Welcome to the next installment of the National Mentoring Research Center E-Newsletter! This newsletter focuses on mentoring research, the work of the NMRC Research Board, and emerging knowledge that can help you plan and implement more effective mentoring services for youth. In this issue, we:

- Feature a reading by NMRC Research Board members, Theresa Melton and Ed Bowers, on growing your capacity for program evaluation,
- Summarize some great new research articles produced by members of our NMRC Research Board and other scholars, and,
- Highlight tools and resources including a free online training designed for adults working with LGBTQ+ youth, a toolkit offering guidance on promoting youth thriving, and new episodes of the Reflections on Research podcast.

- Rachel Bennett, Research Manager at MENTOR

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Have a question about mentoring evaluation and research?
Get an answer!
Write to us and we’ll answer your questions in a future issue.

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Enhancing Capacity for Program Evaluation
Theresa Melton, PhD – NMRC Research Board Member
Ed Bowers, PhD – NMRC Research Board Member

As scholars who regularly work with youth mentoring programs, one of the most frequent activities on which we collaborate with partners is program evaluation. This is not surprising given that evaluation is an essential activity of mentoring programs for several reasons. Engaging in evaluation can help ensure that the goals of the program align with the needs and values of the community, that programs are implemented in line with the original program design, and that programs impact the intended outcomes for youth. Results from an evaluation can also be instrumental in helping to design or improve programs and are also often useful to, if not required by, funding agencies. Given the potential consequences evaluation can have for program improvement and funding, one might think that programs would place evaluation at the top of their priorities. However, programs are not always well-positioned to engage in evaluation or to utilize results from evaluation to improve their policies and procedures. Therefore, when considering engaging in an evaluation, it is important for a program to consider their capacity for evaluation.

What is a program’s capacity for evaluation?
Evaluation capacity speaks to a program’s readiness and ability to both engage in an evaluation and make use of the results. Often, we speak about evaluation capacity building, as we work with programs to both improve their preparedness and ability to engage in program evaluation and to apply findings from the evaluation to improve programming. This process frequently includes a thorough review of the written documents used to guide programming and working with programs to better understand what data are already collected and how data can be stored and managed. Reviewing these types of policies and practices can help assess both the program’s current capacity and the steps they can take to improve it.

It can be helpful to consider a program’s capacity for evaluation in five key areas: evaluation planning, data collection, data analysis and communication, culture of evaluation, and stakeholder engagement. Evaluation planning includes the development of resources that guide the evaluation. For example, does the program have an outlined plan for how the program operates, and was this plan developed with the input of key stakeholders? Does the program have a clear system to manage data? Programs should also ensure that there is a clear plan for data analysis and relevant experience on the team, and they should consider the culture of evaluation within their program. For example, does leadership/management support evaluation, and is there evidence of evaluation as a priority by way of staff professional development opportunities? Finally, what role do stakeholders play within the evaluation? Have they been included in developing the purpose and outcomes of interest? Will they be in the room when decisions are made from the results?
Challenges in building program capacity
At the National Mentoring Summit in 2023, we presented a workshop with a team of colleagues focused on building evaluation capacity. In the workshop, representatives from 50 youth serving programs engaged in activities to identify and reflect on their current capacity for evaluation. During this workshop, we spent time discussing common challenges programs faced. For many participants, that included insufficient time to prepare and engage in the evaluation, a lack of resources to support data collection and analysis, and an absence of staff training on things such as data literacy. For others, the greatest challenge to building their capacity for evaluation included a lack of buy-in or engagement from staff. Even the best evaluation plan will falter if the staff delivering the program or partnering on the evaluation are not engaged and do not see the value of their efforts.

How to improve your capacity for evaluation
Often, engaging in small evaluations, such as answering “Did youth benefit from our program?,” can actually help support improvements in many areas. For example, there may not be established champions or resources to support the evaluation, such as additional staff support or financial resources. However, engaging in a small evaluation can be sufficient in demonstrating its value to other individuals within the program, including administration. This may improve the culture of evaluation, increasing resources that can support more rigorous work. Connecting with local universities can be helpful in improving capacity (e.g., providing assistance developing data collection tools or, a student may offer low-cost assistance to conduct evaluation activities) and also helping staff learn important skills, though programs should be careful to find the right partner (see Ettekal et al., 2017 or Melton et al., 2022). For some programs, developing a research advisory board has been helpful, as it brings together several experts on the content area and evaluation.

There are a few points to consider while assessing your program’s capacity for evaluation. Remember that evaluation is an ongoing and iterative process. Even programs that have established key tasks related to evaluation capacity, such as having an established logic model or system to manage data, should consider that although these tasks may have been completed, they may not be the best fitting. Programs may engage stakeholders and find that their tools are not reflective of their voices and opinions. Or they may speak with staff and realize that the stated goals do not accurately reflect their purpose and observations. Therefore, we should consider whether a task needs to be reworked. Aligned with this point, one’s capacity for evaluation should be reassessed often. Additionally, when working to improve one’s capacity, it is important to identify small, realistic next steps. These small moves toward improved capacity can be incredibly powerful in the long term. For example, during a recent course on evaluation, our students realized that many were collecting data without a clearly articulated plan for the program. For those students, developing a logic model is a critical next step to ensure that the data being collected maps on to the purpose of the program (if a logic model is unclear, see the NMRC’s resources on how to establish your own).
Try this brief reflection task yourself. Think about your program’s current capacity for evaluation and consider the five different areas within which your team may be able to increase its capacity for evaluation: planning, data collection, analysis and communication, culture of evaluation, and stakeholder engagement. What is one thing you can do to help move your capacity forward? For example, can you work with your team to assess or develop a clear logic model? Can you look for evaluation “champions” within your program? You may find that making small progress toward your program’s capacity is more manageable than you initially thought, and making small progress can lead to big gains in your program’s capacity for evaluation.

Additional Resources
Measurement Guidance Toolkit for Evaluation – This toolkit offers information on conducting meaningful, practical program evaluations and where to get additional support. Guidance includes answers to common questions, advice for designing and administering evaluation tools, and key things to consider when engaging in program evaluation.

References


Building blocks for a happy life: Longitudinal associations between early life income, mentorship and later well-being
– by Thomas Chan, Veronica Fruith, and Nicardo McInnis

(Reprinted from Abstract) Longitudinal data from the Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID; N = 2996) were used to test hypotheses about the link between well-being and financial and social developmental resources. Results suggest that higher average family income from birth to age 18, and personal and professional mentoring received between 17 and 30, were positively associated with indicators of positive well-being and negatively related to negative indicators of well-being. Interactions between early life family income and mentoring during emerging adulthood were not significant predictors of any of the well-being outcomes. In all cases, the magnitudes of the coefficients became larger when simultaneously accounting for early life income, emerging adulthood mentoring, and their interactions—suggesting that financial and social resources in earlier life are independently linked to later life well-being. Findings highlight that mentoring received in emerging adulthood benefits downstream hedonic and eudemonic well-being, regardless of financial resources.

Relevance for practitioners: Though mentoring alone is unable to compensate for the effects of economic disparity, it can lay a foundation for well-being during emerging adulthood particularly when young adults are able to leverage multiple forms of support. Similar to prior research, the current study found that those who grew up in a low-income household report more negative physical and mental health outcomes in adulthood but, also tend to receive more mentoring in early adulthood than those from high-income households. The presence of more mentors during emerging adulthood tended to predict greater well-being in later adulthood suggesting that variance of support types (e.g., professional and career development, and interpersonal relationships) can foster more general life satisfaction and greater flourishing. Particularly during the transitional stage of emerging adulthood, when many young adults lose access to naturally occurring mentors available through school and extracurricular programming, providing opportunities for new mentoring relationships is especially important. Young adults are likely to encounter mentorship in the workplace but may lack access to mentors who can support other domains important in this stage of development. Programs serving young adults can help foster well-being by filling gaps of necessary support.

Available at: https://doi.org/10.1002/ajcp.12738
The effectiveness of interventions for youth that activate the social network: a meta-analytic study
- by Natasha Kopera, Roos M. van der Heijdenb, Sophie Donkb, Thao Kieua, Hanneke E. Creemersb, Levi van Damb,c, Susan Branjea, and Geert Jan J. M. Stamsb

(Reprinted from Abstract) This meta-analysis aimed to examine the effectiveness of interventions for youth that activate the social network for improving youth outcomes (e.g. psychological problems, child safety). A literature search yielded 37 studies with 35 independent samples (N=712,269) of youth aged 0-26 years (M=7.20), and 409 effect sizes. A three-level meta-analysis controlling for the dependency among effect sizes within studies showed no overall effect of interventions activating the social network (d=0.11, p =.241). Yet, moderator analyses revealed positive effects for youth-initiated mentoring interventions (d=0.46), youth deciding who to involve (d=0.52), interventions that involve only one person (d=0.56), European samples (d=0.40), interventions targeting youth with mental health needs (d=0.75), data retrieved through questionnaires (d=0.10) and official records (d=0.14), assessments completed by professionals (d=0.34) or parents (d=0.17), and outcomes that were corrected for pretest differences between conditions (d=0.27). This meta-analysis demonstrates that social network activation matters for intervention effectiveness under specific conditions.

Relevance for practitioners: How a youth’s social network is engaged and which outcomes this network is best situated to improve were among the most salient questions explored in this meta-analysis, which examined a variety of interventions, including mentoring, that featured efforts to get young people to “activate” their existing networks as a form of support. Though analyses showed no significant overall effect of interventions activating the social network compared to those that did not, the positive effects it revealed for youth-initiated mentoring suggest that approaches which center youth’s autonomy are key to utilizing their social network to enhance program outcomes. Given the relationship between social connection and positive mental health, engaging supportive adults from a youth’s network appears an especially apt means of improving outcomes within this domain. These findings offer useful examples of how program activities can contribute to desired program outcomes when they have a clear relationship to one another, as well as the value in integrating mentoring support into the existing networks of young people.

Available at: https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S027273582300079X

Exploring the impact of natural mentors on sociopolitical stress: Implications for educators and youth workers
- by Amanda L. Davis, Neshat Yazdani, Mariah Kornbluh, and Samuel D. McQuillin

(Reprinted from Abstract) Aims: This study examines college students’ access to natural mentors during the contentious 2020 U.S. presidential election and considers the role of natural mentors as protective factors in relation to coping and sociopolitical stress. Methods: Data were collected from 588 students between the ages of 18 and 29 who were enrolled at 10 institutions of higher education across the U.S. at the time of data collection. Chi-square tests of independence explored differences in access to mentors. T-tests examined differences in sociopolitical stress and coping between those with and without mentors, and multivariable regressions examined whether relationship characteristics influenced these associations. Results: Findings indicated significant differences in access to mentors based
on gender, religion, and political affiliation. Furthermore, results indicated that mentored college students reported higher levels of coping. Relationship characteristics did not affect these associations. Conclusion: Results highlight global implications for community practitioners as they support young adults’ civic engagement in divisive sociopolitical climates, especially as elections become increasingly polarizing on a global scale.

**Relevance for practitioners:** Of the college students surveyed, women, Republicans, and those with a religious affiliation were more likely to have access to a mentor, while nearly 43% of students reported having no mentor they could turn to for support. Though no difference in levels of sociopolitical stress were found between mentored and non-mentored students, the current study revealed that mentored students did report significantly higher rates of coping such as participating in advocacy efforts, seeking social support, or other forms of self-care. With younger generations becoming increasingly likely to report more negative impacts due to sociopolitical stress, mentoring programs can focus outreach on youth and young adults who lack access to natural mentors and offer resources and education on topics like healthy coping strategies and civic engagement.

Available at: [https://www.gjcpp.org/es/article.php?issue=46&article=286](https://www.gjcpp.org/es/article.php?issue=46&article=286)

**Mentoring in Group-Based Adolescent Girl Programs in Low- and Middle-Income Countries: Evidence-Informed Approaches**
- by Miriam Temin, Sarah Blake, and Eva Roca

*(This article does not include an Abstract)*

**Relevance for practitioners:** Investigating a series of Community-Based Girl Groups (CBGGs) in low-resourced communities in Guatemala, Kenya, and the U.S., the authors identified mechanisms critical to program sustainability and supporting collective economic and development opportunities for mentees and mentors engaged in CBGG models. Many of the programs were embedded within broader interventions such as public health or violence prevention efforts and utilized mentors with similar lived experience to deliver structured curricula to build life skills, health knowledge, and social support among peers. Prior evaluations of CBGGs have demonstrated mixed effects on well-being and empowerment outcomes for adolescent girls. However, CBGGs may hold unique potential to impact community outcomes, particularly in settings where gender inequality and limited access to educational opportunities constrain economic mobility for women and girls. Providing mentors with compensation, opportunities for networking, and leadership advancement were noted to foster asset-building for individual mentors but also created more buy-in and long-term program sustainability. Though more research is needed to understand how CBGGs may contribute to broader community outcomes this model offers an example of the pathways programs can create to support collective change.

Available at: [https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/jyd/vol18/iss3/5/](https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/jyd/vol18/iss3/5/)
Preventing substance use among urban, African American youth: The potential of mentor-mentee conversations

- by Michelle R. Kaufman, Kate Wright, Jeannette Simon, Alicia Bazell, David L. DuBois, Lori-Ann Palen, and Carl Latkin

(Reprinted from Abstract) Background: Early adolescence is a critical time for preventing substance use onset. Mentoring can help protect youth via social influence; however, little is currently known about direct mentor-mentee interactions around substance use. To investigate this topic, interviews were conducted with mentors to explore their comfort with, and perceived barriers and facilitators to, discussions about substance use with youth mentees. Methods: Interviews were conducted with 26 adults serving as mentors to African American youth ages 12-14 in programs in the Baltimore/Washington, DC area. Themes were identified through qualitative analysis and pertained to comfort and engagement, commonly discussed topics, and barriers and facilitators. Results: Although mentors expressed comfort with the idea of talking about substance use with their mentees, there also was an equally salient theme of having not actually done so beyond relatively cursory conversations. Salient expressed barriers to substance use discussions with mentees included fear of overstepping unclear boundaries in the mentor role and concern about having accurate information. Facilitators included training provided by programs, personal or familial experience with substance use, and concern with disparate legal ramifications for youth of color if caught in possession of, using, or selling drugs. Mentors also were in general agreement that a digital app could serve as a useful resource for discussing substance use with mentees. Conclusions: These results suggest mentors of urban youth of color may benefit from additional training and support for engaging them in discussions about substance use as well as useful topics to address in this regard.

Relevance for practitioners: Mentors can play a vital role in discussing substance use with youth, but uncertainty about how to initiate these conversations and what information to share with mentees may prevent mentors from feeling confident in their ability to do so. As the study authors note, many of the mentors interviewed expressed comfort talking about substance use but half noted only having a few or no conversations at all on the topic – particularly if mentees did not initiate or seemed dismissive of mentors attempts to discuss substance use. Appropriate boundaries, accurate information on substance use, and evidence-informed strategies for prevention or reduction in substance use are among some of the helpful topics on which programs can provide training and ongoing support to mentors.

Available at: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.drugalcdep.2023.110943
LGBTQ+ Training Resource **Ally: Verb** – Created by NMRC Research Board member, Dr. Christian Rummel, this free online training resource offers a roadmap for volunteers, mentors, youth-serving organization staff, educators, and caring adults to take action in support of LGBTQ+ youth. The training series, Ally: Verb, offers tools and insights to leverage the power of mentoring relationships to strengthen protective factors and help LGBTQ+ young people grow into their possibilities. Check out the newly released modules and subscribe for updates on the [Mentorist website](https://mentorist.org/ally%3A-verb-training).

**Available at:** [https://mentorist.org/ally%3A-verb-training](https://mentorist.org/ally%3A-verb-training)

**Portrait of Thriving Youth Guide** – Developed by the University of Virginia’s Youth-Nex Research Center, under the direction of NMRC Research Board member Dr. Nancy Deutsch, the **Portrait of a Thriving Youth** describes what optimal development looks like during this important period of development. The guide provides an overview of key adolescent learning and development domains and implementation guidance on how to foster skill-building for each. In the guide, practitioners can also find an assessment tool to help them identify how well their services support youth thriving.

**Available at:** [https://education.virginia.edu/research-initiatives/research-centers-labs/youth-nex/youth-nex-initiatives/portrait-thriving-youth](https://education.virginia.edu/research-initiatives/research-centers-labs/youth-nex/youth-nex-initiatives/portrait-thriving-youth)

**New Episodes of Reflections on Research Podcast** – Join MENTOR’s Senior Director of Research and Quality, Mike Garringer, as he talks with different mentoring researchers about pressing topics and emerging research in youth mentoring. These short, 30-minute conversations provide an easy opportunity to learn more about the latest research in our field and how it applies to your program!

**Season 4 Episode 5 – Dr. Bernadette Sánchez:** Dr. Sánchez drops by the podcast to discuss mentoring for Latino and Latina youth, how mentoring can reinforce familial and community support for young people, and social capital.

**Season 4 Episode 6 – Dr. David DuBois:** In this episode, David DuBois talks about his recent evidence review of credible messenger mentoring. Dr. DuBois shares major findings of his review, key practices that influence program outcomes, and recommendations for scaling and supporting credible messenger mentoring models in juvenile justice contexts and beyond.

**Available at:** [https://nationalmentoringresourcecenter.org/research-tools/reflections-on-research-podcast/](https://nationalmentoringresourcecenter.org/research-tools/reflections-on-research-podcast/)