

Five Keys for Effective Mentoring

New Insights From Research

“Mentor.”

That word likely stirs up all kinds of images for you. Depending on your experiences, some of those images are incredible while others evoke disappointment or painful memories.

In your own life as well as your work as a ministry leader, you intuitively know mentoring is important. What’s less clear is what kinds of mentoring relationships or program models best help to support young people. What can we do to assure volunteers actually serve as reliable guides on the path toward maturity?

Some swear by long-term one-on-one mentoring. Others center ministry around peer-led small groups. Still others maintain that *adult* mentors are key. Each of these strategies has shown results in certain settings, so which should we choose?

A recent meta-analysis of mentoring research offers some help with these questions. Drawing on a decade’s worth of research on mentoring programs, the research team from the University of Illinois at Chicago outlines best practices that can help us determine which strategy makes the most sense for our ministries.

Key #1: More Than One “Right Way”

First, the good news: there’s no *one* right way to set up mentoring relationships.

Programs using adult mentors show similar outcomes to those using older teens (though most churches we’ve worked with find that pairing teenage leaders with adults is an even greater win-win). Programs utilizing a one-on-one approach to mentoring show similar outcomes when compared with group mentoring models. The location where the mentoring takes place doesn’t appear to matter either (whether in a coffee shop or over a game of basketball). It seems effective mentoring relationships travel.

- Do you have adults who have a heart for meeting with teens one-on-one? Great!
- Have some that are amazing at building a small group of middle schoolers into a tight-knit community? Fantastic!
- Have space on campus for groups to meet? Cool!
- People willing to open up their homes on weeknights? Just as good!
- Have a few incredible senior girls who can co-lead a freshman small group with a few adult women before going off to college next year? Perfect!
- Know a few incredible senior citizens willing to love those senior girls unconditionally? Yes, please!

Whatever your strengths, resources, or opportunities in your particular setting, use them to build into the lives of teens in intentional ways without worrying that some other model would be better.

Key #2: In It For the Long Haul

Mentoring is better the longer and more consistently it goes on.

The research team found that the longer a mentoring relationship continued, the more influential it was in the life of the young person. They also found that more consistent meetings were better. Meeting at least twice a month for at least a year is a good starting place.

This shouldn't surprise anyone who has ever, well, had any relationship with another human being. Unlike my dog, Flop, who is happy to immediately make friends with whomever comes around the next bend, most teenagers take time to warm up to a mentor. And they grow to deeply trust the people who prove faithful over time.

Especially if your goals for mentoring go beyond casual comfort to deep, long-lasting, positive influence, it's important not to confuse a superficial I-think-you're-cool/dorky/safe connection with an enduring, transformative relationship. Those take time, as the research bears out.

While there is evidence that shorter relationships can work when both mentor and mentee know up-front how long the mentoring will last, not enough research has been done to draw any air-tight conclusions. What research *has* shown is that when a mentoring relationship is broken off prematurely and unexpectedly, it can have a net-negative impact on the teens involved. In other words, if a small group was supposed to last the whole school year but the leader flakes out in November, the kids might have been better off with no group at all.

When setting up a mentoring program, then, do whatever it takes to maximize the consistency and longevity of the relationships. The next two keys give some ideas for moving toward that goal.

Key #3: Matchmaker, Matchmaker

One of the most important aspects of an effective mentoring program is matching mentors and mentees well. This happens best when there are shared interests.

This could be as superficial as a shared love of sports or video games, or something more substantial like a mentor working in a career the teen aspires to. Whatever criteria are used, shared interests correlate to stronger mentor-mentee ties and better outcomes overall.

One likely reason is that shared interests give the relationship room to breathe and grow in its earliest, most fragile stages, providing an easy topic of conversation or activity to engage in together. In other words, they allow the relationship to develop naturally rather than being forced, something that other research has shown is of great importance in mentoring. (For more on natural mentoring research, see [this link](#).)

Key #4: Recruit, Train, and Support

This is arguably the most important of the five keys. It also takes the most work.

The secret to any effective mentoring program is the process by which you find great mentors, train them so they can do a great job, and then support them so they continue to do a great job.

1. Recruit

First, go out and find the best mentors you can find. Back to the first key above, they don't have to fit any particular template to be great. In fact, it's best if they are as varied as the teens they'll be mentoring. Finding mentors with different interests, personalities, and experiences will give you the best chance to match them up well with mentees. This, in turn, will help both mentor and mentee feel better about the relationship, and will make it more likely they will want it to continue.

At the same time, it is extremely important that all your mentors share the maturity of character to positively influence and consistently engage the teenagers you pair them with. Having high standards for the type of mentor you recruit is one of the best ways you can improve the outcomes of your mentoring program. This is one of the reasons we recommend pairing older teenage mentors with adult co-leaders who can support them as they continue to navigate their own maturing process.

2. Train

Second, train your mentors thoroughly and intentionally. Don't just educate them about teen culture and the challenges they might encounter in their mentoring (though these are quite important); give them clear guidelines and important roles.

Guidelines include when and where to meet, how often, and what to do when together. Important roles mean giving a mentor a clear job description that goes beyond "hanging out."

Research shows that when mentors are given a specific role to play in a teen's life they are more satisfied and the teen shows better outcomes. This role might be listening and giving advice in certain areas of life, or it might be a teaching or information-providing role such as leading a Bible study. Whatever it is, make sure your mentors have clear expectations of what their role will be.

3. Support

Third, engage in ongoing support. Mentoring, like anything based on relationship, can be difficult and messy. As such, it can wear down even the most enthusiastic volunteer. Your mentors need ongoing support and encouragement to stay fired up about the impact they can have in the lives of teens.

Meet with mentors regularly to build them up and remind them of the importance of their mission. Provide them with the tools they need. Check to ensure that they are fulfilling the clear roles and guidelines you designed for them.

Not to over-simplify, but the research suggests that if an equation existed for building a great team of mentors it'd be:

Intentional recruiting + thorough training + enthusiastic support =

A team of mentors set up for success.

Key #5: Start Small

The last key is simple: don't build a program bigger than you can sustain. Quality leaders who are trained and supported well (key #4) and share interests with the kids they mentor (key #3) are so important. In fact, they are the difference between mentoring that makes a difference and mentoring that might look good but accomplishes nothing.

If necessary, it's best to patiently assemble a team of mentors while saying "no" to those who might do more harm than good, even if it means being unable to reach everyone right away. Insist on finding the attributes you need, and don't water down the effectiveness of the whole program by compromising.

Since a mentoring relationship that is cut short can be worse than no mentoring relationship at all (key #2), take care not to put together an unsustainable program that will collapse soon after it begins. Mentoring can be hugely beneficial for teens, but it's better to make sure a few get mentored well than to find many whose pseudo-mentors aren't really helping them at all.

So build off the strengths and assets of your community to find as diverse and large a group of mature, consistent mentors as you can. Train them by providing clear guidelines and expectations. Match them up with one teen or a group of teens with whom they share some interests, and provide ongoing support and encouragement through the bumps in the road. If you do these things well, you can rest assured that the young people in your ministry will have the best possible chance to experience the incredible benefits of effective mentoring.

Action Points

1. Think back over the significant mentoring relationships in your life. How, if at all, did those relationships show evidence of these five keys?
2. Think through what your ministry is already doing with mentoring. Where are things going well, or not so well? What sorts of goals for improvement might you have based on these five research-based keys? Do you need to expand or cut back the scope of your program in order to be more effective?
3. If you're starting from scratch, come up with a list of great potential mentors, the best you can imagine in your context. What would their specific roles be in your program? How could you recruit those people to your cause? How could you equip and encourage them for the long haul? Create a plan from recruitment to ongoing support, and start inviting these adults to consider investing in the life of a young person.
4. For a helpful online resource for mentoring programs, see [this link](#).