



# **The SAGE Encyclopedia of Out-of-School Learning**

## **Cross-Age Peer Mentoring**

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Cross-age peer mentoring denotes an interpersonal relationship between an older, traditionally high school youth and a younger, typically, middle or elementary school-age child that focuses on fostering growth and development of the younger person. The relationship must endure and include regular, often weekly, contact over an extended period of time—long enough for a relationship of trust and mutual commitment to develop. The one-on-one attention mentees receive from mentors and the opportunities for mentors to exercise perspective taking, leadership, and social skills convey the developmental properties of cross-age peer mentoring relationships.

This form of mentoring was originally labeled as *developmental mentoring*, to reflect the key normative development opportunities afforded to mentors and mentees through the reciprocated exchanges of empathy, friendship, and attention. Michael Karcher, a researcher on this topic, later recommended that the label *cross-age peer mentoring* be used more consistently so as to avoid confusion with *developmental style*, another important term in the mentoring literature. More important, it also captures the critical age difference characteristic of cross-age peer mentoring, one of the two main ways of differentiating it from other peer support interventions. The other is that it is a relationally focused intervention for strength promotion rather than for risk or problem reduction. This entry discusses the parameters of cross-age peer mentoring; the characteristics of mentees, mentors, and mentoring relationships; and the structure of cross-age peer mentoring programs.

### Parameters of Cross-Age Peer Mentoring

This section describes several other ways in which cross-age peer mentoring differs from peer education, peer counseling, peer tutoring, and other types of peer interventions in which youth work with other peers in a helping capacity. The most important difference, reflecting the developmental nature of cross-age peer mentoring, is that mentoring is a nontherapeutic and nonremedial relationship. Therapeutic, educational, or remedial processes are more central to most peer education, counseling, and tutoring programs. Any program that aims to directly reduce misconduct, improve grades, or remediate interpersonal skills deficiencies among children is not mentoring. Understanding the power that older peers can have on children through cross-age peer mentoring relationships can help stakeholders and child advocates establish a mentoring program that is distinct from more remedial or corrective peer interventions.

Mentoring, especially when provided by teens to younger children, is a way to propel growth and should not be focused on treating problems. This, of course, is something most teens would be ill prepared to do even with a great deal of training. However, teens can be, or can be trained to be, effective at encouraging, paying attention, listening, and modeling positive attitudes toward school and others. Mentoring is, as first described by Homer in *The Odyssey*, a relational experience born out of an older and wiser person's recognition of a child's potential and desire to nurture his or her growth.

Match duration represents another key factor that differentiates cross-age peer mentoring from other forms of youth-supporting programs. Peer tutoring, helping, and counseling are typically short-term interventions that last fewer than 10 meetings. They are not dependent on creating a deep relationship. Conversely, cross-age peer mentoring requires establishing and nurturing reciprocal relationships, which takes time and sustained effort. For this reason, Karcher suggests that peer groups meet at least 20 to 30 times across a school year. These meetings might occur weekly or biweekly during the academic year and must be consistent to

provide the opportunity for a real relationship to form and grow.

Another distinctive feature of cross-age mentoring is the requisite condition that mentors be “older and wiser.” Common to all mentoring relationships, by definition, this characteristic is particularly important in programs with teenage mentors. Studies suggest that a mentor should be at least 2 years older than a mentee because mentors need to be sufficiently mature and independent of the mentees’ social world. Very few studies report the effectiveness of cross-age peer mentoring programs that utilize preteens as mentors, which is why it can be argued that cross-age peer mentors should not be preteens. Elementary-age children have only a rough awareness of how their needs may differ from others, as they have a limited ability to take their peers’ perspectives. Furthermore, most lack the degree of impulse control, foresight, and other-centeredness required of a successful mentor.

Of course, teenage mentors also need a great deal of support, but the depth of connection they can cultivate with mentees seems considerably greater than that of younger mentors. This is critical because it is the depth and nature of mentoring relationships that is believed to make these relationships unique and more effective than other peer interventions. This does not mean that elementary schools cannot enlist upperclassmen to support a younger child, as doing so may yield very satisfying interactions that may make school a more pleasant place for both. But such relationships, even if lasting throughout the year, probably should be called something other than “mentoring relationships.” Big buddies, pals, or older friends may become very important people to the younger child, but at this age, probably these relationships rarely include true mentoring.

### **Mentee Characteristics**

Even though cross-age peer mentoring programs are not intended to reduce individual, behavioral, academic, or social deficits, advocates of and stakeholders in these program often emphasize recruiting youth who are at risk in some observable way. This focus is unfortunate, problematic, and often self-defeating. It is critical to consider how to best involve such youth. Typically, central to the solution is to ensure that a program is neither stigmatized nor paralyzed by an overrepresentation of emotionally, behaviorally, or socially at-risk youth. Experts recommend that no more than 20% (1 in 5 mentees) have a history of misbehavior, misconduct, poor emotion regulation, or aggression. Considering the very real possibility that most children are “at risk,” in some way that is not (yet) observable, a program that recruits no more than a third of its mentees with any observable or known risk will still yield a large pool of children who can undoubtedly benefit from the sustained, caring attention and interest of older peers.

Research shows that students most likely to accept support from mentors are those who demonstrate an openness to support seeking either in their behaviors in class or by their enthusiasm to participate in the program. Such mentees often seem to need academic, social, or emotional support the least—yet they are the least likely to lead mentors to burn out quickly (which is not an insignificant issue). In addition, even among youth at a greater risk for academic, social, and emotional difficulties, some will be more receptive to working with an older peer. These children should be the primary recruitment targets, and less interested but equally at-risk youth should be referred to tutors or counselors for less relationally focused remedial services.

Conversely, “wallflowers” who are not recognized by teachers, because of either their low levels of misconduct or their high levels of engagement in school, are often precisely the

children who do not get much attention in general and likely need help recruiting mentors. Students with lower levels of interpersonal resources (e.g., personality, physical appearance) and environmental support (e.g., peer networks, parental availability) may be just as open to engaging in formal mentoring programs organized within school or community settings as other youth, but they are not usually recognized. The absence of opportunities to connect with older individuals may lead youth to be more solicitous of mentors' academic and emotional support and, thereby, indirectly influence the likelihood of a natural mentoring experience occurring and the mentor benefiting as well.

Selecting mentees for a cross-age mentoring program—assuming that all children encounter adversity and all have potential that can be tapped into—a pool of participants who reflect the larger study body composition will best avoid stigmatizing a program and fostering cliques of socially similar kids in a program. Available research on successful mentoring and youth development programs reveals the following trends in the selection criteria:

- At least 30% of children have no identified risks.
- Fewer than 40% of children are at risk for academic and social disengagement.
- Fewer than 25% of children have emotional, behavioral, or interpersonal difficulties (“risks”) easily recognized by peers and adults.

Recruiting “good kids” as mentees is in no way a “waste of a mentor,” as mentees who exhibit prosocial behavior and positive attitudes toward school often serve as valuable role models for other children whose prior relationships may not have prepared them well for effectively engaging in school (or in mentoring relationships). Notwithstanding the possibility that even these promising youth can have considerable yet unobservable adversity in their lives, they can serve as primary socializers for other children in the program. Furthermore, their participation may help reveal their potential as future leaders (and mentors).

### **Mentor Characteristics**

The developmental experience and benefits that cross-age peer mentoring provides to mentors hinge on their focused, consistent, and enthusiastic engagement in the process. Lev Vygotsky's *zone of proximal development* provides a useful framework for understanding how older peers' efforts to mentor a child can afford developmental growth not propelled by other academic and extracurricular activities at school. In the zone of proximal development, individuals are helped to practice skills just beyond their current capabilities. Mentors help their mentees in this way, to be sure; but consider that a well-structured cross-age peer mentoring program similarly helps teens engage at a higher level of maturity and cognitive complexity than what they can do alone. Teen mentors practice collaboration and self-sacrifice, can observe the effects of past behaviors on their current relationship experiences, and better understand the various influences on children's behaviors. Few other opportunities for youth can propel their development in that way. But for these developmental experiences to occur, mentors must actively engage in the program.

Program staff often need to contend with the fact that not all teens volunteer to mentor out of a desire to support a child. One of the founding fathers of modern psychoanalysis, Alfred Adler, described social interest as one's ability to identify with others and the tendency to be empathic, caring, and interested in others. Cross-age peer mentors who exhibit a higher level of social interest are more likely to enthusiastically work with challenging mentees. Many programs initially have potential mentors complete the Crandall's Social Interest Scale, as it has proven to be instructive for program coordinators and insightful for mentors to complete

before signing up for a full-year mentoring relationship. Having a more positive view of youth also has been found to predict greater effectiveness of high school–age mentors with more challenging mentees. Conversely, mentors with negative attitudes toward youth can adversely affect good kids by mentoring them.

### **Mentoring Relationships**

The main goal of cross-age peer mentoring is the development of reciprocal relationships between mentors and mentees. Experiences of empathy, praise, and attention in mentoring relationships contribute to the youth's growth and self-development. Mentoring researcher Jean Rhodes suggests that mentoring relationships that are based on trust, empathy, and mutuality most strongly contribute to positive outcomes from mentoring. Such a relationship between mentor and mentee conveys a sense of worth, likability, and specialness to both participants. This is why an interpersonal focus and consistent contact are the essential components of cross-age peer mentoring relationships.

For a relationship to form, however, the mentoring match should engage regularly for a consistent period of time so that trust and mutuality develop naturally. Weekly peer mentoring meetings for the duration of a school year are advised. But, and this is very important, a relationship is only as good as it ends. Matches should not be expected to extend beyond the school year. This is an unreasonable commitment to request of a teen and is therefore irresponsible of adults to request. There is no experimental research evidence that multiple-year matches are more effective, and considerable evidence that less than half of the matches in schools continue into the next year, regardless of what either participant anticipates. For this reason, matches need to be not only regular and sustained for a period of time but also must conclude effectively each year.

Teens cannot be expected to create developmental experiences for their mentees on their own. More support, planning, structure, and match monitoring may be needed for cross-age peer mentoring relationships. Planned, structured, and well-supervised cross-age peer mentoring relationships have been shown to lead to positive impacts on mentees' social skills, self-efficacy, and academic achievement. Benefits for mentors of such structured yet relationally focused programs include improvement in moral reasoning and empathy, developmental competencies, organizational skills, and connectedness to school and community. Conversely, research has not found such positive outcomes for unstructured cross-age peer mentoring programs and instead has found several negative outcomes for youth in programs that let teens direct their own mentoring relationships. For this reason, program staff should establish an environment, ideally with authentic input from advanced, experienced mentors who can suggest activities and rituals for the program (e.g., certain celebrations, end-of-meeting reflections), in which the relationship can grow and thrive.

The benefits seem greatest when using some structured activities as a context in which the relationship can develop. The benefits of cross-age mentoring programs are not directly related to the curriculum content or specific skills learned from activities—that would be peer education. But this content and these activities can help orient the participants' actions and attitudes and foster a program culture. In many programs, dyads meet in a larger group setting that is oriented around a common schedule and set of activities. The activities can set the stage for observational (vicarious) learning from older peers through opportunities for mentees to see, learn, and emulate prosocial behaviors displayed by mentors. The Cross-Age Mentoring Program, for example, orients all activities using two theories. The first is a theory of adolescent connectedness to school, peers, teachers, parents, reading, the future, and self.

Each month, a set of three or four meetings will focus on one of these connectedness “worlds.” The second theory used is that of cognitive perspective taking and complementary interpersonal negotiation strategies. Using these two theories, program staff develop activities that foster engagement (connection), empathy (perspective-taking), and social interest both by content and by modeling.

Conversely, in the absence of structure, guidance, and monitoring, mentors have a tendency to inadvertently model and promote risk-taking and authority-undermining behaviors of mentees. Thomas Dishion and his colleagues referred to this impact as “deviancy training.” The likelihood of negative effects of cross-age peer mentoring is higher when the program lacks structure and close supervision and also when the current structure (activity type and content) does not cultivate authentic prosocial engagement by mentors and mentees.

### Program Structure

Program staff support plays a critical role in a program’s success, providing ongoing monitoring of mentoring relationships and the regularity of mentoring contacts. In successful mentoring programs, program staff monitor and ensure that mentors and mentees are satisfied to avoid dropouts prior to match termination.

Providing orientation to mentees may allow them to learn how to best “utilize” their mentors and navigate mentoring relationships. Considering the goals of peer mentoring, mentors are often trained in a developmental approach to avoid assuming the roles of tutors.

Termination presents an important aspect of training. Premature termination of relationships may cause harm to mentees and mentors. When a mentor begins to miss meetings, program staff intervene and address the mentor’s behavior. But with careful recruitment and thorough training in the importance of closure, mentor inconsistency and failure to follow through with the yearlong commitment should occur less commonly. When absences happen, staff also can help mentees not personalize mentors’ absence as well as ensure the implementation of proper termination procedures when the time comes.

**See also** [Group Mentoring](#); [Mentoring](#); [Natural Mentors](#); [Positive Youth Development](#); [Social Class and Socioeconomic Status](#)

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