

Supporting the Youth Mentoring Movement with Effective Practices and Continuous Quality Improvement

For over 30 years, MENTOR has provided the youth mentoring field with guidance and recommendations on standards of practice that can improve the mentoring experiences of youth, their families, and volunteer mentors, as well as build organizational quality, capacity, and sustainability for those who operate mentoring programs in communities across America. Since 1990, the cornerstone publication for this effort has been the *Elements of Effective Practice for Mentoring™*, now being published in its 5th Edition, which provides program staff with a suite of standards and recommended practices that both research and practitioner wisdom suggest will support meaningful mentoring relationships and facilitate high-quality mentoring services. MENTOR has also engaged in considerable efforts, primarily through the work of our municipal, regional, and statewide Affiliates, to help programs adopt these practices and engage in continuous quality improvement. Through technical assistance, coaching, and our National Quality Mentoring System assessment process, we help build the knowledge, skills, and capacity of mentoring professionals to design and implement effective practices in their work.

But how do we know that these practices are the right ones to recommend? What evidence do we have, from research or other sources, that these practices lead to stronger mentoring relationships, better program experiences, and more meaningful outcomes for young people? Where did these “best practices” come from and what do we know about the impact they have on staff, youth, and volunteers?

As we launch the 5th Edition of the *Elements of Effective Practice for Mentoring™* (EEPM), we thought it would be good to highlight some of the research that has informed the practices we recommend and to highlight why they matter in terms of program quality and the experiences of program participants. In the pages that follow, we review some meaningful research related to 1) our understanding of good practice in the context of mentoring programs, 2) research that directly examines the practices recommended in the EEPM, and 3) research on our efforts to help programs improve their quality through focused assessment, coaching, and technical assistance support. Taken together, this body of research highlights that resources like the EEPM can help programs do their work better, especially when coupled with professional development and improvement processes that support their efforts to continuously improve.

RESEARCH ON MEANINGFUL PRACTICES IN DELIVERING MENTORING SERVICES

When youth mentoring first started growing in popularity in the 1990s there was very little information available to practitioners about the most effective ways to design, plan, and implement such a program. Obviously, established organizations such as Big Brothers Big Sisters had established service delivery models and sophisticated metrics of implementation, but as public and private funding for mentoring expanded rapidly, many other youth serving organizations found themselves scrambling to determine how exactly these mentoring relationships could be provided safely and effectively. A mentoring program can be a complicated enterprise, with important nuances related to finding participants, preparing them for their mentoring experience, and supporting them as they go through and ultimately end their mentoring relationships — to say nothing of all the other practices related to managing and sustaining an organization (e.g., fundraising, evaluation, marketing). When MENTOR was formed in 1990, it was with the intention to bring infrastructure and capacity building to the mentoring field. And that meant, in part, codifying what were emerging

as meaningful practices in doing this work so that others could build programs that were effective and of high quality.

Thankfully, a period of seminal mentoring research was also getting underway and the field's knowledge about "what works" would soon grow exponentially. There has been a particular surge in the last decade in research that examines the effectiveness of implementing certain practices in mentoring programs. Here we highlight several relevant research studies — by no means an exhaustive list — that illustrate what we have learned about mentoring program practices and the nuances of doing them in particular ways.

The 2002 meta-analysis of 55 mentoring program evaluations by DuBois and colleagues (DuBois et al., 2002) represents the first major attempt to rigorously connect program practice implementation and the benefits youth received from the program. The study found that **the effect size of programs increased as the number of theoretically informed "best practices" increased**, most of which are highlighted in the EEPM (e.g., training of mentors before and after their relationships had started, match supervision and support). The authors concluded that that program impact is enhanced significantly when more of these "best practices" are used, suggesting that the actions of program staff directly facilitate strong relationships and meaningful program outcomes. A similar 2011 study by DuBois and colleagues (DuBois et al., 2011) found increased adoption of these practices across a wider sample of programs, concluding that dissemination of "best practices" had removed much of the variability in quality across the programs included in the study.

Other studies have explored the benefits of engaging in specific practices, as well as specific strategies for delivering those practices to youth, caregivers, and mentors. A sampling of such studies includes:

- A study by Raposa and colleagues (2018) examined matching strategies used by program staff when pairing youth and their mentors. They found that **matching based on racial or ethnic similarity** was predictive of longer mentoring relationships. Perhaps more crucially, a **shared dislike of certain activities or hobbies was the strongest predictor of match longevity**, even more so than shared interests. In fact, mentors who expressed dislike for the young person's interests were in the shortest matches of all, suggesting that programs must pay considerable attention to the characteristics of youth and mentors before they are paired to ensure they will have some common traits and that mentors do not inadvertently reject key aspects of the young person's interests or identity.
- A study by Aresi, Pozzi, and Marta (2020) of school-based mentoring programs examined the influence of **match setting and supports** on relationship closeness and the retention of mentors. They found that mentor reports of relationship closeness were associated with their perceptions of having been adequately prepared and supported by program staff, as well as with their perceptions that the program provided adequate space and resources for their mentoring sessions. Ratings of closeness also fueled their overall satisfaction with the program experience and their intention to stay in the mentoring role in the future, highlighting the connections between staff implementation of key practices, mentor satisfaction, and, ultimately, mentor retention.
- A 2018 study (McMorris et al., 2018) examined several programmatic factors that were associated with the trajectories and quality of mentor-youth relationships. Factors associated with the strongest and longest relationships included the **recruitment of mentors with favorable attitudes about young people**, staff helping mentors **set reasonable expectations** for the mentoring experience, and mentors' perceptions of **the volume and quality of training and match support** received. In particular, the absence of adequate ongoing training and support when working with a youth who was resistant or ambivalent to the relationship was a predictor of matches designated

as “tough” or struggling. These findings suggest that several important staff practices may influence the mentoring experience and enhance or constrain the success of the relationship.

- The *Role of Risk* study (Herrera et al., 2013), which examined several factors associated with the quality and duration of mentoring relationships in the context of youth participants’ “risk” profiles, found that, relative to those who did not receive pre-match training, mentors who received **pre-match training** met more frequently with their mentee, were more likely to have a relationship that lasted longer than 12 months, and had mentees who reported experiencing higher-quality relationships with them. **Regular support calls from case managers to mentors** were also linked with longer-lasting matches and more frequent meetings between mentors and youth.
- A study by McQuillin, Straight, and Saeki (2015) found that attending a **longer mentor training that included enhancements** such as roleplays, additional information about available resources, and ongoing “booster” trainings increased mentors’ perceptions of program support, the value of training received, and their plans to continue mentoring relative to those attending standard training. This study highlighted the value of not only robust pre-match training, but also ongoing training that reinforces key concepts and helps address challenges in evolving mentoring relationships.
- A 2021 study (Keller & DuBois, 2021) examined the influence of program staff on the quality of mentoring relationships, finding that the **work engagement and motivation of staff as well as their emphasis on adherence to program guidelines** were associated with several aspects of relationship quality and closeness, as reported by youth. Crucially, they found that a nondirective approach to **match support** was strongly associated with lower relationship quality.
- A 2020 study (Keller et al., 2020) found that the **length of time staff spent on match support conversations with mentors** predicted how helpful mentors found their advice, mentors’ use of strategies suggested by the staff members, and ultimately, their perceptions of the quality of the program itself. A minimum threshold of 6-10 minutes per support check-in was associated with higher ratings of supervision, organizational culture, and their overall experience in the program, suggesting that staff time investment in match support practices influence how mentors perceive their time in a program and their satisfaction with the experience.
- A study of mentoring relationship duration and closure practices by Spencer and colleagues (Keller & Spencer, 2017) examined a number of factors contributing to prematurely ending mentoring relationships across several mentoring providers. Factors associated with early relationship closure included **enrollment of youth** whose needs or behavioral challenges were beyond the scope or capacity of the program to address, **unrealistic mentor expectations** as to how long the match might last that went unaddressed by staff, and challenges in the provision of **adequate and timely match support** that contributed to breakdowns in mentor-caregiver relationships or in the relationships mentors and caregivers had with program staff. Most concerning was the finding that three quarters of matches ending prematurely did not experience adequate **closure practices**, including not having a final “goodbye” meeting with their mentor (or even a staff member).

These studies, and many others whose findings are cited in the new EEPM, illustrate the deep body of research that demonstrates the connection between specific staff actions and approaches to their work and how mentoring relationships play out for youth, families, and volunteers. We see a consistent trend that the adherence to proven program practices, and the care and attention to detail in the implementation of those practices, has a tremendous impact on the quality and longevity of mentoring relationships, ultimately influencing the impact of these relationships on the young people served.

RESEARCH SPECIFICALLY FOCUSED ON THE ELEMENTS OF EFFECTIVE PRACTICE FOR MENTORING

In addition to the studies noted above, there have been several others that have directly examined the specific practices highlighted in several editions of the EEPM. These studies highlight that adherence to the practices recommended in the EEMP are associated with a number of benefits for youth, mentors, and programs as a whole.

- A 2016 study (Kupersmidt et al., 2016) of 45 mentoring programs examined the level of implementation of 22 core practices across six “standards” recommended in the third edition of the EEPM. The **total number of practices** adhered to by programs was associated with **longer mentoring relationships**, specifically those lasting two years or longer. The total number of *standards* met by programs also predicted longer matches. Interestingly, **adherence to the training standard and associated practices** alone was also predictive of match length, suggesting that adequate preparation of mentors is a key activity that can increase the chances that a mentoring relationship thrives.
- A study by Stelter and colleagues (2018) examined the implementation of these same core practices from the third edition of the EEPM in programs serving youth in foster care, who often struggle to maintain long-lasting mentoring relationships. Once again, results indicated that **higher levels of implementation** of the EEPM practices and standards (i.e., sets of practices in specific areas) were associated with **longer mentoring relationships**. Specifically, delivering at least 18 of the 22 practices or at least three of the six standards was predictive of longer relationships for youth in the study.
- A study by Drew and colleagues (2020) examined the use of three specific practices recommended in the fourth edition of the EEPM: 1) Program staff **setting realistic expectations for mentors** as part of mentor preparation and matching; 2) Providing an adequate amount of **pre-match training** to mentors (i.e., amount of pre-match training); and 3) **Making matches based on mentor preferences, goals and characteristics**. These three practices were linked with mentor satisfaction with their mentoring relationship and investment in the relationship, as well as a decreased desire to have been matched with a different child, respectively. These mentor experiences were, in turn, associated with higher levels of mentor commitment to the mentoring relationship.
- Perhaps most definitively, a 2023 study by Keller and colleagues found that **stronger staff implementation of the recommended program practices** from the fourth edition of the EEPM was associated with higher ratings of **mentoring relationship satisfaction, commitment, and security**, and **lower levels of mentor-youth relationship negativity**. The findings further suggested that better implementation of these practices contributed to a stronger “working alliance” between staff and mentors, which then predicted increases in relationship quality. Simply put, when program staff adhered to the EEPM more closely, mentors forged stronger working relationships with staff and, in turn, created stronger relationships with youth and had fewer of the negative interactions that can lead to shorter or even harmful mentoring experiences.

Taken together, these studies demonstrate that adherence to the practices recommended across several editions of the EEPM are associated with longer and stronger mentoring relationships across a variety of program settings, models, and populations served. They also suggest that when staff implement these practices at a meaningful and consistent level, they work more effectively with mentors, youth, and families and that mentors are more satisfied with the experience and are more committed to serving as a mentor over time.

RESEARCH ON EFFORTS TO IMPROVE PROGRAM QUALITY AND PRACTICE IMPLEMENTATION

Given the strong body of research demonstrating that these program practices matter a great deal in supporting the quality and duration of program-provided youth mentoring relationships, the obvious follow-up question is: Can the implementation of these practices be improved through focused efforts to bolster program quality? Considering that the mentoring field faces challenges related to professional development and the adoption of evidence-based practices (see Stoeger, Balestrini, & Ziegler, 2020), it is important that mentoring programs and staff have access to coaching, technical assistance, and other supports that can improve the quality and consistency of their work.

We know from research in related fields that focused and intentional efforts to engage program staff in quality improvement efforts can be successful. For example, there is a considerable body of research related to the Youth Program Quality Assessment and Intervention (YPQI) work led by the Forum for Youth Investment's Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality. Their quality improvement work with afterschool programs is grounded in an assessment of practice implementation by program staff, followed by coaching, professional development, and staff-led improvements in key practice areas. It is worth noting that the YPQI is considered a “low-stakes” intervention, meaning that it is voluntary, rather than a mandated activity, and takes a relatively small amount of staff time to implement, compared to more rigorous forms of program support. Evaluations of this work (Smith et al., 2012) have found **large and statistically significant increases in the quality of instruction** by staff at participating sites, compared to a control group of programs that did not participate in YPQI. Programs that participated made meaningful improvements in the areas they focused on, resulting in often dramatic increases in quality at the “point of service,” meaning the day-to-day interactions that staff had with young people.

We have similar evidence from the world of mentoring, where two major program quality initiatives have been evaluated to assess their impact on the organizations and professionals who participated.

The first set of findings comes from the randomized controlled trial evaluation of the **National Quality Mentoring System** (NQMS; Keller et al., 2019), a program quality improvement process for mentoring programs analogous to the YPQI. As with that initiative, a mentoring program completes a self-assessment of their implementation of various program practices, which is then reviewed by a trained consultant who helps the program identify areas of strength and weakness. The program then identifies several practices on which they want to improve, codified into an “Improvement and Innovation” plan, and spends a year or more working on those improvements and re-rating their level of quality at that later point.

The evaluation of NQMS involved 66 mentoring programs that were randomly assigned to either participate in the NQMS process or wait at least a year to begin (the control programs were allowed to work on program improvements on their own during this time). The results showed that the organizations participating in NQMS were more likely to report experiencing improvements in the quality of their programming and in their organizational competitiveness relative to those in the control group. 82% of the intervention programs made an improvement plan and 72% completed all or most of their plan goals within a year of the plan’s creation. The participating programs spent more time on planning and implementation of changes, compared to controls, and often codified their practices into manuals and handbooks that could drive program quality through changes in staffing or expansion to new sites.

The programs participating in NQMS also had stronger financial capacity at follow-up and were more likely to engage in formal program evaluation activities compared to the programs in the control group. Several factors related to program readiness for change were identified in the study — having an organizational “culture of learning,” stable and adequate staffing, and adequate time for the process, just to name a few (Spencer et al., 2021). One of the major contributing factors as to whether programs were able to make meaningful

improvements was the provision of training and technical assistance by the MENTOR Affiliate they were working with (or with other local providers).

Which brings us to the second study related to MENTOR's quality improvement efforts: an analysis of **technical assistance outcomes from the National Mentoring Resource Center** (NMRC). The NMRC is a federally funded training and technical assistance entity funded by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention at the U.S. Department of Justice. Since 2004, MENTOR has led this project and provided thousands of hours of technical assistance and professional development to hundreds of mentoring programs and staff around the country.

Analysis of pre-post technical assistance assessments from participating programs (Anderson, 2022) reveals the tremendous impact that even small quality improvement supports can have on a mentoring program. Ninety seven percent of participating programs reported being satisfied or very satisfied with their technical assistance experience, with the average program **implementing three new or improved policies or procedures** and **creating or improving four program tools or materials** (e.g., mentor training curricula, activity guides for matches, policy and procedure manuals for staff) as a result of the technical assistance received.

Most importantly, NMRC technical assistance also resulted in some major improvements in staff knowledge and performance. Programs reported statistically significant increases in their **knowledge and performance of best practices** across all 10 areas of programming asked about in pre-post evaluations (these 10 areas roughly correspond to the topics covered in the EEPM). There were also statistically significant increases in staff ratings of overall program performance. These pre-post differences indicate improvements of approximately 15% from baseline levels for overall ratings of both program knowledge and performance. It is worth noting that these program improvements are the result of a relatively "low-stakes" intervention, as the average TA request and resulting support averaged about 20 hours of program staff time spread across an average of 4 planning meetings.

These evaluations demonstrate that mentoring programs can make meaningful, measurable improvements in the quality of their services through dedicated assessment and improvement interventions provided by capacity-building organizations such as MENTOR Affiliates. These initiatives are often relatively low cost and require a reasonable amount of time investment by mentoring program staff. In the case of NQMS, the process is meant to be ongoing over the life of the program; programs reassess their services in continuous 3-year cycles, enabling them to build on prior improvement work and innovate based on emerging needs for their staff and communities.

CONCLUSION

The research highlighted here makes a strong case that evidence-based practices in mentoring program delivery can drive meaningful mentoring experiences for youth and volunteer mentors, with both program participants and staff reporting many benefits when programs emphasize strong implementation and alignment with guidance such as the *Elements of Effective Practice for Mentoring™*. We also see evidence that programs can improve their practices over time if they have access to meaningful assessments, coaching, and technical assistance. MENTOR looks forward to expanding our efforts on these fronts in the years ahead.

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