



iStockphoto.com / bonniej

BRYCS BRIEF

Summer 2010

New Directions in Mentoring Refugee Youth

Agencies serving refugees and immigrants often provide newcomer youth with mentors to help support their successful integration. Although mentoring programs have traditionally matched youth with adult volunteers from the larger community, more recent approaches to mentoring—such as group mentoring and family mentoring—may be especially beneficial for refugee youth. This BRYCS Brief highlights these new directions in youth mentoring and provides recommendations for developing mentoring services to refugee youth.

Mentoring is usually defined as "...a one-on-one relationship between an older, more experienced adult and an unrelated, younger protégé... [where] an adult provides encouragement and guidance aimed at developing the competence and character of the protégé." (Roffman, et al, 2003, p.100)

A Framework for Mentoring¹

Mentoring currently covers a broad range of activities, which can differ by:

- **Setting:** Mentoring may be field-based (ie, mentor and mentee meet on their own in the community) or based in schools, youth-serving agencies, or other community organizations, including refugee resettlement or ethnic community-based organizations.
- **Structure:** Although most programs still tend to match one adult mentor with one youth mentee, mentoring programs now include a variety of structures, including family, group, cross-age peer, and intergenerational mentoring.
- **Goals:** Programs may take different approaches to mentoring by stressing

either social support to youth or assisting with the development of specific skills, such as schoolwork or for career. Regardless of emphasis, mentoring programs tend to promote the same goals of building self-esteem, social connections, and skills, with the ultimate goal of helping youth successfully transition to adulthood.

Successful mentoring relationships have resulted in improved school performance, healthier relationships with family members and peers, and reduced substance abuse and aggression in youth.²

Special Considerations for Refugee Youth

Refugees arrive in this country with many strengths, including a strong sense of family obligation, the importance of education, and hope for the future. Although the majority of refugee youth adjust well to their new country, they typically must also contend with challenges such as the following:

Marginalization: After enduring difficult migration experiences, often including separation from or loss of family members, refugees may face poverty and discrimination upon their arrival in the U.S., including living in low-income

¹ Karcher, M., Kuperminc, G., Portwood, S., Sipe, C., & Taylor, A. (2006). [Mentoring Programs: A Framework to Inform Program Development, Research, and Evaluation](#). *Journal of Community Psychology*, Vol. 34, No. 6, 709–725.

² Roffman, J, Suarez-Orozco, C. & Rhodes, J. (2003). "Facilitating Positive Development in Immigrant Youth: The Role of Mentors and Community Organizations". In *Community Youth Development: Programs, Policies and Practices*, ed. by F. A. Villarruel, D.F. Perkins, L. M. Borden and J. G. Keith.

neighborhoods with schools that have fewer resources and higher drug, gang, and crime rates; at school, youth must learn English, catch up on academic knowledge and skills, and may be the target of bullying.

Acculturation Gap – A critical issue for most immigrant families is that children and youth tend to acculturate more quickly, while parents adapt more slowly, and the resulting “acculturation gap” can mean that youth receive less parental support and guidance, and feel less connected to their ethnic heritage.

Biculturalism – Integrating a strong sense of ethnic heritage with a positive identity as an American – or bicultural identity – can be a challenging yet crucial element in long-term youth adjustment and success.

When refugee children and youth first arrive in this country, their focus is on learning a new language and culture and they can therefore benefit from mentoring that helps them learn new skills and connect with the larger culture. Pairing refugees with mentors from the majority culture can also serve to educate others, helping with integration. As time goes on, refugee youth begin to address the more complex issues of acculturation and identity development, and a mentor from a similar background, but with more time in this country, can provide a role model for successfully negotiating the two cultures.³ For all of these reasons, refugee youth can benefit from supportive and long-term mentoring relationships when these are provided in a culturally competent manner that builds on the many assets of these resilient youth, their families, and communities.

“After two decades of experience in establishing, maintaining and evaluating mentoring programs, I have found that, for the most part, the role of the family in the mentoring experience has been minimal. It is time to take a look at the potential and benefits of the involvement of families in mentoring activities.”
(Weinberger, 2004, in [Strengthening Family Policy Center Brief No. 4](#), p. 4)

New Directions in Mentoring Youth

- **Mentoring as a Family Strengthening Strategy.** Although the youth is still the primary mentee, the mentor engages the entire family in activities or the mentoring relationship, strengthening the connection to this primary source of support and identity for refugee youth. For more information on this approach to mentoring, see [Strengthening Family Policy Center Brief No. 4](#).
- **Group Mentoring.** Mentoring is provided either by one mentor or a team of mentors to a group of youth and typically takes place in schools or other community agencies. Focus is equally on developing peer relationships and social skills; in team mentoring, youth benefit from a variety of mentors as well as peers. For more information, see [Group Mentoring: A Study of Mentoring Groups in Three Programs](#).
- **Cross-Age Peer Mentoring.** Mentoring is provided by an older youth, typically in high school, who is matched with a younger one in middle or elementary school. Meetings are usually one-on-one and take place in the school. In some programs, refugee mentors who have been in this country for longer are paired with newer arrivals. For more information on this approach, see [Cross-Age Peer Mentoring](#).
- **Intergenerational Mentoring.** Youth are matched with older adults, usually 50+. In cases when both are refugees, youth can assist elders with English and knowledge about US culture, while elders can help refugee youth learn about their cultural background and connect to their roots. For more information on this approach to mentoring, see [Mentoring Across Generations](#).

Culturally Competent Mentoring Programs

A recent study⁴ found that mentoring services for Horn of Africa refugee and immigrant youth were most effective when they:

- Recruited staff from the same cultural and language background
- Trained staff in cultural competency
- Developed partnerships with the ethnic communities
- Involved the youth themselves in helping plan and shape the mentoring program so that it was culturally appropriate and effective

“One stakeholder... used the strategy of ‘shadowing’ a trusted person in the Horn of African community as a way of training staff in cultural awareness and settlement issues.”
(Griffiths, p.38)

BRYCS promotes engaging refugee communities and organizations from the beginning when developing programs as a means of empowering communities, as well as ensuring engagement and cultural competence. For more information about developing culturally competent programs for refugee youth, see the BRYCS publication, [Growing Up in a New Country: A Toolkit for Positive Youth Development with Refugees and Immigrants](#). For information about developing mentoring programs, see MENTOR’s resource, [Mentoring Refugee and Immigrant Youth](#).

³ Birman, D., & Trickett, E. J. (2001). The process of acculturation in first generation immigrants: A study of Soviet Jewish refugee adolescents and parents. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 32(4), 456-477.

⁴ Griffiths, M, Sawrikar, P. and Muir, K.. (2009). Culturally appropriate mentoring for Horn of African young people in Australia. *Youth Studies Australia*, Vol. 28, No. 2: 32-40.



BRYCS Photo / Courtesy of CSS Anchorage

Promising Practices in Refugee Youth Mentoring

The following programs have developed innovative strategies, adapted specifically to mentoring refugee youth:

Promising Practice: [*The Go-Betweener™ Mentoring Program*](#) pairs refugee and immigrant youth with ethnically and linguistically matched adult mentors, so that newcomer youth can build positive relationships with adults who have themselves successfully navigated the acculturation experience and know what it is like to “go-between” two cultures. The goals of the program are to prevent or reverse “downward assimilation,” develop self-esteem, help mentees set goals, and lastly to instill pride in one’s culture and comfort in American culture. The program began in 2008, and has so far made approximately 20 mentor matches. Some mentors work with sibling groups; all mentors are encouraged to be a resource for the youth, as well as the youth’s family. This program serves refugee and immigrant youth between the ages of 7 – 17 in the ten county Atlanta metropolitan region. Overall, the agency serves more than 6,000 individuals per year in more than 65 languages. Culture Connect has developed strong partnerships with area refugee resettlement and refugee serving agencies.

Promising Practice: [*Los Angeles Team Mentoring \(LATM\)*](#) operates after-school programs in 14 different Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) school sites. Teams of adult mentors work with groups of youth using an activity-based curriculum focused on leadership development, team building, community service, conflict resolution, and cultural diversity. Mentor teams are made up of teachers, college students, and community volunteers. LATM mentees represent the diversity of the Los Angeles community, including African-American, Middle Eastern, Asian and Latino students, many of whom are refugees and immigrants.

For more examples of successful refugee youth mentoring services, see this [list of additional programs](#) from the [BRYCS Promising Practices Database](#).⁵

See BRYCS [Highlighted Resources: Youth Mentoring](#) and [Research and Policy Resources](#) for up-to-date resources and research related to refugee youth mentoring.

Additional BRYCS publications on youth development can be found on the [BRYCS Publications page](#), including [Growing Up in a New Country: A Toolkit for Positive Youth Development with Refugees and Immigrants](#).



For more information on refugee youth expression through the arts, please visit [BRYCS Youth Arts and Voices](#).

For technical assistance on developing mentoring programs for refugee youth, [contact BRYCS](#).

⁵ To search the BRYCS Promising Practices Database for mentoring programs, go to the Advanced Search page at www.brycs.org/promisingpractices/advsearch.cfm and type “mentor” in the free text search box. This search currently yields twenty programs that provide mentoring for refugee youth.

Special thanks to Dr. Dina Birman for her contributions to this BRYCS Brief.