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Dear Project Director:

We are delighted to be able to make this fact sheet available to you to help you make your mentoring program a success. This publication was funded by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools under contract with EMT Associates, Inc. Although this publication has not yet been officially released by the U.S. Department of Education, we have been authorized to make it available on the Web at this time to solicit your feedback.

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Sincerely,

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MENTORING FACT SHEET

U.S. Department of Education ■ Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools
Mentoring Resource Center

#18, July 2007

Avoiding Early Match Termination

Mentoring programs always make matches between mentors and youth with the expectation that these pairings will have fun, achieve their goals, and last a good long time. In reality, many mentoring pairs do not have long-lasting relationships. Research into Big Brothers Big Sisters community-based program practices has found that as many as one in five matches end before six months, with only 45% lasting for the full 12 month intended duration **(Grossman & Rhodes, 2002)**.

School-based programs, by their very design, often struggle to create long-term matches. In-school mentoring programs often only require a school-year-long commitment from mentors, and many do not get around to making matches until well into the school year, two factors that inherently limit the amount of time even a successful match will spend together over the course of the year. School-based programs also struggle to keep matches going across the summer break (especially when youth are graduating from their particular school or mentors decline to renew their participation). As a result, only half of the mentees in Public/Private Ventures' recent School-based Mentoring Impact Study continued into the following school year, with an average match length of just over five months **(Herrera, Grossman, Kauh, Feldman, & McMaken, 2007)**.

Even without factoring in the aforementioned time and schedule constraints, school-based programs can face high levels of attrition. Often viewed as a less intensive form of intervention than community-based mentoring, school-based programs may be more likely to quickly end matches that, for a variety of reasons, are struggling, with the expectation that youth can quickly be rematched into a better relationship. The recent P/PV study found that about 10 percent of participating youth had been rematched within the school year and that only 18 percent met with the same mentor over the three full semesters in the study. The number of early

terminations can easily grow if programs are serving highly mobile youth populations or are using highly mobile mentors (college students, for example).

These difficulties in creating long-term matches can have serious consequences. Research confirms that short matches that terminate early (three months or less) can have a potentially negative impact on youth, who may actually regress in several key risk areas as a result of a failed mentoring relationship **(Grossman & Rhodes)**. Despite these findings, there is little research to date into why some matches fail and how programs can minimize this circumstance. This fact sheet discusses key findings from several recent studies on match relationships and match failure and offers suggestions for programs about how to improve match relationships and length.

What are the Characteristics of Failed Matches?

Most mentoring research focuses on what makes matches successful: the approach the mentor uses, activities the pair engages in, the frequency and

nature of their time together. But less attention has been paid to those matches that are not successful. There is general agreement that mentors who take a youth-centered developmental approach will be more successful than those who adopt a rigid "prescriptive" tone when working with their mentee. And certainly mentoring programs have always tried to position matches for success by pairing volunteers and youth based on criteria such as common interests, similar ethnic or cultural backgrounds, and geographic proximity. But beyond these common factors, what criteria indicate that a match is poised for success (or failure)? And what makes a volunteer a good fit for mentoring in the first place? Some recent research hints that the key to long, successful mentoring relationships may simply be who the participants are as people when they walk through the program door.

In an effort to better understand what makes mentoring relationships work, Dr. Renee Spencer of Boston University has focused much of her research on matches that were not successful. Her work highlights many of the reasons why mentoring relationships wind up dissolving prematurely. In a recent study of early-terminated matches, her team interviewed 31 program participants (11 youth) and found several common reasons that matches did not last **(Spencer, 2007)**. Many were related to either disappointments with the experience or what Spencer terms "deficiencies in mentor relational skills":

Unfulfilled or unrealistic expectations—

Many mentors were disappointed with the realities of the mentoring experience. Several had decided to become mentors because they wanted to form close personal relationships with a youth or wanted to have a very meaningful impact in the young person's life. They assumed they would have an intimate bond with the youth and their impact really would, as many recruitment messages put it, "change a life." Once into their mentoring relationships, they realized that the experience would be quite different. Many were overwhelmed by their mentee's considerable needs or negative family circumstances. These mentors experienced feelings of guilt that they were not able to help more or frustration that their efforts to help seemed to be in vain. Some terminated the relationship because they were convinced that another mentor could do a better job or commit more time and energy. Said one: "I'm sure he's found another Big Brother who takes much more of an interest, and who has more time to do these things… I hope he has."

Other mentors had the opposite experience: they found that their youth did not need as much support as they expected. They came to the mentoring experience expecting to engage a young person with considerable needs and have a dramatic impact on their life. When matched with a young person who did not meet their preconceived notions, they felt as if their contributions were simply not needed. They did not get the feelings of personal satisfaction from helping someone with significant needs. Their motivation in volunteering was not met and they decided to withdraw from the experience. Said one: "It was a little disappointing that he was not like that…I was kinda hoping for, you know, the poor kid… with no dad, just him and his mom."

> *"I'm sure he's found another Big Brother who takes much more of an interest, and who has more time to do these things..."*

These mentors all expected to feel "good" as a result of their participation. Whether because they were overwhelmed by the needs of the youth or because they did not feel like their help was needed, these mentors did not get what they wanted out of the experience. They tended to end their relationships, often by citing other excuses, such as work or family problems.

Another group of mentors had developmentally inappropriate expectations of what the youth would be able to bring to the relationship. Several were surprised that their mentee did not initiate more contact or take more interest in their activities, failing to understand that youth often do not feel comfortable in taking the lead in a relationship with an adult. A lack of appreciation was also cited by some mentors, with one saying "…if I'm gonna do that for… a young person I'm not related to, then it needs to be… appreciated." These mentors

Youth also talk of unmet expectations

Several of the youth Spencer studied also indicated that their expectations of the match were not met. Many of them had expected an easier time getting to know their mentor and were disappointed that they had been unable to form a closer relationship. They were not comfortable opening up to their mentor and felt they were not a high priority in their mentor's life. Many of these mentees ended their match not because they wanted out of the program, but because their mentor was not providing them with the meaningful interaction they desired. Spencer concludes that many of the mentees, as with the mentors, became much more aware of their own preconceived expectations after their matches started to struggle. Programs must be aware of youth expectations and make sure both sets of participants are getting what they want out of the relationship.

did not realize that many young people have a hard time expressing gratitude externally, even when they feel it strongly. Mentors who expect a fully mutual and equal relationship with their mentee may be setting themselves up for disappointment.

Inability to bridge cultural differences—

Several of the mentors whose matches ended early were unable to navigate the difficulties in the match created by cultural and socioeconomic differences. Many were surprised by the family circumstances of the youth and unable to come to terms with the differences between their mentee's lifestyle and their own. These mentors were often unaware of the impact of their own biases in creating friction in the match.

Other mentors experienced guilt from the large socioeconomic gap between themselves and their mentee. One expressed concern about bringing their Little to their home, saying, "When we go over to my apartment…I almost feel worse, like I'm making her… 'look what I have'… I'm the rich White girl and you're the poor black girl."

Other mentors felt that racial or cultural differences prevented them from serving as effective role models for that particular young person. Many felt their mentee might have been better off with someone from their own cultural background. Most programs make matches, in part, based on ethnic or cultural similarity on the assumption that common backgrounds might help the match get off to a good start. But it is interesting to note that it is the mentor's own perceptions of their efficacy that is at work here. These cultural differences may have been quite real, and potentially awkward for the match, but it was the mentors' resulting feelings of inadequacy or their poor understanding of their own biases that was the core issue.

A lack of youth focus—

Another key mentor skill deficiency was an inability to simply relate to the youth at their level. These mentors had a hard time just "having fun" or giving the youth a voice in the match. Not surprisingly these mentees struggled to develop feelings of closeness with their mentor. Many of these mentors likely fell in to the "prescriptive" category, perhaps attempting to bring overtly adult solutions to the young person's problems. Others may simply have been uncomfortable around children or unable to relate to their differences and limitations. This indicates that some experience working with youth, or an innate ability to interact with people of different ages, is a critical skill for mentors.

Family interference—

While less of a concern for school-based programs than community ones, Spencer's research also indicates that problems with the youth's family were a common factor in early terminations. In these instances, family members actively subverted the match, either by withdrawing the child from the program or by creating difficulties for the mentor in communicating with the youth and planning activities. It is unclear whether these family-related problems were the result of unmet parent expectations or the result of tension resulting from many of the other cultural and socioeconomic factors noted previously.

Spencer's research, although conducted on a small number of matches, highlights many of the common

reasons why matches fail: mentors come into the match with a range of expectations, biases, and feelings of self-efficacy, and when these factors clash with the reality of the mentoring experience and the messy work of forming a relationship with a much younger (and often quite different) individual, the result can be a match that never gets off the ground.

Based on this and other research, Spencer theorizes that there are several relational processes that characterize matches that have a greater chance of success **(Spencer, 2006)**:

1. **Authenticity**—The matches that report "being real" with each other and an ability to be open and honest

2. **Empathy**—The matches where the mentor is able to relate to the youth without their biases and differences getting in the way, characterized by awareness and understanding of youth needs

3. **Collaboration**—These matches work effectively together and have the ability to problem solve and compromise

4. **Companionship**—These matches genuinely enjoy each other's company and place great importance on the relationship

These four traits, combined with the reasons for match failure noted earlier, offer a clear picture of characteristics to promote and avoid in newly developing mentoring relationships.

What Does Other Research Say?

Additional research further confirms the personal and relationship factors that allow matches to overcome obstacles and thrive. Drs. Tom Keller and Julia Pryce have been examining the great diversity and variety in mentoring relationships (both good and bad). In one study of a Big Brothers Big Sisters school-based program, their team examined three critical areas of relationship development: the interpersonal tone of the relationship, the types of activities engaged in, and the overall developmental trend of the relationship **(Pryce, 2006)**. They closely observed 27 matches during their meetings to figure out just how the relationships were developing and why. These observations led to the identification of five fairly distinct "types" of matches, which highlight the qualities of those that thrived and those that either terminated or failed to connect:

Type of Match	Relationship Dimensions
Dependable	Engaged tone, mentor adopts a "friend" or "counselor" type of role, progressive trend in the relationship development.
Distant	Disengaged tone, mentor adopts an "acquaintance" or "teaching assistant" type of role, a stagnant trend in the relationship.
Disjointed	Tentative tone, mentor adopts a "friend" or "counselor" type of role, the relationship trend plateaus, with some gains but little overall development over time.
Durable	Tentative tone, mentor adopts a "friend" or "counselor" type of role, breakthrough trend where the match really takes off after a rough start.
Directed	Task-focused tone, mentor adopts a "teaching assistant" type of role, a stagnant trend in the relationship.

(Pryce & Keller, in preparation)

Many of the failed matches from Spencer's research could easily fit into these categories. Those mentors who lacked a youth focus or whose expectations were unrealized could be categorized as "directed" or "distant", while others likely had "disjointed" relationships that grew less satisfying or more stressful over time. The good news is that 13 of the 27 matches studied by Keller and Pryce fell into the "dependable" category, but that leaves 14 matches struggling at some level and at increased risk for early termination. Only two matches landed in the "durable" category, finding meaningful success after substantial early struggles.

In addition to this typology of mentoring relationships, the researchers also grouped mentors by their level of "attunement"—their ability to identify and solve relationship barriers and reflect on their own role and

actions when working with their mentee. There were three categories of attunement:

Level of attunement	Characteristics
Highly attuned	Consistently seeks to attend flexibly and creatively to verbal or nonverbal signs from youth as to preferences, concerns, and feelings.
Moderately attuned	Inconsistent response to student needs. Although generally attuned, mentor's attention and flexibility varies due to challenges connecting with youth, involvement of other group members, or lack of program support
Intermittently connected	Consistently limited response to youth. Slow or unable to adjust approach based on youth's verbal or nonverbal signs as to preferences, concerns or feelings.

(Keller & Pryce, 2007)

Keller and Pryce further define attunement as "insightfulness, inter-subjectivity, adaptability." Attuned mentors not only notice issues in their interaction with the youth (many of Spencer's failed matches noticed their problems) but also work creatively to find solutions that resolve the problem. They have the critical mentor skills of empathy and collaboration discussed in Spencer's work, making them sensitive and understanding of youth needs, aware of potential relationship problems, and able to overcome differences to find a resolution that leaves both mentor and mentee happy. Not surprisingly, the 13 "dependable" matches in the Keller and Pryce study all had mentors that were either highly or moderately attuned. Mentors with less attunement struggled greatly to develop the relationship and achieve long-term success.

Other mentoring research indicates that mentors' feelings of self-efficacy (and their motivations for volunteering) can have a tremendous impact on their perceived quality of the mentoring relationship and their enjoyment of the experience (Karcher, Nakkula, and Harris, 2005). Those who are not confident in their role as a mentor are likely to be overwhelmed by the youth's needs, while those who have volunteered to get "good feelings" in return or make a substantial impact may find their expectations unmet or view their work as ineffectual.

Mentor Traits That Indicate Successful Matches

When looked at together, this research highlights several personal traits that can help mentors build effective long-term relationships:

- High level of attunement in their personal relationships
- Belief that they are capable of filling the mentor role (self-efficacy)
- Realistic expectations about the relationship, the experience, and the impact they can have on youth
- The ability to problem solve and seek out support from the program to overcome difficulties and avoid ending the match
- Having a youth-centered focus—the ability to relate to youth at their level
- An awareness of their own personal biases and cultural competency
- The ability to reflect on their own motivations, actions, and contributions to the relationship.

Mentors lacking many of these traits may have trouble enjoying the mentoring experience and understanding and responding to their mentee's needs. Their matches can be marked by disappointment, frustration, and, perhaps early termination. Realistically, many adults who volunteer to mentor will not bring all of these personality traits to the experience, and mentoring programs must work to provide training and other forms of support that can help mentors develop, strengthen, or compensate for those characteristics that are lacking. While mentoring relationships are sometimes successful because of some inherent spark or connection

that makes two individuals click together right away, more often the process of finding just the right mentor for a young person will require that the volunteers available have the skills and characteristics needed to make that connection happen.

Building Better Matches

Based on this understanding of what makes an effective mentor and the common pitfalls that lead to early match termination, the question becomes: what can programs do to build on this research and create more effective matches? There are several program practices where these concepts can be brought to bear:

Volunteer recruitment—

Programs should examine their recruitment messages to see if they may be inadvertently creating false expectations about the experience for potential mentors. Are the needs of youth accurately portrayed? Is the level of impact a mentor might have overstated? This is not to say that the message can't be very positive, but is it in alignment with what volunteers will experience after being matched?

Programs should also consider recruiting more heavily from groups of adults that have some experience working previously with young people. If volunteers have worked successfully with youth in other capacities, it may indicate that they will come to the program with a level of attunement and youth focus that will help them navigate the relationship successfully. Remember, however, that people who are already heavily involved with youth in their jobs, such as teachers, may find the mentoring role less enjoyable and more of a burden, as was found in one of the failed matches in Spencer's study.

Recruitment messages should clearly state the commitment requirements of your program. Many early terminations are not the result of interpersonal problems but rather of mentors underestimating the time a mentoring relationship will require or signing up even though they are unlikely to fulfill the requirements because of family, work, or other personal obligations.

Participant screening—

Conducting a thorough screening that pays particular attention to the traits and characteristics noted above can help identify those volunteers who are best suited for the role of a mentor and those who are less likely to be successful. Programs might adopt more extensive application and interview questions to assess a potential mentor's level of attunement or whether they have the confidence to succeed in the role. Detailed screening can also bring out cultural and racial biases that may negatively impact a mentoring relationship or discover unrealistic expectations about what the mentoring experience will be like. Through such tools as personality or social skills inventories, personal interviews, and conversation with work and personal references, program staff can learn whether a volunteer has a foundation of the characteristics needed to be a successful and satisfied mentor.

Similarly, programs can spend more time assessing what the youth hopes to get out of the relationship, their expectations around meetings with their mentor, and the level of cooperation and participation they are likely to bring to the initial stages of the relationship—all information that can be used to help prepare and guide the mentor.

Participant training—

It is unknown just how well an individual's attunement and relational skills can be enhanced by pre-match training, but comprehensive training prior to matching provides the best opportunity for programs to assess how mentors will respond to relationship challenges and how comfortable they are in the mentoring role. Provide many opportunities for role-playing, observing how they act towards the "youth," how confident they are handling difficult situations, and whether any biases or cultural competency issues come up.

Another critical training area is explaining the support system available to mentors. One common feature of the failed matches in Spencer's study was the confusion mentors felt about the circumstance they found themselves in with a struggling match. Many chose to simply terminate the match (with some simply abandoning the youth altogether) because they did not know how to properly handle the situation. Given the

devastating impact that abandonment can have on a mentee, it is critical that all mentors know that there are many options for addressing problems in a match and that ending the match is always a last resort that must be handled with care. Make sure your mentors and mentees know all the supports available to them and that asking for some help is a good (and expected) thing in mentoring relationships.

Be sure that your initial training also includes these critical elements that can help your mentors feel more comfortable about their role and the program's expectations of them:

- The unique role of the mentor as both friend and guide
- Information about active listening and successful communication strategies
- An overview of youth development with a focus on the youth you serve
- Information about program expectations regarding activities, reporting problems or concerns, how match closure is handled, and contact after the match has ended.

Matching—

Programs may want to go beyond the typical criteria when making matches. The information gathered in your program's thorough screening process about personal traits and characteristics can be very valuable when making matches. While traditional matching criteria such as race, gender, common interests, and compatible meeting times are important, the ability of a mentor to respond effectively to a youth's particular needs or personality may be what really makes the match work. Some youth may need a mentor with high levels of attunement to draw them out, others might need a mentor who has the confidence to effectively negotiate the many barriers they throw up in the early stages of the relationship, and still others may require a mentor who can relate well to the youth's cultural identity. Remember too that, as with all friendships, personalities matter a lot in mentoring relationships, and finding ways to let youth and volunteers have a voice in "choosing" each other can make the matching process more successful (see sidebar).

A strategy for "natural" matches

One such matching activity, recommended by Dr. Michael Karcher, does this through a variation on "speed dating." In this matching strategy, unmatched mentors and mentees are all brought into a big room. Mentees then take turns having five-minute conversations with each of the mentors covering: where they were born, their first pet, and their favorite hobbies. After these conversations, mentors and mentees write down the top three people they enjoyed talking to (not the three they had the most in common with). This exercise almost always results in a program coordinator being able to match everyone in the room with someone in their top three choices, allowing for very "natural" and initially comfortable matches. The exercise works because it asks participants to reflect on who they enjoyed talking to, who they clicked with—something that might not happen if the lists were simply based on "who has the most in common with whom."

Match supervision—

Although you have laid a solid foundation through careful recruitment, screening, training, and matching, the work of avoiding early termination has just begun. Check in with mentors, youth, and parents frequently throughout the critical first three months of the match. Look for problems that may be related to attunement or unmet expectations. As you gather information, try to place your matches into Keller and Pryce's categories; this can help identify who needs some extra support and the strategies your staff might use to correct their relationship problems. Pay extra attention to the feedback from youth and their parents as they may be reluctant to talk about problems in the match. And if you do identify problems with the match, make every effort to problem solve and find solutions that will avoid one of the participants ending the match prematurely.

Remember that no mentoring program can achieve match perfection. Every program has matches that do not click; every program has matches that struggle and end in frustration. But by paying more attention to the personal characteristics and skills of your mentors—their hopes, expectations, and ability to empathize and collaborate—the better positioned you will be to make and support effective matches and avoid ones that end prematurely.

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