



Best Practices for Virtual Mentoring

Six key findings from a literature review

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Introduction

Mentoring has long been considered an evidence-based practice for promoting positive youth development. Many mentoring programs provide frequent face-to-face opportunities for interactions several times per month. COVID-19 disrupted that. Yet, the existence of virtual mentoring has been going on over several decades. Virtual or electronic mentoring refers to digital platforms that facilitate communication between a mentee and a mentor, including, emails, social media, short message service (SMS), app-mediated connections, and computer platforms⁸. Only about 3% of mentoring programs in the United States are virtual. Out of this number, only 1% are exclusively virtual⁸. Though virtual mentoring is understudied, extant studies show that it has a significant impact on youth mentoring relationships, improved academic grades, leadership development, and social and life skills. Additionally, virtual mentoring has a demonstrative benefit of overcoming geographic and socio-economic barriers, and is flexible and convenient to youth with physical disabilities relative to traditional mentoring^{7,13}. We screened 27 articles published between 1993 and 2020. Though there are varied outcomes from the 15 articles and 980 participants (10 – 25 years) included in the study, best practices or achieving a successful virtual mentoring program is mainly dependent on the six pillars. Below, we summarize six important pillars of major, effective virtual mentoring interventions gleaned from the published literature.

1. Participant training in the use of technology

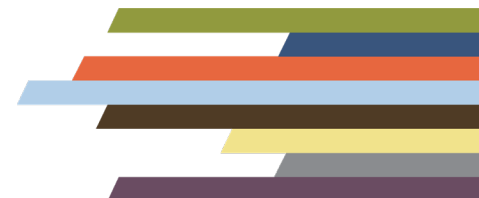
Program participants, including mentees and mentors, need basic training on the use of the system of communication used for virtual mentoring. Participants who have prior experience in electronic communication are more successful in virtual mentoring programs^{3,6,7,8}.

2. Outcome focused

Of course, we all care about outcomes. Mentoring programs focused on specific outcomes have shown to yield a significant impact on mentees, comparative to non-specific (relationship only) programs.^{3,5}

3. Two-way interactions

It's much easier to engage with youth in a two-way, virtual interaction compared to one-way interaction. Social interaction systems with a chat component are more useful, especially to adolescents.



Recommended virtual mentoring platforms include Chronus (integration of Zoom, Slack, and Skype), Zoom, and LiveStream^{11,12,14}.

4. Project-based and rewarding

Programs that incorporate project-based assignments and awarded certificates of completion for mentees have seen significant interest and positive outcomes. For example, in a science-based study, all students were required to complete an individual class project for a virtual science and health fair presentation. They were given a wide range of choices, including a two-page paper, video game, one-page spoken word/rap with video, design of their own website, maintenance of a daily blog, completion of the post-course survey, and creation of a healthy living project^{7,9}.

5. Reliable Technology

The selection and establishment of a reliable IT support system are instrumental to the virtual experience's success. This includes the selection of internet and user-friendly programs, recruiting an IT support staff assisting with troubleshooting in the case of two-way communication, ensuring the safety and privacy of participants through password protection, and other IT protocols unique to your population^{3,7,9}.

6. Durable in Length

Though a minimum mentoring period of 6 months has shown some significant impact, programs with an average of 16 - 20 months with at least 2-3 hours per month have much better outcomes^{3,7,8}.

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