

Background

The YouthBuild USAⁱⁱ National Mentoring Alliance (NMA) was formed in 2009 with funding from the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP). The goal of the NMA is to improve outcomes for YouthBuild participants through the support and guidance of a one-to-one relationship with a caring adult. This three year grant from OJJDP provides funding to a minimum of forty YouthBuild programs to hire a dedicated Mentoring Coordinator to establish and sustain a solid mentoring component for sixteen to seventeen year old students that will be fully integrated into a well-functioning YouthBuild program.

The YouthBuild USA NMA model incorporates the six evidence-based standards identified by MENTOR/National Mentoring Partnership in the *Elements of Effective Practice*ⁱⁱⁱ – recruitment, screening, training, matching, monitoring and support, and closure – ensuring a solid and safe foundation for the development of mentoring relationships. Through innovative real-time and web-based technical assistance, just in time training, and a holistic approach which makes use of group mentoring and community service activities to support one-to-one matches, the NMA has been able to scale beyond the minimum forty required to fifty-eight actual mentoring programs. These fifty-eight programs have committed to supporting over 1500 successful mentoring relationships that last fifteen months.

During Summer 2011, YouthBuild USA conducted a needs assessment to identify and prioritize performance gaps in the NMA that can be addressed through training and technical assistance (T/TA). As part of this process, a total of sixteen onsite visits were conducted for the purposes of this needs assessment, including interviews with seven mentors and twenty-one mentees. In addition, 163 mentors and eighty-four program staff members responded to a survey conducted as a part of this needs assessment.

The following collective story reflects the current impact of mentoring at the YouthBuild programs, as told by those survey respondents and interviewees.

Connecting, Clicking, and Opening Up

While the participating YouthBuild USA NMA programs report an overall strengthening of outcomes among mentored youth, the impact of mentoring within the fifty-eight participating programs can be seen first and foremost through the significant moments within the lives of participating students. For example, one young man described how his mentor was there for him at a critical time:

I was on the phone with my mentor when I found out that my grandmother had passed...he came right down to see me. He really helped me get through that. He put in my head that it was okay for me to mourn but to still stay on track and do what I have to do.

Similarly, a female student shared her story of how mentoring made a difference in her life because of the actions of her mentor at a significant moment:

She took me to the hospital when I went into labor and she sat there until my mom got there. That helped the relationship a lot because it showed that she's a really caring person and that she will be there for me as much as she can.

Frequently mentees referred to a moment when they “clicked” or “connected” with the mentor, a moment that formed a basis of trust for opening up and further sharing. What it took to get there in most cases was a **demonstrated commitment** to be there and do what they said they would do, **which communicated the mentors’ personal stake in the relationship**. The students’ descriptions of these connections showed that they expected the adult mentors to take the lead, to be tenacious in contacting them, even when they were hard to reach.

The mentor’s personal investment in the relationship often was evidenced not only by the “be there time,” but also by the emotional risk the adult volunteer would take first to open up. **Mentoring is a two-way street and YouthBuild mentees expect their mentors to be the first to drive down that road**. They showed through their words that they want the mentors to open up, show up, and call up first, but once that break through occurred, the students were ready to follow suit. Several mentees described these types of experiences^{iv}:

*“When my mentor opened up to me about her mom and sister who died in the same car accident, she told me that she couldn’t live anymore, but she kept going. When **she opened up to me, it made me want to open up to her.**”*

*“Our relationship is stronger even though she is an older person; **she showed me that I can trust other people. She was there for me and gave me advice.**”*

*“**We connected because she opened up** to me and she’s really easy to talk to. It took about a month or so for me to **trust** her and I got to see that she’s cool. We normally hang out or go out to eat once a week and we text and call each other.”*

*“**We clicked** on the first day we met and were exchanging each other’s interests and hobbies.”*

*“We had **a lot of time to talk** and I think that’s what really **made us click** because she got to talk to me about her life and that made me **open up** to her.”*

*“His laid back attitude is what **helped us click**. He made me feel comfortable talking to him.”*

*"I felt that **our relationship connected** when she told me that she had also dropped out of school and got her GED **just like I did**, and we're both mothers of two daughters."*

*"He **believed in me** when nobody else did."*

YouthBuild mentees expect their mentors to take on the mantle of servant leader, providing guidance and support to their mentees by positive example, compassionate communication, and determination.

Center of gravity

In the survey conducted in the Summer of 2011, mentors were asked "What have you learned from your mentoring experience that would help YouthBuild support others making the commitment to a mentoring relationship?" The top three words used in response to this open-ended question were **commitment, patience, and time**. That is it.

That is everything. The center of gravity for all successful mentoring relationships is the personal stake mentors express through their commitment, patience, and time.

For the underserved high-risk students represented by YouthBuild, these mentor-stakeholders do what no one else has done before for them: Show up on time, every time. Do what they say they are going to do. Listen more. Prejudge less. Raise the bar of possibility through exposure.

Both mentors and mentees expressed in a number of different ways the "magic formula" that YouthBuild USA NMA programs have discovered. Simply this: **mentoring favors the "Steady Eddie" – that reliable, committed adult "stakeholder" who will be there in both the remarkable and unremarkable times**.

It is all well and good to talk about "being there" or "taking a personal stake," but admittedly, that is a bit vague. What in fact does the "be there guy" – the "stakeholder" – do? Mentors were asked about this very thing. In the survey, two different questions were posed to draw out a picture of quality time:

What activities have you and your mentee participated in that have strengthened your mentoring relationship?

How have you assisted your mentee in developing and achieving their Life Plan^v goals?

Within the first few weeks of participation in mentoring, each YouthBuild mentee, with the help of a counselor or other staff member, will begin a YouthBuild Life Plan, which requires the student to formally document his or her goals and brings those goals, hopes, and dreams into focus. A YouthBuild Life Plan requires young people to evaluate their leadership skills, engage in service opportunities, develop healthy relationships, and determine steps to building a positive social network. Mentors are encouraged to work with the mentee on the development and achievement of goals. The most innovative programs also have mentors develop their own life plans alongside their mentees, supporting the notion that mentoring is a two-way street.



Relationship strengthening activities recommended by YouthBuild

Mentors:

- Call
- Call again
- Cook together
- Eat dinner together
- Explore college options
- Go bowling
- Go for a walk
- Go ice skating
- Go out for lunch
- Go shopping
- Go to concerts
- Go to the library
- Go to the movies
- Group activities
- Look for a job
- Play basketball
- Practice interviewing skills
- Serve the community
- Show up
- Talk
- Talk
- Talk on the phone
- Talk over coffee
- Talk some more
- Team building
- Texting
- Tutoring
- Work on Life Plan goals
- Work out

The responses to the questions above paint a picture of Steady Eddie providing a combination of emotional, functional, and problem-solving support that opens new doors. Activities range from bowling to exploring college options. Life plan support is dominated by job search and employment skills support, followed closely by general encouragement, counseling, and listening.

Generally, these are not compartmentalized activities, but rather, fun and functional ones that are happening simultaneously, or in overlapping spheres. Goal oriented and problem-solving discussions are happening over lunch, while bowling, or after a basketball game. In some cases, the youth has such emotional issues they are working through, that no problem-solving or functional work can happen until those needs are addressed.

YouthBuild mentors as a whole seem to understand intuitively that the entire crux of mentoring hinges on the development of trust between the youth and adult. In the mentor survey, mentors indicated a desire for additional training, resources, and support in expectations (of themselves, youth, the mentoring relationship, and the program), boundaries, communication strategies with youth (including the use of social media), and mentee needs and issues (motivations, developmental levels, at-risk behavioral issues/challenges). They want to make sure they do not break trust by not meeting expectations or commitments, by crossing inappropriate boundaries, or by failing to communicate as needed.

Programs that have found ways to support the development of the mentor-mentee trust relationship by leveraging available resources – such as group mentoring, community service projects, ongoing training, and mentor support groups – have shown greater success in meeting and exceeding their match objectives.

I fired my mentor

Not all mentoring matches lead to heartwarming stories of magic moments, lifelong relationships, and improved outcomes. In fact, as many as half of volunteer mentoring relationships end prematurely, i.e. after only a few months, far sooner than the recommended twelve month duration, which can lead to increases in risky behavior and decreases in youth functioning.^{vi} For YouthBuild mentoring relationships, “premature” is less than the fifteen months that both mentor and mentee have committed to as part of the OJJDP mentoring initiative.

Two YouthBuild students described their reasons for ending their mentoring relationships:



I fired my mentor. We were together about three months. I let her go because she worked too much, we didn't really spend much time together and every time we went out somewhere I always had to pay my own way. We would always go out to eat but we never sat down and got to know each other, we never got a connection. I would have rather done other things like walk in the park and talk or something, so I knew I wanted to get a new mentor.

I don't talk to my mentor. She is too busy, I stopped calling now. I used to call her and used to have things I wanted her to go to but she wouldn't go. Last time I talked to her I invited her to my graduation and she didn't show up so that was the last straw.

While disappointing and unfortunate, what these cases also show is a fundamental value of YouthBuild, which is youth empowerment. These young women were empowered to say, "No, that is not acceptable, and I will choose to not continue in this situation."

Even matches that continue throughout the committed duration can struggle with making a connection, reducing the potential impact of a fully realized mentoring relationship. One student from Sumter County YouthBuild put it this way: "Have someone push the mentors to connect with us more, even if we don't connect with them."

In each of these cases, the youth were saying (indirectly to the interviewer, if not directly to the mentor) that they want the adult mentors to be tenacious in staying in touch with them. They weren't looking for flashy activities, but opportunities to make a real connection.

The mentors whose relationships had terminated prematurely were asked in the survey to describe the circumstances under which the relationship ended. Responses included:

- Mentee left the program
- Mentee had many family problems
- She moved away and stopped talking to me
- Lack of effort on mentee's part; no communication
- Youth never called back or showed up to meets

For the most part, the mentors' perspective was that the youth chose not to continue. This is a particularly complicated dynamic, as the mentees are in fact young adults who are being encouraged and trained within the YouthBuild context in self-expression, personal choice, and empowerment. While the mentor/stakeholder has an obligation to be tenacious in their communication with the young person, they also need to respect the free will and shared stake of the mentee. As one student put it, "A

mentee's responsibility in the relationship is the same as the mentor; you have to keep in contact with each other." This statement is evidence of the **mentor magnet training each YouthBuild mentee receives as part of the program, a skill which they will take forward with them throughout their lives.**

Where there are such challenges, the best scenarios may be those in which both the mentor and mentee can learn through them, such as in this case:

I learned not to be discouraged by a mentee's inexperience to meet commitments. It would be encouraging to know that staff has the tools to access and determine the level of sincerity of potential mentees. In addition, the mentee should understand the commitment that they are making before attempting a match with a mentor.

Learning to trust

Trust is the magic ingredient for YouthBuild programs working with deserving youth. The YouthBuild mission – to unleash the intelligence and positive energy of low-income youth to rebuild their lives and their communities – is fundamentally centered in this development of trust. Trust in themselves, in their futures, in their communities, and in other caring individuals.

As we have seen through the comments of participating youth and adult volunteer mentors, mentoring is a key component of building trust. YouthBuild staff who have had the opportunity to observe these mentoring relationships concur. Over ninety percent of the program staff that completed the needs assessment staff survey observed a positive difference in youth as a result of the mentoring initiative.

*"The impact on the youth is amazing! I can honestly say that each and every one of the youth with a mentor seem to be more comfortable with themselves. **More able to take risks**, challenge themselves, ask questions, venture out into the world looking for jobs or heading to our local community college." – Mentoring Coordinator, YouthBuild Santa Rosa, CA*

*"The young people participating are benefitting from mentoring activities... [they] have years of issues and the process is slow, but I can see changes in behaviors and **they are learning to trust.**" – Executive Director, Sumter County YouthBuild, SC*

*"Some are **receiving attention from a positive adult for the first time**. At least one is receiving rides to her GED test. What a message on so many levels! The fact that they're not being paid makes a **huge impression on the mentees**. They seem to be able to impact the youth in ways that paid staff cannot." – Mentoring Coordinator, CSC YouthBuild, OR*



*“The youth in my program who are matched seem more engaged. They are definitely **more invested**”.* – Program Manager, YouthBuild of Northern Kentucky, KY

While it is too soon to tally the results of mentoring in terms of YouthBuild program outcomes (such as program completion, academic achievement, and positive placement) at the time this paper is being written, these comments indicate that **mentoring is having an amplifying effect of positive programmatic impact**. Other emerging trends – including reentry support, YouthBuild alumni mentoring champions, VISTA participation at NMA programs, and mentoring support groups – reinforce the picture of a mentoring spark being fanned into full fire throughout participating programs.

To learn more about how to fan the flame of mentoring within your mentoring program, please visit the YouthBuild National Mentoring Alliance Community of Practice:

<http://youthbuildmentoringalliance.org/>

Follow the NMA on Twitter: @YouthBuildNMA

Find YouthBuild USA online: <https://youthbuild.org/>

Or join us on Facebook: <http://www.facebook.com/#!/YouthBuildUSA>

End Notes

ⁱ YouthBuild mentors were asked in a 2011 survey, “What have you learned from your mentoring experience that would help YouthBuild support others making the commitment to a mentoring relationship?” The keywords from their responses were compiled and are represented in the word cloud on the title page of this paper.

ⁱⁱ The mission of YouthBuild USA is to unleash the intelligence and positive energy of low-income youth to rebuild their communities and their lives. In YouthBuild programs, low-income young people ages 16 to 24 work full-time for 6 to 24 months toward their GEDs or high school diplomas while learning job skills by building affordable housing in their communities.

ⁱⁱⁱ http://www.mentoring.org/downloads/mentoring_1222.pdf

^{iv} The quotes listed from YouthBuild students are from interviews conducted within the context of the needs assessment. To protect the privacy of the students, names and program locations are not included with the quotes. The YouthBuild programs that participated in the needs assessment interviews are as follows: CCEO YouthBuild, Eagle Ridge, GAP, LA Conservation Corps, LAYC YouthBuild Charter School, Pathways YouthBuild, Prevention Plus, Project Rebuild, River City YouthBuild, Sumter County, Tomorrow’s Builders, YouthBuild Bogalusa, YouthBuild Dallas, YouthBuild Jefferson/Marion Counties, YouthBuild Lowell, YouthBuild McLean County

^{vi} Rhodes, J., Liang, B., & Spencer, R. (2009). First do no harm: Ethical principles for youth mentoring relationships. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, 40, 452-458.

