors were female. Mentors were a mix of Caucasians and African Americans. The two classroom teachers of the third graders were also involved.

### Materials

The dependent variable in this study was change in behavior reported by the teacher. *The School Social Behavior Scales (SSBS)* was used as a measure (Merrell, 1993). The SSBS is a 65 item instrument consisting of two behavioral scales. Scale A measures social competence and consists of 32 questions. It consists of three factors: interpersonal skills, self-management skills, and academic skills. Antisocial behavior is measured by 33 items in Scale B. It also is divided into three factors: hostile-irritable, anti-social-aggressive, and demanding-disruptive. Items addressed such behaviors as physical aggression, teasing, and being disrespectful. Internal consistency reliability of the SSBS ranged from .96 to .98. Content validity ranged from .62 to .82 for Scale A, while Scale B ranged from .58 to .86 (Merrell, 1993).

The mentors followed a curriculum derived from *Character Counts* (Nish, Katzberd & McNeill, 2002). Lessons were scripted and served as a vehicle for discussion pertaining to positive decision making skills. Each lesson targeted a specific attribute of good character. Included in the session was practice to develop and hone decision-making skills as the mentor provided scenarios of real-life situations that called for resolutions

Students completed an *About Me* survey, a short instrument through which students specified personal preferences and provided insight about how they felt about school (i.e., favorite subject, hardest subject, etc.). A log was housed in the school office to record visits. Mentors were asked to complete journal entries after each visit.

## Procedure

At the onset of the study, the School Social Behavior Scales (Merrell, 1993) was completed by the classroom teacher. The instrument was also completed at the conclusion of the study, so pre- and posttest results were obtained. Students completed an *About Me* survey at the beginning of the study prior to their first visit with their mentor.

Training was conducted for all mentors on use of the curriculum and procedural directions. At this time, each mentor was provided a notebook with the lessons, the survey completed by their student, and a journal for reflection following each session. Mentors read through the first lesson and possible scenarios were presented. Group discussions followed which indicated that all mentors had a complete understanding of the material that they were to present.

Mentors were assigned a student. No effort was made to match students with mentors based on gender or race as research indicates that matching based on these criteria does not make a difference in the outcome (Jekielek et al., 2002).

A contract was signed by mentors that established guidelines to be followed to ensure systematic procedures for the study. Mentors signed in at the school for each visit and the total number of visits was monitored. Safeguards were in place to allow a mentor to make-up missed lessons due to student absenteeism or inability of the mentor to meet on scheduled dates.

Mentors met with their assigned student for 30 minutes, one-on-one, for a total of 12 visits over a six month period (from November to April). Responses from the *About Me* survey allowed the mentors to have knowledge of their student and often provided information to stimulate discussions. The visits were conducted at the school during predetermined times and dates established by the school. The school provided the classrooms for the mentoring to take place and kept a log in the office for signing in and out.

## Results

Final analysis showed valid data for 38 students. Absenteeism and/or mobility accounted for the six students dropped from the study. Data from both pre and posttest scores on the SSBS were analyzed using a correlated t-test on each of the six behavioral characteristics.

Results revealed statistically significant evidence for the students' improvement in three out of six behavioral characteristics. Comparisons of the pretest and posttest scores indicated that students appeared to improve in interpersonal skills,  $t(df=37) = -2.472$ ,  $p=.018$ , in hostility-irritability,  $t(df=37) = -2.151$ ,  $p=.038$ , and in antisocial-aggressiveness,  $t(df=37) = -3.072$ ,  $p=.004$ . Compared with the situation before the program ( $M=42.37$ ,  $SD=12.57$ ), the students have shown improvement in interpersonal skills after the program ( $M=45.18$ ,  $SD=11.04$ ). Similar findings were found when the students were compared in hostility-irritability before ( $M=30.47$ ,  $SD=15.46$ ) and after the mentoring ( $M=34.08$ ,  $SD=14.89$ ). The most statistically significant results were found in

antisocial-aggressiveness before ( $M=19.16$ ,  $SD=8.26$ ) and after the mentoring program ( $M=22.47$ ,  $SD=9.09$ ).

Results from interviews with mentors and from analyses of journal entries indicated that the mentors enjoyed their roles and felt confident with their presentation of the curriculum. The researcher who supervised the study found fidelity of implementation of the program with the mentors adhering to the protocol.

#### Discussion

Mentoring studies with children and adolescents have shown positive results in behavior and decision making skills (Broussard et. al, 2006). Because so many at-risk children do not always have appropriate role models in their environment, mentoring can be a major factor in their development. Involvement with a role model has been found to assist the child with resilience when facing negative situations. Decision-making skills are developed and appear to be long lasting (Kenny et. al, 2002).

As a result of this study, students were found to have made significant improvements in interpersonal skills. Students displayed more sensitivity toward their peers and more effectively participated in group discussions and activities. Student interactions with their teachers were also more appropriate. They were less hostile and irritable. Students were less likely to blame others for their problems. Also found were positive results in antisocial and aggressive behavior displayed by students. Students were not as physically or verbally aggressive at the end of the year as they were at the beginning of the program.

The SSBS showed no statistically significant growth in academic skills, self-management skills, or demanding-disruptive behavior. The authors did not anticipate a growth in academic or self-management skills, as these were not targeted. Demanding-disruptive scores showed an improvement, though not statistically significant. It should be noted that the areas of growth as demonstrated by the SSBS are aligned with the focus of the curriculum.

Journals provided examples of the in-depth dialog between mentors and students giving evidence of progress in developing decision-making skills and further documentation of program fidelity. Students demonstrated their ability to comprehend, apply, synthesize, and evaluate ideas presented. Students were able to practice and hone decision-making skills as the mentor provided scenarios of real-life situations that called for resolutions. For example, one journal entry stated, "at first he had a hard time with thinking of compliments, but with some help, he thought of some. When I asked him to think of a compliment someone could give him, he said nothing. With some encouragement, he thought of some." The entries also showed that students grew from the lessons. One journal read, "We talked about heroes today. He said his hero was his cousin who 'beats people up.' We discussed why this was not good." The following week the journal entry read, "We talked about heroes again. He said that his mother is his hero and he told me why."

The lessons provided the flexibility that mentors needed to meet the needs of the different students. Purposely designed with an abundance of activities, the mentors were trained to try a variety of approaches to get the point across. One mentor wrote of her first meeting, "He seemed very shy at first. He was a little reluctant to answer the questions I

asked him. He is interested in drawing . . . I let him do the activity where he gets to draw.”

### Conclusion

In conclusion, findings from this study indicate that having a guide to follow allowed the mentors the foundation needed to begin conversations about character and gave the mentors ideas to expand their discussions based on individual needs. Comments in journals evidenced that relationships were formed between the mentors and the students.

There were several limitations to the study. The study was conducted with a small number of African American third grade students in a low-income urban area. A larger group of participants with students of other ages and races would make the research more generalizable. Another implication would be to examine the lasting effects of the mentoring relationship on the students. Teachers of the students in subsequent years should be requested to provide information regarding current behavior.

This study adds to existing literature by providing an example of positive results from a program which required very little cost to implement and did not overburden the school with additional responsibilities. In short, this program can be replicated without much difficulty with the assistance of motivated mentors.

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