

THE MENTORING GAP

Mentoring is powerful – this has always been true – but it's more critical today because **young people need more guidance and preparation** to navigate the demands and complexity of the changing labor market.

Simply put, there are nowhere near enough mentors available. Moreover, the most potent form of mentoring, natural mentoring, is **unequally distributed**, with youth from higher-income households more likely to have access to caring adult support outside the family. Why does this matter? Because the U.S. has historically aspired to the idea that all youth deserve an equal opportunity for success – and mentoring has become a critical ingredient for such success.

WHY MENTORSHIP MATTERS

Youth need supportive, caring mentoring relationships.

Two types of mentors: formal and natural.



Formal Mentors

Formal mentors are assigned to youth through programs like Big Brothers Big Sisters. An estimated 5% of American children and adolescents are in such programs.



Natural Mentors

Natural mentors emerge from a young person's social circle, usually among extended family, neighbors, teachers, coaches, religious leaders and employers. More than 75% of American adolescents report having a natural mentor, though rates vary significantly by social class.

A 2015 report, *Don't Quit on Me* from the Center for Promise, suggests that "relationship poverty" is impacting the life chances of millions of young people. Its findings include:

- Too many young people are facing too many hurdles to high school graduation with too little help.
- According to the National Center for Children in Poverty, 42% of children live in low-income families, half of whom are living below poverty.
- The presence of just one "stable, anchoring relationship" can be a gateway to crucial forms of support for academic and career success.
- According to young people themselves, they need mentors who: invest time in them over an extended period; have a "be there no matter what" commitment; empathize with their life situations and challenges; and offer help without judgment.

Mentors are especially valuable when mentorship is based on a shared interest.

- Based on a meta-analysis of mentoring programs, when programs pair mentors and youth based on similarity of interests, the overall benefits are nearly double what they are if there isn't a shared interest.
- In higher education, connections with mentors in areas of interests are tied to long term thriving in work and life.
- Based on a survey of 30,000 college graduates, the Gallup Purdue *Great Jobs Great Lives* report concludes:



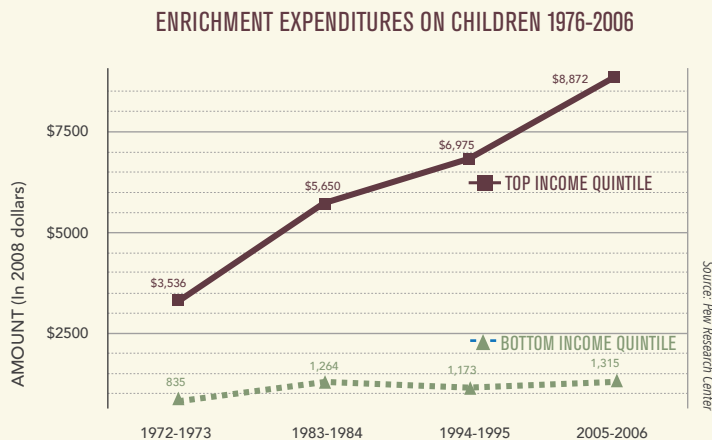
"If graduates had a professor who cared about them as a person, made them excited about learning, and encouraged them to pursue their dreams, their odds of being engaged at work more than doubled, as did their odds of thriving in their well being."

THE PROBLEM

Despite the beneficial effects of formal mentoring programs, only **2.5 million (5%)** of the **45.7 million** youth between the ages of 6 and 17 have a volunteer mentor.

The rate of formal mentoring has remained stable over the past decade, suggesting that we will never be able to meet young people's need for mentoring through programs. Worse than the overall shortage of formal mentors is a disturbing gap in access to natural mentors. Lower family income, receiving public assistance, and neighborhood poverty are all negatively related to the likelihood of acquiring a natural mentor during adolescence and the transition to adulthood. What's more, lower income youth have fewer non-family mentors who can bridge them to new opportunities and discuss ideas about the future. They also are less likely to see their mentors as role models.

This natural mentoring gap is on top of the opportunity gap created by historic levels of income and wealth disparity. Between 1979 and 2005, average after-tax income (adjusted for inflation) grew by \$900 a year for the bottom fifth of American households, by \$8,700 a year for the middle fifth, and by \$745,000 a year for the top 1% of households.



During roughly the same time frame, enrichment expenditures for youth in higher-income households has **increased 700%** more than that of lower-income households.

The advantages youth get when they're exposed to enrichment experiences and networks of professionals and caring adults need to be available to all youth.

"Poor kids, through no fault of their own, are less prepared by their families, their schools, and their communities to develop their God-given talents as fully as rich kids. For economic productivity and growth, our country needs as much talent as we can find, and we certainly can't afford to waste

— Robert D. Putnam,
Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis

WHAT WE CAN DO



We need to teach youth to fish for mentors and we need to stock the pond with more mentors.

We need mentoring interventions that help mobilize community resources and networks, facilitate youth's capacity to draw on natural support, and encourage all adults to take a more active role in the lives of youth – and there are several successful models to draw on and replicate.

Youth Initiated Mentorship (Teaching Youth To Fish)

In the Youth Initiated Mentoring (YIM) approach, youth nominate adults to serve as their mentors, selecting from the adults already in their social networks. YIM program staff then provide relationship oversight, including screening, training, and supporting the mentors.



The National Guard Youth Challenge Program

The YIM model has been successfully deployed for over a decade through this intensive program for adolescents who dropped out of high school.



The Connected Scholars Program

This program guides high school and college students in cultivating a network of supportive adults, rather than a single mentoring relationship. Students practice strategies for reaching out to and connecting with sources of support through role-playing, structured conversations, and networking events.

Intentional Mentorship (Stocking the Pond)

Intentional mentoring approaches seek to increase the availability of caring adults who serve as mentors. Adults in thousands of after-school programs, summer camps, competitive sports teams, and online interest group engage youth but may not know how to be effective mentors. All of these adults should have access to mentoring instruction and coaching.



Connected Camps

This program trains teens to teach and mentor younger children digital citizenship and STEM skills in the online game of Minecraft.

For more resources visit the [Center for Evidence-Based Mentoring - MENTOR](#), [Connected Scholars Program](#) and [Everyday Mentor](#).

INTENTIONAL MENTORSHIP: DIGITAL YOUTH NETWORK



The Digital Youth Network in Chicago, which founded a model for 21st century library spaces known as YOUMedia, has developed an approach to mentoring centered on interest-driven mentorship that cultivates trust and respect among teens and adult mentors.

"They call them mentors, but they don't really act like teachers or parents, which is, I think, what kind of makes them cool...It's just easier to talk to them because they always seem like they listen, even if it isn't just about DYN."

- DYN student

65% youth said they had a personal relationship with at least one mentor

89% youth said they could trust the mentors at YOUMedia

A survey of 200 participants at YOUMedia Chicago conducted by the Consortium for Chicago School Research revealed

SOURCES/REFERENCES



All young people deserve **quality mentoring relationships** that will allow them to have a shot at realizing their full potential. We cannot leave this to chance.

Intentional mentoring approaches seek to increase the availability of caring adults who serve as mentors to all youth. This involves encouraging all adults to recognize and capitalize on their day-to-day encounters with young people as opportunities to provide support and to share interests and connections.

- Center for Promise. *Don't Quit On Me: What Young People Who Left School Say About the Power of Relationships.*
- Gallup. *Big Six Experiences Linked to Life Preparedness.*
- DuBois, et al. *How Effective are Mentoring Programs For Youth. A Systematic Assessment of the Evidence.*
- Schwartz et al. *Youth-Initiated Mentoring: Investigating A New Approach to Working With Vulnerable Adolescents.*
- Schwartz et al. *Community Developmental Assets and Positive Youth Development: The Role of Natural Mentors.*
- Ben Eli-Yahu et al. *The Interest Driven Pursuits of 15 Year Olds: "Sparks" and Their Association With Caring Relationships and Developmental Outcomes.*
- Gallup. *Gallup-Purdue Index Report 2015.*
- MENTOR. *The Mentoring Effect: Young People's Perspectives on the Outcomes and Availability of Mentoring.*
- Putnam. *Our Kids: The American Dream In Crisis.*
- UChicagoCCSR. *Teens, Digital Media, and the Chicago Public Library.*
- Baron et al. *The Digital Youth Network: Cultivating Digital Media in Urban Communities.*
- Sarah E.O. Schwartz and Jean E. Rhodes. *From Treatment to Empowerment: New Approaches to Youth Mentoring.*
- Schwartz et al. *"I Didn't Know You Could Just Ask:" Empowering Underrepresented College-Bound Students to Recruit Academic and Career Mentors*
- Making Cents International. *Teaching Youth How to Fish for Mentors*
- Raposa, Dietz, & Rhodes. *Trends in Volunteer Mentoring in the United States*

For more information, please visit the [Connected Scholars Program](#) or the [Rhodeslab.org](#)

CREDITS

Produced by
Connected Learning Research Network



Connected Learning Alliance

