

A Resilience Model for School-Based Mentoring Programs

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Abstract

This article describes a mentoring program pairing university students with at-risk youth. A resilience-based model provides a positive framework for mentors to emphasize strengths and responsibility in youth whose lives have been shaped by poverty, family dysfunction, or learning disabilities. Specific activities for relationship building, teaching the construct of resilience, and building resilience through a mentoring relationship are described.

Introduction

When schools are committed to the mission of providing every student an opportunity for success, those identified as “at-risk” become the focus of a variety of intervention programs. In mentoring programs, students benefit from access to caring adults who can offer support and serve as a role model. This positive contact with a caring adult can help young people to overcome risk factors that jeopardize their social and academic functioning. Studies indicate that young people believe that a mentoring relationship with a responsible adult enhances their likelihood for a positive future (Ginzburg et al., 2002; Resnick et al., 1997). By having a mentor to guide them, at-risk students are able to more effectively change their future for the better. One-to-one mentoring programs promote positive outcomes by helping youth develop a healthy sense of identity while strengthening self-regulation skills. Successful mentoring programs may help to prevent school failure or dropout and involvement in criminal activities (Blechman, 1992; Flaxman, Ascher, and Harrington, 1988; LoScuito, Rajala, Townsend, & Taylor, 1996).

School-based mentoring programs can have many positive effects in an at-risk student. In two studies conducted by Big Brothers Big Sisters of America, (Jucovy, 2000), students who attended a school-based mentoring program through the Big Brothers Big Sisters Association of America yielded significant positive results after participation. Results included students who developed more positive attitudes towards school, achieved higher grades in social studies, languages and math, and improved relationships with adults and peers. Students were also better able to express their feelings, developed higher levels of self-confidence, and were more likely to trust their teachers.

Students are typically selected to participate in the mentoring program based on the lack of positive substance in their lives. Therefore, when students recognize that they have been chosen because of these deficiencies, the potential for stigmatization must be considered. Our model for mentoring uses the construct of resilience to neutralize this focus on deficits and maintain an emphasis on strengths and personal responsibility.

This program is consistent with many other mentoring models in its goal of strengthening resilience in mentees, but it also strives to explicitly teach these at-risk youth the construct of resilience. In this article, we describe a mentoring program that has been implemented at two middle school campuses in Abilene, Texas. The program pairs education majors at a local university with seventh and eighth grade students. Specific activities for relationship building, teaching the construct of resilience, and building resilience through a mentoring relationship will also be described in this article.

The Resilience Model

Over the past three decades, resilience models for research and practice have challenged traditional assumptions based on negative developmental outcomes (Luthar, 1991; Masten, 2001, Werner, 1993). Researchers have focused on children who demonstrate good outcomes in spite of the prevalence of risk factors in their lives. These findings have inspired a shift from a deficit-model of development toward the identification of factors that distinguish young people who seem less vulnerable to the circumstances that threaten their adaptive development from those at-risk youth who suffer from negative outcomes. One of these researchers (Masten, 2001) suggested a list of these protective factors that includes “connections to competent and caring adults in the family and community, cognitive and self-regulation skills, positive views of self, and motivation to be effective in the environment.”(p. 234).

Mentors who enter relationships with youth whose lives have been shaped by poverty, family dysfunction, or learning disabilities are often challenged with the task of deconstructing the belief systems that maintain self-destructive behaviors. At the heart of these belief systems is learned helplessness – the belief that no amount of effort will bring success (Seligman, 1975). At-risk students often make choices based on short-term satisfaction because they have little confidence in their ability to sustain the behaviors required to achieve long-term goals. These beliefs, in addition to a mentee’s awareness that he or she has been selected as one of the students who “needs a mentor,” render the mentoring relationship vulnerable to unhealthy patterns of sympathy, dependency, or even manipulation. Therefore, mentoring relationships that do not establish an immediate focus on resilience may conceivably reinforce the negative and self-destructive belief systems that keep at-risk students from reaching their potential. A mentoring relationship limited to the provision of compassionate support to an at-risk youth could appear to be beneficial initially, but may offer no long-term influence on the development of a positive identity and the demonstration of responsible behavior. Training mentors to implement a resilience-based model will help them to stay focused on empowering students who believe that they are helpless in rising above their circumstances. Using the construct of resilience to shift these belief systems to more positive outcomes has the potential for effecting change that endures long after the mentoring relationship has ended.

University Students as Mentors

In our program, students enrolled in teacher education at a local university are enlisted and trained as part of a required course in adolescent development. Mentors go

to the school as a group one afternoon each week. Mentees are selected by the school counselor and begin the program in the seventh grade. The youth can choose to continue the program each semester through their eighth grade year.

The program is structured around the limitations of using college students. The mentees expect to have more than one mentor over the course of the program since the university students are only enrolled in the course for one semester. Since this structure is established at the outset of the program, mentees are less likely to experience feelings of abandonment or rejection that often result from a mentoring relationship that is expected to endure but ends prematurely. However, in some circumstances we allow the university students to continue with their mentee after the semester is over by joining the group in the following semester or contacting the local Big Brothers Big Sisters organization to establish a mentoring relationship with the student outside of school.

Initially, the goal of the program is to establish rapport between the mentor and mentee. Resilience-based projects and activities are then incorporated into the mentoring experience. Mentoring pairs choose a different project each semester. Resilience-based activities can provide mentors with the tools and structure necessary to challenge and direct a young person toward new belief systems and better functioning. A successful mentoring program may also allow time for less structured activities, tutoring, or help with school assignments. Mentoring activities should strive for an appropriate balance of structure and flexibility to enable the mentor to individualize the program and the mentee to make choices. Empowering students in a relationship will build more positive outcomes. An excellent way to communicate to a youth the message of positive expectations is to engage the youth in decision making, which creates a truly collaborative relationship based on trust. The youth experiences empowerment, which conveys the message that his or her opinion is valued and acted upon.

The following section is intended to provide examples of mentoring activities designed to teach the concept of resilience and develop protective factors. Selection of specific activities should be based on the age of the mentee as well as the availability of time and resources within the mentoring program.

Activities for Building Relationships

M (mentor) & M (mentee)

Using individual packages of candy pieces of various colors, mentoring pairs reach into the package and share information based on the color selected. A printed sheet assigns categories to each color. For example, selection of a yellow piece of candy might direct the individual to tell something about his or her family. Other color categories might include information about pets, favorite activities, admired celebrities, or how an unexpected prize of one hundred dollars might be spent.

Alike and Different

Mentors and mentees are frequently from very different backgrounds. It is therefore beneficial to begin the program by recognizing that though these differences exist there are significant similarities as well. In this activity mentoring pairs are instructed to identify

five ways in which they are similar and five ways in which they are different. When pairs not only acknowledge their differences but also discover the circumstances, interests, and values they share, they begin to break down barriers that might exist in establishing a trusting relationship.

Family Tree

Understanding the family structure of the mentee can help build rapport while introducing the mentor to the people who are influencing the life of the student. This activity can result in a simple diagram with names and lines designating relationships or include elaborate drawings and descriptive words to characterize the individuals in the family.

Projects to Teach and Develop Resilience

Persistence through Setbacks: Video Game

Youth who have played video games are familiar with a process whereby progress in the game involves a series of setbacks. A common format for these games allows for a certain number of errors before the player is sent back to the start of the game or back to a lower level. Throughout the game, players encounter obstacles and adversity that require the use of strategy and a variety of resources. A mentoring project that takes advantage of this familiarity is the development of a video game that represents the mentee's life. In this project the student represents his or her life as a game with setbacks, obstacles, and goals to be reached. The mentor assists in identifying the resources and tools needed to overcome the adversity to "win the game" or reach the next level.

Internal Locus of Control: The Remote Control

Locus of control refers to an individual's perception of control over what happens in his or her life (Rotter, 1954). Those who have an internal locus of control perceive that their efforts and actions influence the outcomes of their lives. Conversely, those who have an external locus of control feel as if external uncontrollable forces and circumstances determine the outcomes in their lives. In this project, a familiar household object is used to teach an abstract concept that is essential to the development of resilience. The first step in this project is the construction of a remote control. Mentors can use cardstock or wood shaped to resemble a remote control. Stickers or paints may be used to add buttons. Mentors help their mentees to identify a variety of potential behavioral and emotional responses that they are capable of demonstrating. This project is intended to teach students that they are ultimately in control of how they respond to the circumstances of their lives and how their responses to these circumstances influence their future. This may help some students to see that when they perceive that others have control over their emotional and behavioral responses, they essentially give others their personal "remote control."

Self-Regulation: The Success Journal

Healthy mentoring relationships lead students to take increasingly more responsibility for setting their own goals, monitoring these goals, and acknowledging their efforts in achieving these goals. Mentoring pairs use the success journal to set realistic goals, develop a plan for reaching these goals, monitor progress toward the goals, and acknowledge this progress. Mentors can help students to shift from a performance based perception of success to a process perspective. Some examples of successes include: avoiding conflict, managing emotions appropriately, persisting in a difficult task, engaging in prosocial behaviors, and trying a new activity.

Identity Development: Scrapbook

Mentors can encourage a healthy exploration of identity. Students may choose to include a variety of items that represent who they are. These may include photographs, letters, pictures of celebrities that have qualities they admire, and art work. Mentors can expand this selection by helping the student to write or select a poem or by giving the student a disposable camera to take pictures of family, friends, and a favorite teacher or coach. As the scrapbook comes together the mentor can affirm the student's individuality and identify character strengths.

Identifying Role Models: Resilience Hall of Fame

An effective way to teach resilience is through the examination of the lives of those who have demonstrated resilience. A poster or notebook detailing these models of resilience can show students the diverse and unique pathways that can be taken to overcoming risk factors. These examples should teach and inspire the mentee. For celebrity role models, pictures, articles, and interviews might be located. Teachers, administrators, or individuals in the community who have overcome obstacles could also be identified and interviewed.

These activities not only encourage the development of protective factors in mentees, but also provide a framework for initiating and maintaining productive dialogue with young people who may have difficulty in interpersonal communication. Mentors are encouraged to incorporate the interests of the mentee into the project design. Allowing mentoring pairs to modify the project guidelines or create a new idea for a project encourages initiative and autonomy. At the end of the semester, mentoring pairs can choose to display their projects for other students or the school counselor. The young students are typically proud of their projects *and* their ability to use the word "resilience" in communication with others. A closing event such as a celebration or field trip to the university campus can help to provide closure to the mentoring relationship.

Our program uses university students as mentors, but this resilience model could be integrated into traditional mentoring programs that strive for the establishment of a more enduring relationship. These activities can also be used to teach the construct of resilience in other types of intervention programs. Regardless of the intervention format, as these programs for at-risk students become increasingly prevalent, we hope the construct of resilience will become a salient component.

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