

# Mentoring relationships from early adolescence through emerging adulthood: A qualitative analysis

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## Abstract

This study compared perceptions of mentoring relationships among early adolescents, middle adolescents, and emerging adults. In ten focus groups, 56 middle school, high school, and college students described relational experiences that were analyzed thematically. Differences in the characteristics of the mentors nominated by the youth across the age groups were noted and five broad themes identified. Three themes were similar across the different age groups: (a) the importance of spending time together and engaging in shared activities, (b) trust and fidelity, and (c) role modeling and identification. Two themes were present in the narratives of all three age groups but played out differently in ways that were consistent with developmental issues and needs of that age group: (a) balancing connection and autonomy and (b) empowerment. These data can help guide future research and practice involving youth mentoring relationships across developmental and disciplinary divides.

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## 1. Introduction

Mentoring relationships are thought to contribute to the positive development of young people in general (Rhodes, 2002); yet, there has been little consideration of how the mentoring process evolves as youth move through adolescence into early adulthood. Further, research has mostly focused on formal mentoring (Rhodes, 2002), despite evidence that natural mentoring relationships, or those formed with adults youth encounter in their communities, are far more prevalent (Spencer, 2007). The little research on natural mentoring relationships does suggest that adolescents derive a variety of psychosocial benefits from these ties (DuBois & Silverthorn, 2005). However, questions remain about the nature of youth mentoring relationships during the different developmental stages within adolescence.

Adolescence is comprised of sub-stages—early, middle, and late adolescence—and has recently been elongated such that these stages coincide with the educational transitions of middle school, high school, and

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college or full entry into the world of work, respectively (Steinberg, 2005). With each of these transitions, adolescents' social worlds expand as they move into new educational, out-of-school, and workplace settings; and they engage in an increasing number of natural mentoring relationships (Beam, Chen, & Greenberger, 2002; Hamilton & Darling, 1989). Interestingly, little attention has been paid to informal mentoring relationships (Linnehan, 2003), much less to how such relationships evolve as youth move through this rich and complex period. Some studies have documented that 53–85% of youth reported having a natural mentor (Spencer, 2007). In another national sample, nearly three quarters of the respondents reported having had a mentor since the age of 14 apart from any reference to a formal program (DuBois & Silverthorn, 2005). Some consideration has been given to the roles these relationships play (Greenberger, Chen, & Beam, 1998; Hamilton & Darling, 1989), but there is little understanding about how mentoring works from the young person's perspective. The handful of qualitative studies examining the nature of youth mentoring focus on formal programs rather than natural mentoring (Spencer, 2006) or tend to focus on youth as a whole rather than as separate developmental stages (Spencer, Jordan, & Sazama, 2004). To date, no qualitative studies investigate the differences in natural mentoring in early, middle, and late adolescence or emerging adulthood.<sup>1</sup>

This lack of differentiation is problematic given literature suggesting great variability in the characteristics and needs of youth during the different adolescent phases (Steinberg, 2005). Along with the biological processes associated with puberty, the onset of adolescence brings significant changes in social, emotional, and cognitive functioning (Arnett, 2004). There are several types of developmental changes that seem particularly relevant to understanding the fit between mentoring and the needs of early, middle, and late adolescents or emerging adults including changes in: cognitive ability and perspective taking, the parent–adolescent relationship, the peer context, and the setting from middle school to high school to college. The shift from preoperational or concrete thinking to formal operational or abstract reasoning brings with it increases in perspective-taking which allows adolescents to engage in deeper and more complex relationships (Carlo, Hausmann, Christiansen, & Randall, 2003). With increases in mobility and independence in adolescence come shifts in adolescents' parental relationships and a greater emphasis on extrafamilial relationships (Arnett, 2004). As youth progress through adolescence, their opportunities for engaging with adults across an array of settings (e.g., in-school, out-of-school, community and workplace) expand greatly. For example, extracurricular activities are associated with many psychosocial benefits (Darling, Caldwell, & Smith, 2005), and some of these positive outcomes may be mediated by relationships youth develop with their activity leaders which have been considered mentoring relationships given their frequency of contact and supportive nature (Hirsch, 2005).

It stands to reason that the shifts described above would affect the nature of mentoring at each developmental stage. Indeed, at each stage, adolescents confront a host of new freedoms and roles that mentors may help them negotiate (Schulenberg, O'Malley, Bachman, Wadsworth, & Johnston, 1996). For example, the developmental shifts associated with early adolescence (e.g., importance of extrafamilial ties), can create a unique opening for mentors. Although friendships play a substantial role in development throughout the life span, they are especially critical in early adolescence (Bukowski, Hoza, & Boivin, 1993); and although friendships have many benefits, they may also play a role in the emergence of relational and physical aggression in early adolescence (Dishion, Andrews, & Crosby, 1995). In addition, the transition from childhood to adolescence can be marked by increases in behavioral and emotional problems (Angold & Rutter, 1992; Fleming, Boyle & Offord, 1993); and although it has been assumed that early adolescents tend to be more influenced by peers as they navigate such challenges, research indicates that parents may contribute to their successful negotiation (Lengua, 2006). Thus, mentors—somewhere between parents and peers—may be in an even better position to influence young adolescents (Rhodes, 2002).

Compared to earlier stages, late adolescents and emerging adults may be more likely to move away from home, and engage in adult work roles. Thus, relationships with nonfamilial adults may not only be more accessible than parents, but may take on different functions and meanings. Hamilton and Darling (1989) study of undergraduates suggests ways that mentoring may shape the transition to adulthood—a time when older adolescents may be especially open to the influence of adults other than their parents. In particular, they

<sup>1</sup> Early adolescence (ages 11 through 14) correspond to middle school years; mid adolescence (ages 15 through 18) corresponds approximately to the high school years, and emerging adulthood (late teens through mid twenties) overlaps typically with the college years (Steinberg, 2005).

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