The Power of Social Support: Mentoring and Resilience

Angelique Day

Mentoring develops resilience in youth. The author reflects on the power of mentoring, drawing on resilience science and school-based mentors in her own troubled young life.

If I have seen further, it is because I have stood on the shoulders of a giant.

- Isaac Newton

A mentor, by traditional standards, has been defined as a person who is usually 8 to 15 years older than his or her prospective mentee. The relationship between mentor and mentee is described as a friendship which encompasses adult equality, but the mentor also performs the fatherly (and/or motherly) tasks of teaching, caring, criticizing, helping, and offering constructive suggestions in both career and personal matters (Zastrow & Kirst-Ashman, 2001). Busch (1985) suggests that mentors feel that mentoring is just as important to them as to their mentees. Benefits to mentors include emotional satisfaction, psychological well-being, growth of the mentor’s reputation, and rejuvenation and creativity.

Mentoring has traditionally been viewed as a career development mechanism. I see it not only as a resource to pave the road in career development, but also as a social buffering technique—an intervention to reduce the negative psychological effects associated with child maltreatment. Exposure to people or events that contradict risk effects will compensate for previous bad experiences and help counter the belief that risk is always present (Newman, 2002). A mentor, in the case of an abused or neglected child, can be a grandparent or other relative, a foster or adoptive parent, teacher, coach, neighbor, or other unrelated adult. These “aunts” or “uncles” can promote social development of children and adolescents (Newman, 2002).

I have personally seen the benefits of mentoring at several different developmental stages of my life. With a home life distraught with poverty, abuse, and neglect, I turned to school, seeking warmth, love, and support. At school, I could escape from the chaos that welcomed me home every night. I was a good student and never drew negative attention to myself. This made me acceptable to both my peers and my teachers. I blended in well; no one could tell that I was any different from any other student in the class. (I grew up in a small, rural, poor community. Although the lower income students were not the most popular, there were enough of us to form a supportive peer network during the school day.)

My sixth grade teacher took a particular interest in me. This attention influenced me to pour all my energy into academics and strive for perfection. After I won a small spelling competition, he provided me with a gift and some words of praise. I still have the card he presented me, and the words have continued to inspire me academically. Soon after the conclusion of my sixth grade year, my home life became too hectic to remain invisible. My father filed for divorce and left the home, and my mother, already suffering from both mental and physical health problems, hit an all time low. The idea of living at home and caring for six children alone was an unbearable thought.
She shuffled us into the local domestic violence shelter where we spent the summer and a portion of the following school year. After time limits would no longer allow us to stay at the shelter, we returned home for a short period of time. Isolation and stress overcame my mother; after a suicide attempt, she was hospitalized, and we were shuffled into out-of-home care. After a brief reunion with us, my mother tried to end her life a second time. We were once again placed with our original family foster home. After some time passed, my father reclaimed us. I entered eighth grade in a new school district. I took this opportunity to recreate myself. No one at this school knew where I had been and I was easily accepted.

My next experience with an influential mentor was in tenth grade. One of my peers encouraged me to try out for the gymnastics team. I had never before had the opportunity to engage in extra-curricular activities, and I was anxious to be part of a team. Because I was obviously behind my teammates in skills, I was referred by a friend to a private instructor. This coach could see how dedicated I was to working; again I felt the feeling of special attention and interest by an adult. I could not afford to pay for lessons, so he allowed me to assist him in the instruction of young children in exchange for free lessons. I spent the next four years working and learning from this coach and received much emotional support. We still keep in touch today.

My final and current mentoring experience has been the longest in duration. My second semester at college, I took a social work class from a particular professor; I did well in the course. Not only did this experience solidify my decision to pursue a degree in social work, but this professor provided me with several opportunities within the department. She hired me as a student employee and introduced me to the social work student organization, and she was a main source of support through the anticipated birth of my son. Ironically, I found out late in my undergraduate relationship with her that she was a former foster parent. We kept in touch, and a year after my graduation, she encouraged me to pursue a graduate degree. I have continued to work with this professor throughout my graduate experience. We have since conducted research, presented at conferences, and published together. She has become one of my closest friends and confidants.

Mentors can provide children with a sense of safety, dedication, and nurturance to children who are recovering from earlier traumatic experiences (Lowenthal, 1999). This informal, “therapeutic caregiving” can assist youth in developing a sense of trust and remaining open to positive learning and emotional experiences (Lowenthal, 1999). These respected older adults can teach social skills, model behavior, give positive or negative reinforcement, and introduce young people to diverse social interactions and contexts (Newman, 2002). These relationships can also provide advice, emotional support, companionship, and opportunities for socialization that at-risk youth cannot find at home (Newman, 2002). Teaching coping strategies and skills for reframing negative experiences into positive ones will result in the child having a capacity to rethink experiences and be an active rather than a passive influence on his or her own future (Newman, 2002). Mentors can help youth develop a positive self image; the introduction of warmth, nurturance, empathy, stability, and a sense of belonging forms the building blocks that promote resiliency.
Social support can come in the form of emotional, physical, informational, instrumental, and material aid (Lowenthal, 1999). Mentoring young adult victims of child maltreatment can provide opportunities for careers or further education—opportunities that result in an increased likelihood of adult stability and higher income (Newman, 2002).

Resiliency is a quality that helps victims of child maltreatment resist and recover from adversities (Newman, 2002). Resiliency is defined by Newman (2002) as a positive adaptation where difficulties—personal, familial, or environmental—are so extreme that the society otherwise would expect a person’s cognitive or functional abilities to be impaired. Resilient children use constructive, beneficial, and effective methods of coping with stress. These include thinking positively, believing in themselves, and accessing support from family and friends (Rose & Fatout, 2003). Resilient children possess cognitive coping skills that build confidence and reduce anxiety, social coping skills that involve forming and maintaining supportive social relationships, and behavioral coping skills that involve engaging in actions, like relaxation, to successfully cope with stress (Rose & Fatout, 2003). Resilient youth are particularly skilled at forging supportive relationships with adults and recruiting surrogate parents, including teachers, friends of the biological parent(s), parents of peers, or extended kin (Newman, 2002).

When resilient children were interviewed on what helped them “succeed against the odds,” the most frequently reported response was help from their informal networks—extended family, peers, neighbors, and mentors—rather than the activities of paid professionals (Newman, 2002). I would concur with this statement. In conclusion, I would like to thank my past mentors; my sixth grade teacher, Mr. Franz; my gymnastics coach, Randy Quillin; and my current and most influential mentor, Dr. Suzanne Cross, Professor of Social Work, Michigan State University. Without their support, I would not possess the confidence and emotional strength that has brought me to my current place in life.

Angelique Day recently received her MSW from the School of Social Work at Michigan State University. She is a child protective services worker. Her interests include transition issues and foster care, kinship care, and child welfare issues in American Indian communities. She can be contacted by email: day.angel@msu.edu

REFERENCES


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Poem by a mentee

Some people specialize in doing thoughtful deeds,
Before you ask they understand your problems
And your needs.
They help because they want to;
They find that being kind,
And making others happy is the first thing on their mind.
They make this world a better place by practicing the art,
Of reaching out to others
And by giving from the heart.

-Author