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Mentors Crucial to Curb Recidivism for Youths

By Judge Leonard Edwards | 7 hours ago



It has been said that all a child needs is one caring adult (<http://joshshipp.com/one-caring-adult/>) in order to become a success in life. When a child is removed from home because of parental abuse or neglect or the child's delinquent behavior, often the best path to a successful life involves one caring adult who acts as a mentor and a guide. If this is true, it contains an important message for juvenile court judges and for the attorneys and other professionals who children meet.

Mentoring a child ranks as one of the most popular interventions we use to improve outcomes for children. The number of mentoring programs nationwide can only be estimated. More than 5,000 (<https://www.brookings.edu/research/designing-effective-mentoring-programs-for-disadvantaged-youth/>) mentoring organizations within the United States serve more than 3 million youths to promote youth well-being and reduce risk. Nationally, then-President Barack Obama called upon individuals in all communities to commit to mentoring young men of color through the My Brother's Keeper Initiative (<https://www.mbkalliance.org/>). This initiative seeks to address persistent opportunity gaps and ensure all youth are able to reach their full potential. Corporations, schools, churches, athletic centers and community-based organizations all invest time and resources in operating mentoring programs. Additionally, national organizations such as CASA (<http://www.casaforchildren.org/>) (Court Appointed Special Advocates), Big Brothers Big Sisters of America and Boys and Girls Clubs of America (<https://www.bgca.org/>) operate in almost every state and local jurisdiction.

Mentoring involves a relationship between two individuals based on a mutual desire for development toward career goals and objectives. Mentoring can be defined by the following three characteristics: (1) interaction between two individuals over an extended period of time; (2) inequality of experience, knowledge or power between the mentor and mentee (recipient) with the mentor possessing the greater share, and (3) the mentee being in a position to imitate and benefit from the knowledge, skill, ability or experience of the mentor.

The data (https://www.campbellcollaboration.org/media/k2/attachments/Tolan_Mentoring_Interventions_Update.pdf) support the effectiveness (<http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1529100611414806>) of mentoring programs — in short, they work. No one seems to have concluded why mentoring is effective and what elements in the mentoring process make it successful; yet the results continue to impress. The data show that the mentees are involved in less criminality, less aggression, less substance abuse and improved academic success, all leading to a more positive role in society. Perhaps most significantly, mentors are problem solvers and can help mentees plan for their future.

What does this mean for juvenile court judges, attorneys and other professionals? We need to support mentoring programs in our communities. This conclusion is consistent with Standard of Judicial Administration (http://www.courts.ca.gov/cms/rules/index.cfm?title=standards&linkid=standard5_40) 5.40(e), which states in part:

“Judges of the juvenile court ... are encouraged to:

(1) Provide active leadership within the community in determining the needs of and obtaining and developing resources and services for at-risk children and families.”

“(2) Investigate and determine the availability of specific prevention, intervention, and treatment services in the community for at-risk children and families.”

Similar emphasis is included in standards for attorneys, social workers and probation officers.

The juvenile court judge should start with CASA (Court Appointed Special Advocates). This program was created to provide a trained support person for abused or neglected children who are the subject of legal proceedings in the court system. The advocate often becomes the most consistent support person for the child and provides critical information to the court about the child’s best interests. While the CASA agrees to serve as a mentor for a year, some volunteers remain connected to their child for years after the youth has aged out of foster care. Juvenile court judges recognize the importance of CASA and have led the creation of 44 CASA programs in California counties serving 50 counties and approximately 12,000 children. Nationally, nearly 1,000 programs serve more than 251,000 abused and neglected children. While it takes a judge to start a CASA program, attorneys and social workers can support the judge’s efforts and can urge a hesitant judge to start a CASA program.

Creative juvenile court judges have expanded the CASA concept to include youth in the juvenile justice system. In Santa Clara County, for example, Presiding Juvenile Court Judge Pat Tondreau worked with community leaders, attorneys and other professionals to create CAFA, the Court Appointed Friends and Advocates (<http://www.courts.ca.gov/27696.htm>) program, a mentoring program for adolescent youth in the juvenile justice system.

Partially modeled on CASA, the CAFA volunteers are thoroughly screened and receive a minimum of 30 hours of training before they are sworn in by a judicial officer to serve as officers of the court. Volunteers are typically college age and often are on a career path toward law enforcement or probation. Many see mentoring as an ideal introduction to the juvenile justice system. Trainings focus on family engagement, school, probation, courts and court reports, the law and the juvenile justice system. Pursuant to local rules of the Santa Clara County Superior Court, volunteers have access to the courtroom and to juvenile court files. At court hearings, they provide a report to the court on behalf of their mentee.

The purpose of the CAFA program is to provide a minor with an advocate who is consistently in the minor's life and to support the youth while on probation and in moving out of the juvenile justice system. The CAFA establishes a relationship with the youth and becomes a friend, a mentor and an advocate. The CAFA will advocate for the youth in courtroom proceedings and will assist in accessing activities including sports and tutoring as well as educational and training opportunities.

The CAFA also helps the youth address problems that face all adolescents, such as getting a driver’s license, getting a summer job, finding housing, sealing juvenile records and securing health insurance. The youths in the program are either wards of the court living at home or minors who qualified for Deferred Entry of Judgment. This relatively new program has already served 56 youth, with 18 currently in the program and four on the waiting list. Plans for expansion are currently under discussion. Critical to the success of CAFA in Santa Clara County was the involvement of FLY (<https://flyprogram.org>) (Fresh Lifelines for Youth), a local youth advocacy program with a focus on rehabilitation. FLY has offices in both San Mateo and Alameda counties.

If mentoring has such positive effects, why do we not find mentoring opportunities for more youth? Perhaps an attorney could ask the court to require the probation officer to take steps to identify a mentor for the youth or locate a mentoring program that will work with the young person. That mentor might be a coach, a teacher, a college student or a volunteer with a local program. In any case, it would be a person who can bring a positive role model into the youth’s life.

In this regard it makes sense for the juvenile court judge to meet with probation officers, attorneys, local mentoring programs and community leaders to discuss using mentoring programs for youth in the juvenile justice system. That is what happened in Santa Clara County. Judge Tondreau with his justice partners, the Santa Clara County Probation Department, the District Attorney’s office and minor’s counsel brought together corporate, religious, educational, service clubs, sports leaders, local community-based organizations that have existing mentoring programs and other judges, particularly retired Superior Court Judge Melinda Stewart. Participants brainstormed ideas about the need for mentors and how a mentoring program could be created.

CAFA has been so successful that the Santa Clara County Probation Department has agreed to provide funding for the next year. They recognize the value of mentoring juvenile justice youth.

The juvenile justice system devotes a great deal of time and energy explaining to delinquent youth what they should not be doing. I suggest that by finding a mentor for youth we will be including a potentially positive person in his or her life, and that may make all the difference. In 1899 the creators of the juvenile court embraced rehabilitation as one of its primary goals. A mentor can be a powerful intervention to help a youth on that path to rehabilitation.

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