

Modern Mentoring

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For decades, mentoring has been a respected and valued approach to assisting youth—usually those thought to be problematic. The typical nature of the activity is a relationship between a volunteer adult and a young person, most frequently a teenager. The adult takes on a counseling and role modeling function that is primarily designed to improve youth behavior by establishing a supportive adult relationship. While this kind of relationship is valuable, it does not usually involve two assets that could be present in the relationship.

First, the adult is usually a person with many relationships in the adult world. These may include friends and neighbors, clubs and associations, businesses, not for profits and government people. This array of relationships represents doorways into a productive future for the young person if the mentor undertakes a process of connecting the young person to any of the array. Often, a significant problem of so-called “problem youth” is that their only connections are with other youth. However, if the mentor understood his/her function as including introduction to the productive adult world, they would often be opening a pathway to opportunity and change that usually can not even be created by the school the youth attends.

Second, the young person has gifts, skills, interests and special knowledge that is often unrecognized because the focus has been upon his/her deficits or problems. Therefore, an important additional function that mentoring can include is the identification of these capacities of the young person. This very process, in and of itself, builds self-respect. And when these capacities become visible because the mentor has identified them, there are many possibilities for connecting the young person to productive activities that are a contribution to the community and positive identity building experiences for the youth.

A basic problem for many young people who are judged as problematic is that they have no significant connections to productive adults nor a means to express their own constructive capacities. Instead, they are often reminded by “youth-at-risk” programs, every day, in every way, that they are a problem.

Modern mentoring becomes a much more valuable activity when it involves connecting young people to productive life rather than just providing counseling. Showing young people the path out of the youth culture into a productive role based on their own gifts can be one of the most important means for changing both youth and the adult society.