

Friends For Youth's Mentoring Institute

CONNECTIONS *Conference Brief*

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Considerations for Mentoring System-Involved Youth

Stephanie Inyama & Stacey Savelle, Guest Contributors

This workshop, presented at the 2008 Mentoring Conference, Mentoring Youth: Defining the Difference It Makes, focused on program development for those working with system-involved youth. In addition to the summary of their material in this Conference Brief, the presentation included youth and mentor perspectives on mentoring on a DVD.

Although there are many considerations for mentoring System-Involved Youth, we have identified **Four Key Elements** essential to successfully mentoring youth in the system:

1. Identify System-Involved Youth and Recognize How Their Needs Differ from Other Youth

The majority of traditional mentoring programs serve an “at-risk” youth population. This term is very broad and can be applied to youth from single-parent families, youth of incarcerated parents, youth from impoverished circumstances, youth doing poorly in school, etc. What these programs may not know is that some of these same youth are also “system-involved” - that is, they are Dependents of Juvenile Court due to abuse, neglect, or exploitation or they are Wards of the Court due to their delinquent behavior.

What these children have in common with other “at-risk” youth is their need for a positive, caring adult role model. There is an additional layer of considerations when choosing the right person to mentor a system-involved youth: being mindful to the life experiences that brought government intervention. There must be special sensitivity to issues of commitment, trust, and boundaries. Paramount among these is the reality that, in many cases, youth in foster care change placements during the mentoring relationship. Every effort needs to be made at the outset to match youth with mentors who understand this and commit to continuing the match even if the youth moves farther away (within reason, of course). For youth in these circumstances, the mentor may have to work harder to earn trust, but once that trust is earned, youth in care will usually form a strong bond. Boundaries are important for any mentor, but for youth who may have had adults breach those boundaries with inappropriate behavior, setting forth the parameters of the relationship in the beginning is very important. Programs have a key role to play as they recruit mentors for this population and prepare the potential mentee for this new and rewarding connection.

In the U.S. in 2005...

- 800,000 children were served by the foster care system
- 514,000 children were in foster care
- 311,000 children entered foster care
- 67,000 children had parental rights terminated
- 287,000 children exited foster care
- The average age of children in foster care: 10.0 years
- Males: 52% and Females: 48%
- As a percentage, there were more children of color in the foster care system than in the general U.S. population.

AFCARS data, U.S. Children's Bureau, Administration for Children, Youth and Families: Trends in Foster Care and Adoption FY2000-FY2005 http://www.acf.dhhs.gov/programs/cb/stats_research/afcars/trends.htm and U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration for Children, Youth and Families, Children's Bureau, http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/stats_research/afcars/tar/report13.htm and <http://www.fostercaremonth.org/AboutFosterCare/StatisticsAndData/Pages/NationalData.aspx>

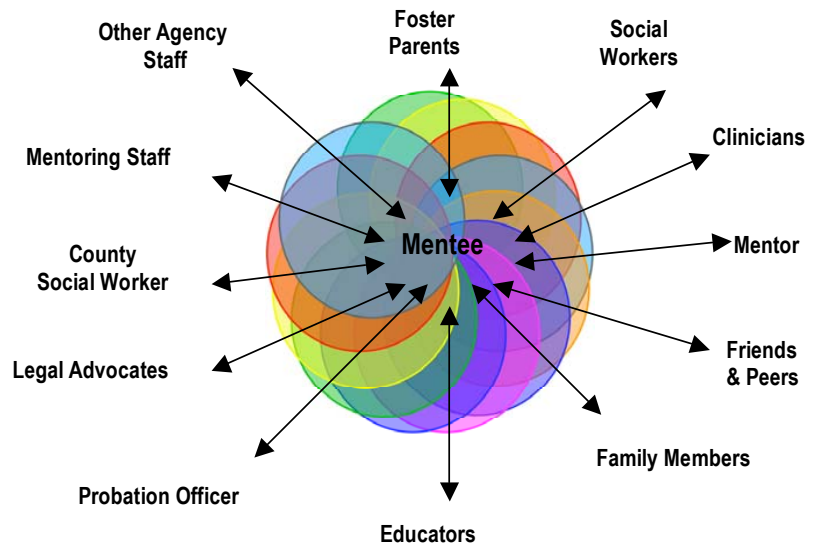
2. Understand How the System Works

Mentoring programs need to learn something of how the system that supervises the mentee operates. This is because involvement with the child welfare or delinquency systems brings both bureaucratic confusion and opportunities for teamwork and support. The primary information the program needs to have is that ultimate decision-making resides with the agency that is responsible for the youth's well-being; Juvenile Court will receive periodic reports about the progress of the youth and family; having foster parent/caregiver support for the match is important; and that developing a positive relationship with the youth's Social Worker or Probation Officer can help the program and the mentor successfully navigate the complexities of the system.

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3. Explore Ways to Integrate Mentoring into the Lives of System-Involved Youth

Youth in foster care have many adult influences in their lives. Most of these "paid" adults are responsible for caretaking and/or providing various types of support and services to these youth. In addition, friends and family members may not always be the most positive influences. Realistically, mentors may be the only non-paid, positive adult influence in their lives. Therefore, it is important programs understand how to sustain these relationships. Program staff can work with internal staff, clinicians, the youth's Social Worker or Probation Officer, and others responsible for the caretaking of the youth by integrating the match relationship into the treatment plan of the mentee. Developing mentoring goals and documenting the progress of the match relationship in the mentee's case plan provides a written record and proof the mentee has made a successful attachment with a positive role model. Program staff may be asked to attend meetings which focus on the mentee or match relationship to ensure the pairing is continually discussed and documented. The mentee's treatment team can provide internal and external support for the match in their reports and in their discussions about the youth. The goals are to document how mentoring is benefiting the youth and to maintain the match relationship regardless of any change of placement and/or circumstances of the mentee.



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4. Provide Resources on Mentoring System-Involved Youth

Programs must educate themselves and offer resources to mentors on the dynamics of mentoring system-involved youth. Understanding the challenges of these youth and providing tools and techniques to deal with their behaviors provides the support needed for successful mentoring. While realizing that mentors are neither clinicians nor Social Workers, information on what mentors can typically expect will help arm them with the confidence and responses that will meet the needs of both youth and adult. Peer support groups for mentors is one way to give adults a safe place to explore challenges and seek solutions tested by others.

Programs should develop formal and informal partnerships with child welfare agencies, other mentoring programs, and community-based organizations in order to create a community of support. This enables partners to leverage much needed resources among themselves. Leveraging resources in activities such as recruitment, training, match support, and recognition assists those partners who lack appropriate infrastructure, brings to the forefront those partners who are the leaders in mentoring, and creates opportunities for sustainability and funding to all.

Other Key Issues

Confidentiality

Special safety concerns

Clearances

Continuity of services

Individualized case plans

About Stephanie Inyama & Stacey Savelle, Guest Contributors

Stephanie Inyama has a 20-year reputation for successfully working with individuals in corporate and non-profit environments to implement client-based programming and infrastructure enrichment. She left the world of banking as the Vice President of Operations Administration to pursue her passion of empowering youth. Using her background of coaching and training staff, she began her mentoring career developing and implementing the GLASS Mentoring Project, a program for youth in foster care. She later went on to create the Foster Care Mentoring Project at Families for Children. She recognized her ability to bring a business perspective into the world of social services and has dedicated her career to enhancing the lives of youth in foster care in the areas of mentoring, prevention, and education. She works closely with the Mentoring and Education Divisions of the Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services and the Probation Department to increase mentoring, prevention, and education awareness and to create partnerships with community agencies dedicated to making a difference in the lives of youth in foster care. She is a MBA graduate from American Intercontinental University and a single mother of a very active 13-year old son. Stephanie can be reached at stephanieinyama@yahoo.com and scinyama@earthlink.net.

Stacey Savelle is currently a Commissioner on the Los Angeles County Commission for Children and Families, having been appointed by the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors in May 2007. She is also a Consultant for the Center for Applied Research Solutions (CARS), providing technical assistance and training for various initiatives involving at-risk youth. Stacey retired as an Assistant Regional Administrator for the Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) in 2003 after 35 years as a social worker and manager for a variety of programs administered by that Department. She earned a BA/BS degree from UCLA and did graduate work at the University of California at Los Angeles School of Social Work. She has spoken nationwide on issues affecting child safety, humor in the workplace, health care concerns, and emancipation issues. She helped establish "Bridges to the Future," a mentoring partnership between DCFS, Probation, and the Los Angeles County Bar Association and, through this program, has mentored a youth for the past four years. It is from the perspective of a social worker, consultant, adoptive parent, youth advocate, and mentor that she addresses the imperative for every foster youth to achieve permanency and share a lasting connection with at least one caring adult. She can be reached at ssavelle@ca.rr.com.



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