

CHAPTER 2



A Developmental Context and the Role of Mentoring

PURPOSE

The purpose of this chapter is twofold:

1. To highlight challenges that youth face as they transition to adulthood; and
2. To explain how mentoring programs can help support older youth in navigating challenges and achieving youth development and leadership competencies.

DEVELOPMENTAL CONTEXT OF YOUTH IN TRANSITION

Today, the transition period from childhood to adulthood is longer than any other generation has experienced. The age range of 14 to 24 years old was chosen as the focus of this Guide in recognition of this shifting dynamic. While a clear linear path of a youth's development does not exist, there are broad patterns of cognitive, emotional, interpersonal, and physical development that mentoring programs for youth and young adults need to be aware of in designing their programs. The literature relating to youth development identifies the following as phases or stages (the developmental context) in which youth must achieve competence as they mature toward adulthood:

- Development of social competencies;
- Building of supportive relationships;
- Engagement in the community; and
- Establishment of independence.

Social competencies comprise one set of skills and knowledge that youth need in order to navigate the transition into adulthood effectively. Making career choices and preparing for work have been identified as key areas in which youth need to develop knowledge during this period. Obviously, the youth's interests and the types of activities the youth will enjoy and benefit from will vary as the youth matures and gains experience. To foster achievement of the competencies identified above, mentoring programs that serve this age range should include opportunities for youth to engage in constructive peer relationships as well as one-on-one interchanges.

CHALLENGES

Many vulnerable youth who reach the age of majority may no longer qualify for services that they received as minors. The development toward adulthood is not an easy one for most youth: they increasingly look outside the family to their peers for approval in order to

establish their independence, and this struggle for self-definition sometimes leads to risky or even deadly behavior. At the same time, programs and services for adolescents and young adults often lack financial resources or are plagued with inconsistencies, systems gaps, and challenges. A mentoring program cannot solve all such challenges but there are some specific challenges that can be “tackled” in the program design.

Although no mentoring program can resolve all challenges youth face, well designed mentoring programs can help youth with disabilities in the following ways:

- Communicating with parents or other family members who may not recognize a youth’s emerging independence or who lack high expectations for the youth’s transition into adulthood;
- Aiding in the improvement of academic skills;
- Promoting opportunities for youth to explore career interests;
- Improving and increasing socialization opportunities with their peers; and
- Providing information and guidance about how to navigate the adult service system.

Mentors can also help guide youth through the sometimes awkward developmental stages that accompany the transition into adulthood. Mentoring organizations can become strong voices within their communities and states as well as nationally to identify and advocate for the reduction of systems gaps in the delivery of services. In order to support the dual goals of improving direct mentoring services and system improvement strategies, an organizing framework for mentoring is needed. What follows is such a framework.

BUILDING ON YOUTH DEVELOPMENT AND YOUTH LEADERSHIP COMPETENCIES

During the review of definitions and current research regarding youth development and youth leadership, some common competencies and outcomes emerged. The Forum for Youth Investment developed a model

that organizes these common competencies and outcomes into five developmental areas — key components to positive youth development: **working, learning, thriving, connecting,** and **leading** (Ferber, Pittman, & Marshall, 2002).

The National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth (NCWD/Youth) has chosen to use these developmental areas as an effective framework for organizing activities designed to foster positive youth development and youth leadership. Further, NCWD/Youth has identified the additional supports and services youth with disabilities may need in each of the developmental areas. [While mentoring relates most directly to the “connecting” development area, it also can play a major role in supporting each of the other youth development competencies.] What follows is an overview of these developmental competencies and suggestions regarding the types of activities that mentoring programs can do or link with other organizations to assist youth in achieving the competencies.

Working: Positive attitudes, skills, and behaviors around vocational direction characterize this area of development. Young people should be actively involved in activities that will expose them to the world of work and offer the opportunity to practice not only the actual skills needed for a particular career but also the work-readiness skills needed for finding and maintaining employment. Meaningful engagement in one’s own career development process is of major importance in order to make informed choices. Youth with disabilities need activities that support career goal-setting and -planning, as well as networking with other individuals in particular fields. Some youth may need assistance in finding and acquiring the supports and accommodations they need to participate meaningfully in education, training, and the workplace.

Learning: Positive basic and applied academic attitudes, skills, and behaviors characterize this area of development. Often, supporting this competency area requires something as simple as giving young people the opportunity to use the skills they have acquired in school or other training programs in a different context. Youth should be encouraged to develop not only a higher aptitude for academic achievement but

also the ability to approach learning with a strategy for achieving success. Youth with disabilities need to learn how to develop and use their personal development plans and to identify the educational and training supports related to specific careers. These youth may also need tutorial assistance and information about service learning, a teaching approach that combines community service with academic curricula to meet community needs.

Thriving: Attitudes, skills, and behaviors that are demonstrated by maintaining optimal physical and emotional well-being characterize this area. Not only must a young person have intellectual and social competencies to achieve success in adulthood; he or she must also have the wherewithal to maintain his or her physical and emotional health at its highest level. This includes having the ability to identify environments and situations that would potentially compromise one's physical health. However, the core of this area of development is the ability to identify and assess those situations that enhance one's physical and mental health. Thriving is the optimal relationship between physical and emotional well-being, as determined by each youth's particular circumstances and range of abilities. Youth both with and without disabilities may need information on community resources related to social, recreational, and physical and mental health needs.

Connecting: This area refers to the development of positive social behaviors, skills, and attitudes. Relationships with elders, peers, supervisors, family, and other community members commonly influence these behaviors, skills, attitudes, and tolerance of diversity. The level to which a young person has developed in this area will also dictate how he or she continues to build varied relationships later on in life and balance the demands of work and personal life. Further, maintaining these relationships in a way that will positively benefit the young person is the goal of this area of development. For youth with disabilities, connecting may include additional factors such as learning to access and use an array of support services, including assistive technology, transportation services, workplace accommodations, and other services to promote independent living.

Leading: This area centers on the development of positive skills, attitudes, and behaviors around civic involvement and personal goal-setting. Youth who are civically engaged in a positive manner, willing to participate in public activity, and able to navigate the civic arena are likely to become adults who participate in civic upkeep. In this case, the term "civic" can refer to an entire city, a neighborhood, a community, or any other setting relating to a public environment. Ideally, a youth who develops the inner strength and vision to set and meet goals will create a Doppler Effect of benefits: as the youth gains personal benefit from leadership experiences, so will his or her surrounding peers, co-workers, and environment.

For each of the five youth development competency areas discussed previously, the table that follows details a set of suggested activities that mentors can either perform themselves or collaborate with others to provide.

Table II aligns the *Guideposts for Success* framework with the youth development and youth leadership competencies described above. Table II illustrates the relationship between each *Guidepost* and each developmental competency area, and provides specific examples of mentoring strategies that can be implemented to assist youth in achieving the competencies.

The developmental areas of "Thriving" and "Leading" both fall under the Youth Development and Youth Leadership *Guidepost* and are combined for the conceptual framework of this table. Each of these developmental areas focuses on the skills, attitudes, and behaviors youth need to support optimal physical, emotional, and civic health.

TABLE II: MENTORING FOCUS STRATEGIES

GUIDEPOST	DEVELOPMENTAL AREA	MENTORING STRATEGIES
<p>School-Based Preparatory Experiences</p>	<p>Learning is based on positive basic and applied academic attitudes, skills, and behaviors.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assisting in the development of a personal development plan. • Identifying resources and supports needed for educational and training enrichment. • Identifying career preparatory needs to include in transition plans. • Providing tutoring support and informal academic self-appraisal. • Exploring service-learning opportunities.
<p>Career Preparation and Work-Based Learning Experiences</p>	<p>Working focuses on the positive attitudes, skills, and behaviors necessary to meet expectations in jobs, careers, and vocational development.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promoting career exploration activities and tools. • Providing information on networking with individuals in a particular field. • Promoting activities to support career goal-setting and planning. • Providing information on job shadowing, workplace visits, and tours.
<p>Youth Development and Leadership</p>	<p>Thriving centers on attitudes, skills, and behaviors that are demonstrated by maintaining optimal physical and emotional well-being.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exploring problem solving and conflict resolution. • Sharing information on community resources related to social, recreational, and physical and mental health needs. • Promoting the role of social, recreational, and sports activities. • Assisting with developing and implementing strategies for balancing work, school, and life.
	<p>Leading is the area of development that centers on positive skills, attitudes, and behaviors around civic involvement and personal goal-setting.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promoting youth leadership development experiences. • Promoting community activities and volunteerism. • Promoting youth activities that encourage group participation as well as collaboration with other individuals and groups.
<p>Connecting Activities</p>	<p>Connecting refers to the development of positive social behaviors, skills, and attitudes.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Providing information on resources for self-sufficiency. • Promoting work and life balance. • Encouraging cultural activities that promote understanding and tolerance. • Providing information on community services.

EXHIBIT 2.1: RESEARCH FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

In 1989, the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development described a well-developed youth as one possessing “five characteristics associated with being an effective human being — [that he or she] will be an intellectually reflective person, a person en route to a lifetime of meaningful work, a good citizen, a caring and ethical individual, and a healthy person” (Pittman, Irby, & Ferber, 2000, pg. 18). The year before, the Grant Foundation recommended that all youth receive

more constructive contact with adults who can help them guide their talents into useful and satisfying paths; opportunities to participate in community activities that they and adults value, especially giving service to others; special help with particularly difficult problems; and [employment experiences] that offer a path to accomplishment and to career opportunity. (Pittman, Irby, & Ferber, 2000, pg. 19)

These concepts helped frame the youth development movement that began in the 1990s.

In the past and present, most mentoring programs “[have] address[ed] specific risk areas or problem behaviors such as school dropout rates, youth violence, adolescent pregnancy, and drug and alcohol use” (Foster, 2001, pg. 2). More recently, however, because of the increased emphasis on assets and positive growth, in the context of this framework “mentoring is generally viewed as one component of a more comprehensive youth development strategy” (Foster, 2001, pg. 2).

Other research notes that late adolescence and young adulthood — from approximately age 16 to age 24 — is a pivotal time in the lives of young adults (Furstenberg, Kennedy, McCloyd, Rumbaut, & Settersten, 2003). The transition from adolescence to young adulthood involves changes in areas of cognitive, emotional, interpersonal, and physical development. For most, the period represents the merger of a number of developmental milestones and challenges directly connected to adult life.

The major milestones commonly cited in the literature (Osgood, Foster, Flanagan, & Ruth, 2004; Furstenberg, Kennedy, McCloyd, Rumbaut, & Settersten, 2003; National Federation for Catholic Youth Ministry, 2001; Shelton, 1983; Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1995) to characterize this phase of development include development of competencies, building supportive relationships, community engagement, establishing independence, and youth leadership and development.

In addition to intellectual and emotional development at this stage, Havighurst (1952) identified work and relationships as important developmental areas while other researchers (Super 1963; Pittman, Irby, & Ferber, 2000) highlighted the importance of identifying and resolving work and career choices.

According to Connell, Gambone, and Smith (2000), a primary purpose of youth development initiatives is to improve the long-term life chances of young people

- to become economically self-sufficient;
- to be healthy and have good family and social relationships; and
- to contribute to their community.

To achieve these outcomes, the authors say that youth must be productive, that they must make connections with adults and peers, and that they must successfully navigate through the challenging circumstances that coincide with adolescence and young adulthood. On connecting with adults and peers, Connell, Gambone, and Smith added that

[r]elationships with both adults and peers are the source of the emotional support, guidance and instrumental help that are critical to young people’s capacity to feel connected to others, navigate day-to-day life and engage in productive activities. In supportive relationships with adults and peers, youth experience high, clear and fair expectations, a sense of boundaries, respect and the sense of another person giving of themselves. (2000, pg. 8)

Further Research and Disability-Related Issues

While this stage of adolescence and adulthood has long been considered a critical one, very little research has been devoted to discerning the factors associated with successfully navigating milestones. Two themes have emerged from the very limited research available on the transition to adulthood for youth in general, which have important implications for vulnerable populations.

First, the process of moving from adolescence to young adulthood has become longer, more complex, and less orderly in recent years. For these reasons, the transition to adulthood is now more challenging for all youth. The second theme concerns the large share of youth in the general population who increasingly rely on the resources of their families as they make this transition (Osgood, Foster, Flanagan, & Ruth, 2004, pg. 3). The Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development characterized this time as one when many youth feel isolated from adults who may provide guidance. These youth spend most of their time with peers who are going through the same rough

EXHIBIT 2.1: RESEARCH FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

times and poor decision making often leads to harmful or lethal activities (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1990). This period is also characterized by uncertainty and searching, and can be particularly difficult for non-college-bound youth who must navigate without the structure of post-secondary education. In this light, it is especially problematic that governmental assistance for vulnerable youth populations typically ceases just as youth are entering the transition to adulthood.

Disability-Related Research Issues

Some disability-specific research indicates that mentoring can help youth with disabilities achieve goals that are part of the transition process including academic achievement, career awareness, connecting with the adult world, leadership and social skill development, and development of skills related to overcoming societal barriers (Rhodes, Grossman, & Resch, 2000; Sword & Hill, 2002; Moccia, Schumacher, Hazel, Vernon, & Dessler, 1989). A study of youth with mild disabilities in middle school substantiates the claim that mentoring can help these youth “have higher self esteem, higher grade point averages, better attendance and fewer suspensions” (Campbell-Whatley, 2001, pg. 212). Still, these findings do not adequately address how youth with disabilities fare in mentoring programs with non-disabled peers. Additional studies are needed to validate and inform mentoring practice so that youth with disabilities gain optimal benefit from a relationship with a caring and supportive adult or peer.