PEER MENTORING: A BRIDGING MODEL
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The Canadian Mentor Strategy for At-Risk Youth

Abstract: The purpose of this article is to investigate the nature of being a youth labelled 'at-risk' in our society, to discuss mentoring as a potential prevention and early intervention strategy and to describe how mentors can serve as powerful resources with at-risk youth in Canadian communities. The author offers a mentoring model that can serve as a bridge between at-risk Canadian youth and their communities, along with eight recommendations concerning how interested readers can put ideas from this manuscript into action in their communities.

Who is At-Risk? The Visibly At-Risk: Before the Bell Tolls

Jack Canfield (1989) has suggested that if we were to visit an average high school just prior to the first bell in the morning, we might see a small percentage of students already inside the school undertaking school-sanctioned activities such as sports and band practices, students' council, year book, or school newspaper. Further, if we had a bird's eye view of the school and surrounding area, we would observe clusters of young people standing around the school waiting to enter. Canfield suggested that the closer the group of young people is to the school, the more 'in' or socially accepted that group probably is, and the further the cluster of young people is from the school, the less popular and socially involved in the school they are. These latter groups are generally identifiable and typically have names or labels which members of the community use (often without affection) to identify them and further separate them from the community.

As we look farther and farther away from the school building, we notice a growing number of young people are increasingly removing themselves from the school environment. Some of them are still in clusters but as we become able to identify them, we recognize that these seem to be groups that have formed 'by default'. These individuals have few options and so they join with others who are also peripheral, but offer some sense of community by their physical proximity.

Still farther away from the school, past the school playing fields and the fence and into the community-at-large, we continue to find groups who, as they are more physically removed, are less identifiable as a specific group. In fact, we might not even count them as members of the school community. Dropouts, street kids, gangs, unemployed, young offenders—these young people comprise the most visible and dramatic examples of at-risk youth. They also represent the most common description of 'at-risk' populations.

The Invisibly At-risk: After the Bell Tolls
School has started and the morning bell has rung. Contained within the classrooms are groups of students who either have decided to remain in school, or have not yet decided to leave. A percentage of these will remain in school until grade 12 graduation, but will not experience further education. A percentage of those that remain today will, for no apparent reason, be gone tomorrow (Levin, 1990; Pawlovich, 1985; Sullivan, 1988). Factors that normally appear to account for a young person dropping out, such as negative academic self-image, low grade point average, or poor study and work habits, do not fit for a large number of these students. For example, in Ontario, a survey of dropouts indicated that half had school grades of B or better and it appears that at least 40% would have successfully completed their academic courses had they remained in school (Radwanski, 1987).

If reasons which ascribe 'personal deficits' to the dropouts can not account for the large numbers leaving school, we need to look to other areas for explanation. Carr (1991) has concluded that students generally drop out because they perceive that their needs concerning relationships, personal relevance and sense of reward are not being met in their school experience. He elaborates:

• the school curriculum has minimal relevance in meeting their present felt needs and perceived future needs;
• the school personnel show little interest, care, respect and regard in relationships with them; and
• the world of work provides rewards (in addition to money) not available in school. (p.5)

These young people are experiencing and leaving a 'system failure'. They are abandoning a school community that they perceive is unable to meet their current needs and future aspirations. The academically under-challenged form the invisibly at-risk group who quietly and gradually fade intellectually and emotionally before they vanish.

What is 'At-Risk'?
To this point, we have defined at-risk within the parameters of a school system. However, an ecological perspective offers a larger context, as we attempt to more fully understanding a young person's experience of being at-risk. Only through such an ecological lens can we perceive the interrelationships between young people and their families, schools, communities, and their world. Words such as "control," "responsibility", "stress" and "burnout" reflect the responses of youth to their environment.

Consider the issues of which young Canadian youth are conscious: school issues (grades, teachers, curriculum), sexuality issues (AIDS and other sexually-transmitted diseases, hetero- and homosexuality, pregnancy, parenting) drugs and alcohol abuse (themselves, family members), peer relations (pressure, friendship, loneliness); multi-cultural issues (identity, racism, melding, religion), career (choice, interests, meaning), family (illness, death, separation and divorce, remarriage families), and global (environment, hunger, war). How much control do adults perceive they have in dealing with any of these human issues? Very little. And, youth? Even less. Huge responsibilities and minimal control.

With the above issues looming over their youthful heads and the associated personal responsibilities they feel concerning issues for which they have so little control, a list of those youth who are not at-risk would probably be considerably shorter than a list of at-risk youth. In fact, one might argue that 'at-risk' is more applicable to the community-at-large than to any given population within it. However, for the purposes of this paper, being considered an 'at-risk' young person involves both personal and social perspective-taking. At-risk groups include:

1. any groups of young people who are unable to perceive sufficient and significant similarities between those who constitute their community's leadership and themselves;
2. any groups of young people who perceive that they have little or no control over significant issues in their lives;
3. any groups of young people who are currently, or could soon become, separated from family or external community support systems.

Based on these three conditions, the following groups of young people can be included as either at-risk or potentially at-risk: ethnic and racial minority groups, women, singly-parented children, intellectually or physically challenged children, the academically under challenged, children from lower socio-economic stratas, street kids, dropouts, unemployed.

Recommendation #1
Community members need to explore, redefine and expand those groups and individuals among the children and youth who may be considered at-risk.

Who is Responsible for At-risk Children and Youth?
Those young people who leave the school system, for whatever reason, will for a short period of time remain as school statistics (i.e., truants, alternative program students, dropouts, graduates). However, over time, many will become dropout statistics for other communities: the unemployed, welfare recipients, street kids, the drug culture, prisons . Somewhat less dramatically, they may become members of the 'under employed'. Members of these groups are at-risk of dropping out, not from school, but from society.

Once these 'at-risk' youth cease to be members of the school community, it no longer takes responsibility for them. They are now members of someone else's community and have become that other community's concern. Should they remain as the school's

concern? While 'at-risk' students were physically attending school, very few people from the extended community sought to help to keep them in school unless it was a matter of 'better to keep them in the school community than to have them invade my community.' The school is not the only sector of the larger community who bears responsibility for youth who drop out.

In our segmented society, we have not always considered schools as part of the larger community and have neatly divided our community-at-large into smaller, static groups where transition and communication among groups is minimal. When creating a list of who are members of a school community, we would probably include those students, teachers, administrators and support staff that are currently actively involved in the school during an average day. However, what about students from feeder schools who form a group of potential and future school members? What about parents? Graduates (alumni)? Local shop keepers? Taxpayers? Future employers? Unions? Service Clubs? Elderly citizens? Human health and social service providers? These groups form their own communities and yet they must also be recognized and welcomed as a part of the school community in order to begin to resolve what has in the past been narrowly labelled a 'school community issue' but needs to be perceived as a 'community-at-large' issue.

> Recommendation #2
> In order to effectively address issues involving 'at-risk' youth, we must explore, redefine and expand our vision of community.

If So Many Young People are At-Risk, How Do So Many Survive?

When one surveys the groups of young people who could be considered at-risk, one might ask who is not at-risk. There are numerous studies that document at-risk populations among our young people. Though these studies underline the seriousness of the conditions that many of our young people experience and clearly demonstrate the immensely destructive consequences of these conditions, they do not convey the full picture. A fuller picture includes those young people who survive these adverse conditions. In fact, given the conditions that can and do contribute to a young person being at-risk, an observer might be more likely surprised by the numbers of young people who not only survive but become socially aware, psychologically balanced community members. These young people have been described as being 'resilient'.

Bonnie Benard (1991), in her synthesis of the literature, suggests the following attributes in profiling a resilient young person:

• Prosocial behaviors reflected in the young person's levels of responsiveness, flexibility, empathy and caring, communication skills and sense of humour; problem solving skills which suggest the young person's ".. ability to think abstractly, reflectively, and flexibly and to be able to attempt alternate solutions" (p. 3);

• Autonomy which describes the young person's sense of personal power, self-esteem and self-discipline; and

• Sense of purpose and future which Benard describes as including "... healthy

expectancies, goal directedness, success orientation, achievement orientation, achievement motivation, educational aspirations, persistence, hopefulness, hardiness, belief in a bright future, a sense of anticipation, a sense of a compelling future and a sense of coherence" (p.5).

According to Benard's review of resiliency literature, resilient children will exhibit behaviors and attitudes that suggest their acquisition of prosocial skills, problem-solving skills, a sense of autonomy and a positive sense of their potential, while children who are less resilient will exhibit low level social skills (or 'anti-social behaviors'), poor problem-solving skills, a lack of personal power or control, and a sense of having no potential and, therefore, no direction. Both groups (resilient and non-resilient children) may be perceived as being 'at-risk' but, based on their attributes, they will either have the skills and perseverance to move ahead or they will become caught in the situation or environment.

Researchers have suggested that there is a relationship between a young person's level of resiliency and "protective factors" (p.6) found in three key environments:

• the family environment (mother, father, siblings, extended family);
• the school environment (teachers, administrators, support staff, peers); and
• the community environment (neighbours, clergy, human social and health services agents, police, community centers and sports clubs, local unions and business people, service clubs).

 Benard has suggested that each one of the three environments can contribute to a child's resiliency. The family is perhaps the most significant contributor but, if the family represents an 'at-risk persona', then the school and community can become facilitative contributors towards the child's resiliency potential. Conversely, a child from a minority group might perceive the community as being largely non-supportive, yet may find "protective factors" in the family that will facilitate resiliency despite the perceived community resistance or prejudice.

In order for children to experience "protective factors" which will increase their resilient behaviors, the environments must clearly express (1) unqualified caring and support of the child; (2) high expectations concerning the child's abilities to mature and to learn; and (3) respect for the child's ability to contribute to the environment (Benard, 1991). It is essential to the growth of resiliency in the child that at least one significant person in one of these key environments represents these perceptions of the child in order for the child to internalize these perceptions into his or her own belief system.

Recommendation #3
Community members, in acknowledging the importance of the family in its impact on a child's resiliency, must enter into a partnership which includes the family, the school and the community-at-large to maximize the conditions in which to facilitate resiliency in our children.

How does a community foster resilience in youth?
The composition of the family, schools and communities have changed considerably over the years. Family, once easily definable, can now represent a myriad of groupings and is defined more by socio-economic status, culture, and lifestyle. Schools will vary in

their make-up from region to region, city to city, even neighbourhood to neighbourhood. Again there is no typical school or school population. Communities are far less static than they once were. At one time, generations of families lived in the same neighbourhood. Now families are far more transient, in part because of the changing face of what constitutes "family" and, in part, because of economics.

Even with these changes, the family still represents the critical environmental contributor to a child's resiliency potential. However, now more than ever, schools and communities must become active partners with the family in fostering resiliency in our children and youth. In turn, the school and communities must rely on their members to volunteer their time, energy and expertise to help one another.

Somewhat ironically, the more important it is for communities to enlist volunteers, the more complicated it becomes for someone to volunteer. The act of volunteering used to be a 'natural' occurrence where neighbours helped neighbours, extended family helped one another, community groups assisted one another. However, with the rapid changes in our society and its various social units, volunteering has become a much more conscious and formalized activity. We have professionalized volunteerism to the degree that a human resource industry has evolved in reaction to the perceived need. Witness:

• Experts in the field organizing volunteer programs for various target groups;
• Experts hired to raise funds for charities and community volunteer organizations;
• Experts training volunteers so they'll behave appropriately;

• Experts setting criteria by which volunteers are selected, screened and processed;
• Experts writing 'how to' manuals which explain all of the easy steps to creating and maintaining a volunteer organization and all the verbal and nonverbal communication skills or developmental and social psychology one needs to learn to look after a specific target group.

(Note: Peavy, R.V. [personal communication, 1992] suggests that we are living in an age of 'manualization' where, for every possible human or social need, there is at least one author who writes an expert 'how to' manual to tell us what we should do).

Many community members who would like to volunteer don't know how. The process of being considered and chosen seems so complex and onerous. Others are looking for a more informal approach, unencumbered by other parties 'interfering'. Still others are uncertain that they actually have anything to offer and leave volunteering to those that they perceive as being more competent. There are many who, like our youth, feel as though they have little control or potential in their own lives, and can not mobilize themselves to volunteer. Although there are still large numbers of people who do volunteer, there are equally as many community members who would, but, for various reasons, do not.

The shift to involving professionals in volunteerism is not 'all bad'. Our family, school and community groups are often so splintered that we need professionals to help us bridge and access one another. In specific cases, we have observed some exciting volunteer 'strategies' recently which have been given immense grassroots support and which have represented the successful

melding of volunteers with professionals. Carroll and King (1985) have referred to one, peer helping, as a 'quiet revolution' which also seems an appropriate description of the other two interventions, self-help and mentoring. All three volunteer strategies have in common that:

• Each is representative of natural occurrences in any given community;
• Each is driven by community-perceived need;
• Although each intervention has specific characteristics, each can be adapted to become community-specific;
• Although each may involve professionals who act as consultants, trainers, coordinators or supervisors, each must be community-sponsored and maintained to succeed.

By 1981, there were over half a million self-help groups in North America and, projecting into the 2020's, experts in the field of counselling suggest that self-help and mentoring groups will be the most widely used source of personal therapy used by North Americans (de Rosenroll, 1992). Self-help involves people who have similar life issues coming together to discuss, to normalize their experience, to share information and to support one another. Peer helping is a volunteer strategy whereby community members volunteer to enhance their communication and problem-solving skills so that they can be more effective in helping their friends in their communities (Carr, de Rosenroll, & Saunders, 1991).

Mentoring is yet another volunteer movement that has had a number of successes and appears to have a great deal of potential as a way of connecting with at-risk young people. (The term 'mentor' is borrowed from *The Odyssey* where Odysseus asks his friend, Mentor, to teach his son.)

A number of researchers, including Freedman, (1990), Hamilton, (1988), and Smink (1990), have written extensively about mentoring relationships in a variety of settings. Mentoring topics and issues are the main focus of several professional journals, including *Mentoring International,* that has produced an annotated bibliography containing over 500 mentoring citations (Autumn, 1989). In a number of mentoring programs, mentors or sponsors are adults who nurture and instruct a mentee, partner or protégé in areas in which the partner is perceived as lacking in "appropriate" development. Baran (1992) has suggested that seven tasks of mentors include:

• being a friend (as opposed to an authority figure)
• being an advocate
• being an academic supporter
• being a personal advisor
• being a role model
• being an agent for social, cultural, athletic and occupational enrichment
• being an agent for the development of positive self-concepts. (pp. 7-8).

Mentoring programs have been successfully implemented in a wide number of 'communities', including business and industry (Murray & Owen, 1991), colleges and universities (Daloz, 1987) and in schools (Foster & Anderson, 1990) and community organizations (Freedman, 1988)). However, the mentoring tasks appear to remain constant across the different environments.

In our deliberate attempts to provide prevention and intervention resources to at-risk young Canadians, mentoring programs

are worth considering. Mentoring programs invite adults from the local community to become involved, typically in one-on-one relationships, with young people. Their relationship may be defined around a formal objective such as learning a skill, choosing a career, gaining knowledge or information about a specific topic. However, as the partnership directs its attention to its purpose, both parties can experience bonding through sharing a significant relationship.

> Recommendation #4
> Mentoring is a powerful strategy for utilizing the strengths and energies of volunteers in our communities to foster resiliency characteristics in our at-risk children and youth and, therefore, when building prevention and intervention programs, mentoring should be given careful consideration.

What is Peer Mentoring? How is it Different from Traditional, Structured Mentoring?

The traditional view of a mentor is that of ".. a wise and loyal advisor, teacher, or coach ... who develops an ongoing one-on-one relationship with someone in need." (Smink, 1990, p.2) Smink further suggests that "… a mentor encourages, listens, gives advice, advocates, acts as a role model, and shares information and experience." (p.2) His definitions portray a commonly-held view of mentoring, that is, one where the relationship is hierarchical and one-way. The power of helping rests with the mentor, while the other (mentee or protege) is considered the 'in need', 'at risk' or 'protected one'.

This definition seems to imply that the mentee is the sole beneficiary in the relationship while the mentor receives nothing.

Murray and Owen (1991) have suggested that "..the titles given to the various roles in a mentoring program can reflect the organization's philosophy, style, and culture." (p.10) In keeping with this perspective, one of the ways which we have attempted to move toward what might be perceived as a more egalitarian relationship is through changing the terminology that is used to describe a mentoring relationship. In this model, 'peer' has been added to the term 'mentoring'. Ideally, then, Peer mentoring describes a relationship where both parties are acknowledged as equal contributors to the relationship and to one another's well being. Peer mentoring partnerships constitute horizontal, rather than vertical, power relationships. Neither party brings or attempts to display any 'role' power over the other, nor does one member give away his/her personal power to the other.

To further emphasize the shift from a hierarchical to an egalitarian relationship, the terms 'mentor' and 'mentee' (or 'protege') have been replaced by 'peer mentoring volunteer' (volunteer) and 'peer mentoring partner' (partner). The volunteer is an adult in the community who has committed to forming a relationship with a younger, at-risk member of the community, the partner, who has also voluntarily entered into the relationship. Both the volunteer and the partner are expected to take responsibility for themselves, as well as for the relationship. The peer mentoring partnership is guided by a program coordinator whose duties include initiating the relationship and facilitating its development, maintenance and eventual closure.

Dodgson (1986) has suggested that "..the essence of the Mentoring Relationship is sharing: sharing power, sharing competence,

sharing self." (p.29) Traditional, structured mentoring partnerships use the relationship to access contracted content areas (information, skills, education) whereas, in peer mentoring, content areas (formal and informal activities) are vehicles by which the relationship is initiated and maintained until the relationship can carry itself.

Peer mentoring partnerships may be formed in response to a variety of perceived needs in the at-risk population and the tasks which the partners undertake together might, as a result, vary considerably. However, a central purpose of any peer mentoring relationship is to allow both the volunteer and the partner to share and explore with one another their perceptions of themselves, each other and their community. Although the volunteer is acknowledged as having more life experience as a result of age and has been selected on the basis of personal qualities, the personal, social, cultural, educational, physical and life span characteristics and experiences of both parties will significantly contribute to the relationship.

The emphasis on the development of the relationship governs all of the steps in the organization and maintenance of the peer mentoring contract. In order to become involved in the program, both parties are interviewed for suitability and for appropriate partnership placement. When a number of partnerships have been designated, the volunteers and the partners initially meet in separate groups with the program coordinator. After these brief 'orientation' meetings, the coordinator brings both groups together where, in their partnerships, they work through structured exercises which help them to initiate their relationships and establish productive communication patterns with one another. The exercises are organized

to encourage ownership and openness in the communication. Rather than being focused on communication skills acquisition, the emphasis during these workshops is on building relationships based on the unique contributions and needs of the peer mentoring partners. The workshop experiences help the partners to determine and further develop those communication patterns that will enhance their relationships with minimal interference from or dependency on the program coordinator.

> Recommendation #5
> Terms like 'peer mentoring', 'volunteer', and 'partner' that characterize the equality inherent in the partnership and workshop exercises that facilitate, rather than direct, the relationship are essential components to constructing an atmosphere where both the volunteer and partner feel respected, in control and competent.

How do we attract and sustain peer mentor volunteers?
In peer mentoring relationships, the partnership represents a triadic, rather than dyadic relationship. Not only are the volunteer and partner involved, but the community is also involved, directly and indirectly. Further, all three parties in this relationship benefit from the relationship.

Volunteers who have been matched with at-risk young people have been offered a rare opportunity: to contribute to and to make a difference to someone who really does need them. They experience an opportunity where they have control and can become an active participant in their community's future. However, they are also offering their time, energy and expertise and, in return, it is the community's responsibility to ensure that it (the community) remains involved,

supportive and appreciative. The community's representative must ensure that peer mentors remain satisfied with their volunteer experiences. Previously, Carr's concept, "the new 3 R's", has been mentioned in reference to the needs that students must have met if they are to stay in school. These same "3 R's", Relationship, Relevance, and Reward, are equally important to volunteers if they are going to stay committed to their peer mentoring relationship.

Relationship
In order for volunteers to maintain involvement, their relationship needs must be met. Initially, prior to the mentoring relationship itself, the relationship which they will monitor will be between themselves and the community's representatives who are enlisting their involvement.

Quite simply, volunteers want to know that they are being encouraged, not only because of what they can do, but because of who they are. In their partnership with at-risk youth, of prime importance is the quality of relationship. Volunteers may become involved in response to a concrete proposal reflected in specific outcomes, but to maintain the partnership, they need to sense that they have built a meaningful relationship with their partner, a relationship in which they also receive — a reciprocal relationship.

Relevance
Although their participation might initially be based on the genuine desire to help and support others or their interest in particular career or professional tracks and on a related motivation to enlist new members, over time as the relationship continues, volunteers measure relevance using different criteria. Time commitments are considerable, and physical and emotional energy are not limitless.

The stakes around relevance gradually increase so that, to maintain involvement, volunteers must perceive personal relevance to themselves and to their partners. Personal relevance might relate to the growth of relationship factors, new interpersonal skills, renewed interest in their work, better relationships with family and significant others, deeper self-awareness or improved self-esteem.

Reward
The community, through its representatives, must continue to validate the importance of the volunteers and their partner and of their relationships. Further, the relevance of the relationship to the future of the community must also be constantly valued.

Volunteerism is defined by the actions of people who offer to help in their communities without the expectation of financial reward for their services. However, even apparently altruistic acts must have a reward system built into them. Again, the make-up of the reward remains subjective and, therefore, open to conjecture.

Reward might be measured in terms of either relationship and relevance factors, or some combination of both. In short, volunteers must feel rewarded by the triadic partnership in order to sustain the partnership. This feeling of reward not only demands satisfaction about the partnership meetings, but also continued involvement, support and commitment by community representatives.

How do we attract and sustain 'at risk' youth in peer mentoring relationships?

Although a large number of at-risk young people, particularly children, will be open to and excited by the opportunity to partner with a caring adult, still others, whose life experiences include abandonment, alienation and isolation, will not be so receptive and trusting. This latter group likely will be skeptical and want to know why the community suddenly has taken a positive interest in them ('Why now?' 'Why me?').

Many at-risk youth live in a fishbowl world, isolated from their communities by educational, social, economic and developmental barriers and yet are periodically observed and prodded by agents of the community ('Is this just another one-time, short term band aid?'). They will question the mentors' motivation ('What are they really up to?' 'Am I the favour-of-the-month?'). Others, the invisible at-risk, that we mentioned earlier, have become invisible for a reason. They may not want to be noticed. ('Why not just leave me alone?' 'Why should I trust you?')

The above are questions that may or may not be voiced, but they are felt and, given the life experiences of youth, they will need to be answered directly. Peer mentoring program initiators must involve at-risk (or former at-

risk) young people in the implementation of mentoring programs so that they are true partners in the projects, not objects of the projects. As well, program coordinators must listen to young people's needs and build peer mentoring programs around meeting those needs.

In order to realize the peer mentoring relationship's potential and to maximize young people's continued motivation for wanting to maintain these relationships, peer mentoring programs must draw both from the 'protective factors' as described in resiliency literature (Benard, 1991) and from the 3 R's, as described by Carr (1991). To quickly summarize, Benard (1991) suggests that resilient individuals have perceived that one or more significant others in their community have actively expressed unqualified caring and support, high expectations concerning their abilities to mature and learn, and respect for their abilities to contribute. Carr (1991) has described the 3 R's, Relationship, Relevance and Reward, as being necessary to the maintenance of any ongoing learning experience.

A quality (effective) peer mentoring relationship must offer at-risk youth, as well as the adult volunteers, concrete experiences which include (1) Enhancement of relationship, (2) Enrichment of life perspective; and (3) Empowerment of potential. Enhancement, Enrichment, and Empowerment combine to provide a bridge between being at-risk in our community to being a part of our community - a bridge from being reactive to our environment to being proactive within our environments.

Perhaps the volunteers' experiences of the 'Bridging Factors' will be less dramatic than

their partners'. Nevertheless, they too will respond to their partners' caring and support, their high expectations and their respect for the volunteers' abilities and, as we have discussed earlier, the volunteers also bring their own 3-R's to the partnership. As one would expect, then, from a mutually beneficial, horizontal relationship, both partners will grow and change as a result.

Enhancement of Relationship: Who cares enough to see...?

The principle focus of peer mentoring partnerships, whatever the context of the association (career exploration, building specific skills, increasing knowledge), is on the quality of relationship between volunteers and their partners.

Just as relationships become the foundations for growth and change, interpersonal behaviors that express caring, support, commitment, respect and trust are the cornerstones to quality relationships. Although the desired outcomes within these relationships include the partners reciprocating in like manner, the onus is on the volunteers to model these behaviors and to express these values.

These interpersonal behaviors (or skills) are quite often absent in the interpersonal experiences of at-risk young people and, if not absent, many of these youth have had few opportunities to be the recipients of 'validating', pro-social behaviors.

Further, as representatives of their communities, volunteers reflect community attitudes. The volunteers, therefore, act not only as models of prosocial behavior patterns, but as envoys of community perspectives of their young partners.

Enrichment of Life Perspective: ... a vision of who I really am...?

Partners in relationships share values, whether consciously or not. The very relationships carry values which are inseparable from the relationships themselves. Peer mentoring partnerships are built on values from both sides of the partnerships. The relationships are vehicles for the parties to share values, to compare and to shift in values if perceived as appropriate. At-risk youth, although 'living' their values on a daily basis, may not be as practiced at reflecting on or skillful at expressing their values as their volunteer partners appear to be in relation to their own. The onus, again, is on volunteers to be more conscious of expressing their values verbally and behaviorally and of helping their younger partners to clarify and assess their values.

At-risk youth often experience clashes of values (i.e., think for yourself, be mature, be independent - but - do what you're told). At once, they become aware of societal values, cultural values, 'survival' values, peer values, and so on. Integral to being at-risk is often the disorientation youths experience as a result of multiple discrepancies among these sets of values. To exacerbate their confusion, they witness representatives from these 'values groups' behaving in ways that are contradictory to the values they represent (i.e., it's okay to consume alcohol, but not to consume other addictive substances).

Values that surround education and career choices are not necessarily incompatible with values of at-risk youths. However, their current life experiences are often so removed from values surrounding educational and career aspirations that these societal values may seem inaccessible and irrelevant. Why

should a native child care to pay attention to a discussion of possible career streams in a white culture? Peer mentoring can provide for a context whereby, in building relationships with credible adult role models who are experiencing personally fulfilling and accessible lifestyles, at-risk youths can conceive of the potential, perceive the route and create their own sense of relevance.

Empowerment of Potential: … And what I might be?

Too many members of our communities, particularly our young people, perceive that power and control rests only with the experts who form the leadership of our communities. Their own unique personal, cultural and social histories have not been valued. They have grown to perceive themselves as 'receivers' rather than contributors in their communities. They lack the perception that they have both rights and responsibilities. In peer mentoring relationships, both parties must recognize and discuss their own and their partners' rights and responsibilities as a foundation for personal growth.

Young people want to contribute to their families, their peer groups and their communities. Yet so many of them don't know how they can contribute and wonder if their participation is even welcome. David Hunt (1989) has suggested that, from birth, we are trained to look to experts to tell us what to do, think and feel, rather than to look to and trust ourselves. Constant reliance on external experts can create high levels of dependence, low levels of control and ownership, and poor self-esteem.

Quality peer mentoring programs, in contrast, can facilitate cooperative independence, responsible self-control, and improved self-esteem. Often the task then

becomes one where the at-risk youths must learn how to access their contributory capacities and, through their volunteers' support and appreciation, maintain their motivation for doing so.

> Recommendation # 7
> In order for peer mentoring programs to bridge psychological and physical gaps between at-risk young people and their communities, we must acknowledge the power of enhancement of relationship, enrichment of life perspective and empowerment through recognizing ones potential and we must recognize that all are requisites for change.

What does the peer mentoring partnership need to know in order to work effectively? The peer mentoring workshops and supervision check-ins between partners and program coordinators incorporate exercises and processes which are structured to maximize sharing and mutual awareness and learning. An experiential approach to learning is not only an effective teaching strategy, experiential learning is congruent with the philosophy which drives ***Peer Mentoring: A Bridging Model.*** Therefore, experiential learning is a vehicle which appears in both the peer mentoring workshops and in the Program Development sections of the training manual.

In experiential learning (de Rosenroll, 1992), participant-learners are encouraged to reflect on experiences in order to find personal meaning and to further incorporate their learning into their lives. In order to fully utilize this process, one must believe that, given the opportunity, people are capable of learning from their experiences and that they can achieve a significant level of learning without input from 'outside' experts.

By using a structured experiential learning approach, the program supervisor acknowledges that the volunteer and partner in the peer mentoring relationship are the only true experts in terms of their relationship. All they really need to know about how to relate to one another rests with their ability to share with and to listen to one another. As the partners realize the uniqueness of their partnership, their interdependence (yet independence, as a unit) and the degree to which they each control the relationship, they become more ready to take ownership and responsibility for themselves and for each other.

> Recommendation #8
> Because an experiential learning approach is philosophically and logistically compatible with Peer Mentoring: A Bridging Model, potential program coordinators must familiarize themselves with this approach and strengthen those areas which they sense are limiting their effectiveness.

Recommendations for Building a Peer Mentoring Program for Youth At-Risk
1. Community members need to explore, redefine and expand those groups and individuals among their youth who may be considered at-risk.

2. In order to effectively address issues involving 'at-risk' youth, we must explore, redefine and expand our vision of community.

3. Community members, in acknowledging the importance of the family in its impact on a child's resiliency, must enter into a partnership which includes the family, the school and the community-at-large to maximize the conditions in which to facilitate resilience in our children.

4. Mentoring is a powerful strategy for using the strengths and energies of volunteers in our communities to foster resiliency characteristics in our at-risk children and youth. When building prevention and intervention programs, mentoring should be given careful consideration.

5. Terms like 'peer mentoring,' 'volunteer,' and 'partner' that characterize the equality inherent in the peer mentoring partnership and workshop exercises that facilitate, rather than direct, the relationship are essential components to constructing an atmosphere where both the volunteer and partner feel respected, in control and competent.

6. In order to sustain mentor volunteers in a community-sponsored program, the community must recognize its responsibilities in the triadic relationship that transpires and, through its representatives, continue to encourage volunteers to explore, identify and personalize needs, particularly surrounding relationship, relevance and reward.

7. In order for peer mentoring programs to bridge psychological and physical gaps between at-risk young people and their communities, we must acknowledge the power of enhancement of relationship, enrichment of life perspective and empowerment through recognizing ones potential and we must recognize that all are requisites for change.

8. Because an experiential learning approach is philosophically and logistically compatible with a bridging model of peer mentoring, program coordinators must familiarize themselves with this approach and strengthen those areas which they sense are limiting their effectiveness.

(This article has been excerpted and adapted with permission from Carr, R., Saunders, G., & de Rosenroll, D. (2004) *The Canadian Mentor Strategy for At-Risk Youth Trainer's Manual.* Victoria, British Columbia: [Peer Systems Consulting Group.](#))

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