Resilience Research for Prevention Programs

Big Brothers/Big Sisters Mentoring:
The Power of Developmental Relationships

strength beauty
humility service
© National Resilience Resource Center

By:
Bonnie Benard and
Kathy Marshall
National Resilience
Resource Center
University of Minnesota
College of Continuing Education

O ne critical finding of Emmy Werner s classic resilience research (1992) is the power of caring relationships to protect healthy development despite environmental risk (Benard, 1991). What has remained an unanswered question, however, is whether intentionally created caring relationships between adult mentors and youths can provide this protective effect. The prevention field now has a research-based answer, a clear Yes!

Public/Private Venture s (P/PV) evaluation of the oldest, most reputable mentoring effort, Big Brothers/Big Sisters of America, offers a benchmark prevention research model for resilience-based mentoring. Our research presents clear and encouraging evidence that *caring relationships* between adults and youth can be created and supported by programs, and can yield a wide range of tangible benefits, the investigators state. Furthermore, The most notable results are the deterrent effect on initiation of drug and alcohol use, and the overall positive effects on academic performance that the mentoring experience produced (Tierney, Grossman, and Resch, 1995, p. iv).

Among all children mentored, the most dramatic results were seen in Little Brothers and Little Sisters whose mentors believed in the innate ability of the youths to solve their own problems. These adults did not attempt to fix the child through simplistic, disempowering tactics.

In its four-part evaluation, P/PV examined program practices and implementation (Furano, Roaf, Styles, and Branch, 1993); volunteer recruitment and screening (Roaf, Tierney, and Hunte, 1994); and the nature of the relationships between volunteers and youths (Morrow and Styles, 1995). The culminating study, *Making a Difference,* explored the impact of mentoring on youth behavior (Tierney et al., 1995).

Center for the Application
of Prevention Technologies

CENTER for SUBSTANCE ABUSE PREVENTION
CENTRAL
CAPT
APPLYING PREVENTION THAT WORKS!

Findings

Using a classical experimental research methodology with random assignment of youth to a waiting list or a mentoring program, P/PV conducted a comparative study of 959 10- to 16-year-olds. In 1992 and 1993, these youths applied to Big Brothers/ Big Sisters programs in eight geographically diverse cities: Phoenix; Wichita; Minneapolis; Rochester, New York; Columbus, Ohio; Philadelphia; Houston; and San Antonio. Half of these youths were randomly assigned to a treatment group for which mentor matches were made and the other half were assigned to waiting lists. After 18 months the two groups were compared.

Participants in a Big Brothers/Big Sisters program were 46 percent less likely to start using illegal drugs and 27 percent less likely to start drinking than those in the control group. For minority Little Brothers and Sisters, the effect was even stronger: They were 70 percent less likely to initiate drug use than similar minority youth. Little Brothers and Sisters were about one-third less likely than youngsters in the control group to hit someone. They skipped half as many days of school as did control-group youth, felt more competent about doing schoolwork, skipped fewer classes and showed modest gains in their grade-point averages with the strongest gains among minority Little Sisters. They also improved their relationships with parents and peers (see Figure 1).

It is important to note most of these youths in both treatment and control groups would be considered "high risk" (see Figure 2). More than half identified their race as minority; 69 percent were between 11 and 13 years old.

Conversely, the Big Brothers and Big Sisters were generally well-educated young professionals. About 60 percent were college graduates; nearly two-thirds had a total annual household income of more than $25,000 (with 40 percent making more than $40,000). Three-fourths of the volunteers were white. **Despite this enormous social distance between the youth and the volunteers, they were able to establish successful relationships across their class and race differences.**

To what does P/PV credit this accomplishment?

To answer this question, researchers looked at P/PV s three earlier studies: the study of mentor-program practices and implementation; volunteer recruitment and screening; and the nature of the relationships between volunteers and youth. The researchers attribute successful outcomes to two overall characteristics: the *developmental one-to-one relationships* and the *program s supportive infrastructure*.

One-to-One Relationships

The mentoring relationships that most successfully fostered youth resilience were of sufficient *intensity,* and supportive in nature.

Lack of intensity (frequency of activities with mentors) is often identified in prevention research as contributing to program failure. In the 400 matches studied here, more than 70 percent of the matches met three times a month for an average of three to four hours per meeting, and 50 percent met once a week. Mentors averaged 144 hours of annual direct contact, excluding telephone interaction.

Morrow and Styles relationship formation study, *Building Relationships With Youth in Program Settings* (1995), in which 82 matches were studied in greater depth for a nine-month period, illuminates the nature of the relationships that were of sufficient intensity and duration to produce positive effects. These investigators found the most successful mentors were able to develop lasting and supportive friendships with the youths by taking time to establish and maintain trust,

Children in our mentoring program are...

➤ 46% less likely to begin illegal drug use (minority boys were 70% less likely than their peers to initiate drug use).

➤ 27% less likely to begin using alcohol.

➤ 52% less likely to skip school.

➤ More confident in schoolwork performance.

➤ Less likely to show violent or antisocial behavior.

➤ Able to get along better with families.

Source: Big Brothers of the National Capital Area, *Program's Impact*, 1996.

listening sympa**t**hetically and nonjudgmentally, encouraging joint decisions about fun activities and negotiating mutually satisfactory activities (pp. 115-116). Later research offers powerful validation of the resiliency perspective with the discovery that sustained relationships were those developmental ones in which the mentor saw himself or herself *as a friend, not as a teacher or preacher* (Tierney et al., 1995, p. 51).

Unlike some other relationships between mentors and youths, the developmental relationships were grounded in the mentor's belief that he or she was there to meet the developmental needs of the youth to provide supports and opportunities the youth did not have. While most developmental volunteers ultimately hoped to help their youth improve in school and be more responsible, they centered their involvement and expectations on developing a reliable, trusting relationship, and expanded the scope of their efforts only as the relationship strengthened (Morrow and Styles, 1995, p. ii).

These volunteers placed top priority on making the relationships enjoyable and fun for both partners. Furthermore, they were there for the Little Brother or Sister, listened nonjudgmentally, looked for the youths interests and strengths, and incorporated the youths into the decision-making process (gave them voice and choice) of their activities. From a resilience perspective, adult mentors provided the three protective factors: a *caring relationship, positive expectations and respect*, and *ongoing opportunities for participation and contribution.* According to the researchers, adult mentors saw risks existing in the *environment* not in the youths.

Fortunately, two-thirds of the 82 relationships examined were developmental. In contrast, in prescriptive relationships, the adult volunteers believed their primary purpose was to guide the youths toward the values, attitudes, and behaviors *the adult* deemed positive. Adults in these relationships set the goals, the pace and/or the ground rules for the relationship. These volunteers were reluctant to adjust their expectations of the youth or their expectation of how quickly the youth s behavior could change (Morrow and Styles, 1995, p. iii).

FIGURE 1.

How Youth Benefit from Big Brother/Big Sister Mentoring Relative to Similar Non-Program Youth 18 Months after Applying

Outcome	Change
Antisocial Activities	
Initiating drug use	-45.8%
Initiating alcohol use	-27.4%
Number of times hit someone	-31.7%
Academic Outcomes	
Grades	3.0%
Scholastic competence	4.3%
Skipped class	-36.7%
Skipped day of school	-52.2%
Family Relationships	
Improved parental relationship	2.1%
Trust in parent	2.7%
Lying to parent	-36.6%
Peer Relationships	
Emotional support	2.3%

Note: All impacts in this table are statistically significant to at least a 90 percent level of confidence. Adapted from Making a Difference, p. 50.

FIGURE 2.

Profile of Little Brothers and Sisters

90% lived with only one of their parents

83% came from households with annual incomes under °°°°°°°°$25,000

40% received food stamps, cash public assistance, or both

40% came from homes with a history of substance abuse

28% came from families with a record of domestic violence

27% were victims of emotional, physical, or sexual abuse

Source: Making a Difference, pp. 19-23

A majority of these prescriptive volunteers were there to *fix kids* typically, to improve school performance. Thus, most of their shared time was spent in conversation about grades and classroom behavior, not fun activities. For these volunteers, risk was seen as existing within the young person. What seemed to stand out for these prescriptive volunteers was less the deficiencies present in the youth s environment, and more particularly in terms of morals and values those present in the youth themselves deficiencies prescriptive volunteers frequently sought to rectify (Morrow and Styles, 1995, p. 40).

Not surprisingly, adults and youths in prescriptive matches found the relationship frustrating and nonsupportive. Of these relationships, only 29 percent met consistently (compared with 93 percent of the developmental), and at the 18-month follow-up, only 32 percent were ongoing (compared with 91 percent of the developmental) (Morrow and Styles, 1995, p. 18).

A Prescriptive Relationship

Youth: When I went out with my Big Brother he...said, Okay, let s go get the library card and let s go to the library and check out a book. But I stayed at the library all day and he kept coming back, and telling me I didn t have the right information. So I studied there until closing time in the library. I was sitting there doing a report on toads and frogs, and when he came back, I had my report done, but I didn t have a rough draft. So like I wrote word for word out of the book; he said that s cheatin . I just sat there and dropped in tears.

Interviewer: What upset you about that?

Youth: I didn t wanna stay there, I felt like I was supposed to write the report in my own words. Like some of it I got out of the book and some of it came out of my own head...I had to do it over... And when he picked me up from the library, it was raining.

(Abridged from *Building Relationships With Youth in Program Settings,* p. 63)

A Developmental Relationship

Mentor: [When he told me about a bad grade] I kind of focused on his other grades first, he said that he had done a good job with the other ones. And then I asked him if he wanted to do better in it, and then I kind of asked him how he could do better. And it was a pretty simple thing because he just didn t do a couple reports. So we decided that, you know, the next ones he got I would help him with them if he wanted. And we did that twice. You know, *so it s like what can we do together to do this*... When I came home with even a B or even an A-, sometimes it would be well why did you get a minus here. It wasn t like, oh you did great. So I was sensitive to that.

(From *Building Relationships With Youth in Program Settings*, p. 59).

Supportive Program Infrastructure

From the studies of Big Brothers/Big Sisters recruitment and screening, and program practices, as well as earlier P/PV research on mentoring, the researchers conclude that there are some program irreducibles that are prerequisites for an effective mentoring program (see Figure 3).

Intensive supervision and support of mentors by paid staff was especially critical to successful outcomes. Supervision is a hallmark of the Big Brothers/Big Sisters approach to mentoring...[and] the program practice most associated with positive match outcomes (Furano et al., 1993, p. 61). Those sites following the Big Brothers/Big Sisters procedures for regular supervision had matches that met at the highest rates; those agencies that reduced this function had problems.

Another enormous but often-unacknowledged benefit of using paid staff is stability and continuity. Case managers ensure that youth are not left

on their own if their mentor pulls out. In fact, several investigators (Ferguson, 1990; Freedman, 1993; Higgins, Furano, Toso, and Branch, 1991) found that even in programs with volunteer mentors, case managers and youth workers play and important and stable role with youth.

<div style="border: 2px solid goldenrod; padding: 1em;">

FIGURE 3.

Mentoring Program Irreducibles

The Big Brothers/Big Sisters mentoring studies clearly outline the essentials of a successful program.

It is not mentoring but relationships that foster resilience, that make the difference.

These are the musts no administrator should overlook:

➤ Thorough *volunteer screening* that weeds out adults who are unlikely to keep their time commitment or might pose a safety risk to the youth.

 ➤ *Mentor training* that includes communication and limit-setting skills, tips on relationship-building and recommendations on the best way to interact with a young person.

➤ *Matching procedures* that take into account the preferences of the youth, the youth s family and the volunteer, and that use a professional case manager to analyze which volunteer would work best with which youth.

➤ *Intensive supervision and support of each match by a case manager* who has frequent contact with the parent/guardian, volunteer and youth, and provides assistance when requested or as difficulties arise.

 Adapted from   *Making a Difference,* p. 52

</div>

Lessons Learned

More than anything, the Big Brothers/Big Sisters mentoring program evaluation establishes the importance of teaching mentors to demonstrate their belief in the innate resilience, capacity, and health of all youth. The research also highlights the critical role sound program management plays. Program philosophy, fit between mentor and youth, and intensity of contacts all matter tremendously. In summary, the P/PV evaluation points in these directions:

The resilience approach to youth development is key to prevention and education efforts. Focusing on fostering resilience rather than on reducing high-risk behaviors brings results.

Perhaps the finding with the greatest implication for prevention and education is the power of a *non*-problem-focused intervention to produce more positive and greater results than the problem-focused interventions that previously dominated the prevention field. As this research shows, Participation in a Big Brothers/Big Sisters program reduced illegal drug and alcohol use, began to improve academic performance, behavior and attitudes, and improved peer and family relationships. *Yet the Big Brothers/Big Sisters approach does not target those aspects of life, nor directly address them.* It simply provides a caring, adult friend (Tierney et al., 1995, p. 1).

In fact, as *Making a Difference* so eloquently demonstrates, an exclusive focus on risk reduction and academic outcomes may push adults into trying to fix and control youth. In Big Brothers/Big Sisters programs, a prescriptive viewpoint resulted in another disappointment, another failed relationship for youngsters assigned to such mentors. It is this societal thinking that has led to, for instance, zero-tolerance policies that expel youths from school and push students onto the streets. At its extreme, a prescriptive approach to social policies can lead to the incarceration of more and more young people who could be successfully reached with a more hopeful resilience approach.

It's HOW we do what we do that counts more than what program we do. Mentoring works IF the mentors are developmental in approach. Mentoring does not work if the mentors are prescriptive.

Successful work with youths requires that adults see the innate resilience and health of young people (Marshall, 1998). Other studies have reached similar conclusions (Resnick et al., 1997; Hattie et al., 1997). Tierney recommends more research to explore the impact of both volunteer and youth characteristics (p. 53). Health and resilience unfold in environments of caring relationships, high-expectation messages, and opportunities for participation and contribution. These environments meet basic human needs for love and belonging, respect, identity, mastery, power, and meaning (Benard, 1991).

Sound program management is critical. Program procedures and policies must be well attended to.

A Big Brothers/Big Sisters match is carefully administered and supported by rigorous standards and trained personnel. Big Brothers/Big Sisters staff members strive for matches that are not only safe and suited to the child s needs but also harmonious and built to last. They take care in selecting volunteers, orienting them, and matching them with children. But Big Brothers/Big Sisters workers are more than just matchmakers. They provide ongoing support, consultation, and supervision to the youth and the youth s family, and often the mentor receives training support that helps all parties get through rough spots in the relationship. P/PV estimates an effort like this costs $1,000 for each mentored youth (Tierney et al., p. 52).

The health of the helper must be a focus of prevention and education efforts. The mental health and well-being of the mentor are critical for program success.

The Big Brothers/Big Sisters evaluation found that serving the needs of mentors is as important as serving the needs of youth. According to Ferguson s 1990 study, Most programs expect to use volunteer mentors to supplement the love and attention that their paid staffs provide to

children, but those that have tried have experienced only limited success at finding mentors and keeping them active. *They have discovered that fulfilling mentors needs is as important for sustaining their involvement as fulfilling youths needs is to sustaining theirs* (p. 15).

This finding directly parallels what has been discovered by educational researchers like McLaughlin (1990): Meeting the needs of *teachers* is a fundamental prerequisite to engaging students. Caregivers must connect to their own health in order to be developmental in their approach with youth nonjudgmental, respectful, empathic, hopeful, and reciprocal. Mentors, adult helpers, cannot give what they do not have (Mills, 1993).

Planning for "mentor-rich" environments must be a major focus of prevention, education, and youth services.

Researcher Marc Freedman (1993) explains, Creating mentor-rich settings schools, social programs, youth organizations is one way of moving beyond the chimera of *supermentoring*, in which a single charismatic adult is called on to be a dramatic influence, providing all the young person s needs in one relationship. In reality, young people need more than one relationship to develop into healthy adults (p. 111). He continues, Our aspiration should be to create planned environments conducive to the kind of informal interaction that leads to mentoring. Indeed, such an approach is rooted in the historic strength and traditional practice of extended and fictive kin structures in many low-income communities particularly African-American neighborhoods (p. ˚112).

Shay Bilchik from the U.S. Department of Justice makes a similar point in considering JUMP. This mentoring program, run by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP), is based on Big Brothers/Big Sisters and was evaluated by P/PV. In 1997 Bilchik said, OJJDP s two-year experience with JUMP suggests that strengthening the role of mentoring as a component of youth programming may pay handsome dividends in improved school performance and reduced antisocial behavior, including alcohol

and other drug abuse. Furthermore, reports the OJJDP (Grossman and Garry, 1997),

  For the past 30 years, society s attention and resources were directed predominately at teenagers problems. The Big Brothers/Big Sisters results suggest society s focus has been too narrow P/PV s evaluation suggests [such mentoring] is likely to be more effective in producing responsible young adults than the traditional approach to youth policy, which has attempted to prevent specific problems or to correct problems that have already arisen. These traditional elements will still be needed, but they should complement and support the basic developmental needs addressed by mentoring programs.

Creating these mentor-rich environments, then, means expanding the world of developmental adult contacts for all young people. This includes supporting parents through family-centered social policies that promote flexible work policies, parental leave, time off to work in schools, decent wages, family health-care benefits, and quality childcare. Programs enhancing parental well being and schedules conducive to parent participation are important. Promoting mentor-rich environments in schools can include reducing the teacher-student ratios so teachers have some one-to-one time, bringing in parent and community volunteers, using cooperative learning groups, offering support groups and using peer helpers.

The Big Brothers/Big Sisters study, along with years of research on resilience and positive youth development, show clearly the path for youth policy and educational reform. (See other publications in this series.) Unless we focus on the mediating variables of relationships, beliefs, and opportunities for participation, we will *not* achieve the desired outcomes of reduced alcohol and other drug abuse, school success, and compassionate and responsible citizens. This is *the* key message of resiliency research and the Big Brothers/Big Sisters evaluation; this is the message for prevention practitioners, educators, youth and education policymakers, *and* our adult society.

NATIONAL RESILIENCE RESOURCE CENTER

The National Resilience Resource Center (NRRC) is located at the University of Minnesota. Executive Director Kathy Marshall and associate for program development Bonnie Benard guide long-term systems change initiatives in selected school and community sites. Resilience research- based systems change training and technical assistance services are available on a fee-for-service basis. For service related requests write National Resilience Resource Center, University of Minnesota, College of Continuing Education, 202A Wesbrook Hall, 77 Pleasant Street SE, Minneapolis, MN 55455 or contact **NRRC@cce. umn.edu**. The NRRC logo was created by John B. No Runner.

To enhance the application of prevention technologies, NRRC and the Central Center for the Application of Prevention Technologies have collaborated in disseminating this information.

References

Benard, B. (1991). *Fostering Resiliency in Kids: Protective Factors in the Family, School, and Community.* Portland, OR: Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, August.

Ferguson, R. (1990). *The Case for Community-Based Programs that Inform and Motivate Black Male Youth.* Washington, DC: The Urban Institute, 1990.

Freedman, Marc (1993). *The Kindness of Strangers: Adult Mentors, Urban Youth, and the New Voluntarism.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Furano, K.; Roaf, P.; Styles, M.; and Branch, A. (1993, Winter). Big Brothers/Big Sisters: A Study of Program Practices. Philadelphia: Public/Private Ventures.

Grossman, J. and Garry, J. (1997, April). Mentoring a proven delinquency prevention strategy. *OJJDP Bulletin*, pp. 1,12-13.

Hattie, J.; Marsh, H.; Neill, J.; and Richards, G. (1997). Adventure education and Outward Bound: Out-of-class experiences that make a lasting difference. *Review of Educational Research, 67,* 43-87.

Higgins, C.; Furano, K.; Toso, C.; and Branch, A. (1991, Winter). I Have a Dream in Washington, D.C.: Initial Report. Philadelphia: Public/Private Ventures.

Marshall, K. (1998). Reculturing systems with resilience/health realization. *Promoting Positive and Healthy Behaviors in Children: Fourteenth Annual Rosalynn Carter Symposium on Mental Health Policy.* Atlanta, GA: The Carter Center. pp. 48-58.

McLaughlin, M. (1990). The Rand change agent study revisited: Macro perspectives and micro realities. *Educational Researcher, 19,* 9: 11-16.

Mills, R.C. (1993). *The Health Realization Primer: Empowering Individuals and Communities.* Los Angeles, CA: California School of Professional Psychology.

Morrow, K. and Styles, M. (1995, May). Building Relationships With Youth in Program Settings: A Study of Big Brothers/Big Sisters. Philadelphia: Public/Private Ventures.

Resnick, M.; Bearman, P.; Blum, R.; Bauman, K.; Harris, K.; Jones, J.; Tabor, J.; Beuhring, T.; Sieving, R.; Shew, M.; Ireland, M.; Bearinger, L.; and Udry, R. (1997). Protecting adolescents from harm: Findings from the National Longitudinal Study on Adolescent Health. *Journal of the American Medical Association, 278,* 823-832.

Roaf, P.; Tierney, J.; and Hunte, D. (1994, fall). Big Brothers/Big Sisters: A Study of Volunteer Recruitment and Screening. Philadelphia: Public/Private Ventures.

Tierney, J.; Grossman, J.; and Resch, N. (1995, November). *Making a Difference: An Impact Study of Big Brothers/Big Sisters.* Philadelphia: Public/Private Ventures.

Werner, E. and Smith, R. (1992*). Overcoming the Odds: High Risk Children From Birth to Adulthood.* Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

*The four Big Brother/Big Sister studies are available through Public/Private Ventures, 2005 Market Street, Suite 900, Philadelphia, PA 19103; 215/557-4400.

Web sites that offer additional information:

OJJDP —*ncjrs.org/textfiles/164834.txt*

Big Brother/Big Sister — *bbsa.org/PPV.html*

National Mentoring Partnership —*mentoring.org/~nmp/kaplan*

Mentor America —*sportnote.com/mentoramerica*

National Mentoring Center —*nwrel.org/mentoring*