

Research Review: The Importance of Relationships with Caring Adults (Part 1) *Ohio Buckeye Clover Graham, March 2005*

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One of the key elements of positive youth development is having relationships with caring adults. A concern is that youth are growing up more isolated from the consistent care of adults (Freedman, 1996; Rhodes, Bogat, Roffman, Edelman, & Galasso, 2002; Styles & Morrow, 1996; Villarruel, Perkins, Borden, & Keith, 2003). While ideally these relationships are established with parents and extended family members, in the context of community-based youth programs, examples of these relationships include unrelated adults, such as 4-H volunteers, teachers, neighbors, and coaches (Scales & Gibbons, 1996).

Youth organizations provide an environment where positive adult relationships are known to develop and flourish (McLaughlin, 2000; Walker & Arbretton, 2004). Understanding the nature of these relationships is essential, as it has been noted that youth often define their attachment to a program or organization in terms of their relationship with a caring adult (Ferrari & Sweeney, 2005; Pittman, 1992; Rhodes, 2004). In turn, establishing a climate that fosters caring youth-staff relationships may be the most critical element to a program's success (Rhodes, 2004; Shortt, 2002). For example, in a study of after-school programs, the characteristics and abilities of staff members leading activities were more important to quality than the specific activity itself (Grossman et al., 2002).

Why are these relationships so important? Adults may provide both *emotional* (caring and nurturing) and *instrumental* (practical and helpful) support to youth (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). Such relationships are grounded in trust and satisfaction (Diversi & Mecham, 2005; Paisley & Ferrari, in press). Adults offer youth access to resources and opportunities, and they are able to open up social networks to which youth may otherwise not have had access (Freedman, 1996). In some cases, the interactions may be quite task-oriented, where the relationship might seem secondary; nevertheless, they provide an important resource for youth to learn important skills (Halpern, 2005). Adults may serve as role models for youth by exemplifying desired knowledge, skills, and behaviors, as well as serving as models of future options and life choices (Villarruel et al., 2003). This is a reminder that one size does not fit all: Different youth need different kinds of support from adults at different times in their lives.

There is considerable research that supports the developmental benefits for youth who have caring and positive relationships with adults. Research in the area of resiliency documents the important role played by attachments to caring adults, particularly for those who have multiple risks in their lives (e.g., Werner, 1989). This research has shown that positive relationships with caring adults yield positive youth outcomes

related to gains in three major areas: (a) educational achievement, (b) social and emotional development, and (c) better decisions about health and safety issues.

More specifically, the mentoring and youth development literature documents that when youth had the support of caring adults, they had better attitudes towards school, felt more competent, and were more likely to pursue higher education (Jekielek, Moore, Hair, & Scarupa, 2002; Sipe, 1996). Socially and emotionally, adult relationships contributed to youth's sense of safety (Walker & Arbretton, 2004), higher sense of self-esteem (Barber & Erickson, 2001; Jekielek et al., 2002; Parra, DuBois, Neville, Pugh-Lilly, & Povinelli, 2002), self-confidence (Parra et al., 2002), and self-control (Jekielek et al., 2002). Caring adults also provided emotional support, advice, and guidance about topics that youth may feel uncomfortable discussing with their parents (Astroth & Haynes, 2002; Jekielek et al., 2002). In addition, youth were more likely to make wise decisions about their health and safety. They were less likely to initiate drug and alcohol use and to engage in risky behaviors such as premature sexual activity (Blum & Mann Rinehart, 1998; Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Jekielek et al., 2002; Parra et al., 2002; Rhodes, Grossman, & Resch, 2000; Sipe, 1996). Particularly in the case of substance abuse, only those long-standing mentoring relationships (i.e., greater than 12 months) had a direct effect on the frequency of alcohol use and drug use (Rhodes, Reddy, & Grossman, 2005).

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