Summary

This review addresses four topics related to group mentoring for children and adolescents, including (1) its documented effectiveness, (2) the extent to which effectiveness depends on characteristics of mentors, mentees, or program practices, (3) intervening processes likely to link group mentoring to youth outcomes, and (4) the success of efforts to reach and engage targeted youth, achieve high quality implementation, and adopt and sustain programs over time. Overall, evidence is beginning to accumulate that supports at least the short-term effectiveness of formal group mentoring programs. Research is only beginning to address conditional factors, intervening processes, and factors related to implementation. However, there is some preliminary evidence that:

- Group mentoring programs can produce an array of positive outcomes for youth (behavioral, emotional, academic, etc.) and seem to be effective across a wide range of youth participants (ages, ethnicities, etc.).

- Additional relational processes, such as group cohesion and belonging and a strong group identity, may also contribute to the outcomes youth experience from group mentoring.

- Group mentoring programs offer a context for activities that develop mentee skills, change mentee attitudes, and offer positive peer interactions; and that these processes may lead to behavioral outcomes for participants.

This review concludes with insights and recommendations for practice based on currently available knowledge.
Introduction

Group activities are ubiquitous in the lives of children and youth. The basic ingredients for group mentoring can be found in classrooms, community centers, parks—wherever multiple young people join together over a period of time with one or more group leaders (adults or older peers) for educational or recreational purposes. Informal group mentoring has been documented in youth organizations, such as after-school centers. However, research has shown that systematic efforts may be needed to encourage mentoring to occur in such settings with greater regularity. Thus, formal programs are undertaken to match mentors with groups of youth; such programs are very popular, with estimates that at least 20% of formal youth mentoring occurs in groups. This review of group mentoring addresses four questions, as follows:

1. What are the demonstrated effects of group mentoring on the development of children and adolescents?

2. To what extent are the benefits of group mentoring likely to depend on characteristics and backgrounds of the youth and/or their mentor(s) or program practices?

3. What intervening processes are likely to be involved in linking group mentoring to youth outcomes?

4. How successful have efforts to provide group mentoring to young persons been in terms of reaching and engaging targeted groups of youth, achieving high quality implementation, and in being adopted and maintained by host organizations and settings over time? What factors predict better reach, implementation, and adoption/sustainability?

For purposes of this review, group mentoring refers to a broad array of “natural” or programmatic contexts in which mentoring activity takes place involving one or more mentors and at least two mentees (see What is Mentoring for definitions of mentoring activity and programs). The activity involved must involve group process (that is, interactions among group members). Group mentoring is thus differentiated from other types of group activities, such as didactic skills training classes that do not incorporate significant opportunities for meaningful, two-way interactions between the mentors and mentees or among the mentees. As noted above, the contexts in which group mentoring can take place include formal programs designed for this purpose (such programs include those in which all mentoring takes place in a group context as well as those that use a “hybrid” approach that combines group mentoring with 1:1 mentoring) and more informally in a variety of settings where youth come together in groups, such as sports teams or after school programs, so long as there is significant consistency in attendance to likely engender a sense of ‘membership’.
A systematic literature search uncovered 42 articles, book chapters, and evaluation reports that examined group mentoring for youth and fell within the scope of this review. Table 1 (page 22) provides summary information about these programs, including goals, settings in which they are delivered, group composition, formality of group processes, and evaluation design; where available, hyperlinks to program websites are provided. Programs target youth varying in exposure to risk, ethnic/cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds, and ages (typically middle or high school aged). Programs vary in group size (ranging from as few as 4 youth to more than 20), number of mentors (ranging from 1 to 10), and mentor:mentee ratios (ranging from 1:1 in many hybrid programs to 10:1). The section of the review addressing the effectiveness of group mentoring (Question #1) focused on quantitative studies with designs that allow reasonably strong causal inferences (i.e., randomized or non-randomized comparison groups, multiple pre-test or baseline assessments, or, in the case of informal group mentoring, examination of change in outcomes over time with statistical control for potential confounders—that is, characteristics of youth and their backgrounds that may be correlated with receiving mentoring and also influence outcomes). There were 13 such studies (see Table 2 on page 29), all of which addressed the effects of formal (program-arranged) group mentoring. Sections addressing Questions #2 (moderators/conditional factors), #3 (mediators/processes), and #4 (reach, implementation, and sustainability) drew from the full array of studies identified through the literature search. Each portion of the review begins with a brief background section. These sections, where relevant, orient the reader to major findings for research in related areas (e.g., group therapy).

1. What are the Demonstrated Effects of Group Mentoring on the Development of Children and Adolescents?

**BACKGROUND**
Diverse fields, including clinical and school psychology, education, and social work commonly employ group interventions for children and adolescents. Meta-analyses have concluded that group therapies, particularly those employing cognitive-behavioral techniques, are effective for treating substance abuse, aggression, and anxiety disorders among youth. In some analyses, effects of group therapies are comparable, if not superior, to those of individual therapies. Preventive interventions, such as a substance abuse prevention program that used a mutual-aid model of group counseling and a support group for children of divorce, have also shown evidence of improving youths’ attitudes and coping skills and reducing problem behaviors.

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DuBois and colleagues’ recent meta-analysis found no difference in effectiveness for mentoring programs that used a group format compared to more traditional 1:1 programs. In line with this finding, of the 12 studies of group mentoring program effectiveness examined in the current review (each of a different program), 10 reported evidence of significant positive effects on at least one youth outcome. The evaluations examined varied outcomes, including healthy attitudes/motivations/skills, behavior, emotional well-being, and academic achievement.
Behavioral: Six of the seven studies that reported on behavioral outcomes reported at least one positive effect. Some of these programs target youth who are identified as being at risk for behavioral or externalizing problems, such as delinquent and aggressive behavior, or emotional or internalizing problems, such as depression and anxiety. For example, in *Cognitive Behavioral Principles Within Group Mentoring*²², groups of 4-8 children (8-12 years of age) with emotional or behavioral problems met with pairs of undergraduate or graduate student mentors. Sessions included group-structured discussions regarding social problem solving and interaction skills and allowed time for children to choose additional activities based on their interests. The experimental (random assignment) evaluation found significant reductions in parent-reported externalizing and internalizing behavior problems in program children ($n = 42$) relative to controls ($n = 38$).

*Reading for Life*³⁰ is a juvenile diversion program for nonviolent offenders, ages 11-18, in which groups of 5 youth meet with 2 volunteer mentors twice weekly for 10 weeks. Group activities consist of selecting a novel and reading it together, journaling, and engaging in facilitated discussions focused on moral development; groups also undertake a community service project. In a randomized study 408 youth assigned to either *Reading for Life* or a control condition involving minimally supervised community service, program youth showed **substantial reductions** in subsequent arrests (recidivism and number of arrests) **as much as 2 years after the intervention**.

Academic: Five of 6 programs that reported on academic outcomes reported at least one positive effect. *Better Futures*, a multi-component program for youth (16 to 18 years of age) with mental health challenges, combined bi-monthly individual coaching, a 4-day summer institute, and a series of 4 group-mentoring workshops over a 10-month period.¹⁴ An experimental evaluation involving 36 program youth and 31 controls, documented evidence of positive program effects on participants’ preparation for post-secondary education and in post-secondary participation. Evidence of favorable effects on academic outcomes also have been reported in evaluations of other group mentoring programs, including *TeamWorks*¹⁷, *Young Men of Distinction*¹⁵, the *Village Model of Care*¹⁶, and the *Youth Development Program*.²¹
Socio-emotional well-being and skills/attitudes: Five of 7 evaluations that assessed outcomes relating to attitudes, motivation, and social skills reported at least one significant effect on this type of outcome favoring program participants, and evaluations of 2 of 5 programs that assessed emotional and psychological well-being outcomes reported at least one positive effect on this type of outcome. For example, the evaluation of Go Girls! found increases in youth reports of sense of efficacy for exercise and diet and in intentions to pursue a healthy diet, but reduced intentions to engage in physical exercise.10 Evaluations of two academically focused programs, TeamWorks, which targets high school youth, and Better Futures, which targets middle schoolers, found evidence of favorable program effects on measures of attitudes and motivation, including attitudes toward school, family, and community47 and self-efficacy, self-determination, and transition planning.14 The evaluation of Better Futures also reported evidence of favorable effects on mental health and hope for the future. In an evaluation of Mentoring for Sexual Health, a hybrid program that included both 1:1 and group mentoring, Shin and Rew31 reported evidence of positive effects on middle school youths’ reported sexual knowledge and sexual attitudes. The evaluation of Mentor Families/Campus Corps38 found, in addition to the above noted evidence of positive effects on problem behavior, favorable effects of the program on youth acceptance of problem behavior and sense of autonomy from alcohol use, although not on refusal skills or sense of autonomy from substance use among youth ages 11-18.

It is important to note instances in which the evaluations showed mixed or non-significant effects. For example, a small-sample experimental evaluation of a high school-based group mentoring program7 targeting self-efficacy among girls who were at risk of dropout found no evidence of effects on either social or academic self-efficacy. The evaluation of Twelve Together failed to find evidence of effects on participants’ self-esteem or locus of control. Whereas Cognitive-Behavioral Principals in Group Mentoring showed evidence of reducing behavioral and emotional problems, no such evident effects were indicated for adaptive skills, social skills, or quality of relationships with parents. Finally, none of the evaluations considered in this section examined outcomes in the domain of career development.

CONCLUSIONS

1. There is evidence that group mentoring programs can be effective in fostering at least short-term improvements in a broad range of youth outcomes, including those in the behavioral, academic, emotional, and attitudinal/motivational domains.

2. Adequate evidence does not exist currently to gauge the potential longer-term effects of group mentoring programs.

3. Adequate evidence does not exist currently to gauge the potential effects of more informal forms of group mentoring.
2. What Factors Condition or Influence the Effectiveness of Group Mentoring?

BACKGROUND

One important source of the variability that is evident in effects of group mentoring programs on youth outcomes (both within and across studies) may be differences in characteristics and backgrounds of participating youth and mentors as well as those relating to program design and practices and the setting or context in which group mentoring occurs. Theoretically, the role of an effective group mentor is a sort of balancing act: experience and maturity vs. similarity (e.g., in age, life-circumstances, culture/ethnicity); an ability to combine a strong stance of leadership and authority with an engaging and fun manner that demonstrates curiosity and interest in young people’s lives.7, 9, 13, 24, 25 To the extent that participating youth are at risk for difficulties in school or social-emotional development (as often appears to be the case), some experience in working with such youth could plausibly also be important in promoting improved youth outcomes.20 Likewise, to the extent the context in which group mentoring is provided calls for specific skills, effectiveness may be contingent on mentors having significant knowledge about the subject matter.24, 25 Unfortunately, whereas existing research provides some insights into mentee characteristics that may play a role in effectiveness of group mentoring, studies have not directly examined the role of mentor characteristics.

It is also important to note that the context, structure, and goals of group mentoring programs likely differ in significant ways from other types of mentoring programs.48 Thus, whereas research on primarily 1:1 mentoring programs has identified a range of program practices that have apparent implications for the effectiveness of mentoring programs,46 such findings may not generalize to group mentoring programs. Group mentoring programs are often based in schools or human service settings and are often constrained by relatively brief duration as well as shorter and less frequent meeting times. The logistical challenges of bringing together multiple people over a sustained period of time may result in most programs having established meeting schedules and locations. While potentially restricting spontaneity in mentor and mentee interactions, such regularity also may offer a welcome sense of consistency and predictability. Indeed, the esprit de corps derived from having the same mentor(s) meeting consistently with the same group of youth may be one of the principal defining features of group mentoring.

More generally, differences in the formality of group mentoring structure that potentially have implications for effectiveness include considerations such as the frequency and intensity of group meetings, inclusion of 1:1 activities, duration of the group mentoring experience as a whole, the levels and types of training and support provided to mentors, and degree to which group sessions are guided by a sequenced and structured curriculum. With regard to the latter, many programs incorporate session-by-session themes and activities and may or may not include opportunities for group members to choose topics. Incorporation of evidence-based and theoretically-grounded practices from related areas also could be important for optimizing
results. Examples include the use of cognitive-behavioral principles from the therapy literature\textsuperscript{22} and training in development of a "growth mindset" from the field of educational research.\textsuperscript{29} Other program practices that could possibly contribute to effectiveness include use of creative activities (e.g., journaling, arts projects) and activities to increase cultural awareness and pride (e.g., rites of passage).

Two conflicting ideas about what makes for the ideal group mentor can potentially be addressed through team mentoring. One idea is that mentors should be similar in age, background or life-experience to the mentored youth. For example, as noted in a naturalistic study of informal group mentoring within after-school youth centers,\textsuperscript{1} mentors in formalized mentoring programs often come from very different social worlds than the youth with whom they are paired. Settings in which informal group mentoring arises (e.g., Boys & Girls Clubs) may naturally bridge such differences because such settings typically attract young adults who are from the communities that are being served. Mentors who share similar backgrounds with their mentees might be poised to be effective role models, but may also lack the kind of expertise needed to manage complex group dynamics. Programs, such as TeamWorks\textsuperscript{49} and Pyramid Mentoring,\textsuperscript{50} address this challenge by intentionally constructing a team of mentors for each group in which mentors bring complementary skills, and each play a specific role. The field is rife with many innovative and promising ideas about program practices; however, research is only beginning to tackle important questions about how best to implement group mentoring programs.

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**Characteristics of mentees:** Gender, age, cultural or ethnic background, and social class are often cited in the rationales for group mentoring programs. For example, Banister and colleagues\textsuperscript{5, 6} argued that group mentoring is a culturally appropriate way to engage Canadian aboriginal teenage girls in discussions of sexual health. Likewise, others have suggested that the interpersonal emphasis of group mentoring mirrors the culturally rooted preference for interdependence found among African Americans and may be particularly valuable in addressing the needs of boys.\textsuperscript{34, 36, 50} One small-sample study of a computer mediated group program for teens with disabilities did report better attendance for girls compared to boys.\textsuperscript{33} An evaluation of the Young Women Leaders Program found little evidence that program effects differed depending on youth SES and ethnicity, although in one isolated finding the overall indicated benefits of program participation for global self-esteem did not hold true for girls from low-income families.\textsuperscript{18} On the other hand, the evaluation of Reading for Life\textsuperscript{30} found evidence that the program may be more effective for boys than girls, and for youth from families with relatively lower income—groups that are expected to be at higher risk of recidivism. In the Youth Development Program, immigrant (but not US-born) participants reported increases in school engagement relative to comparison youth; moreover, in analyses that focused solely on program participants, those who reported a strong ethnic identity and comfort interacting with multicultural peers prior to program participation were more likely than others to experience a sense of connection with their mentor and report engaging in mutual help with other group members.\textsuperscript{21} Overall, the studies examined in this review had samples that spanned middle and high school ages, included a broad diversity of ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds, and a range of exposure to risk factors; the findings of favorable effects in most studies points to the likelihood that group mentoring can be effective across a wide range of mentee characteristics.
Program characteristics: The potential implications of variations in group mentoring practices for youth outcomes have received little systematic study. Available research does, however, offer some insight into potentially important practices. For example, studies of the Young Women Leaders Program have found that supportive relationships among mentors (as indicated by mentors’ perceptions of receiving support from other mentors in the program) were predictive of improvements in participants’ self-esteem and that participants’ self-reported social adjustment was stronger when groups were led by co-facilitators (vs. a single facilitator).

CONCLUSIONS

1. Because so little research has addressed conditional factors that may influence the effectiveness of group mentoring, only a few very tentative conclusions can be offered (see below) and none can be offered regarding fundamental issues such as group composition (including group size, number of mentors, mentor:mentee ratios), what constitutes sufficient duration, frequency and intensity of meetings, and the extent to which a formal curriculum is implemented.

2. There is emerging evidence that group mentoring can be effective across a wide range of mentee characteristics, including age, gender, ethnicity, and exposure to risk, and there are isolated findings to suggest that group mentoring might be particularly effective for youth exposed to higher levels of risk.

3. While the research on program practices is limited, one area that shows promise for enhancing effectiveness involves program practices that foster peer support among mentors (e.g., through opportunities for mentors of different groups to interact or through co-mentorship within groups).

3. What Intervening Processes are Most Important in Linking Group Mentoring to Youth Outcomes?

BACKGROUND

Similar to other mentoring approaches, the interpersonal relationships formed between mentors and mentees have been posited to be the primary link between group mentoring and youth outcomes. Whereas individual youth might experience less closeness in their relationships with mentors, the group context also theoretically may foster other developmental and relational processes that enhance important youth outcomes. At least two types of intervening processes theoretically could contribute to positive outcomes for youth in group mentoring: (1) group social relational processes, and (2) social-cognitive skills and attitudes learned through intentional group-based activities and discussions. On the other hand, research on interventions for problem behaviors has raised concerns about the potential of “contagion” of negative behaviors when high-risk youth are grouped together for preventive or therapeutic purposes. A meta-analysis of group-based social skills training with anti-social youth found little evidence of such effects, but did note that positive effects were stronger when groups included a mix of prosocial and anti-social youth. Thus, it may be that the...
composition of groups (e.g., avoiding the formation of groups made up predominantly of youth who share a high risk for behavioral problems) is a more critical consideration than whether to implement group interventions at all.

Young people face the challenge of simultaneously establishing their independence from parents and avoiding the lure of negative peer influences.\textsuperscript{54} Plausibly, group mentoring programs may offer a “one-stop shop” for addressing both sides of that challenge by virtue of youth forming relationships with non-parental adults who can foster and mediate positive peer interactions.\textsuperscript{1} Accordingly, Kuperminc & Thomason\textsuperscript{55} offered that a sense of connection with mentor(s), group cohesion, and peer-based mutual help, may be particularly important processes. For example, as has been demonstrated in research on mutual help groups for adults with mental illness,\textsuperscript{56} the opportunity to both offer and receive help from peers can be an important factor in promoting positive outcomes. Other social processes that have been proposed as intervening processes in group mentoring include the formation of a group identity,\textsuperscript{7} a sense of belonging,\textsuperscript{10, 11} provision of a “safe space” that fosters open dialog,\textsuperscript{4, 5, 9} establishment of a network of different relationships with peers and adults,\textsuperscript{7, 49} a structure that enables youth to take increasing responsibility for planning and managing group activities over time,\textsuperscript{35} and a setting that establishes prosocial behavioral norms.\textsuperscript{8}

Positive attitudes and social-cognitive skills gained through participation in group mentoring may also be important to the effectiveness of group mentoring. Growth in such skills and attitudes are important outcomes in their own right, but can also be considered as intervening factors that have the potential to be important in facilitating behavioral or other outcomes. For example, increases in motivation and academic skills can lead to academic attainment,\textsuperscript{14} and increased confidence in being able to maintain a healthy diet and a program of physical activity can lead to improvements in health behaviors over time.\textsuperscript{10} Unfortunately, research within the group mentoring literature has not yet addressed these processes.

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**Group social-relational processes:** An evaluation of the *Youth Development Program*\textsuperscript{21} found that program participants reported a strong sense of connection to their mentors both at the middle and the end of the academic year program. Participants also reported increases in mutual help from mid-year to post-test. Gains in mutual help, in turn, predicted improvements in participant reports of peer relationship quality and sense of school belonging, and reports of both mutual help and a sense of connectedness with the mentor predicted improvements in youths’ interpersonal skills. A study of informal group mentoring in the context of a community-based drill team for African American youth exposed to community violence\textsuperscript{8} found that greater involvement with the drill team was associated with more positive perceptions of supportive and trusting relationships with adult team leaders, greater sense of community and connectedness with other drill team members, and more prosocial behavioral norms. In further analysis, perceptions of connectedness with group leaders weakened
the association between youths’ exposure to community violence and behavioral outcomes, including delinquency and drug use. Perceptions of sense of community and prosocial peer norms were linked to improved emotional well-being, including higher self-esteem and lower psychological distress. Both qualitative and quantitative studies of Go Girls!\textsuperscript{10, 11} have similarly suggested that a sense of group belonging is critical to the effectiveness of group mentoring. However, while the evaluations of Go Girls! considered the development of a sense of group belonging as a proximal outcome of participation, the quantitative evaluation did not examine the role of this process in explaining other youth outcomes.

**Negative group influences:** As noted previously, this review identified a few instances of negative program effect, two of which were seen in the academic outcome domain. The evaluation of the Youth Development Program\textsuperscript{21} found that program participants reported greater declines in sense of school belonging relative to comparison group youth; however, subsequent analyses of mentors’ process notes suggested that those negative effects were limited to groups that had difficult discussions about racial issues in the school and that had low levels of group cohesion. Such negative effects also were not apparent in groups where participants reported relatively high levels of connectedness to mentors and mutual help. Twelve Together,\textsuperscript{12} an after school dropout prevention program for middle school students also found small negative effects on English grades and course credits earned at the post-program assessment; however those negative effects were no longer present at 1-year follow up. Finally, the evaluation of Go Girls! found small increases in negative attitudes about healthy eating and exercise despite overall improvements in healthy behaviors. None of the negative findings from these studies seem to reflect concerns about “contagion” effects in which group members train one another to enact destructive behaviors; however, because few studies included follow-up assessments more than a few weeks beyond program conclusion, the possibility that negative effects might emerge over time cannot be ruled out.

**CONCLUSIONS**

1. Because research is only beginning to address the intervening mechanisms that might influence the effectiveness of group mentoring, only tentative conclusions can be offered in this area.

2. In addition to whatever role may be played by the relationships that emerge between mentors and mentees in the context of group mentoring, available research suggests that there are additional relational processes, including group cohesion and belonging, mutual help, and a sense of group identity, that may contribute to more positive outcomes for youth in this type of mentoring.

3. By simultaneously involving multiple types of relationships between and among mentors and peers, group mentoring may provide a context that helps build skills, positive attitudes, and confidence in social interactions; preliminary evidence suggests that these processes, in turn, contribute to positive behavioral outcomes over time.

4. Although research to date suggests little potential for “contagion” effects that have been observed for other group interventions for adolescents, these cannot be ruled out until such processes receive more direct examination.
4. Have Group Mentoring Programs and Supports Reached and Engaged Targeted Youth, been Implemented with High Quality, and been Adopted and Sustained?

BACKGROUND

Research on 1:1 youth mentoring as well as the prevention literature more generally suggests that a wide range of factors could be important in program adoption, reaching and engaging targeted youth, ensuring quality implementation and sustaining programs over time.\(^{37, 58}\) For example, in the context of education policies that emphasize standardized testing, successful implementation of a mentoring program may hinge on the extent to which the program is perceived as contributing to students’ academic success. Other considerations include the extent to which the program is perceived as being needed and likely to achieve important benefits, the extent to which sufficient resources (e.g., funding, staffing, skills and relevant expertise) are available or can be garnered, and the extent to which program elements can be adapted to fit local needs and to maximize compatibility with the local culture. Attention to organizational processes is also important. Such processes include decision-making, communication, and collaboration within the organization or group that will implement the program, as well as an ability to coordinate with other organizations. A further consideration is the availability of leadership to set priorities and foster consensus on a vision for the program, to “champion” support both for establishing the program and maintaining it over time, and to ensure managerial and administrative support throughout the program’s implementation.

The research on group mentoring considered for this review reveals little attention to the study of factors that may increase the likelihood of reaching and engaging targeted youth, ensure that group mentoring is implemented with a high degree of fidelity or quality, or foster the adoption or sustainability of group mentoring within different settings. Topics in this area that have received some attention include implementing mentoring programs given limited resources, maintaining mentees’ engagement, selecting appropriate mentors and creating structures to support their work, and logistical issues. For the most part, the “evidence” supporting practices that address these issues is limited to conceptual propositions and experience-based observation.

Larger groups may make it difficult for mentors and mentees to develop close affective relationships, may make formation of subgroups or “cliques” that exclude some members more likely, and may place additional burdens on mentors.

Theoretically, the size of the group also may have implications for issues such as program reach and implementation. With larger groups, it may be more feasible to engage larger numbers of youth. Also, larger groups may make it difficult for mentors and mentees to develop close affective relationships, may make formation of subgroups or “cliques” that exclude some members more likely, and may place additional burdens on mentors (e.g., additional effort devoted to behavior management). Yet, the potential exists for logistical challenges to grow as the number of members in a group increases. Other practical considerations that could have implications for issues such as adoption, implementation, and sustainability include whether or not there is a regular meeting space and regular meeting time as well as transportation considerations relating to getting to and from meetings.
With further respect to implementation, programs may seek to reduce the burden on mentors by utilizing a co-mentoring or team mentoring approach. Advantages of these approaches include being able to draw on complementary skills, enabling mentors to cover for one another (e.g., the group can still meet if one mentor is unable to attend a given session), and an opportunity to model positive interactions and teamwork. However co-mentoring and team mentoring can introduce additional challenges. Effective teamwork among co-mentors could potentially be undermined by power dynamics, for example, if a more experienced mentor does not share authority with a more junior mentor. Relying on a co-mentor to “pick up the slack” might result in individual mentors feeling a decreased sense of responsibility. Thus, theoretically, regular meetings between co-mentors that occur outside of group time may become necessary, resulting in increasing mentors’ time commitment to the program.

Finally, from a cost perspective, a theoretically appealing feature of group mentoring is the prospect of using a group format to reach a large number of youth with fewer human and financial resources than needed for more traditional approaches to mentoring.7, 9, 36

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The limited available evidence does suggest that group mentoring programs are less expensive to implement than 1:1 programs,51 however, such programs also pose some important challenges. These include maintaining the interest and commitment of group members, attending to the skills and supports that are necessary for being a successful group mentor, and managing group logistics. Although comparison to the costs of implementing a 1:1 program is valuable, an arguably more important type of analysis is one that considers both costs and benefits. For example, the evaluation of *Reading for Life* estimated the cost per participant at about $1,000 per youth compared to $300 per youth in the control condition. However, when taking into account the estimated societal cost of each subsequent arrest that was “prevented” by the program, the study’s authors estimated that the program saved approximately $3.50 for every dollar spent.

The societal cost of each subsequent arrest that was “prevented” by the *Reading for Life* program was estimated to save approximately $3.50 for every dollar spent.

Other research on group mentoring touches on the theoretical idea discussed above that maintaining a viable group may require balancing individual interests and preferences of each group member with those of the group as a whole (for example, the integrity of the group may become threatened if some members become disengaged). In an evaluation of the *iCode* program,25 an intensive group mentoring program focused on science and technology, the evaluators noted that mentees sometimes had difficulty attending the expected number of sessions because of conflicts that arose with other interests, such as sports and recreational activities. In response, the program managers encouraged mentors to be flexible about attendance policies, while acknowledging that consistent attendance was necessary for youths’ achievement of program goals. Despite these efforts, the researchers reported retention rates below 50% for the year-long program.
As noted previously, the skills required to be an effective group mentor may be quite different from those of a 1:1 mentor. Research referenced previously, for example, points to quality implementation potentially being facilitated by training mentors with skills in group facilitation, perhaps involving professionals with group expertise to support and assist mentors in managing group dynamics.\(^{26}\)

Taking advantage of existing community resources offers a potential solution to these challenges. For example, partnering with a local university, programs may capitalize on students who are highly motivated to apply skills they are learning in their areas of study. This strategy was used by *Mentoring for Sexual Health*, as indicated, in which nursing students served as mentors. Similarly, undergraduate students earned course credit while serving as mentors in the *Youth Development Program*.\(^{21}\) Supervision, which included planning, reflection, and ongoing training was integrated into course requirements. Neither program formally evaluated this strategy, but both programs showed positive effects on youth outcomes that the researchers attributed in part to the partnership that enabled and structured the use of the students as mentors.

**CONCLUSIONS**

1. Research is currently lacking to inform understanding of factors that may influence reaching and engaging targeted groups of youth, ensuring high quality implementation, and fostering the adoption and longer-term sustainability of group mentoring as an approach to supporting young persons in different settings.

2. Available studies suggest that key challenges specific to group mentoring may include managing limited resources, maintaining mentees’ engagement, selecting appropriate mentors and creating structures to support their work, and logistical issues; however, systematic data are lacking to address best practices in these areas.
As we can see in this review of the research-based evidence around group mentoring, there is a lot of promise and potential in this model, as well as a number of “unknowns” that future research can help illuminate. These types of programs have shown the ability to produce strong outcomes for participants, but there is inconclusive evidence of exactly how these programs work best and who they serve effectively. So what are practitioners to do with the mixed findings and as-of-now incomplete understanding about group mentoring? Below I discuss some key concepts to keep in mind when designing and delivering group mentoring services.

When First Considering Group Mentoring, Think About Why the Group Aspect Matters

All mentoring programs need a strong theory of change that guides the development and implementation of services. But group mentoring offers an interesting challenge in that it often changes the basic components of a mentoring program. Instead of nurturing a close, mutual relationship between one child and one adult, these programs bring together groups of youth, each of them with unique needs, personalities, and interests, and match them with a number of adults, all of whom are expected to work well together and deliver a consistent message and meaningful activities. This, obviously, creates a more complicated web of interactions between participants. (Hybrid programs, in which mentor-mentee dyads also participate in robust planned group activities, may complicate this even further by embedding the primary mentoring relationship in a more macro-level mentoring environment where other adults may provide support and interactions with peers are part of the mechanism of change for individual youth.) And while there are challenges to this more complicated picture, there are also opportunities.

What is critical is that programs think about why the group aspect matters to what they are trying to achieve:

- Does the group setting offer better opportunities to practice new skills than a one-to-one relationship would?
- Is the group setting designed to feel more “safe” to youth who may be reluctant to open up one-to-one?
- Does being in groups allow for different types of activities or let youth hear different perspectives from their peers?
- Might a group structure allow more access to more mentors, each of whom provide a different piece of what youth need?
• Does the use of multiple mentors for a group help reduce the instances of “missed mentoring” by allowing the other mentors to step in and run the group when one mentor can’t make it? On the other hand, can the use of multiple mentors reduce the sense of responsibility each mentor feels because there is someone else to “pick up the slack”?

• In hybrid programs, how and when do the group activities supplement or enhance the direct one-to-one mentoring?

These types of questions can help practitioners clarify why they think a group model will facilitate the changes they are looking for in mentees.

What practitioners (and those who fund programs) should avoid is moving to a group model just to save time (i.e., fewer mentors to recruit) or money (i.e., less need for staff to provide intensive supervision and case management). Although both of these things may be true (especially the staff time spent on supervision and checking in with participants compared to one-on-one mentoring), practitioners should recognize that hoped-for cost savings from reduced recruitment or easier supervision might be offset by staff time and costs from developing curriculum and coordinating group activities. Although it may be less time-intensive to run a group program, that difference may not be as big as anticipated and the cost may be fairly even. In fact, those one-to-one/group hybrids, might even be more expensive and time consuming for staff all of the effort of running a one-to-one program and the activity coordination of the group. Programming decisions should always be informed by careful consideration of what will likely produce the most positive outcomes for youth, not simply what will be “easier” or “cheaper.” Make sure that the group aspect actually adds something to the programming, that it provides an opportunity to do something meaningful for youth that one-to-one mentoring relationships could not.

**THINK ABOUT HOW YOUR PROGRAM CAN BUILD REAL RELATIONSHIPS IN GROUP MENTORING**

It can be tempting to call any youth-serving program where adults and groups of kids interact a “group mentoring” program. But that does disservice to the fact that group mentoring programs are often very intentional about the groups they create and manage and the depth and quality of the relationships between participants. Of course, informal mentoring can happen organically in just about any program where youth and adults (either staff or volunteers) work together. But most group mentoring programs are usually very thoughtful about the matching of particular youth with a set of mentors: They strive for a blend of different personalities, needs, and abilities among youth participants and choose mentors who bring different skills, perspectives, and backgrounds. And perhaps most importantly, strong group mentoring programs design their activities in a way that allows for maximum participation and interaction for every member of the group.

It can be easy for youth who are shy or who have trouble being open with their peers to get lost in the shuffle of free-flowing group activities. It can also be a challenge to not let the more vocal and extroverted members of the group draw most of the attention and engagement from the mentors. Thus, when developing a group mentoring model, it is important to pay attention to the blend of personalities in the group and think about how activities can engage even the most reticent
participants in the conversations and group dynamic. Mentors may also need training (or frequent reminders) to build equitable relationships with all of the youth they mentor. There will always be some youth who get more out of a program than others, but group mentoring programs should take care to keep the group context from marginalizing some youth. Each mentee should have equal opportunity to bond with their mentors and interact with their peers.

Programs can facilitate this by not overstuffed their schedules with recreational and other “active” activities. One of the potential pitfalls of group mentoring is the desire to make the experience fun and engaging by emphasizing “doing things” more than “talking about things.” But group mentoring programs may want to also provide youth with the opportunity to share what’s happening with them, to surface ideas and feelings, to truly be *relational*. It can be difficult to provide these opportunities if every minute of the program schedule is spent on recreational activities or games. Practitioners should ensure that their programs are more than just a collection of activities they should also provide moments for facilitated conversation, sharing, and interpersonal connection. Practitioners should also pay attention to sequencing of activities, allowing mentors and mentees to get to know each other before diving into projects that require a high level of trust and collaboration, and providing time and sensitivity to the potential difficulty of drawing the group to a close at the end of the program. (See below for more information about the stages that these groups tend to go through.)

**PROVIDE SPECIAL TRAINING TO MENTORS AND COMPOSE MENTOR TEAMS CAREFULLY**

In some ways, mentors in group programs have an even harder job than those in one-to-one programs. Not only do they have to build a meaningful relationship with multiple youth (instead of just one) they also have to make sure that their work as a mentor is coordinated with the other mentors in the group. And, they have to carefully manage a whole group of youth over each and every activity. So while the group format can seem appealing for volunteers who are uncomfortable with the idea of one-to-one mentoring, the reality is that the group dynamics and relationship juggling here may be even more fraught with peril!

But programs can anticipate this and provide training that will help group mentors succeed in their role. Lack of definitive research notwithstanding, topics that seem likely to be valuable, if not essential, to address in training include:

- Establishing group norms and rules
- Working with the other mentors to coordinate and supervise group activities
- Ensuring that the advice and messages provided to youth are consistent, or at least not contradictory, across all the mentors in the group
- Providing and facilitating opportunities for discussion and youth sharing within an activity-centric environment (this is critical if this is to truly be a mentoring program and not just a youth activity program; youth must have opportunities to talk and share and mentors will need to know how to encourage this)
• Handling conflicts or disagreements among mentors about how to run an activity, respond to a youth need, or provide meaningful advice
• Ensuring that each youth participant gets equal treatment and opportunities to engage
• Using staff support to iron out problems and to get the most out of the group structure

Programs should also think about the composition of the mentors in a particular group. What would be the ideal mentor-youth ratio? How will the mentors’ personalities mesh? Do their personalities mirror or complement the diversity of personalities in the group of youth? Do the mentors bring a diversity of skills and backgrounds? Do they all have similar or complementary approaches to engaging youth? Think of group mentors as a sports team, where the talents of each individual contribute to the whole, but only when each member is “on the same page” as their teammates. Use thoughtful groupings and rigorous training to bring out the teamwork among group mentors.

**DON’T SKIMP ON SUPERVISION AND ONGOING MENTOR AND MENTEE SUPPORT**

As noted earlier, group mentoring programs may be a bit less labor intensive than one-to-one programs in terms of checking in with parents and guardians and other time-consuming forms of match monitoring and support. Simply having participants meeting in one location and engaging in staff-supervised activities may greatly reduce the amount of supervision work needed compared to a typical one-to-one community-based program.

But that doesn’t mean that programs can just set up their groups and turn them loose. They will still need to make sure that these groups are functioning in healthy, effective ways. They will still need to problem solve and troubleshoot. Programs may want to pay particular emphasis to the following circumstances and dynamics:

• **The typical life cycle of a group** – These groups can have many ups and downs as they come together, get to know each other, engage in activities, and wrestle with the inevitable conflicts and disagreements that happen in any group of humans over time. A good example of this cycle is articulated as a journey through various stages: Forming, Storming, Norming, Performing, and Adjourning/Mourning (see the materials from this program for more information). Program staff will want to provide targeted support and perhaps specific activities to the groups as they go through this progression and should note that not all groups will evolve at the same pace.

• **Mentor attrition** – Some practitioners believe that group mentoring program may make it easier for under-committed mentors to forego their responsibilities after all, there are other mentors there to pick up the slack if one doesn’t show up. The group dynamic can also create tensions and jealousies if youth seem to prefer one mentor over another or if mentors feel inadequate in relation to their partners in the group. So programs should still check in with mentors individually to see how they are experiencing the program and provide additional training and support as needed.
Youth disengagement – As noted previously, some youth may get lost in the shuffle of a busy and activity-focused program. Staff will need to make sure that individual youth are getting what they need from the experience and that mentors are doing a good job of running their groups and implementing the strategies for group cohesion covered in their initial training.

**EMPHASIZE ACTIVITIES THAT GET YOUTH ENGAGED WITH EACH OTHER (AND THE WORLD)**

Although there is some concern in the world of one-to-one mentoring that too much emphasis on curriculum and highly prescribed activities will curtail the development of close mentoring relationships, group mentoring programs, by their nature, may be much better off when they give the groups something to do. There are many reasons to expect this: an engaging activity may keep members of the group from feeling bored or disengaged when the mentors are talking with other youth, it may reduce the opportunities for negative interactions and so called “deviancy training” among participants, and, ideally, it can give youth a chance to practice new skills and build relationships with each other.

The group format also allows mentees to take on more meaningful projects and community-oriented activities than if they were just in a solo relationship with a mentor. Group mentoring programs may want to emphasize activities that encourage civic engagement, service to the community, and meaningful and lasting impact. These types of activities can give mentees a real sense of accomplishment and provide fertile ground for working on teamwork, problem-solving, and leadership skills. Just keep in mind that, as with one-to-one mentoring, group mentoring needs to also be fun and enjoyable. Don’t let too many “serious” activities take away from the enjoyment and bonding that can happen during social or recreational interactions.

You can find several tools and activity guides that can support group mentoring in the Resources section of the NMRC website. And remember that you can always request NMRC technical assistance to help start or improve a group mentoring program at: [http://www.nationalmentoringresourcecenter.org/index.php/connect-with-us/technical-assistance.html](http://www.nationalmentoringresourcecenter.org/index.php/connect-with-us/technical-assistance.html).

*David DuBois served as editor for this review. Thanks are also due to the anonymous expert reviewers whose comments and suggestions on an earlier draft of the review served to strengthen the final review and implications for practice.*
REFERENCES


