Lunch Buddies: Teens Mentoring Youth

The Situation
When youth feel valued and useful, research clearly shows many positive outcomes including better mental health, higher levels of moral reasoning, and more involvement in the community. One specific means for youth to feel valued is for them to have a useful role in the community, through community service and involvement. Youth who feel valued in the community have been shown to have a more positive sense of self-esteem and self-concept, a greater sense of personal control, a sense of optimism about the future, greater achievement of self-actualization’ and reduced delinquency.

In the 2002 National Search Institute Survey for Developmental Assets of 1,462 youth (grades 6-12) in Jerome County it was found that only 24% of the youth perceived that adults in the community value youth and that only 29% of these youth felt that they are given useful roles in the community.

Our Response
Marsha Hawkins-Lockard, University of Idaho Extension Educator working with the Jerome County HealthNet Coalition implemented a peer mentoring program in the Valley School District during the 2002-2003 and 2003-2004 school years. The purpose of the program was to connect caring, trained youth volunteers with at-risk elementary school children to provide friendship, social skills, and personal development through a meaningful, one-on-one relationship.

Mentors were selected by the high school teaching staff based on their ability to model responsible behavior, commit to the program and provide compassion and friendship. All mentors attended a 90-minute training taught by the extension educator. The training provided an overview of health and safety rules when working with youth, developmental assets, expected role-modeling behaviors, and the importance of reliability and confidentiality. All mentors and mentees met at least two times per month, and some met weekly.

A teacher or counselor selected the elementary school-age mentees. Elementary students who needed assistance with social or academic achievement were selected and parental permission was obtained for each mentee to participate in the program.

Program Outcomes
In 2002-2003, 23 mentors were recruited and trained at Valley High School; in 2003-2004 47 mentors were trained with a majority of the mentors returning from the previous year due to a positive experience with the program.

To evaluate the program’s effectiveness, mentors completed a training evaluation and a pre-
September) and post- (in May) Attitude and Behavior Survey. Each mentee also completed a four-question, self-evaluation survey at the beginning and at the end of the program. School personnel completed a ten-item pre and post Behavioral Assessment on each mentee as well.

On the 5-point scale mentors rated their attitude and behaviors at the beginning and the end of the school year. In response to the question “of feeling valued by adults in their community” perceptions increased from 4.52 to 4.75. In response to the question: “Because of my training and/or because of my role as a peer mentor, I am more likely to demonstrate appropriate behavior and avoid inappropriate behavior.” An increase from 4.52 to 4.70 was shown.

Mentees were asked four simple questions on the pre and post evaluations due to their age. The greatest change in attitude occurred in response to the question “I can say ‘no’ to friends if they want to break the rules” showing an increase from 3.82 to 4.39.

Participants’ Responses
The lunch buddy program has made a positive impact in the school culture on the peer-mentors and on the mentees. Comments from the mentors:

- “I initially signed up to be a Lunch Buddy to build up my resume, I didn’t know that I would gain so much by the experience.”
- “I like being a lunch buddy, it is fun to help the kids and it helps me to understand some of the things they are going through.”
- “I like being a role model and making a difference.”
- “I like knowing that I get to help someone, I help their self-esteem.”

Comments from the school counselor and teachers:

- “The program has been excellent.”
- “The Lunch Buddy was one of the positive things in my students’ year.”
- “The program provides positive role models for the younger children, and it has had a positive impact on the older kids.”

Cooperators and Co-Sponsors
The program received a $2,000 grant from the HealthNet coalition and the Regional Substance Abuse Authority. The funds were used for training materials, small gifts for the mentees and mentors, and for an end of the year evaluation party.

The Future
This program has received very positive comments from students, parents and school personnel. Valley School District will be continuing the program for many years to come as they can see the position value of youth mentoring.

For More Information
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