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New Study Shows Volunteer Mentors Decrease Symptoms of Depression in Higher-Risk Youth

ISSAQUAH, Wash. – Having the guidance of a caring adult mentor may help overcome symptoms of depression among young people, according to a five-year study of 1,300 youth in Washington State.

The study, funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, sheds a new and encouraging light on the effects of a positive adult role model in the lives of higher-risk youth. *The Role of Risk: Mentoring Experiences and Outcomes for Youth with Varying Risk Profiles* focuses on youth from seven community-based mentoring programs serving youth in Washington. It was authored by leading national researchers, Drs. Carla Herrera, David DuBois and Jean Grossman, with Issaquah-based Washington State Mentors acting as the intermediary.

“In recent years, there has been increasing pressure on many mentoring programs to serve higher-risk youth,” says Dr. Herrera. “But there were a lot of unanswered questions: Could programs reach these youth? Could they benefit them? Did they need to alter their practices to work with them effectively?”

[*The Role of Risk*](#) presents findings from the first large-scale study to examine how the levels and types of risk youth face may influence their mentoring relationships and the benefits they derive from their program involvement. Participating programs served youth facing a wide range of challenges. The vast majority lived in difficult home environments, and about half had trouble in school or with peers or had mental health concerns. Programs reached these youth with very little effort beyond their normal outreach strategies, suggesting that such “higher-risk” youth are fairly typical of the youth they serve.

The study followed youth for 13 months, comparing mentored youth to a group of similar youth who had not been offered mentoring. Mentored youth reported fewer symptoms of depression, greater acceptance by their peers, more positive beliefs about their ability to succeed in school and better grades. The strongest findings were related to depression which is linked to a host of short- and long-term cognitive, behavioral, and social problems. The findings are particularly salient given that almost one in four of all the youth in the study reported worrisome levels of depressive symptoms at enrollment.

While youth from all backgrounds benefited from mentoring, it is noteworthy that higher-risk youth, who are often considered “hardest to serve” in mentoring and other social programs, had gains that were at least as strong as those for youth from less challenging backgrounds. The findings further suggest that program practices such as mentor training and regular support calls from program staff can help strengthen matches. Training and support may also be most effective when tailored to youth’s risk profile.

According to Dr. Herrera: “Mentors described very different challenges and training needs and reported different reasons why matches ultimately ended, depending on the risk profile of the youth with whom they were matched. If programs tailored their training and support to address specific match needs, they may be able to have an even stronger impact on young people’s lives.”

The Role of Risk stands to have a lasting impact on the mentoring field, showing that with the right kinds of programmatic support, volunteer mentors can help youth make gains in a number of key areas for their development. Most notably, they can help ameliorate symptoms of depression in youth facing a wide range of challenges.

Washington State Mentors (WSM) developed the initiative and worked with programs to ensure that the matches were supported by strong, evidence-based practices. WSM plans to translate materials from the study into tools for use by programs, including a Youth Risk Assessment Survey that can help programs measure youth’s risks factors when they enroll. This is part of a broader effort by WSM to promote the adoption of practices shown in the study to be related to longer and stronger matches, and to share the study’s results with mentoring programs across Washington and the nation.

About Washington State Mentors

Washington State Mentors (WSM) is an umbrella organization for the state’s mentoring community. By providing capacity-building support in areas such as training and technical assistance, data collection and tracking, public awareness and public policy, WSM helps increase the number of children served and helps improve the quality of mentoring provided. WSM is a public/private partnership between Washington State’s Department of Social and Health Services and Costco Wholesale. Lt. Governor Brad Owen is founding chair of the WSM board of directors. For more information on WSM, please visit wamentors.org or call 866.316.8190.

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