

## Intergenerational Mentoring: A Unique Response to the Challenges of Youth

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### INTRODUCTION

Children, youth, and older adults face many serious challenges. Some are different, but many are similar. Young people sometimes have difficulty navigating the path of early life and adolescence. The challenges they face are often exacerbated by factors outside of their control such as difficult family situations, poverty, and troubled communities. Older adults are sometimes challenged by loneliness and isolation from their families and communities.

- Approximately 32%, or 23 million children, are living in a single parent home or without either parent.<sup>1</sup>
- 14.2% middle school students and 38.1% of high school students use tobacco products<sup>2</sup>, over 20% of adolescents drink regularly and over 10% of adolescents smoke marijuana frequently.<sup>3</sup>
- The national high-school dropout rate was 10% in 1998.<sup>4</sup>
- Suicide is the eighth leading cause of death for all persons regardless of age, sex or race; the third leading cause of death for young people aged 15 to 24.<sup>4</sup>
- Elders account for one-fifth of all suicides.<sup>5</sup>
- There has been a significant shift in the number of older adults that live alone. By 2005, 32% of all elderly will live alone, which often results in decreased socialization.<sup>6</sup>

Both young and old seek meaningful relationships and positive interactions to address challenges and improve feelings of self-worth. Together young and old are assets to the community and can offer support to one another through meaningful interaction. Mentoring is one forum for such interaction. Mentoring is “a relationship between a more experienced person and a younger person which involves mutual caring, commitment and trust.”<sup>7</sup>

### BENEFITS OF MENTORING PROGRAMS

Mentoring programs have proven to produce positive results. An 18-month study of over 950 youth at various local Big Brothers Big Sisters agencies found the mentored youth to be:

- 46% less likely to begin using illegal drugs,
- 27% less likely to begin using alcohol,
- 53% less likely to skip school and 37% less likely to skip a class,
- less likely to hit someone,
- more confident of their performance in schoolwork, and
- demonstrating improved relations with families.

The findings were even more striking within the minority population. Among minority youth that had not already begun using drugs, the mentored youth were 70% less likely to report initiating drug use.<sup>8</sup>

### INTERGENERATIONAL MENTORING

Older adults and young people are alike in that their unique talents and strengths are often overlooked. Intergenerational mentoring is a unique way of bringing the two groups together in a purposeful way while developing a mutually beneficial relationship. Intergenerational mentoring:



- provides youth extra attention, guidance and support,
- offers older adults a more productive lifestyle that contributes to a greater sense of purpose and allows them to feel more connected to their communities,
- empowers communities by facilitating community collaboration, pooling resources, and engaging in cooperative problem solving,
- promotes the understanding of shared values and respect for individuals in all life stages, and
- fosters an appreciation for rich cultural heritages, traditions, and histories.

### WHY OLDER ADULT MENTORS?

Older adults are living longer, increasing in number, and are generally healthier than ever before. With changing patterns of retirement, many older adults find themselves spending a longer period of time in full or partial retirement. Many of these older adults want to find ways to be active and continue to contribute to their communities. Older people have more time to devote to new pursuits and are in an ideal position to provide the support that young people need.

- The size of the older population is projected to double over the next 30 years, growing to 70 million by 2030.<sup>9</sup>
- It is projected that one in five people will be age 65 or older by 2030 due to the aging of the Baby Boom generation.<sup>9</sup>
- 65% of adults over 55 reported that retirement is “a time to begin a new chapter” in life by being active, involved, and setting new goals.<sup>10</sup>
- 83% report that volunteering and community service play or will play a role in their plans for retirement. Volunteering and community service rank second in importance to older adults, only behind travel.<sup>10</sup>

Older adults are an invaluable, under tapped and growing resource that can make a difference in the lives of young people. Older adult mentors can help children and youth develop the awareness, self-confidence and skills needed to overcome difficult obstacles and improve school performance. Older adults have an opportunity to feel valued and invested in the future, while young people receive extra attention, guidance, and support from a caring adult.

## EXAMPLES OF INTERGENERATIONAL MENTORING PROGRAMS

### ACROSS AGES

Across Ages is an intergenerational mentoring approach to substance abuse prevention. The unique and highly effective feature of Across Ages is the pairing of older adults with high-risk middle school students. Evaluation data from the program has shown that it is a significant prevention method. Children and youth in the program acquired a significant:

- improvement in knowledge about/reactions to drug use,
- decrease in substance use (e.g. tobacco, alcohol),
- decrease in absenteeism and negative/disruptive behavior in school,
- improvement in positive attitudes about themselves, their schools and the future,
- improvement in attitudes toward adults, particularly older adults, and
- increase in school attendance.<sup>1</sup>

### MENTOR LINK

Mentor Link, in Arkansas, is an intergenerational mentoring program that is administered through the Tri-county Retired and Senior Volunteer Program, and funded 50% by Title V of the Older Americans Act. This program currently links 24 older adults with 34 high school teenagers (ages 12-18) that may be having difficulty in school, living in an unsatisfactory home environment, dealing with teenage parenting or pregnancy, living at or near poverty level, or lacking clear goals in life/career. The role of the older adult is to work one-on-one for a minimum of three months with a youth to resolve social, educational or employment problems and to help youth set realistic goals for themselves

### BRIDGES INTERGENERATIONAL MENTORING

Bridges Intergenerational Mentoring program of Interages in Montgomery County, Maryland builds relationships between older adults (over age 55) and at-risk immigrant youth (ages 10 through 14). The purpose is to provide immigrant children, who have been in the United States for less than 3 years, with a nurturing, supportive older adult mentor to help them with acculturation, academic achievement, communication skills, and personal development. This project is implemented at neighborhood schools with large populations of poor immigrants and heavy concentrations of drugs and other criminal activity. The senior mentors, trained by Interages' staff to communicate across cultures, meet with the students after school once a week and often spend individual time with the protégés during vacations and on weekends.

### RELEVANT PUBLIC POLICIES

Public policies can encourage mentoring by including specific language that ensures opportunities for seniors to serve as mentors, tutors, and volunteers. For example Congress authorizes the Corporation for National and Community Service. This is a federal program that supports seniors who serve in a variety of capacities including Foster Grandparents who may serve as tutors in schools or Head Start programs, or as mentors to teenagers. Supporting programs and policies with implicit intergenerational provisions is an important step in allowing our society to invest in our children through our country's growing resource of older adults.

For further information, please contact: Generations United • GU, 1333 H Street N.W., Suite 500W, Washington, D.C. 20005; • (202) 289-3979, Fax: (202) 289-3952; e-mail: [gu@gu.org](mailto:gu@gu.org). The GU web site at [www.gu.org](http://www.gu.org) contains additional information about grandparents and other relatives raising children.

*Generations United (GU) is the national membership organization focused solely on promoting intergenerational strategies, programs, and policies. GU represents more than 100 national, state, and local organizations representing more than 70 million Americans. It is the only national organization advocating for the mutual well-being of children, youth, and older adults. GU serves as a resource for educating policymakers and the public about the economic, social, and personal imperatives of intergenerational cooperation. GU provides a forum for those working with children, youth, and older adults to explore areas of common ground while celebrating the richness of each generation.*



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