

# Mentoring Programs and Literacy: Tips and Resources for Program Staff

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While considerable time and resources have been put into helping young children prepare for school and in encouraging early reading success, attention to the ongoing literacy needs of older children and youth have, until recently, taken a back seat. However, in the last few years adolescent literacy has gained more attention. Policy makers and educators now realize that ongoing literacy development is a critical issue as students transition into middle and high school settings. The literacy skills that adolescent students must achieve go far beyond the basic elements of decoding words and being able to read and write in complete sentences. They must be able to comprehend complex texts from a variety of sources and across subject areas, to interpret and analyze the information they receive, to respond critically to what they read, and to draw conclusions and discuss and debate their ideas. At the very least, middle and high school students must have the skills to identify key areas in texts, understand information, and relate the ideas they encounter to other knowledge and personal experiences.

Unfortunately, many middle and high school students lack these skills. Results from the most recent National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) test indicate that approximately 25 percent of eighth- and 12<sup>th</sup>-grade students cannot identify the main idea in text, understand informational passages, or extend ideas in text.<sup>1</sup>

Educators and policy makers are working to improve programs that help adolescent learners become more proficient in these areas. A 2004 report to Carnegie Corporation of New York by the Alliance for Excellent Education proposed 15 key elements of effective adolescent literacy programs. While the recommendations are directed primarily to the formal education setting, several are also relevant to programs serving youth outside of the classroom. These include:

- ◆ encouraging student motivation and self-directed learning
- ◆ providing strategic and individualized tutoring assistance

- ◆ providing extended time for literacy skill development
- ◆ offering comprehensive and coordinated approaches to literacy that includes after-school and community program involvement<sup>2</sup>

For mentoring programs, motivating students to learn is a significant role that mentors can play in increasing the literacy skills of their mentees. Research shows that if students are not motivated to read, they will benefit very little from reading instruction. Helping mentees understand how reading and other literacy skills are relevant to their lives, building on what students already know and believe, imparting a love of reading and learning, and linking learning to their goals and aspirations for their own futures, can all make a big difference.

A well-developed mentoring relationship can provide many opportunities for nurturing love of learning and motivating youth to develop the literacy skills they will need to be successful through their school years and beyond. For example:

- ◆ Mentors can model such traits as learning new skills, enjoying reading, writing and speaking, and being curious about the world around them.
- ◆ They can help young people think about their futures and explore colleges and careers.
- ◆ They can offer praise and encouragement for school-related successes, problem solving abilities, creative thinking, and other literacy-based achievements.
- ◆ They can help mentees become more connected to school by encouraging their participation in school activities.
- ◆ They can support mentees in achieving success in school subjects by offering help with homework, improving study habits, and becoming more organized.

<sup>1</sup> Alliance for Excellent Education Issue Brief: "Adolescent Literacy: Opening the Doors to Success." January 2005.

<sup>2</sup> Biancarosa, G., and Snow, C. E. (2004). *Reading Next—A vision for action and research in middle and high school literacy: A report from Carnegie Corporation of New York*. Washington, DC: Alliance for Excellent Education

- ◆ They can connect mentees and their families with other needed services, such as tutoring, academic testing for possible disabilities, free or inexpensive school supplies, and basic needs to help them stabilize their lives.

But mentors cannot do all this important work on their own. School and program staff must be fully on board in order to integrate literacy development as a significant programmatic objective. Below are some things mentoring program staff can do:

### **Educate yourself and your staff on literacy issues**

Your staff may already be aware of some of the issues and concerns regarding school success for the youth you are serving. However, in order to develop a stronger focus on literacy development, you will want to learn more about local data on youth literacy and the kinds of school-based approaches that are already being used in your district to improve literacy among struggling students. Here are some suggestions:

- ◆ Review national data and reports on current literacy research, practice, and policy. This will not only help you understand the current issues in the field of youth literacy but will also give you the background you'll need to talk with local educators and school administrators about the problem. A good place to start your research is the Alliance for Excellent Education's fact sheets and other publications on adolescent literacy (see resource list at the end of this publication).
- ◆ Review achievement data for the schools you are working with to see how well they are already addressing literacy issues.
- ◆ Ask to speak with your principal or other school leadership to learn about their literacy activities and resources, and discuss ways your mentors can support and complement these efforts.
- ◆ Find out what other community organizations are providing learning resources for young people outside of the classroom.

### **WHAT IS LITERACY?**

*The National Literacy Act of 1991 defined literacy as "an individual's ability to read, write, and speak in English, and compute and solve problems at levels of proficiency necessary to function on the job and in society to achieve one's goals, and develop one's knowledge and potential" (National Literacy Act of 1991, Sec. 3).*

### **Clarify what you hope to accomplish and how**

Though one of your program's goals is improving academic outcomes, school-based mentoring programs are first and foremost about developing a positive, quality relationship between an older person and a child or youth. Be sure not to let academics, tutoring, homework help, and drilling in specific topics get in the way of the mentoring relationship. Your mentors can support literacy development best by making it part of the relationship, making it fun, and building on the youth's interests and abilities.

Here are some questions to consider as you develop a more focused approach to helping improve literacy skills within the context of your mentoring program:

- ◆ What do you want to accomplish by incorporating literacy development into your program?
- ◆ How will you know you are achieving what you set out to accomplish? Do you want to try to evaluate the effectiveness of certain literacy activities?
- ◆ Will you use a literacy assessment tool to help understand the needs of individual mentees, talk with teachers to develop an individual plan, or take a broader approach that encourages mentors to build on the skills and interests they see in their mentees?
- ◆ Do you want to track the kinds of activities mentors are using to help student improve literacy skills?

- ◆ What resources, both within your program and school and in the larger community, can you draw upon to enrich student learning?
- ◆ How do your literacy development efforts complement what is already being done at the school? How will you maintain communication with teachers, support staff, and other school programs?
- ◆ How to help mentees set future goals and relate them to core literacy skills such as reading, speaking, writing, working with numbers, and so on

## Provide training and support to mentors

Mentors don't have to be teachers to help mentees develop skills in reading, writing, comprehension, and other literacy areas. But they may need some special training and support in helping their mentees develop these skills and to clearly define their role in the learning process. If you decide to have mentors take on substantive academic or literacy activities, their training should cover:

- ◆ Key differences between mentoring and tutoring (see the MRC publication, *Making the Grade: A Guide to Incorporating Academic Achievement Into Mentoring Programs and Relationships*, for handouts on this topic)
- ◆ Definitions of literacy development and what can mentors do to help foster it
- ◆ Where to find activities and resources that help develop literacy skills (in the community, online, etc.)
- ◆ Where to go to get additional academic support for their mentee (your school and community resources)
- ◆ How to work effectively with teachers to offer assistance, learn more about the mentee's strengths and needs, and impart the mentor's perceptions about the child's progress
- ◆ How to encourage parents to participate in their child's learning through family activities and school involvement
- ◆ How to offer appropriate praise and encouragement to mentees

## Commit or develop resources for materials and supplies

In order to support your mentors' efforts in engaging in literacy-rich activities with mentees, develop a small budget for learning tools, paid tutors, art and other supplies, and the occasional group or individual field trip. Seek out small grants for free or low-cost sources of books that mentors can give to their mentees, such as FirstBook ([http://register.firstbook.org/#book\\_bank](http://register.firstbook.org/#book_bank)) or other book distribution programs. Ask for donations for paper, notebooks, educational games, computers, and other resources from local businesses.

## Develop structured activities for matches

Mentors may be eager to help develop literacy skills but are often stymied about how to proceed when they are actually face-to-face with their mentee. Program staff should make available tools, supplies, resources, and activities that mentors can draw from when meeting with their mentee. Many online literacy resources are free to download (see resource list on p.5), and program staff can draw from these and other resources to develop structured group or individual activities for matches to choose from. Working with teaching and resource staff at the school can also help program staff build a rich and varied set of activities and resources that can promote literacy skills.

Programs in which matches meet in a group setting can develop a few group activities that can further enhance learning through peer interaction and discussion. For example, you might set up a reading club that offers a monthly group session to share ideas and do some activities based on the reading. An occasional group outing, if your budget allows for it, can also motivate students' interest in learning.

It is important that mentors involve youth in making choices about these activities, so be sure that a range of choices is available. Also, always build in some free time during each session for fun, relaxed conversation, and other unstructured activities. Remember, these literacy activities will have more meaning and impact in the context of a solid mentoring relationship.

If you have expectations about how much time mentors spend working on literacy, make these clear up front and develop a way of checking in to see if the tools and resources you are providing are helpful and sufficient. Reinforce the importance of the relationship as key to the mentor's role, and make sure that whatever materials you offer are fun and interactive.

### **Develop and maintain resource information**

To help mentors in their role as a champion for their mentees' literacy skill development, programs will need to get creative about finding free or low-cost educational resources. Strategies to research include:

- ◆ How to find a trained tutor or other academic support service (your program will likely want to coordinate these services with school personnel rather than having the mentor set this up)
- ◆ Where to go for free or low-cost books and school supplies for children and families
- ◆ How to get free tickets to educational activities in the community (for matches or families)
- ◆ Free programs and activities that are offered through libraries, museums, colleges and universities, after-school programs, clubs, and other community services

### **Maintain programming over the summer**

Educators have long known that students lose academic ground over the summer. And recent research on school-based mentoring confirms that keeping matches alive over the summer months improves a relationship's chances of continuing into the following school year and reinforces positive youth outcomes.<sup>3</sup> Developing a summer mentoring component with an educational focus can help ensure that your matches will develop a stronger bond and that mentees will be more prepared academically when they return to school in the fall. Some suggestions for summer programming include:

- ◆ Provide a method for regular communication between mentors and mentees. This could be as simple as sending each other pre-stamped postcards, regular phone calls, monitored e-mail or other supervised electronic contact, or in-person meetings. Contact at least every two weeks is believed to be most effective regardless of the method.
- ◆ Develop one or two group activities at a location that offers opportunities for learning. Examples might include a trip to the zoo, science museum, or local nature or wildlife park. Prepare some guided activities for matches to do during the event if they want to, but emphasize fun.
- ◆ Provide projects that matches can do over the summer via mail, e-mail, a special Web site, or in person, if possible. Ideas include keeping a shared journal of summer highlights, organizing a book club with an online "chat" feature, or writing a story together.
- ◆ For students who are really struggling academically, locate a summer tutor or get assignments from teachers in subject areas that need the most work. Although mentors are not tutors, they can help the student keep on track with summer academics.

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<sup>3</sup>Herrera, C., Grossman, J.B., Kauh, T.J., Feldman, A.F., McMaken, J., with Jucovy, L.Z. (2007). *Making a difference in schools: The Big Brothers Big Sisters school-based mentoring impact study*. Philadelphia, PA: Public/Private Ventures.

Literacy opens doors for youth—to school and career opportunities, to being an involved citizen, to take on leadership roles in the community, and much more. Helping your mentors nurture literacy development in their mentees can lead to long-term results far beyond the scope of your mentoring program. And by intentionally building literacy activities into your program you can help mentees be more successful in school while setting them on a path of lifelong learning.

## Web and Print Resources For Literacy Development:

There are literally thousands of educational web sites on the Internet, some better than others. Many offer Web-based games and activities while others offer tips and ideas that can be done away from your computer. There are also many organizations that are dedicated to promoting literacy development across all ages. These sites offer a wealth of information about literacy development and also provide links to resources and recommended reading. Here are a few sites that can help program coordinators and mentors get started in finding useful resources.

### WEB RESOURCES

*General literacy resources for program managers and mentors:*

#### Alliance for Excellent Education

The mission of the Alliance for Excellent Education is to promote high school transformation to make it possible for every child to graduate prepared for postsecondary education and success in life. Their Web page on adolescent literacy provides information on current news and events as well as links to a number of studies, reports, issue briefs, and other resources.

[http://www.all4ed.org/adolescent\\_literacy/issue\\_briefs.html](http://www.all4ed.org/adolescent_literacy/issue_briefs.html)

#### LEARNS

Funded by the Corporation for National and Community Service, LEARNS provides training

and technical assistance to projects focused on literacy, tutoring, mentoring, and out-of-school time. LEARNS is a partnership of the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (NWREL) and the Bank Street College of Education (BSC).

<http://www.nwrel.org/learns/index.html>

#### Literacy Connections

This site provides a wealth of information on reading, teaching and tutoring techniques, ESL literacy, and adult literacy. Their resources are useful for teachers, volunteers, and directors of literacy programs.

<http://literacyconnections.com/>

#### The Mentoring Resource Center

The official Web site for the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Safe and Drug-free Schools Mentoring Grants initiative has many publications and resources designed for school-based mentoring programs. The publication, *Making the Grade: A Guide to Incorporating Academic Achievement Into Mentoring Programs and Relationships*, offers both background reading and practical information for helping mentors work on academics and related areas with their mentees.

<http://www.edmentoring.org/publications.html>

#### National Institute for Literacy

This federal agency provides leadership on literacy issues, including the improvement of reading instruction for children, youth, and adults. In consultation with the U.S. Departments of Education, Labor, and Health and Human Services, the Institute serves as a national resource on current, comprehensive literacy research, practice, and policy. Their Web site includes free, downloadable publications directed at program managers, teachers, parents, and volunteers that range from research briefs to practical guides.

<http://www.nifl.gov/>

#### ReadWriteThink

This partnership between the International Reading Association (IRA), the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), and the Verizon Foundation provides educators and students

with access to the highest quality practices and resources in reading and language arts instruction through free, Internet-based content.

<http://www.readwritethink.org/index.asp>

### **YouthFriends Volunteer Reading Guide**

This 16-page guide is designed for volunteers who want to foster reading enjoyment by helping both younger and older students improve their literacy and comprehension skills. It offers basic information about the stages of reading development in children, tips and activities, and a list of resources for further assistance.

<http://youthfriends.org/YF/documents/Reading-Guide2006.pdf>

*Activities, games, and other useful tools for mentors and mentees:*

### **100 Best Books for Kids**

A list of one hundred books selected by the National Education Association as great reading for children and young people. Pick one and read it together!

<http://www.teachersfirst.com/100books.cfm>

### **Funbrain.com**

This site by the Family Education Network provides free educational games and quizzes in math, grammar, science, spelling, and history. It also provides excellent resources for teachers and parents.

<http://www.funbrain.com/>

### **Literacy games from LEARNS**

A variety of games to build reading comprehension and reinforce literacy skills.

<http://www.nwrel.org/learns/trainingopps/games/index.html>

### **Literary Connections' "Tips for Tutors"**

Activities and tips designed for volunteers engaged in helping children develop literacy skills. Included are downloadable activities with instructions for how to use them.

<http://literacyconnections.com/AdviceForReadingTutors.php>

### **Reading Is Fundamental**

Founded in 1966, RIF is the oldest and largest children's and family nonprofit literacy organization in the United States. Although RIF's highest priority is reaching underserved children from birth to age 8, many of the articles, resources, tips, and activities are relevant to elementary and middle school students. The pages for parents may be especially useful for mentors, as they contain simple strategies and activities for encouraging children to enjoy reading.

<http://www.rif.org/>

(Be sure to check out RIF's "Tips and Tricks" at: <http://www.rif.org/parents/tips/default.mspc>.)

### ***PRINT RESOURCES FROM THE MRC LENDING LIBRARY COLLECTION***

Laird, Heather. *Academic Activity Guide: A Learning Resource for Mentors and Mentees*. Friends for Youth. 2003.

This resource offers a great collection of constructive learning activities designed to give matches opportunities for discovery and learning together.

Olley, Anne-Maree. 2003. *Time to Think: A Guide to Thoughtful Discussion*. Essential Resources Educational Publishers.

This guide offers great activities and conversation starters that mentors and teachers can use to engage students in philosophical discussions that teach critical thinking, independent thought, and logic.