Educator Brief

Series
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Mentorship: Promoting Developmental Competencies, Resources, and Strengths in Immigrant Origin Adolescents

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WHAT IS MENTORING?

Although there is considerable variation in defining mentorship, mentoring has generally been recognized as taking place between young persons (i.e., mentees) and older or more experienced persons (i.e., mentors) who are acting in a non-professional helping capacity to provide relationship-based support that benefits one or more areas of the mentee's development.[1]

WHY DOES MENTORING MATTER?

A whole child approach—attending to the interrelated academic, cognitive, physical, mental, social-emotional, and identity domains of child development—begins with a focus on relationships. Additionally, decades of longitudinal research have indicated that children

Inside

> **Fostering Immigrant Adolescent Connectedness Through Mentoring**

> **Supporting Student Belonging and Opportunities for Mentorship Both Inside and Outside of School**

> **Resources**

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who have positive relationships with nonparental adults are more resilient to adverse childhood experiences.[2] Mentoring initiatives support the whole child framework by strengthening youth's individual and environmental assets.

Historically, U.S. youth mentoring initiatives have been focused on prevention and mitigation of a range of psychological, social, and behavioral problems, whereas newer mentoring models seek to promote developmental competencies, resources, and strengths.[3] Within this broader perspective, mentoring is positioned not only as a source of support for individual adolescents but a mechanism for building stronger communities that address inequalities and foster connection and understanding.[4]

What Do We Know About Mentoring & Immigrant Adolescents?

Approximately 2.5 million children and adolescents in the United States are paired with caring adults in semester- or year-long mentoring programs each year, with millions more in shorter-term programs.[5] Although the focus of many Western European programs, immigrant and refugee youth have rarely been the focus of U.S. mentoring organizations.[6][7] However, there is a growing body of research that indicates that mentoring can play an important role in supporting the normative and specific needs of immigrant origin youth (IOY).

Like their nonimmigrant origin peers, IOY face normative developmental tasks including forming positive relationships with family and peers, exhibiting positive conduct, and doing well enough in school.[8] However, IOY must also navigate experiences that include managing family separations, forging pathways to belonging, and negotiating acculturation. They face higher acculturative stress as they navigate two cultures, balance social and peer norms, and learn both a new language and school system.[9] Research on mentoring IOY is connected to a wide range of potential benefits including an increased sense of school belonging, academic motivation and achievement, and decreased depressive symptoms and stress.[10]

Current Context

Immigrant origin youth constitute approximately 26% of the K-12 population in the United States. This includes roughly 2 million immigrant and refugee adolescents with diverse socioeconomic, racial/ethnic, and cultural backgrounds and migration experiences.[11] As thousands of immigrant and refugee adolescents arrive in the U.S. each year, schools and communities can work together to foster their healthy development

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through a broad range of supports that include an increase in immigrant origin adolescent mentoring initiatives and cultural bridging opportunities.

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Fostering Immigrant Adolescent Connectedness Through Mentoring

Research suggests that both informal and formal mentoring relationships can promote positive developmental trajectories across broad domains that include academic, cognitive, health, psychological and social outcomes.[13] The range of mentoring approaches generally fall within several categories:

Informal or **natural** mentoring relationships develop organically between young people and the individuals in their extended family, school, and community. Natural mentors may include non-parental relatives, neighbors,

teachers, coaches, or friends who provide support and serve as advocates.[14]

Formal mentors are assigned through programs and may vary by provider (intergenerational vs. peer mentor), as well as format (one-to-one vs. group).

☐ **Community-Based** mentoring models, the most classic model, pairs adults with youth in order to provide positive adult contacts and supports. While widely practiced, the evidence for the effectiveness of this practice varies widely depending upon such factors as the consistency and quality of long-term matches as well as mentorship training that is evidence-based and culturally informed.

☐ **Peer** mentoring models mobilize relationships between IOY and their non-newcomer peers. Since peer relationships are an important predictor of well-being, engaging non-newcomer peers can create an environment that benefits all youth and supports inclusion.[15]

☐ **Group** mentoring (one or more mentors working with at least two mentees) is a promising delivery mechanism that can build adolescents' sense of belonging and well-being. While

one-to-one mentoring models continue to be beneficial, they are not adequate for bridging the growing need for mentors, nor do they maximize social supports for IOY's diverse backgrounds and needs.[16] Group mentoring supports connection and cohesion and can be particularly helpful for IOY who are acculturating to a new environment.[17]

☐ **Social mentoring** programs are more commonly seen in continental Europe and match newcomer families with mentors from the host society to provide guidance and support social participation and acculturation.[18] Mentoring programs that involve the entire family may be helpful in both addressing families' concrete needs and alleviating the acculturation gap between adolescents and parents.[19]

☐ **Youth-Initiated Mentoring (YIM)** is a hybrid approach that empowers youth to identify and recruit natural mentors.[20] This model leverages existing relationships since mentors are chosen by the adolescents themselves and can provide a strong foundation for the mentoring dyad. Other hybrid approaches seek to increase natural mentoring relationships by teaching youth to identify and reach out to adults within their existing social networks. For example, **Network Engaged Mentoring** is a newer approach that pairs mentees with formal mentors who help youth identify and actively engage with caring adults beyond their mentoring dyad.[21]

Supporting Student Belonging and Opportunities for Mentorship Both Inside and Outside of School

Immigrant origin youth are members of a broad social ecology that includes families, schools, neighborhoods, and communities.[22] Within that ecology, schools are an important frontline for fostering networks that support positive IOY development and resilience. Schools provide the structure for social adaptation, language learning, and adult attachment, as well as the tools to navigate the cultural and structural systems in a new country.[23] Since adolescent students have fewer years before they graduate from high school, schools play an important role in supporting the whole child and a healthy transition to adulthood.

Build a Culture of Connectivity within School

☐ Provide educators with information about the countries and contexts from which students are arriving and the approaches to education they may have received in their home context. Work with immigrant community organizations who can assist.[24]

☐ Provide teachers and staff with training about immigrant and cultural migration backgrounds to understand challenges faced by IOY and families, as well as reduce implicit and explicit bias.[25]

☐ Actively honor and celebrate the histories, cultures, and traditions of all students.

☐ Take time to cultivate relationships across the school community to build trust and a sense of belonging. Many adolescents prefer a context in which caring adults are available, but not necessarily assigned to them individually.

☐ Maximize social supports for IOY by fostering access to both adult mentors and peer mentors who can support them and relate to their experiences.[26]

Improve Engagement with Youth and Families

☐ Support staff in building relationships with families by providing training and designating time during the work week.[27]

☐ Ensure teachers, staff, and guidance counselors are familiar with local resources to expand IOY and families' connections to the community.

☐ Develop partnerships with immigrant community organizations and respected leaders. Organizations can provide schools with information on immigrant culture and language, advise on outreach, and help relay information to parents about the U.S. school system.[28]

☐ Create programs and events at school that help connect families to community resources.

Foster Community Efficacy through Increased Community Partnerships

☐ Invest in staff whose role is to build community partnerships that can provide services beyond the scope of the school.

☐ Access and availability to neighborhood and community-based resources are often unequal and ethnically exclusive.[29] Work with community partners to support a diverse array of mentoring opportunities that consider the broader context of all immigrant origin adolescents' experiences.

☐ Support mentoring initiatives that include not only one-to-one mentoring models but encourage connectedness throughout youth networks in the form of peer, group, and natural mentoring initiatives.

☐ Partner with local government and nonprofit organizations to develop social ecosystem maps that assist helpers in identifying key organizations and services that are available throughout the community.

☐ Advocate for the development of community-based social mentoring programs that support immigrant families in social connectivity and access to after-school activities, as well as social and health services.

To Learn More

☐ [Mentoring for First-Generation Immigrant and Refugee Youth: National Mentoring Resource Center Population Review](#)

☐ [Towards Effective Social Mentoring Practices for Newcomers](#)

☐ [The Chronicle for Evidence Based Mentoring](#)

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The Immigration Initiative at Harvard (IIH) was created to advance and promote interdisciplinary scholarship, original research, and intellectual exchange among stakeholders interested in immigration policy and immigrant communities. The IIH serves as a place of convening for scholars, students, and policy leaders working on issues of immigration—and a clearinghouse for rapid- response, non-partisan research and usable knowledge relevant to the media, policymakers, and community practitioners.