

Mentors and Role Models for Young People

An Education Foundation Australia Fact Sheet



“Exposure to a wide range of positive role models, informal support and advice is a crucial component of the struggle to broaden the horizons and facilitate the success of disadvantaged children” (Bentley, 2003)

“Adolescents have a drive to differentiate themselves from their parents and so are more open to the influence of other adults. Such adults bring contact with and valuable insights into the wider world.” (MacCallum & Beltman, 2001)

Research shows that positive contact with adults other than parents is important to young people during adolescence. Young people need significant others who can guide and support them. According to psychologist Michael Carr-Greg, two of the most important factors in building young people's resilience to life's challenges are access to a charismatic adult and the chance to be around people who are socially capable.

A positive connection with at least one adult is particularly important in fostering success at school: successful students have access to a whole range of knowledgeable and caring adults other than their parents and teachers. A supportive relationship with people outside the family is an important protective factor against the risk of underachievement and early school leaving.

Positive role models and mentors who inspire, assist or motivate young people can have a powerful effect on student motivation, engagement and achievement in school. Because they may have different skills and knowledge than family members and teachers, they can bring new examples of career and life trajectories as well as new insights into the wider world and the possibilities it can offer.

Yet a growing number of young people do not have a network of supportive adults. The level of informal support available to young people is declining as social structures and roles change. Changes to families and communities mean that fewer people know their neighbours, more single parents head households and community networks are harder to access.

Some young people do not have a trusting connection with any adult at all. This makes them more vulnerable to loneliness, depression and low self-esteem. Alarming, it is

the most disadvantaged young people who most lack the networks and role models who could help them.

This trend coincides with the fact that too many young Australians are at risk of under-performing at school, becoming disengaged, leaving school early, struggling with the transition from school to work and struggling to enter or succeed in further study. The right support can ameliorate this picture.

Effective mentoring and role model programs for young people are well organized, adequately resourced and strongly supported by the school. Their many benefits include engaging new people outside the school to support the learning of young people and building stronger links between schools and their communities. There is a growing trend towards business involvement in mentoring and role model programs, where employees volunteer to work with young people over a short or long period, supported by the company.

Education Foundation Australia's Back to School Day program connects students to graduates of their own school who have chosen a wide range of career and life paths. By selecting role models who share a common ground with students - attending the same school and often growing up in the same community - it aims to convey the message that school and learning can be a vehicle for a diversity of creative and fulfilling pathways.

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