



Refugee Youth Mentoring: Essential Elements for Effective Programs

While organizations serving refugees and immigrants have long used mentoring as a program strategy, for many, mentoring with youth is a new venture. Fortunately, there is a body of evidence to inform effective strategies in the new refugee youth mentoring programs now emerging across the country.

What is Refugee Youth Mentoring?

“Refugee youth mentoring” refers to programs or activities where more experienced people (mentors) act in a non-professional capacity to provide support that benefits refugee youths’ development.¹

The setting, structure, and goals of refugee youth mentoring programs can vary. Youth mentoring can be one-on-one, or use a group format. Mentors may be adults or peers. Some programs take place in a school context, while others operate in the community outside of school.



Youth mentoring generally refers to a relationship between a young person and an older, more experienced, non-parental figure who provides guidance, support, and encouragement to the mentee.² However, peers may also mentor other youth.

¹ Oberoi, A. (2016), “Mentoring for First-Generation Immigrant and Refugee Youth,” *National Mentoring Resource Center Population Review*, National Mentoring Resource Center, Washington, DC. [Available here.](#)

² Schwartz, S. E. O., & Rhodes, J. E. (2016). “From Treatment to Empowerment: New Approaches to Youth Mentoring.” *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 58(1-2), 150-157. doi:10.1002/ajcp.12070

In September 2018, the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) announced the allocation of over \$8 million for a Refugee Support Services Youth Mentoring “Set-Aside,” dramatically increasing support for 15- to 24-year-old refugee and other ORR-eligible youth in 34 states.

This Set-Aside aims to help ensure youth embark on a positive path to social and economic integration in the United States.

The Evidence on Youth Mentoring

There is a robust and growing field of research evidence related to mentoring generally, but limited research on mentoring with refugee and immigrant youth. When it comes to youth mentoring programs in general, the evidence base suggests taking the following steps:

■ Mentors³

- Select mentors whose educational or occupational backgrounds align to the goals of the program.
- Pair mentors and mentees based on shared interests.
- Support mentors to also play teaching and advocacy roles.
- Consider peer mentoring models as well as adult-youth mentors. Both peers and adults can be effective mentors.

■ Supervision and Support⁴

- Provide mentors with thorough pre-service training and ongoing support.
- Support mentors in effectively setting goals with mentees and developing action plans to achieve them.
- Equip mentors with suggested activities and relationship development guidance.

Ideas for Relationship-Building Mentorship Activities

- **Create together.** Write a story; build a website; take photos; make a collage of the mentee’s values or goals.
- **Learn languages.** Practice English; learn words and phrases from the mentee’s native language(s).
- **Explore the community.** Visit a museum, aquarium, zoo, planetarium, art gallery, park, cemetery, public library, local university, etc. Use public transportation together to get there.
- **Plan a service project** in the school or community.
- **Talk about the school day.** Talk about highs and lows; discuss strategies for managing time, taking tests, and studying.
- **Talk about your family heritage.** Research your roots together. Talk with elders about their life stories and historical events.
- **Research interesting or unusual careers.** Visit a job site or help arrange a job shadow. Interview someone who has an interesting job. Research career qualifications.

Adapted from [Effective Strategies for Providing Quality Youth Mentoring in Schools and Communities: Training New Mentors](#).

■ Format⁵

- Consider both group and one-on-one mentorship (both are effective).
- Aim to establish longer-term mentorship relationships (more effective than shorter-term ones).
- Make the time commitment clear to both mentor and mentee.

³ DuBois, D. L., Portillo, N., Rhodes, J. E., Silverthorn, N., & Valentine, J. C., (2011). “How Effective Are Mentoring Programs for Youth? A Systematic Assessment of the Evidence. *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*,” 12(2), 57-91.

⁴ See MENTOR/National Mentoring Partnership. (2015). *Elements of effective practice for mentoring* (4th ed.). Alexandria, VA. This guide’s steering committee reviewed over 400 peer-reviewed journal articles and research reports and consulted over 200 practitioners and mentoring organizations.

⁵ Ibid.

Effective Mentoring Programs with Immigrant and Refugee Youth

While limited, the research on mentoring programs with immigrant and refugee youth suggests that these programs may help achieve several important outcomes:

Mentoring programs with immigrant and refugee youth may help...

- **Strengthen parent-youth relationships**
- **Foster positive social relations with teachers and peers**
- **Increase motivation and sense of academic confidence/efficacy in school**
- **Facilitate acculturation and access to resources**
- **Improve academic engagement**

The evidence also points to additional considerations and steps to take when designing and implementing mentoring programs with refugee and immigrant populations.⁶ Let's look at some steps you can take:

Consider Culture and Language in Selecting Mentors

Both cross-culture and same-culture mentoring relationships show potential. In either case, cultural awareness and competency are key traits in any mentor. You can look for these traits in same-culture mentors or in mentors who have international work or education experience. You can also foster cultural competency in mentors by providing training and/or shadowing opportunities. Also consider whether mentors will be most successful if they share a language with their mentee.

Screening Mentors for Biases

Go beyond background checks: screen prospective mentors' attitudes about immigrants and immigration policy. Screen out applicants who have

views that would be a barrier to giving refugee and immigrant youth the mentoring they need.

Engage with the Community

Many hypothesize that mentee engagement can be increased through coordination and communication with community leaders, families, and schools during the program design process and throughout implementation. Consider hosting mentoring activities at religious sites or other places youth and families feel comfortable, such as local libraries.

Providing Support Pre-Mentoring and During Mentoring

As you plan and implement your mentoring program, take these four steps to provide mentors and mentees with adequate support:

1. **Provide training** pre-mentoring on the nuanced needs and specific cultural backgrounds of the mentees and families you wish to serve. Switchboard's online Resource Library allows you to search for [Country Guides](#) that may be shared with mentors to help familiarize them with mentees' cultural backgrounds. Training should also cover your policies on safety, confidentiality, and appropriate physical contact.
2. **Raise awareness** pre-mentoring and during mentoring that refugee youth's experiences pre-migration, during migration, and post-migration may include trauma. Train mentors on the basics of trauma-informed care. Share information on any support resources available to mentors and mentees, along with information on self-care.
3. **Respect** cultural norms and family-related customs of the native cultures of the youth being served, both pre-mentoring and during mentoring. Apply a gender lens to your program design to ensure equal access for youth of all genders.
4. **Remember relationship-building activities** during mentoring, including setting clear expectations, involving mentees in activity choices, and engaging with families.

⁶ Oberoi, 2016.

Seven Questions to Ask to Improve Your Mentoring Program

1. Are we engaging the right mentors?
2. Does our training build cultural competency and skills to support the program focus?
3. Are the program expectations clear to mentors, mentees, and families?
4. Does our program respect and respond to our families' cultures and customs?
5. How are we supporting mentor-mentee relationship development and maintenance?
6. Do our mentees have a voice in programming?
7. Are we gathering the information we need to understand how our program is doing?

Conclusion

As new youth mentoring programs for refugee and immigrant youth are developed, organizations should tap into the existing evidence base in order to design high quality, effective programs. The quality of the relationships between mentors and mentees is at the heart of any mentoring program and its success.

When designing mentoring programs, planning carefully about how to engage and support mentors, mentees, and their families in order to build and maintain healthy mentoring relationships, and supporting those connections along the way, will help ensure that refugee and immigrant youth can have the greatest opportunity to reap the benefits of mentoring relationships.

Resources

[National Mentoring Resource Center Topic Page for Mentoring Refugee and Immigrant Youth](#): This webpage provides an up-to-date overview of the available research and findings on mentoring with refugee and immigrant youth, with links to evidence reviews, practice reviews, webinars, and more.

[Mentoring for First-generation Immigrant and Refugee Youth: National Mentoring Resource Center Population Review](#): This literature review examines research on mentoring for first-generation immigrant and refugee youth, with focus on effectiveness, intervening processes, and quality of implementation.

[Elements for Effective Practice for Mentoring, 4th Edition](#): This research-informed guide outlines standards for high quality youth mentoring programs, including basic and advanced benchmarks for programs to strive to meet.

[Effective Strategies for Providing Quality Youth Mentoring in Schools and Communities: Training New Mentors](#): This guide offers guidance for developing mentor training, including sample agendas and activities.

To learn more about Switchboard, visit www.SwitchboardTA.org.



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