

Mentoring has a potentially important role to play in the emotional and spiritual development of today's youth.

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Youth mentoring and spiritual development

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RELIGIOUS ORGANIZATIONS OFFER a potentially rich pool of caring adults who are driven by their own spiritual commitments and a strong ethic to serve others.¹ Indeed, more Americans volunteer through religious organizations than through any other venue. Religious organizations account for half of all volunteering, with an estimated 60 percent of the members of religious congregations engaging in volunteerism.²

Similarly, a national survey of volunteer mentors indicated that nearly a quarter (24 percent) did so through religious organizations, second only to school. Finally, recent Census Bureau data tracking volunteer trends revealed that 43 percent of American volunteers who engaged in a mentoring relationship did so through religious organizations.³ It appears, then, that mentoring, especially through faith-based organizations, has a potentially important role to play in the emotional and spiritual development of youth.

A religious congregation represents a rich intergenerational network of parents' friends, extended family members, and spiritual models who can help shape and reinforce not only behavioral and academic outcomes but also spiritual development.⁴ Here we use

the term *spirituality* to describe the experience of discovering universal meaning and beliefs and the term *religion* to describe the social, organizational, and practical expression of spirituality.⁵

Mentoring relationships in general and in faith-based organizations can take a wide variety of forms, ranging from the informal connections forged between youth and caring adults to more formal, programmatic ties.⁶ Informal mentoring in faith communities often happens through shared activities, such as youth groups, classes, family gatherings, and rituals.

Formal mentoring relationships can arise beyond the bounds of the religious settings through structured mentoring programs. The most prominent faith-based mentoring program in the United States is the Amachi Project. In Amachi (a Nigerian Ibo word meaning “who knows but what God has brought us through this child”), adults are recruited from churches to provide mentoring to children of incarcerated parents. Across the United States, thousands of youth have been mentored through this program,⁷ and preliminary studies suggest that participation can lead to improvements in self-efficacy, school performance, and emotional regulation.⁸ However, the evaluations have not highlighted the influence of the programs on mentees’ spiritual development.

Amachi and other organizations serving children of prisoners have expanded widely in recent years, thanks in part to generous government allocations. Since 2002, the U.S. Congress has authorized millions of dollars to support programs that provide mentors to the children of prisoners. Other federal agencies are also supporting faith-based mentoring through their funding programs. For example, the Juvenile Mentoring Program, which was sponsored through the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, awarded 12 percent of its grants to faith-based programs in 2002.⁹

It is important to remain mindful of both the benefits and potential complexities of this relatively new trend in mentoring. One benefit of administering mentoring programs through faith-based organizations is the potential for greater access to children of prisoners and other underrepresented youth, since social policies in general, and mentoring programs in particular, often do not reach the most severely disadvantaged youth. Such organizations

have credibility with and access to many disenfranchised families.¹⁰ In addition, mentoring relationships forged through religious organizations could offer some advantages in adolescents' search for meaning, such as reconciliation of their own and their parents' belief systems. Particularly in the light of the associations between religious involvement and positive youth outcomes, mentoring relationships that provide a potential for spiritual and religious development of mentees could serve a protective role.¹¹

Some critics, however, have raised concerns over the increasing role of the federal government in supporting faith-based initiatives. Potentially vexing questions concerning the separation of church and state can easily arise.¹² Indeed, the Freedom from Religion Foundation has filed several lawsuits over faith-based mentoring initiatives of the Department of Health and Human Services. One such challenge was to Phoenix-based Mentor Kids USA, which worked only with Christian churchgoing mentors who sign a fundamentalist Christian mission statement. There is also the issue of organizational capacity, for despite their best intentions, religious organizations are not human service agencies. Thus, they are often hard pressed to provide the infrastructure needed to carry out careful screening, training, and ongoing support to volunteer mentors.¹³

Finally, particularly when the mentee is not already a member of a congregation, religiously motivated mentors might feel compelled to advocate particular spiritual paths. Such proselytizing is not supported by empirical evidence and could render the mentoring relationship less effective. Previous research has underscored the importance of nonjudgmental approaches so that the youth can learn to think critically and independently.¹⁴ Few studies, however, have examined the processes that underlie faith-based mentoring programs. Furthermore, it is likely that a more developmentally grounded understanding of spiritual development could give mentors new frameworks for helping their mentees examine this dimension of life without crossing the line into religious proselytizing.

In addition, little is known about the effectiveness of mentoring programs and natural mentoring relationships (in either community or faith-based contexts) on youth's spiritual development or

about whether faith-based mentoring programs have any “added value” compared to their secular counterparts. We do know that, as with all other mentoring programs, the success of relationships forged through religious organizations is highly dependent on adherence to empirically supported practices.¹⁵

For close bonds to arise, mentors and youth need to spend time together on a consistent basis over a significant period of time¹⁶ and engage in positive interactions with each other.¹⁷ Close and enduring ties are fostered when mentors adopt a flexible, youth-centered style in which the young person’s interests and preferences are emphasized.¹⁸ To the extent that faith-based mentoring programs can incorporate these lessons, they are well positioned to have a positive impact on our nation’s youth.

Notes

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