Young people and mentoring
Time for a national strategy

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The Australian Government funds a range of mentoring programs for young people. In April 2004 the Federal Opposition promised to create 10,000 new mentors over the next three years. In May 2004 three leading non-government organisations released a national strategy paper on young people and mentoring. That paper was prepared by ROBYN HARTLEY. Here she discusses the current situation in Australia and outlines the main features of the strategy.

Many people can identify someone other than their parents who nurtured, guided and supported them, or who was responsible for setting them on a particular path as they were growing up.

Caring relationships with extended family members, other adults and older peers provide a strong base for healthy development and a positive sense of self for all young people. The importance of such relationships in "protecting" vulnerable young people is widely acknowledged (Werner and Smith 1982; Werner 1989; Resnick, Harris and Blum 1996).

However, with smaller extended families, more single-parent families, and fewer strong local community networks, the opportunities for such natural or informal mentoring relationships to occur as children and young people interact with, seek out, learn from, and are guided by older people and peers with more experience, are reduced.

There is little doubt that well-planned and supported formal mentoring programs which seek to replicate some aspects of informal mentoring can provide children and young people with emotional and practical support and general guidance at many points in their lives. However, not all programs are equally successful or valuable, and the factors that make for good mentoring are becoming increasingly clear.

Formal mentoring

According to Colley (2003: 30): "Although the past 25 years have produced a vast amount of academic literature on mentoring, it has failed to achieve any consensus" [in defining mentoring]. Nevertheless, there is agreement about some key aspects. The following definition, adopted by Mentoring Australia (2000), reflects widely acccepted key elements of mentoring: "mentoring is a mutually beneficial relationship which involves a more experienced person helping a less experienced person to identify and achieve their goals".

Reference to "goals" reflects the purposefulness of planned mentoring relationships. For mentoring of young people, "purpose" is probably more appropriate and inclusive than "goal". Mentoring generally focuses on young people's social and learning development, and "goal" tends to have connotations that do not sit easily with mentoring where the primary focus is the emotional and social relationship between the mentor and the young person. The purpose of mentoring clearly varies with the mentee's needs, and the setting of the program and its aims.

The key difference between formal and informal mentoring is that the former is a planned, intentional and generally supported intervention whereas the latter is seen as occuring "naturally" in a young person's life. The nature and form of informal mentoring relationships is understandably varied and research suggests that the "characteristics and preferences of both the mentor and the protégé influence the nature, functions, and benefits of the ties" (Rhodes et al. 2002: 150).

While the purposeful nature of formal mentoring is important, the quality of the relationship is crucial to success and mutual satisfaction. In successful mentoring relationships, mentors are often described as "a good friend", "someone who's there for me", "someone who I talk to", "someone who helps me". The *relationship* is always the context, and the positive impacts of mentoring are likely to be greatly reduced (or even harmful) when this is not the prime consideration, as the research reported below clearly indicates.

In practice, the relationship and its purpose are frequently intertwined (MacCallum and Beltman 2003). For example, school-based programs focusing on direct assistance or skill development reach a new level when an emotional and social bond is formed. In mentoring programs based on providing social and emotional support, mentors often begin to provide more focused guidance and support – for example, about education and work options – as part of the relationship.

Mentoring is similar to, but also different from, other sorts of formal and informal relationships. It can be regarded as a particular example of role modelling, but differs from it in that "role modelling focuses on how the role model is perceived by the young people concerned, and the young person's desired goal, whereas mentoring focuses on explicit action by the mentor to assist the young person to reach their goal" (MacCallum and Beltman 2002: 8). Mentoring is also sometimes associated with, but has features that distinguish it from, coaching, tutoring and the "buddy" systems operating in schools and amongst some other groups.

Mentors are generally, but not exclusively, volunteers. This is one aspect which distinguishes mentoring relationships from the often numerous professional "helping" and "guiding" relationships young people experience with, for example, teachers, counsellors and social workers. Another point of difference is that there is an inherent emotional and social element to mentoring relationships, although of course some professional relationships do include an emotional relationship, as well as a direct element of support and guidance.

The voluntary nature of mentoring can be very powerful. It signals to a young person that support and assistance is willingly given. It also underlines the mutual benefit that positive mentoring relationships have, providing satisfaction and learning for the mentor as well as the mentee. Research shows that most people take on volunteer work for reasons of both altruism and personal satisfaction. It is clear that many mentors gain much from their mentoring relationships with young people.

Why mentoring?

Formal mentoring has a relatively long history but interest has burgeoned in the past decades. Colley (2003) refers to the "rise and rise" of mentoring in some western countries, especially in the United States, Canada, Britain and some countries in the European Union. In the United States, the Bush administration has championed mentoring in terms of volunteerism. An estimated five million American youth are involved in school and community based volunteer mentoring program (Grossman and Rhodes 2002). There has been a subtantial expansion of mentoring under the Blair government in Britain, especially targeting young people at risk of disengaging (or already disengaged) from education, training and employment, and more generally around career education (Colley 2003). In Australia, there was an increase in the diversity of programs in the 1990s.

Although the specific circumstances differ, and the development of mentoring needs to be seen in the cultural context of each society, it is generally accepted that there are fewer opportunities than in the past for young people to find informal support through extended families and close-knit community networks. Many factors contribute to this. Smaller family units, changes to women's and men's work and family roles, a substantial proportion of single-parent families, and the absence of positive male role models in some families reduce the capacity of communities to provide children and young people with ongoing and sustained support at crucial times in their lives.

This does not negate the support which many families and communities do provide, and the important role which supportive peer relationships play in providing a strong underpinning base for young people as they grow up. However, at present, there are gaps in social support and guidance, and also indications that some young people feel varying degrees of isolation, depression, rejection, loneliness and feelings of poor self-worth (for example, AIHW 2003: 89-112).

Coinciding with changes in family structures and less binding community networks, there are social and cultural pressures on young people which mean that the level of information and guidance they need to make their way in the world is increasing. Young people are expected to be more adult earlier, expectations which for some may be at odds with spending longer periods in school and educational institutions. They face a future which in many ways is exciting and challenging, but also increasinghly complex and uncertain. The choices they face in education – one example is the increased flexibility in post-compulsory education programs in many states in Australia – offer a greater range of opportunities, but they also

make it more difficult for young people and their families to make the best informed decisions. Even relatively well informed young people and families sometimes find it difficult to find their way "through the system". In addition, the level and quality of information and support available can be quite varied.

Young people are generally expected to be "work ready" when they enter employment. Many schools and tertiary institutions have programs to help students through the various "transition" points along the way and part-time work helps students to gain work-related skills. However, the fact that almost 15 per cent of 15-19 year olds are not fully engaged in learning or work suggests that, for various reasons, some don't get the assistance and support they need (Dusseldorp Skills Forum 2003).

Intergenerational unemployment also contributes to the difficulties that some young people have in gaining access to employment. In families where one or both parents are unemployed, it is much less likely that young people have access to information, contacts and informal networks which are often important in finding a way into employment. In 1999, Gregory reported that 18 per cent of dependent children lived in a family in which no parent was employed, and 28.5 per cent lived in a family where no male was employed. According to Gregory (1999), both of these proportions had increased over the previous 20 years.

What makes an effective mentoring program?

As the number of relatively rigorous evaluative studies of mentoring has increased, there are better opportunities to identify more carefully the elements of effective mentoring across different models and approaches. There has also been a greater focus on the relationship itself, on the need to carefully match the type of relationship with the young person's needs, and the similarities and differences between naturally occurring mentors and planned volunteer mentors in young people's lives (Rhodes et al. 2002).

What emerges is the crucial importance of well-planned and supported programs and the need for a greater understanding of and sensitivity to what makes for successful mentoring. Rhodes (2002) provides a useful summary of the current situation by saying that mentoring can powerfully influence positive development, but there are two major challenges: first, not to underestimate the complexities of mentoring relationships; and, second, to better understand (and promote) the conditions under which they are most likely to flourish. At the same time, the importance of matching mentoring relationships with young people's needs and personal circumstances highlights that, in mentoring, "no one size fits all".

DuBois et al. (2002) carried out a meta-analysis of 55 program evaluations and found that the effectiveness of programs did not depend on whether mentoring took place alone or in conjunction with

other services, or whether the program had general psycho-social goals or more focused goals, or whether or not it followed the model of the Big Brothers Big Sisters program. (The latter was included as a measure because it is regarded as a "good practice" model.) The findings concerning stand-alone and integrated programs are unclear, since Benard (1992) concluded that mentoring is most effective when seen as one of a range of youth services.

Factors significantly related to more positive outcomes are the presence of a number of both theory and empirically based "good practices", and the formation of strong relationships between mentors and mentees (DuBois et al. 2002:157). Ongoing training for mentors, structured activities for mentors and young people, expectations for frequency of contact, mechanisms for support, and involvement of parents were among the strongest predictors of reported positive outcomes (DuBois et al. 2002: 188).

As already noted, the nature and quality of the mentoring relationship is crucial. Frequency of contact, emotional closeness, and longevity in relationships all contribute to positive youth outcomes (DuBois et al. 2002; Jekielek, Moore and Hair 2002). The latter researchers also found an increase in positive effects in relationships which were youth centred and, not surprisingly, where the young person had a positive perception of the relationship. They found that the quality of relationships was higher when there was a good program structure and planning, which involved consideration of the interests of both mentor and mentee in the matching process, and social and academic activities, but especially social activities that reportedly help build trust (Jekielek, Moore and Hair 2002: pvi).

The building of trust and giving attention to young people's interests and needs is particularly important. From her own in-depth study of mentoring relationships and from other research, Colley (2003: 162)

concludes that: "When young people are able to negotiate mentor relationships on the basis of their own needs and concerns, they usually perceive mentoring in a highly positive way, and can identify important benefits they have gained."

It should not surprise that mentoring relationships that last longer are more likely to have positive effects, and that the benefits of mentoring are likely to emerge over a relatively long period of time (Grossman and Rhodes 2002). Grossman and Rhodes studied a group of adolescents in the Big Brothers Big Sisters programs and found that mentor relationships that lasted a year or longer reported the largest number of improvements. Older adolescents, those who had been referred for services, or those who had "sustained

emotional, sexual or physical abuse" were most likely to be in early terminating relationships.

Importantly, Grossman and Rhodes (2002) found that young people in mentoring relationships that terminated in a short period of time reported decreases in several areas of functioning. This reflects other findings. There is a clear message that short-term relationships have the potential to harm young people. Inadequate mentor training, poor matching, and inadequate ongoing support for both mentors and young people can lead to the breakdown of mentoring relationships, leaving already vulnerable young people feeling abandoned.

Mentoring and young people in Australia

Formal mentoring for young people in Australia includes programs which focus primarily on the social-emotional relationship, those with a clearly defined educational/ vocational purpose and those somewhere in between which broadly aim to help young people make more informed decisions about their personal goals and their life, and/ or promote leadership and general development. They are both community-based and site-based – that is, they take place in such places as schools, clubs and youth detention centres.

Some programs have a relatively long history. Big Brothers Big Sisters began in Australia some 25 years ago, and is part of an international movement which was established in North America over 100 years ago. The Learning Assistance Program (LAP), a school based program that brings together students, volunteers and teaching staff as partners in students' learning, was established in the 1970s.

The main development of programs in Australia took place during the 1990s, following a burgeoning of interest in developments overseas. The School Volunteer Program (SVP) in Western Australia is a well-established school based mentoring program in primary and secondary schools. STAR, a cross-age, cross institutional program involving university students working with secondary school students in Western Australia, began in 1994. The Plan-it Youth model for mentoring in schools began in 1997 as an initiative of the Dusseldorp Skills Forum and the model has been taken up by over 40 schools across Australia. The Smith Family provides a suite of mentoring opportunities for students in secondary and tertiary settings, consistent with their broad "Learning for life" approach.

The Australian Government has a tiered approach to mentoring for young people. The main youth-related program is Mentor Marketplace. It currently supports mentoring for a diverse range of groups including young people in school, indigenous young people, young people leaving care, in youth detention, and in semi-independent accommodation. There are also funds for mentoring in the more broadly focused Stronger Families and Communities program. Both initiatives are funded through the Australian Government Department of Family and Community Services.

Other Australian Government departments support programs which include an element of mentoring, in youth leadership development programs and interventions for at risk and vulnerable young people. State governments also support a range of mentoring initiatives in schools and in the community.

The Federal Opposition proposal for a National Mentoring Foundation and support for 10,000 new mentors over three years, announced in April 2004, "lifts the bar" and is likely to promote further debate about mentoring.

It is difficult to get a complete picture of all current initiatives, especially as short-term funding and under-funding makes for a changing landscape; programs come and go. In addition to the groups of young people mentioned above, there are mentoring initiatives for boys not living with their fathers, young mothers, young refugees, young people looking for an apprentice-type relationship with a professional and young people looking to gain leadership or entrepreneurial skills.

National strategy paper for young people and mentoring

The decision of the Dusseldorp Skills Forum, The Smith Family, and Big Brothers Big Sisters Australia to collaborate in developing a national strategy grew out of a concern that a more considered and broader

approach is needed if the benefits of mentoring for young people are to be sustained and expanded. They have been delivering quality programs for some years and have seen the positive results.

Consultations with practitioners, program managers and researchers, as well as a review of the research and policy literature support the argument that it is time to move beyond short-term programs, to "promote and support a broader concept of mentoring than has been evident in Australia to date, and to foster cross-fertilisation of what is known about successful mentoring with other current developments and policy frameworks" (Big Brothers Big Sisters Australia, Dusseldorp Skills Forum, and The Smith Family (2004: 3).

The strategy paper draws principally, but not wholly, on perspectives relating to 12–25 year olds. However, consultations indicated that younger

A mentor's view

"May has been involved in LAP (Learning Assistance Program) since it first began in the school. For her, it has been a challenge well worth the time and effort. Not only has it kept her on the ball, it has given her the rare opportunity of seeing how a child with learning difficulties is progressing and given her a reason to be interested in the welfare of that child. The growth in confidence, the developing of some personal goals, and the realising of those same goals are some of the challenges that keep being met in the LAP program."

Faria, Y. (no date), *Knowledge in Your LAP*, The LAP Association, South Australia.

children could and should be included. They are involved in a number of established mentoring programs. The largest community-based and school-based mentoring programs in Australia use a common set of program principles for primary school aged children and older age groups. The strategy paper acknowledges though that discussions with people with expertise in childhood would be necessary to develop a more comprehensive strategy that specifically includes children at different developmental stages.

Principles guiding a national strategy

Formal mentoring is a community function reflecting local needs. Clear national goals, funding guidelines and benchmarks are needed to ensure that programs are of high quality and reach those who might best benefit. However, they must be flexible enough to cater for local needs and for diverse groups of young people according to their developmental stage, cultural background and personal circumstances.

High quality mentoring for young people builds on and enhances existing policy frameworks, including those relating to community building, early intervention, school to work transition, careers advice for young people, and youth development. It also has considerable potential to improve understanding and communication across age groups and strengthen common bonds between generations.

Mentoring is a broadly based approach, not restricted to particular groups. Children and young people need support at different times and points in their lives and formal mentoring programs can be

organised around any and all of these times. Nevertheless, mentoring offers considerable support for disadvantaged young people

Mentoring has an important role in helping young people to better understand the education, training and work options open to them, to maintain contact with education and training opportunities, and to find pathways to employment and economic and social participation.

Formal mentoring programs are one effective means of supporting young people, not a single solution to complex social and individual needs.

Especially where young people face multiple disadvantages, mentors are best regarded as complementary to and an addition to the work of professionals and other supportive services, not as a replacement for them. Further, mentoring needs to be available in ongoing and sustainable ways.

Finally, planning for mentoring programs should include young people's views wherever possible and in ways appropriate to their developmental stage. Innovative youth-driven options to encourage, facilitate and support young people's contributions to mentoring programs need to be explored.

Recommendations from the national strategy paper

The national strategy paper proposes a three-tiered structure: a national peak organisation, regional coalitions of mentoring providers, and the federal government.

In countries where mentoring is more firmly established than in Australia, national peak bodies of practitioners and other interested persons play a major role. A national peak organisation could, among other responsibilities: support the key community role of mentoring; promote networking and partnerships; encourage vibrant debate about mentoring; provide resources and support for mentoring programs; and disseminate information.

Regional coalitions of mentoring providers would sit between governments, other funding bodies, the peak organisation, and individual programs. They would have responsibility for promoting and supporting local development of mentoring, providing a forum for discussion and providing a range of services including program coordinator training, mentor training, assistance with mentor matching, assistance with evaluation, and advice and support.

The Australian Government's responsibilities would include: expansion of access to mentoring; support for mentoring including funding for coordination, training, and evaluation of mentoring

programs within their jurisdiction; funding for a small secretariat for a national body; and leadership in promoting the role of mentoring in the general community and with other levels of government.

The strategy sets out a series of suggested areas for action. They include:

- Establishing a clear definition of mentoring, with agreement among stakeholders on a definition that is inclusive but which clearly sets out the parameters of formal mentoring.

- Adopting a set of benchmarks, reviewed and updated over time, and a mandatory set of standards for mentoring programs regarding the protection of children and young people.

- Encouraging and promoting an enhanced role for business, employers and philanthropic foundations in supporting mentoring of young people; identifying key corporate and community advocates to promote the community building role of mentoring young people; promoting local partnerships around community building which include mentoring of young people; and exploring ways of building a more widespread culture of employers and more experienced staff mentoring young people in large and small enterprises, both before they start work and when they are employed.

Suggested areas for action in relation to increased and longer-term federal funding for mentoring models and programs shown to be successful include: complementary funding by the federal government of collaborations with state-funded programs and partnerships and resources to support school-based mentoring programs. The key community building

A parent's view

"To whom it may concern. Ted has been an incredible mentor for our son L, aged 15. He has talked to him as an adult. He has also encouraged L to be happy with his decisions. L certainly has more confidence since knowing Ted. Ted is a good thinker who can guide a young boy in the right direction. We thank him greatly."

Bean, D. (2002), *Wise Heads on Young Shoulders*, Plan-it Youth, Central Coast (New South Wales).

role of mentoring needs to be acknowledged by appropriately funding programs for the time and resources required (a) to establish strong and viable networks (including school-community links), and (b) to expand the diversity of mentors by drawing in community members who are not traditionally volunteers but may have much to offer.

A way forward

There is still much to be learned about successful formal mentoring. However, there are well established models to build on, consensus about the value of well planned and resourced programs, and a growing agency and public interest in mentoring. A strong national strategy is likely to support organisations and individuals already working in the field, encourage local initiatives, and promote debate about mentoring.

Most importantly, a national strategy has the potential to increase the number of caring and supportive relationships between young people and adults who are not their parents, and to help more young people make stronger connections to community networks and education, training and work structures. It also has the potential to contribute to better understanding and stronger bonds between generations.

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Robyn Hartley is a freelance writer and researcher. She was commissioned by the Dusseldorp Skills Forum, The Smith Family, and Big Brothers Big Sisters to prepare the *National Strategy Paper on Young People and Mentoring,* which was launched in May 2004. The paper is available for downloading from two websites: *www.dsf.org.au* and *www.smith family.com.au/content.cfm?randid=337489*