

# A MODEL FOR THE INFLUENCE OF MENTORING RELATIONSHIPS ON YOUTH DEVELOPMENT

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*Anecdotal reports of the protective qualities of mentoring relationships for youth are corroborated by a growing body of research. What is missing, however, is research on the processes by which mentors influence developmental outcomes. In this article, we present a conceptual model of the mentoring process along with a delineation of some of the current research on what makes for more effective mentoring relationships. A set of recommendations for future research is offered. © 2006 Wiley Periodicals, Inc.*

Anecdotal reports of the protective qualities of mentoring relationships for youth are corroborated by a growing body of research. However, few researchers have explored the processes by which mentors influence developmental outcomes. In this article, we present a conceptual model of the mentoring process, drawing from theory and research on child and adolescent development and close relationships. Although we view the processes outlined in this model as generally applicable to mentoring relationships in childhood and adolescence, we recognize that the effects of mentoring are likely to depend upon the age and circumstance of the youth, as well as the quality and duration of the relationship. Accordingly, we discuss issues in the development and assessment of mentoring

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relationships and consider the interplay of the proposed mentoring processes with other relevant factors. After describing the model, we review research that directly addresses how the mentoring relationship is linked to positive outcomes for youth in domains such as self-concept, behavior, and academic achievement. Finally, we offer a set of recommendations for future research.

## CONCEPTUALIZATION

Mentoring involves a caring and supportive relationship between a youth and a non-parental adult. The positive effects of mentoring are generally thought to be derived from the support and role modeling these relationships offer. However, little attention has been paid to delineating how these processes work to bring about change. Rhodes (2002, 2005) has proposed that mentoring affects youth through three interrelated processes: (1) by enhancing youth's social relationships and emotional well-being, (2) by improving their cognitive skills through instruction and conversation, and (3) by promoting positive identity development through serving as role models and advocates. These processes are likely to act in concert with one another over time. Furthermore, the effectiveness of each of these three processes is likely to be governed, at least in part, by the quality and longevity of the relationships established between young people and their mentors.

### *Social and Emotional Development*

Mentoring relationships may promote the social and emotional well-being and development of youth in several ways. The relationships may provide youth with (1) opportunities for fun and escape from daily stresses, (2) corrective emotional experiences that may generalize to and improve youths' other social relationships, and (3) assistance with emotion regulation (Rhodes, 2002, 2005).

Mentoring relationships provide opportunities for youth to engage in a variety of social and recreational interactions with adults. Such activities may provide both welcome respite and enjoyable experiences for youth who typically must contend with disadvantages and difficult circumstances. Recent research on social support highlights involvement in mutually pleasurable social activities as a distinct aspect of supportive relationships that has been referred to as *companionship* (Sarason & Sarason, 2001). In contrast to other forms of social support sought out during times of distress, companionship is motivated by the desire to share in "purely enjoyable interaction, such as the pleasure in sharing leisure activities, trading life stories and humorous anecdotes, and engaging in playful spontaneous activities" (Rook, 1995, p. 440).

Mentoring relationships also have the potential to provide youth with positive experiences in social relationships, which may lead to improvements in other important relationships for some youth (Keller, 2005a). By offering youth genuine care and support, mentors can challenge negative views that they may hold of themselves or of relationships with adults. Moreover, mentors can demonstrate that positive relationships with adults are possible. The mentoring relationship can thus become a "corrective experience" for those youth who may have experienced unsatisfactory relationships with their parents (Olds, Kitzman, Cole, & Robinson, 1997). This experience may then generalize, enabling youth to perceive their proximal relationships as more forthcoming and helpful (Coble, Gantt,

& Mallinckrodt, 1996). As Kohut (1984) has argued, close relationships can be therapeutic in and of themselves, helping individuals realize “that the sustaining echo of empathic resonance is indeed available in the world” (p. 78).

The hypothesized potential of positive relationships to modify youths’ perceptions of other relationships is suggested by attachment theory (Bowlby, 1988; Sroufe & Fleeson, 1986). According to attachment theory, a child seeks comfort and protection from caregivers in times of distress. A sense of security is restored when an attachment figure demonstrates a sensitive response that alleviates the distress. Over the course of numerous interactions, a child constructs cognitive representations regarding the reliability of care from an attachment figure and his or her own ability to elicit care in times of need (Bretherton, 1985). These experience-based expectations, or working models, are believed to be incorporated into the personality structure and to influence behavior in interpersonal relationships throughout and beyond childhood (Ainsworth, 1989; Bowlby, 1988). Although considered to be relatively stable over time, working models may be modified in response to changing life circumstances, particularly the opportunities to engage in different patterns of interaction presented by new relationships (Belsky & Cassidy, 1994; Bretherton, 1985). Although changes in working models can occur at any point in development, mentoring relationships in adolescence may offer distinct opportunities for the revision of working models because of the increases in perspective taking and interpersonal understanding that occur during this time, as well as the desire to gain some autonomy from parental control and influence (Allen & Land, 1999; Cassidy & Kobak, 1988).

Youth who have experienced caregivers as unavailable or inconsistent and have models of relationships tinged with anxiety, anger, uncertainty, and mistrust may be less likely to see the value in turning to others in times of stress (Belsky & Cassidy, 1994). However, mentors who are sensitive and consistent in their relationships with these youth may help them feel worthy of care and effective in attaining it. In turn, these youth may become more open to, and likely to, solicit emotional support to cope with stressful events or chronic adversity, thereby buffering the effects of a negative environment (Rutter, 1990). Furthermore, relationships with mentors that are characterized by consistent and responsive caregiving also may promote a sense of stability and predictability in children’s lives. When the child knows the mentor is a dependable source of protection and support if something should go wrong, the sense of security that results may allow productive exploration of the environment that leads to the development of knowledge, skills, and competence (Ainsworth, 1989; Bowlby, 1988).

In some cases, mentors may function as alternative or secondary attachment figures—providing a secure base from which youth can make crucial social and cognitive strivings. In other cases, mentors may simply alleviate some of the relationship tensions and conflicts that arise throughout development, especially during adolescence. Mentors can offer youth adult perspectives, advice, and suggestions that might be ignored if they were presented by a parent (Keller, in 2005a). By serving as a sounding board and providing a model of effective adult communication, mentors may also help youth better understand, express, and regulate both their positive and their negative emotions (Pianta, 1999).

The ability to regulate affective experiences, both alone and in relationships with others, is increasingly thought to be an outgrowth of a strong attachment relationship and a central feature of healthy social and emotional development (Cowan, 1996). Good mentors, as can good parents, can engage with youth in ways that help them develop their capacity for emotion regulation. For example, what Gottman (2001) has referred to as “emotion coaching” is a stance toward, and way of relating with, children around their emotions that

helps teach strategies for managing feelings. Adults who adopt an emotion-coaching approach tend to be more aware of emotions, both their own and those of children (Gottman, Katz, & Hooven, 1996). They are more likely to validate and verbally label the child's feelings, view the child's negative emotions as an opportunity for intimacy or learning, and engage in limit setting, problem solving, and discussions of goals and strategies for dealing with situations that lead to negative emotions (Gottman et al., p. 244). Furthermore, adults who openly display positive emotions—particularly under difficult circumstances—actively model the process of using positive emotions constructively (Denham & Kochanoff, 2002). Mentors who use their relationships as opportunities for emotion coaching may enhance the social competence of their mentees. In doing so, mentors may help them to expand their social network and construct close and supportive ties with others.

### ***Cognitive Development***

Mentoring relationships may contribute to the cognitive development of youth through several mechanisms, including exposure to new opportunities for learning, provision of intellectual challenge and guidance, and promotion of academic success. In the first case, the mentor may introduce experiences that broaden the youth's horizons, from visiting the library to exploring a cultural institution to enrolling in a course together. Likewise, the mentor may foster the development of knowledge and skills that require practice and instruction, such as learning a language or learning to play chess. In some instances, a youth may seek out a mentor who has expert knowledge in a specialized field of interest that the youth wants to pursue.

Regardless of the particular activity chosen, a mentor can approach interactions with the intention of exploiting "teachable moments." In general, the nature of intellectual challenge and support provided by the teacher is thought to play a major role in facilitating the cognitive development of the learner. Vygotsky (1978) described a "zone of proximal development" in which learning takes place: the range between what a youth can attain when problem solving independently and what he or she can accomplish when working under adult guidance or with more capable peers. To the extent that interactions with a mentor occur within this zone of challenging but attainable pursuits, the mental capacities of the youth may increase and improve. Within this framework, learning occurs in the context of collective work and the active exchange of ideas, with children "appropriating" from shared activities with more sophisticated thinkers (Rogoff, 1990). In particular, caring adults may enable youth's own "wonderful ideas" to emerge; by nurturing their ideas and helping them extend their evolving theories, mentors may give children "reason" that takes their thinking "one step further."

Beyond the quality of the scaffolding provided by the mentor, the interpersonal qualities of the mentoring relationship may contribute to the youth's acquisition and refinement of thinking skills. Research from the educational literature underscores the social nature of learning. For example, positive perceptions of teacher-student relationships are consistently associated with increases in motivation, academic competence and achievement, school engagement, school value, and behavioral adjustment (Goodenow, 1992; Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Midgley, Feldlaufer, & Eccles, 1989; Reddy, Rhodes, & Mulhall, 2003; Roeser & Eccles, 1998; Ryan & Grolnick, 1986). Similarly, the mentoring relationship may contribute either directly or indirectly to the child's success in school. Mentors may promote positive attitudes toward school, encourage scholastic effort, and even assist with school projects or homework. School-based mentoring programs based on this premise are experiencing rapid

growth (Herrera, 1999). It certainly is conceivable that a mentor in a close, trusting relationship with a youth could validate and support the child's existing intellectual interests or encourage curiosity and motivate learning in new areas. Research on parenting and classroom learning suggests that the most effectively engaging adults are not overly directive, but rather are responsive and provide an appropriate balance of structure, challenge, enjoyment, and support (Csikszentmihalyi & Rathunde, 1998).

### *Identity Development*

By serving as role models and advocates, mentors may contribute to youths' positive identity development. That is, mentors may help shift youth's conceptions of both their current and their future identity. Markus and Nurius (1986) have referred to "possible selves"—individuals' ideas of what they might become, what they would like to become, and what they fear becoming. Such possibilities, which often emerge as youth observe and compare the adults they know, can inform current decisions and behavior. Indeed, many lower-income youth have limited contact with positive role models outside the immediate family and believe that their opportunities for success are restricted (Blechman, 1992). Even among middle-income youth, adult occupations and skills can seem obscure and out of reach (Larson, 2000). Still other youth have unrealistic expectations and little knowledge of the level of education that is needed for their chosen profession. Thus, the idea of possible selves is similar to Levinson's (1978) notion of the "imagined self," which becomes refined over time and helps adolescents navigate the transition into early adulthood. Freud also proposed an identification process in which people internalize the attitudes, behaviors, and traits of individuals they wish to emulate (Freud, 1914). Similarly, Kohut (1984) discussed the ways in which children and adolescents attach themselves to an idealized parental "imago" whose qualities they incorporate into their own personality. As they identify with their mentors, youths may find that their early internalizations begin to change, causing shifts in their sense of identity and social roles.

This process is reminiscent of what Cooley (1902) has described as the *looking glass self*—wherein significant people in youths' lives become social mirrors into which the young people look to form opinions of themselves. The opinions that one sees reflected then become integrated into one's sense of self. Additionally, Mead (1934) described how individuals can incorporate the "reflected appraisal" of others' views of them—imagining how they are perceived by significant people in their life. For example, Harter (1988) contends that children's determination of global self-worth is based not only on their self-evaluation of competence in activities they consider to be important, but also on their perception of acceptance, support, and regard from significant others. As the mentors' positive appraisal becomes incorporated into the mentee's sense of self, it may modify the way the youth thinks that parents, peers, teachers, and others see him or her.

More generally, mentors may help youth to build both social and cultural capital by facilitating their use of community resources and by opening doors to educational or occupational opportunities (Dubas & Snider, 1993; McLaughlin, 2000). Participation in such new opportunities can also facilitate identity development by providing experiences on which youth can draw to construct their sense of self (Youniss & Yates, 1997). Indeed, Waterman (1984) has proposed that such activities provide opportunities for discovering special talents and abilities and are thus a primary source through which identity is formed. When mentors promote youths' participation in prosocial activities and settings, they expose them to socially desirable or high-achieving peer groups with whom they can then identify.

### *The Relationship Context: Mediating and Moderating Processes*

Mentoring relationships are not all alike, and some are likely to have greater influence than others. Furthermore, mentoring is likely to work differently with different youth. We contend that the contribution of mentoring to the developmental processes outlined varies on the basis of a number of interrelated factors, including what the youth's preceding relationship history is, whether the relationship becomes close and meaningful to the youth, and how long the mentoring relationship lasts (Rhodes, 2002, 2005).

*Previous Attachments.* Youth who have enjoyed good relationships with their parents may be drawn to adults as role models and confidants. In such cases, the relationship may focus more on the acquisition of skills and the advancement of critical thinking than on emotional issues (Hamilton & Hamilton, 2004). On the other hand, youth who have experienced unsatisfactory or difficult parental ties may develop more intense bonds with their mentors to satisfy their social and emotional needs. In either case, the nature and outcomes of mentoring relationships may be shaped, in part, by youths' relational histories. Given mentees' varying relational histories and needs, effective mentoring may involve taking cues from them in order to strike a comfortable balance among practical goals, recreation, and exploring of emotions in establishing a positive mentoring relationship.

*Quality of Mentoring Relationship.* The level of attunement necessary for taking cues from mentees and responding to their needs empathically may be a key contributor to the quality and nature of the mentoring relationship. Indeed, the potential mechanisms of influence described for the domains of social-emotional, cognitive, and identity development presuppose the development of a close, caring mentoring relationship. As Levinson observed, "Mentoring is not a simple, all-or-none matter" (1978, p. 100), and, if a bond does not form, youth and mentors may disengage from the match before the mentoring relationship lasts long enough to have a positive impact. Without some connection—involving such qualities as trust, empathy, authenticity, mutual respect, sensitivity, and attunement—the dynamics through which mentoring relationships can promote positive developmental outcomes seem unlikely to unfold (Collins & Miller, 1994). For example, Allen and Eby (2003), who emphasize the importance of attunement in relationships, contend that more sensitively aligned adults are better able to provide the sort of safe haven that adolescents need to take on challenges and cope with emotional stress. Mentors who are attuned with their mentees are theoretically in a better position to handle discussions around vulnerable topics without undermining the adolescents' sense of self-confidence (Allen & Eby, 2003). The importance of attunement in the "I-Thou" relationship (Buber, 1970) between the mentor and the youth is that the youth learns something about the adult, which can be described with words such as *confidence*, *trust*, and *respect*.

Presumably, attunement becomes possible only to the extent that the mentee is willing to share his or her feelings and self-perceptions and is actively engaged in the relationship. Meaningful connections with mentors may be particularly valuable for youth who mask their true feelings from their parents, teachers, friends, and others out of fear of disapproval or rejection (Darling, Hamilton, Toyokawa, & Matsuda, 2002). Mentoring relationships may enable these youth to air sensitive issues and seek adult values, advice, and perspectives. A mentoring relationship also may enable youth to pursue interests not considered popular by peers or to practice new skills without embarrassment in front of peers. Dworkin, Larson, and Hansen (2003) have described processes in which youth

engage in such conversations and activities with adult guidance as involving both high intrinsic motivation and focused concentration—wherein the youth is “involved in actively constructing personal change” (p. 17).

This does not imply that every moment in the mentoring relationship need be packed with profundity and personal growth. Mentoring is perhaps better characterized as a series of small wins that emerge sporadically over time. As in other close relationships, mentoring involves social interaction over an extended period in which information is exchanged, emotions are expressed, goals are negotiated, and behavior is mutually influenced (Reis, Collins, & Berscheid, 2000). What distinguishes the relationship from a series of casual contacts is the meaning attributed to these interactions (Laursen & Bukowski, 1997). The relationship is bound to experience many mundane moments, which might be laced with boredom, humor, and even frustration. In times such as these, a mentor’s continuing presence and determination to make the best of circumstances can communicate to the youth that he or she is valued and that the relationship will endure. Theoretically, it is the accumulation of common experiences, including fun times and trying times, that forges a connection from which the mentee can draw strength in moments of vulnerability or share triumph in moments of accomplishment. A mentor’s personal qualities, such as patience, flexibility, and persistence, may be important in this regard (Rhodes, 2002).

*Longevity of Mentoring Relationship.* Given the importance of a sense of closeness and caring in mentoring relationships, and the likelihood that such qualities take time to evolve, another important moderator of mentoring effects may be the duration of the relationship. Moreover, it is likely that the benefits of mentoring accrue over a relatively long period; therefore, sufficient time is needed for the relationship to develop and unfold. Indeed, the processes highlighted (i.e., socioemotional, cognitive, and identity development) are complex and, in some cases, involve gradual changes in the ways that youth think about and approach other relationships.

In addition to enabling important qualities and benefits of mentoring to crystallize, time may permit mentoring relationships to run their natural course. All relationships follow unique developmental pathways marked by turning points, transitions, and transformations (Keller, 2005a). Nevertheless, potentially important stages in the developmental course of most mentoring relationships include (1) anticipating and preparing for the impending relationship; (2) initiating the relationship and becoming acquainted; (3) growing close and sustaining the relationship by negotiating roles, establishing patterns of communication, and developing familiar routines; and (4) eventually contending with the decline or dissolution of the relationship (Keller, 2005b). Brief or prematurely terminated mentoring relationships may preclude the natural unfolding of these important developmental stages.

Because a personal connection is at the heart of mentoring, terminations, inconsistencies, or interruptions in the course of a relationship can touch on vulnerabilities in youth in ways that other, less personal youth programs do not (Rhodes, 2002). A relationship that ends prematurely or on negative terms may exacerbate a child’s sensitivity to rejection and damage a child’s self-concept (Downey, Lebolt, Rincon, & Freitas, 1998). Even a relationship that ends because of an understandable and inevitable change in life circumstances, such as a residential move, can represent a significant personal loss that causes grief for the child. Consequently, the manner in which the ending of the relationship is handled has potential implications for the ways any gains achieved through mentoring are perceived, interpreted, and retained (Keller, 2005b).

### **Assessment**

The great variability in youth mentoring relationship types or contexts poses both an opportunity and a challenge for assessment. It is an opportunity for understanding whether there are universal or core characteristics of mentoring that are beneficial for all, or whether there are specific processes and qualities that are especially beneficial not only for certain people, but also in particular contexts. For example, most attention has been given to one-on-one mentoring of youth to the neglect of a more recent trend of group mentoring, in which one or more mentors may work with two or more youths collectively. Here, it may be important to assess group dynamics, such as a sense of collective belonging or attachment, that are less relevant in one-to-one mentoring.

Similarly, although mentor programs have served diverse populations of youths, including girls versus boys, ethnic minorities, and various age groups, little is known about processes and outcomes specific to these groups. The lack of research assessing gender, ethnic, and other group differences may, in part, be caused by limitations in the measurement of mentoring processes and constructs. With few exceptions (Liang, Tracy, Taylor, & Williams, 2002; Rhodes, 2002), most mentoring relationship measures rely on a global index or a few atheoretical dimensions (for a review, see Nakkula & Harris, 2005). Thus, although such measures may reflect many activities or qualities that seem to be salient in youth mentoring, because they tend not to be theory based, they are at risk for missing aspects or processes important for comparing different populations.

Indeed, it would be useful to explore whether mentoring comprises separate dimensions that differentially relate to outcomes depending on contextual and demographic background (e.g., mentoring context, familial and cultural background, gender, developmental age). For example, giving youth choice over activities might be more important when mentoring adolescents versus younger children, or those from individualistic cultures versus collectivistic cultures, in light of developmental and cross-cultural theory that emphasizes strivings toward autonomy and agency in the former groups.

### **RESEARCH**

Our proposed model suggests that mentoring has the potential to influence multiple domains of youth development, although individual relationships are likely to vary in the type and degree of benefits they provide. The potentially wide-ranging impact of mentoring is supported by a recent metaanalysis of mentoring program evaluations that reported consistent, albeit modest, effects across several youth outcomes, including problem/high-risk behavior, social competence, academic/educational indicators, and career/employment preparation (DuBois, Holloway, Valentine, & Cooper, 2002). Studies focusing on mentoring processes remain relatively rare; we review research that is relevant to the domains presented in our model—social-emotional, cognitive, and identity development.

#### ***Social-Emotional Development***

Evidence has been found to support the potential of positive mentoring relationships to strengthen or modify youths' other relationships. When youth develop strong and engaging connections with their mentors, there is evidence that their capacity to relate well to others also increases (Rhodes, Grossman, & Resch, 2000). Studies have revealed

connections between mentoring relationships and improvements in youth's perceptions of support from peer relationships (Rhodes, Haight, & Briggs, 1999) and from significant adults in their social networks (DuBois, Neville, Parra, & Pugh-Lilly, 2002). Other evidence suggests that some improvements in youth outcomes derived from mentoring are mediated by improvements in youths' relationships with their parents. Rhodes and associates (2000) found evidence that volunteer mentoring relationships contributed to improvements in adolescents' perceptions of their parental relationships, including levels of intimacy, communication, and trust. These improvements, in turn, predicted positive changes in a wide array of areas, such as the adolescents' sense of self-worth, scholastic competence, and academic achievement (Rhodes et al., 2000) and substance use (Rhodes, Reddy, & Grossman, 2003). A qualitative study of enduring volunteer mentoring relationships between adolescents and adults indicated that several of these mentors actively assisted the youth with developing more effective strategies and techniques for regulating their affect, which, for some youth, was perceived to be connected to improvements they had experienced in their performance at school and in their relationships with their parents (Spencer, 2002). Still, the research on mentoring has yet to draw fully from the many and rich theoretical models of close relationships with adults, particularly parents, offered in the literature on child and adolescent development.

### *Cognitive Development*

The social nature of learning, and particularly the potential impact of mentoring, has been indicated by studies on the role of social support in cognitive development. As noted previously, for example, positive perceptions of teacher–student relationships have been associated with successful school outcomes among youth (Connell & Wellborn, 1991), such as increases in school engagement, school value, student motivation, academic competence and achievement, and behavioral adjustment (Reddy et al., 2003; Roeser & Eccles, 1998; Ryan & Grolnick, 1986).

Several studies have also specifically documented improved academic adjustment for youth with close and abiding connections with natural and assigned mentors (Klaw, Fitzgerald, & Rhodes, 2003; Lee & Cramond, 1999; Slicker & Palmer, 1993). In the qualitative study of mentoring relationships described (Spencer, 2002), adult mentors and their adolescent protégés narrated numerous examples of times the mentors joined with the youth to help them complete a task or achieve some goal. The scaffolding provided by these mentors, whether in the form of assistance with a research project or help with preparation for a school musical audition, appeared to offer important opportunities for developing new skills and learning new approaches to problem solving.

### *Identity Development*

Somewhat surprisingly, given the common presumption that mentors serve as positive role models for youth, little attention has been paid in the research literature to the contributions that mentoring relationships may make to youths' identity development. However, research evidence supports the possibility that mentors effect change in youths' perceptions of their future. Hellenga, Aber, and Rhodes (2003) used discriminant function analysis to distinguish between adolescents with and without a discrepancy between their vocational aspirations and expectations for the future. Having a career mentor was

associated with a match (as opposed to a gap) between adolescents' aspirations and expectations. In addition, youth with natural and volunteer mentors have been found to be more likely to graduate from high school and attend college (DuBois & Silverthorn, 2005; Klaw et al. 2003) and less likely to take part in delinquent problem behaviors (Aseltine, Dupre, & Lamlein, 2001; Beam, Chen, & Greenberger, 2002; Davidson & Redner, 1988; DuBois & Silverthorn, 2005; Grossman & Tierney, 1998; Zimmerman, Bingenheimer, & Notaro, 2002).

### *The Relationship Context: Mediating and Moderating Processes*

Research supports the notion that the quality and longevity of the mentoring relationship, as well as the quality of previous relationships, play important mediating and moderating roles in the efficacy of mentoring.

*Previous Attachments.* Grossman and Rhodes (2002) found that the mentoring relationships of youth who had more troubled histories, such as having been referred for psychological or educational programs or have endured emotional, sexual, or physical abuse, were more likely to end prematurely than those of youth who had no such difficulties in their background. These differences were notable, given that this study also found that youth in longer-lasting relationships reported greater improvements.

*Longevity of the Mentoring Relationship.* Research indicates that the longevity of mentoring relationships is important in moderating their outcomes (Rhodes, 2005). In a particularly convincing demonstration, Grossman and Rhodes (2002) reanalyzed data from the national Public/Private Ventures randomized evaluation study of Big Brothers/Big Sisters programs. Relative to those of control subjects, youth whose relationships terminated within a year derived significantly fewer benefits (Grossman & Rhodes, 2002). Youth in particularly short matches suffered relative declines in self-worth and scholastic competence. In contrast, youth who were in matches that lasted more than a year reported relative gains in levels of self-worth, perceived social acceptance, scholastic competence, parental relationship quality, and school value, and lower levels of both drug and alcohol use. These findings are consistent with a recent metaanalysis of mentoring program evaluations, which found relatively modest effects for relationships that lasted less than a year (DuBois, Holloway, Valentine, & Cooper, 2002). When mentoring relationships were enduring and supportive, however, they facilitated a range of positive changes in developmental outcomes.

Relatively little research differentiates the characteristics and outcomes of mentoring relationships for different-aged youth. There is some evidence, however, that the older youth (13- to 16-year-olds) are at greater risk than younger youth (10- to 12-year-olds) for being in an early-terminating relationship.

*Quality of the Mentoring Relationship.* Research examining the effectiveness of youth mentoring has also found a strong emotional connection to be a distinguishing feature of those mentoring relationships that are associated with better outcomes for youth (DuBois & Neville, 1997; Grossman & Rhodes, 2002; Herrera, Sipe, & McClanahan, 2000; LoSciuto, Rajala, Townsend, & Taylor, 1996). Indeed, one study (DuBois, Neville, Parra, & Pugh-Lilly, 2002) found support for a model in which the perceived benefits of

mentoring relationships flow through relationship closeness for mentors and protégés, rather than being directly linked with variables such as amount of contact and types of shared activities. Mentoring relationships in which the youth consider their mentor to be a significant adult in their life have also been found to be more likely to promote higher self-esteem (DuBois, Neville, et al., 2002).

Liang and colleagues (2002) found that, in addition to closeness or engagement, natural mentoring relationships marked by authenticity, empathy, and empowerment were associated with lower levels of loneliness and higher self-esteem among college-aged women. Similarly, in a qualitative study of adolescents participating in a formal mentoring program, authenticity, empathy, and companionship were identified as dominant themes in close and enduring mentoring relationships (Spencer, 2004).

Unfortunately, many questions about what fosters close and enduring mentoring relationships remain unanswered because very little research has examined the development of mentoring relationships (Keller, 2005b). In qualitative studies based on in-depth interviews, mentors frequently note an initial period in the relationship, sometimes 6 months to a year in length, when the youth is reluctant to trust the mentor, is uncommunicative, and may fail to keep appointments or return phone calls (Spencer, 2002; Styles & Morrow, 1992). The commitment of the mentor during this time of testing, as reflected in patience and perseverance, is seen as the key to eventual development of a comfortable and productive relationship. In a qualitative study, Morrow and Styles (1995) described the development of two types of relationships characterized by different goals and interaction styles. For one group of mentors, early goals in the relationship focused on transforming the youth (i.e., improving behavior or grades, taking more responsibility). These goals remained consistent throughout the match, which was often short-lived and frustrating for both parties. For the other group of mentors, early goals focused on relationship building (i.e., learning youth's interests, establishing trust), and later, these mentors expanded their focus to include transformation goals. In this study, the latter type of mentoring relationship was linked with positive outcomes, including mutual attachment and commitment. In another qualitative investigation, Hamilton and Hamilton (1992) observed that mentors who appeared to be effective were able to foster relationships by introducing challenging and constructive activities that built upon children's existing interests or that sparked new interests.

## CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

### *Conclusions*

Youth mentoring is a popular and widespread phenomenon with demonstrated potential to promote the positive development of young people. However, describing exactly how mentoring relationships may exert a positive influence on youth remains a challenge. Research aimed at understanding the processes at work in youth mentoring should be guided by solid conceptual models that incorporate relevant theoretical perspectives from the literature on child and adolescent development. We have presented a conceptual framework that portrays a close mentoring relationship as the catalyst for three intertwined processes: (1) enhancement of social and emotional development; (2) improvements in cognitive functioning through conversation, joint activity, and guided instruction; and (3) promotion of positive identity development. In each of these domains, we have suggested possible interpersonal mechanisms

drawn from theories of parent–child, teacher–child, and peer relationships. In our model, for example, attachment theory provides a foundation for proposing how mentoring may affect youths' social and emotional functioning. This conceptual framework is beginning to be fruitfully utilized in research on the mentoring process, but there may be several other models from parent–child and other close relationships that could inform our understanding of mentoring. It is also important to consider the ways in which mentor relationships operate according to, or depart from, models developed for other types of relationships.

In this article, we also have provided an overview of the very limited research focusing on mentoring processes. The existing research lends some preliminary support to aspects of our proposed model. Nevertheless, much greater attention needs to be paid to understanding mentoring processes so that mentoring programs can be effective in their efforts to improve the lives of the youth they serve. Attempts to arrive at general conclusions about the influence of mentoring are complicated by the relationship context and numerous other personal, environmental, and situational factors that are potential moderators of mentoring effects. Strategies employed by mentors to promote positive identity development, for example, may be more effective with some youth than others, depending on their background, beliefs, and values. Larger samples than typically seen to date are needed to provide adequate sensitivity in the examination of how mentoring process and effect vary according to these factors. Likewise, qualitative examinations of the mentoring process are needed to generate insights regarding key processes at work in mentoring relationships and to develop more nuanced understandings of the ways these processes promote youth outcomes from the perspectives of youth and their mentors. Longitudinal studies that closely examine mentoring relationships from initiation through termination are needed to investigate the interplay between the processes that promote strong, enduring relationships and the processes that influence positive developmental outcomes for youth. In addition, studies that follow youth through the transition to adulthood would be informative because the continuing influence of the mentoring relationship might be apparent long after actual interaction has ceased.

### ***Recommendations for Research***

To encourage future research on youth mentoring that examines and refines the conceptual framework presented in this article, we offer a small sampling of possible research directions for each domain in the model.

*Social-Emotional Processes.* Researchers interested in the social and emotional benefits of mentoring may find it fruitful to address several issues regarding the nature and function of support provided by mentors. One salient question, for example, is the relative extent to which a mentor serves as an attachment figure (to whom the youth turns for help and reassurance when distressed) versus a friendship figure (with whom the youth enjoys companionship for fun and diversion). Researchers also might investigate whether having a mentor can influence the youth's impression of relationships with adults and can provide a model for social interaction that translates to improvements in other relationships. Another area for research is the manner in which a mentor may help the youth to develop the capacity to manage and express emotion in a productive way.

*Cognitive Processes.* The examination of how mentoring may facilitate the intellectual development of youth might follow several avenues. For example, researchers can evaluate not just the extent to which a mentor exposes the youth to new opportunities for learning, but also the effectiveness of the mentor in engaging the youth's interest in learning. Another important issue is how effective mentors introduce and sustain intellectually challenging activity while not pushing so hard that they frustrate or alienate their protégés. In addition, the growth in school-based mentoring calls for research that investigates whether mentors influence academic achievement indirectly by providing motivation and support or whether they are more effective when focusing directly on school-related activities.

*Identity Processes.* Several directions are suggested for research investigating how mentoring fosters identity development among youth. One topic of interest is whether role modeling by mentors is likely to be influential at the level of instilling values and behavior or of encouraging educational and occupational aspirations. Another question is the extent to which feedback from a mentor is incorporated into self-concept relative to messages from other adults in the child's social network. Researchers also can examine how well mentors promote the development of social capital by providing a bridge to social networks and educational and occupational opportunities beyond the youth's previous experience.

As youth mentoring programs assume an increasingly important role in our society, we need to improve our understanding of the ways in which they work—and do not work. With a deeper understanding of the mentoring process, we can use programs more effectively to capitalize on the potential to influence a range of developmental outcomes positively.

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