



Research Corner: *Natural Mentors*

Dr. Jean Rhodes, University of Massachusetts – Boston, February 2005

Natural Mentors Help Mold Lives of Teens, Study Says

From UIC News

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Natural mentoring relationships positively impact teens, but these relationships do not meet all the needs of at-risk youth, according to a study by University of Illinois at Chicago researchers (http://www.mentoring.org/downloads/mentoring_393.pdf). The study appears in the March issue of the American Journal of Public Health.

"Unlike mentors who are assigned by a program, natural mentors come from different areas of the young person's own life such as their extended family, neighbors, teachers, coaches, religious leaders and employers," said David DuBois, lead author of the study and associate professor of community health sciences in the UIC School of Public Health.

Using data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, the researchers found that more than 70 percent of those in the study reported a mentoring relationship with an adult. These relationships lasted an average of nine years.

Mentors, such as teachers, were often important figures in the day-to-day lives of youth, which may be a factor in promoting positive outcomes, according to the researchers.

The study found that having a natural mentor was associated with:

- a greater likelihood of completing high school, attending college, and working at least 10 hours per week;
- a decreased likelihood of being in a gang and having physically hurt someone in a fight in the past year, as well as a lower level of risk taking;
- higher levels of self-esteem and life satisfaction;
- a greater level of physical activity, as well as regular use of birth control.

However, there was no evidence that natural mentors have an impact on other outcomes, including binge drinking, drug use and smoking.

The researchers noted that mentors may not have the ability to provide a high level of monitoring -- an important factor in preventing substance abuse -- when they have only periodic contact with teens. Mentors may also inadvertently model negative behaviors such as smoking or drinking.

The study concluded that the benefits of having a mentor generally were not enough to outweigh the negative effects of different risk factors that many young people experience, such as poverty, unsafe neighborhoods and troubled family relationships.

"Our findings highlight the positive difference that a mentoring relationship can make in the life of a young person, DuBois said. But they also tell us that we need to look at these relationships as only one part of the answer to the enormously challenging issue of how to ensure the health and success of our nation's young people.

DuBois suggests that structured programs and services for youth and natural mentoring should be woven together to make each more effective.

UIC ranks among the nation's top 50 universities in federal research funding and is Chicago's largest university with 25,000 students, 12,000 faculty and staff, 15 colleges and the state's major public medical center. A hallmark of the campus is the Great Cities Commitment, through which UIC faculty, students and staff engage with community, corporate, foundation and government partners in hundreds of programs to improve the quality of life in metropolitan areas around the world.