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We are delighted to be able to make this case study available to you to help you make your mentoring program a success. This publication was funded by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools under contract with EMT Associates, Inc. Although this publication has not yet been officially released by the U.S. Department of Education, we have been authorized to make it available on the Web at this time to solicit your feedback.

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Sincerely,

Judy Strother Taylor
Project Director



U.S. Department of Education Mentoring Resource Center

Case Study

Mentoring Models for Youth With Disabilities: Miami “Shake a Leg” Program

By Kerrilyn Scott-Nakai

Introduction

The impact of mentoring programs on young people has been firmly established; mentoring can positively impact a young person’s life. Despite the growing awareness of the impact and increasing prevalence of mentoring programs, few programs integrate youth with disabilities and even fewer programs specifically focus on providing mentoring services to students with disabilities.

Research indicates mentoring programs can change the course of a young person’s life. Offering positive, consistent, and long-term relationships with mentors can increase a variety of protective factors (i.e. self esteem, problem solving and healthy decision making) and decrease corresponding risk factors for youth (i.e. substance use and school drop-out). (Grossman and Rhodes, 2002).

However, the research on mentoring programs for youth with disabilities is less established. There is a dearth of studies regarding the impact of mentoring on students with disabilities as well as a lack of clarity regarding the prevalence of these mentoring programs. A 15 year longitudinal review of mentoring programs throughout the nation clearly identified a variety of demographics and risk factors for youth, but does not identify disability as a youth characteristic (Sipe, 1999). Additionally, a random national survey of 1,504 adult mentors also identified a variety of mentee

characteristics without discussing the prevalence of youth with disabilities (McLearn, Colasanto, Schoen, & Shapiro, 1999). The reason for this lack of attention to disability issues is unclear.

Why make provisions for including youth with disabilities in mentoring programs?

Mentoring research has demonstrated the effectiveness of mentoring in helping youth develop skills, knowledge, and motivation to successfully transition from high school to adult life (Rhodes, Grossman, & Resch, 2000). This transition is a major goal of youth with disabilities, and is a priority for school systems as well as the U.S. Departments of Education and Labor.

For young people with disabilities, mentoring relationships can facilitate an easier and successful transition by focusing on: academic success and self efficacy, developing career goals and vocational skills, and healthy decision making and independence skills (Rhodes et al., 2000). These goals are strongly aligned with the Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools (OSDFS) school-based mentoring initiative. Thus, the currently funded mentoring programs are well positioned to integrate these youth with special needs.

While youth with disabilities may be participating in mentoring programs to some extent; given the lack of research and

resource materials, program staff may be unsure of appropriate procedures and lack knowledge regarding effective service strategies for these students. Program teams lack guidance on how to facilitate the inclusion of youth with disabilities. Some of the potential issues include:

- Does the youth need accommodations in order to participate?
- How can the program acknowledge the needs of youth with disabilities while encouraging excellence, and help them develop an orientation toward success?
- Is the mentor prepared to foster development in a young person who may have significant academic limitations or barriers, social problems, boundary issues, or medical complexities?
- What disability-related information does the mentor need?

These issues can be addressed through the integration of some new practices and an inclusive attitude toward all youth. The Miami Shake-A-Leg (SALM), School Mentoring Initiative for Learning and Enrichment (S.M.I.L.E.) provides an excellent example of effective practices for serving youth with disabilities and other special needs.

Program Description

Shake-A-Leg Mission: The mission of SALM is to *“To foster lifelong independence and quality of life for people with disabilities, and disadvantaged youth”* and to *“Create and maintain an environment that fosters dreams and provides programs enabling people with disabilities to develop the confidence and skills to achieve them.”* SALM focuses on providing high-quality services in the following five areas: Physical Activity, Pro-Social Behavior, Mentoring and Volunteering, and Health and Wellness

Last year, SALM served more than 9,000 people on over 32,000 outings. The agency has a strong focus and commitment to serving youth and families with disabilities.

They have a long-term history of working with the Coordinating Committee for the Developmentally Handicapped, Special Olympics, Best Buddies, Easter Seals, the State of Florida Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services, and Developmental Services Medicaid Waiver Division. In order to ensure equitable and accessible services, full scholarships are available for a variety of programs, including: Developmental Disability Day Sailing, Special Olympics Sailing Team, and group instructional classes and outings.

“We knew we wanted to create a place where people could take sailing to whatever level, and Kerry is taking it to the ultimate level of international competition. She will be the only North American disabled female sailor in the 180-year-old race, which runs off the Isle of Wight. She and her crew will face 8,500 able-bodied competitors in 1,000 boats from around the world.” --Co-founder Harry Horgan

Partnering to Serve the Community: In order to ensure long-term sustainability the agency has a diverse set of partners and funders including: public and private partnerships, corporate sponsorship, environmental funding and federal, state, and regional education partners. They have also developed strong partnerships with the local universities and colleges, which is where they recruit many of their volunteers.

More specifically partner agencies include: The Hispanic Coalition, The Community Crusade Against Drugs, The City of Miami Police Gang Unit, The Coconut Grove Family and Youth Intervention Center, and a number of other community organizations, schools and local law enforcement agencies,

School Mentoring Initiative for Learning and Enrichment (S.M.I.L.E.): In 2004, SALM applied for and received a mentoring grant from the U.S. Department of Education, OSDFS. This allowed the agency to expand their mentoring services and created the School Mentoring Initiative for Learning and Enrichment (S.M.I.L.E.). The program is

based on the need for Inclusive recreational and educational programs for children with disabilities and youth from Title I schools. The program is designed to provide mentoring while incorporating learning and enrichment for children with disabilities and inner city youth. A total of nine schools are participating in the program:

- 6 schools from Miami-Dade County Public Schools (3 elementary and 3 middle schools)
- 3 private high schools

By the end of the three-year grant period, the program will serve a total of 180 mentees and up to 180 mentors.

Mentors include high school students, college students, and adult volunteers. The mentors are recruited based on a variety of criteria including: age, experience in aquatic or enrichment activities, and certifications in aquatics and enrichment activities. All mentors are required to submit a completed application with personal essay, participate in an interview, attend a formal training event, and commit to the time requirements. Two types of mentors are recruited:

- **Counselor Mentors:** assist outdoor educators, counselors or teachers in providing care for children during the daily activities including watersports land-based enrichment and classroom time.
- **Specialist Mentors:** assist a specific watersports or enrichment Recreational Specialist with daily activities pertaining to a specific zone. (ex: kayaking, sailing, dance, art etc.)

Mentors and mentees attend the program over a 34 week period. A major service component is the intensive Summer Mentor Camp. All mentors and mentees participate in the following activities:

- 34 sessions of sailing and/or kayaking
- 17 sessions of academic tutoring
- 3 sessions of environmental education activities
- 3 sessions of drug and violence prevention
- 3 sessions of nutrition, health, and wellness
- 3 sessions of self-esteem and character education

- 3 sessions of conflict resolution
- 12 family festival sessions

Watersports and activities are a foundation of the program. The program uses Biscayne Bay as a classroom and watersports and enrichment activities as tools to improve students' academic performance and pro-social skills. The Watersport Park and Marine Academy integrates on-shore and off-shore environments to provide purposeful recreation, vocation and education programs serving those in need. According to the Program Coordinator, *"It is critical to utilize accessible equipment that eliminates barriers and fosters inclusion."*

Program Goals

- Sustained matches for 12 months
- Academic improvement
- Reduction in unexpected school absences
- Improvement in psycho-social measures
- Increased physical activity
- Increased participation in community and environmental activities
- Reduction in negative social perceptions
- Increased awareness of the impact of negative social behaviors
- Increase knowledge of nutrition, healthy activities, and personal care
- Improved conflict resolution skills
- Increased parental involvement

Best Practices and Strategies

There are several key strategies that the SALM team have utilized in developing, maintaining, and enhancing their mentoring service design geared towards at-risk youth and youth with special needs throughout the Miami area.

#1 Establish an Inclusive Environment

As a agency, SALM is dedicated to providing universally accessible services that are available to all people. In particular, the

agency has successfully established a fully accessible watersports training facility that is open to all people in the local community and accommodates visitors from around the world.

1) Let students with disabilities and their families know they are welcome: The mission and vision statements for both the agency and program clearly articulate the dedication to providing services to all people, including and specifically to those with disabilities. Additionally, the S.M.I.L.E. project clearly identifies that services are inclusive in their project brochures, websites, and when conducting recruitment presentations.

2) Establish a “level playing field”: As a program S.M.I.L.E. focuses on providing inclusive activities that integrate children with disabilities with their able bodied peers. The goal of these team centered activities is to increase ongoing participation in programs among peers by creating a “level playing field” for student with disabilities to interact and engage in activities with their peers.

3) Assess and make needed accommodations: Mentees with disabilities may need some level of accommodations in order to effectively engage in the mentoring program.

What are Accommodations?

- “Accommodations are changes in materials or procedures that provide access to instruction for students with disabilities. They are designed to enable students with disabilities to learn from and engage in activities without the impediment of their disability, and to show their knowledge and skills rather than the effects of their disabilities” (Thurlow, 2002)

Since accommodations for each youth will differ, individual assessments are conducted for each mentee to determine their specific needs. This assessment is conducted by the Program Coordinator in collaboration with the mentor, mentee, and their family. Additional information regarding a student’s specific academic needs is derived from reviewing

their Individual Education Plan (IEP). Examples of accommodations that are provided include: computer or other communication aids and physical aids for engaging in the various group outings and physical activities.

Special support services may also need to be provided to the Mentors. For mentors that are working with youth with special needs for the first time, it is critical they receive the appropriate training, guidance, and support. For S.M.I.L.E., this includes a formal initial full-day training, ongoing professional development and training and participation in regularly scheduled meetings (to exchange ideas, discuss new strategies and partnerships, and offer support to one another). Additionally, as part of the screening process the mentor’s history and comfort level of working with youth with disabilities is assessed.

#2 Provide Strength-Based and Goal-Oriented Activities

A Strength-Based Approach: The youth development and resiliency research has established the value of integrating a strength-based approach to working with young people (Bernard, 1999). More recently, the risk and protective factor research has supported a balanced approach to addressing both risk and protective factors when working with youth (Hawkins and Catalano, 2001). Unfortunately, youth with disabilities are often solely characterized by their limitations and challenges as compared to being recognized for their strengths and positive attributes. How can a mentoring program acknowledge and provide for the needs of youth with disabilities while encouraging excellence and success towards goals?

1) The S.M.I.L.E. program aims to identify and facilitate the individual assets and strengths of each mentee. Many of the activities are geared towards building self-esteem and efficacy. For example, the program uses hands-on and interactive art, drama, and music activities to enable

participants to creatively and openly engage in role playing, poetry, reading, music, and creative expression. These activities aim to break down social barriers for the youth and reduce negative perceptions regarding their physical, cultural, or economic differences. Youth are able to express their feelings more openly when using an indirect medium (e.g. role playing).

2) Build leadership and a sense of contribution: Character education and self-esteem workshops are offered to mentees and focus on improving their self perceptions of their abilities and positive attributes. Additionally, mentors encourage youth to participate in leadership, integrity, and good citizenship activities. The mentors foster and guide the youth's ability to make a positive contribution in their community. This gives the youth a sense of value and increases their perception that despite their disabilities, they can make a difference in their community too.

Goal Oriented Activities: Setting appropriate short- and long-term goals is a common and effective strategy in helping mentees define themselves and solidify their aspirations. Setting goals, and following through, can develop youth self-esteem and efficacy and demonstrate the feasibility of achieving academic and personal goals.

However, if goal setting is to be effective in mentoring programs, it must be done in a way that does not impede the growth of the mentoring relationship itself. The goals must be determined by the youth, not the program or the mentor. And their goals must be envisioned and pursued in a way that lets the youth "own" the process, not be a passive recipient of an outside "intervention." Realistic goal setting plays a particularly important role for youth with disabilities.

3) Develop individualized goal plans: The S.M.I.L.E. Project Coordinator in collaboration with the mentor, mentee, their parents/caregivers, and their teachers review the student's Individual Education Plan (IEP). The goal is to identify the student's current academic and behavioral progress and to

define feasible academic and behavioral goals for that student. An academic and behavioral plan is developed for each student.

4) Customized Academic Support:

Tutoring Services are customized to meet the individual student's needs. It is recognized that multiple methods of instruction may be needed based on the student's learning style and disability. Additionally, the mentor works with the teacher on identifying appropriate materials and instruction.

#3 Focus on Transitional and Independence Skills

As stated earlier, the mentoring research has demonstrated the effectiveness of mentoring in helping youth develop the relevant skills, knowledge and self-efficacy needed to successfully transition from middle school, to high school and onto further education or careers. For young people with disabilities, mentoring relationships may play a critical role in facilitating an easier and more successful transition by focusing on: academic success and self efficacy, developing career goals and vocational skills, and healthy decision making and independence skills.

1) Career Adventures Curricula: This curricula is designed to equip mentees and their mentors with skills to assist gainful employment and transition to the workforce. The sessions inform students about requirements to gain entry into post-secondary education. The long-term goal is to increase the youth's independence through the creation of employment and post secondary education opportunities.

2) Future Vocational Training Opportunities : The S.M.I.L.E. program offers a variety of marine related work transition and vocational training programs including dockmaster training, boat repair and maintenance, marine carpentry, water safety, and junior watersports instructor training. These skills are introduced to mentees with the intention of enrolling

students in these career-oriented programs in the future.

Program Guiding Principles

- *To bring hope, confidence, social integration, independence and fun back into the lives of people with disabilities and their families.*
- *To provide affordable and effective services and programs that will enhance the participant's independence, employment potential, and quality of life.*

Program Replicability

Establishing some basic provisions for the inclusion of youth with disabilities in mentoring programs is a first step in making programs more accessible and inclusive for students with disabilities. These provisions will also add to the overall quality of your mentoring program and the experiences of other participants.

- Promotional materials should clearly identify that youth with disabilities are welcome to participate. A statement inviting participation of youth from diverse backgrounds, including youth with disabilities can clarify for them that they are truly welcome.

- An effective mentoring program will seek mentors with an understanding of the determination and perseverance needed to overcome barriers. The mentors' experience and comfort level working with students with disabilities should be addressed during the application process.
- In designing training for mentoring programs, consider issues such as boundaries, disclosure of disability-related information, specific strategies and guidelines for working with youth with disabilities, and expectations for mentors and mentees.
- Encourage and provide guidance to mentors to accept youth at their current level of development while still holding high expectations for future achievement.
- Recognize that disabilities vary widely among youth, and what works for one youth may not work for another. Be flexible, think outside of the box, and be willing to make accommodations as needed.
- Remember sometimes you just have to "shake-a-leg" and get up and do something to start with and overcome your fears.

- *"I love Tuesdays because that is the day that Eliut my mentor and I tell jokes and go sailing together" --5th grade mentee, blind and autistic student*
- *"I had a student who NEVER came to class, he always skipped school. Since he has been part of the Shake-A-Leg program, he has attended all of his classes and is motivated while doing classwork and participating in activities!" ---- Teacher, Campbell Drive Middle School*

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Thurlow, M. (2002). Issue Brief: Accommodations for students with disabilities in high school. www.ncset.org/publications/viewdesc.asp?id

Additional Resources and

Connecting to Success is an electronic mentoring program that matches mentors to students with disabilities. National Center on Secondary Education and Transition, Institute on community Integration, University of Minnesota: 6 Pattee Hall, 150 Pillsbury Drive, SE Minneapolis, MN 55455

Partners for Youth With Disabilities is an organization dedicated to the delivery of unique mentoring services for students with disabilities. In addition to its core one-to-one Mentor Match Program, PYD offers multiple innovative and effective group and educational programs that build skills in the areas of independent living, self-advocacy, entrepreneurship and career development and provide opportunities for socialization, leadership, community service, healthy living and participation in the arts. http://pyd.org/mentoring_programs/index.htm

About the Author: Kerrilyn Scott-Nakai

Kerrilyn Scott-Nakai is a Senior Project Director at CARS and has over 12 years of progressive experience conducting research and program evaluation projects focusing on prevention programming for at-risk youth and their families. Ms. Scott-Nakai has worked at the local, state, and federal levels. She has overseen local and statewide evaluation projects, managed staff, contributed to the management and design of large-scale national studies, and worked on reports for local, state, and federal agencies. She is also highly skilled in the provision of consultation and training services. Over the years, she has established a strong track record of effectively providing technical assistance to a broad array of prevention staff in the areas of program design, evidence-based implementation practices, evaluation, and fidelity (including adherence to federal and/or state funding requirements, model program designs, and adherence to prescribed research design protocols). She is currently the Project Director for the Safe and Drug-Free Schools and Communities (SDFSC) Technical Assistance Project and oversees the provision of TA, training, product development, and resource dissemination to 43 grantees throughout the state of California.

Mentoring Resource Center

Case Study Series

The Mentoring Resource Center (MRC) has been created to provide United States Department of Education Mentoring Program grantees with training, technical assistance, publications, research, and consultation, all in an effort to help their program staff design and implement the highest quality mentoring programs. Funded by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools, the MRC is a collaborative effort between EMT Associates, located in Folsom, CA, and the National Mentoring Center, located in Portland, OR.

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