BUILDING BRIDGES IN THE COMMUNITY THROUGH MENTORING PROGRAMS
MENTÖRLÜK PROGRAMLARI İLE TOPLUMDA KÖPRÜLER KURMAK

Nadire Gülçin Yıldız*

Dear Editor,

Mentoring is a form of structured trusting relationship, which aims to match disadvantaged at-risk youth with caring individuals who offer guidance, direction, support, motivation, encouragement and reassurance. The goal in mentoring programs is to develop the competence and character of the mentee (National Research Agenda, 2004). While traditionally parents fill this role, some children lack such a relationship. It is predicted that 20% of youth lack a supportive relationship with a caring adult in their lives (Lawner & Beltz, 2013). When kind, concerned individuals serve as role models, it is more likely that youth will become healthy, successful adults who are integrated into society. Therefore, they are able to form perceptions about society through their observation and social interactions which will influence how they perceive their potential role in society.

Data gathered from a survey of 31,272 adolescents enrolled in high schools as part of the European School Survey Project reveal that youth who become drug addicted before age 15 are at the highest risk for chronic substance abuse and dependence (Pumariega, Burakgazi, Unlu, Prajapati & Dalkılıç, 2014). Psychosocial variables, such as lower school grades, lower parental education, lower income, lower anxiety, higher irritability, higher antisocial traits, greater time with peers, less time with family and higher family substance abuse, may also contribute to adolescent substance abuse. In addition, according to the 2013 Adolescent Research Profile Report of Turkey (2014), 39% of youth reported experiencing difficulty adapting to their developmental tasks. The same document indicates that 70% of those who report being exposed to physical abuse at home were mainly abused by their fathers (37%) and by their siblings (33%), threatening family functioning. Being exposed to verbal abuse at school by teachers and administrators threatens the school climate and psychosocial development, highlighting the need for a systemic social support programs for youth.

This National Report offers recommendations based on study results with a sample size of 6,747 (i.e., survey with 12-18 years adolescents and their parents or custodians). Interestingly, the document recommends a mentoring system to promote readiness for learning academic materials. Findings also emphasize the development and sustainability of government-based national programs and United Nations or European Union-based international programs for girls with a lower socio-economic status family background. While the Ministry of Family and Social Policies document of 2014 Child Services General Administration statistics indicate that there are 62 Children Support Centers and 1,144 children received services (i.e., specialized in neglect, abuse and juvenile delinquency) there is no individualized psychosocial rehabilitation model developed nation-wide through the use of strengthening the social support system of at risk youth. Issues like violence and/or separation in the immediate family, increased divorce rate, socio-cultural (e.g., migration), economic and mental health problems place children at risk, while limiting adult supervision necessary for healthy physical, psychological and cognitive development.

Social relationships are strongly linked to wellness changing neuroplasticity. An fMRI-based handholding procedure examined the effectiveness of Emotionally Focused Therapy through the modification of social regulation of neural threat, which indicated changes on the brain's representation of threat cues if a partner is presented (Johnson, Moser, Beckes, Smith, Dalgleish, Halchuk et al., 2013). Similarly, active listening activates positive emotional brain regions (e.g., attending behavior, paraphrasing, reflecting feelings, summarizing), which affect the following areas: ventral striatum, right anterior insula and medial PFC & superior temporal sulcus found

*Faculty Member at Üsküdar University Psychology (English) Department Istanbul / Turkey, and Coordinator of Evidence Based Mentoring Program
1Address for Correspondence: Üsküdar University, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Psychology (English) Department, Altunizade Mah. Haluk Türksoy Sok. No: 14 PK. 34662 Üsküdar / Istanbul, Turkey, Phone: +90 216 400 22 22, Email: nadiregulcin.yildiz@uskudar.edu.tr
in an fMRI study (Kawamichi et al., 2014). Academic issues such as high stakes testing for high school and college entrance, social issues such as bullying and peer pressure, and community issues such as safety in the community only exacerbate the above-mentioned risk factors of disadvantaged youth in Turkey. Approximately 31.2% of Turkey's population is under 18 (TUİK, 2013). Mentoring programs offer preventive relationships, which enhance social skills.

Mentoring programs can build trust and repair attachment bonds in children living in institutions serving at risk youth (e.g., those children with neglect and abuse, delinquent behaviors and living on the street). To support and guide disadvantaged youth in order to become responsible adults, mentoring-based community engagement programs may be critical. Such program activities provide opportunities to instill social skills in the context of relationships. One's ability to use necessary social skills determines his or her ability to succeed in life; and such social skills can only be attained in a relational context. Enabling teens to develop healthy social skills through mentoring relationships where they feel empowered restores their self-esteem, helping them gain greater self-confidence.

Previous research studies provide convincing evidence that mentoring programs are effective in the development of social skills and relationships. Making a Difference: The Impact Study of Big Brothers Big Sisters (Tierney, Grossman, & Resch, 1995) indicated reduced antisocial activities (violent behaviors, drug or alcohol use) and improved academic outcome and relationships with family and friends. DuBois D.L., Holloway, Valentine and Cooper’s (2002) meta-analysis revealed similar results. Based on the review of 360 studies, Hair, Jager and Garrett (2002) identified programs that designed the promotion of quality relationships and good social skills. Results indicated that when youth engaged in these programs’ activities, they improved parent-child relationships, peer relationships, conflict resolution skills, self-control and behavior regulation, social confidence, social assertiveness, social self-efficacy and social initiative. Lawner and Beltz (2013) conducted a synthesis of experimental evaluations of 19 mentoring programs (e.g., Big Brothers Big Sisters) to study “how frequently these programs work to improve such outcomes as education, mental health, peer and parent relationships, and behavior problems, and what lessons can be learned to improve outcomes” (Lawner & Beltz, 2013, p. 1). Mentoring Programs such as Big Brothers Big Sisters of America have created and supported one-on-one relationships between adult volunteers and at-risk youth for more than a century. This organization is also one of the oldest, best-known and most elaborate, mentoring programs across the world (e.g., Australia, Austria, Canada, Ireland, Israel, Netherlands, New Zealand, Poland, Russia, and United States) and it fits with our collective cultural dynamics, which emphasize relational lifestyle.

The Turkish government is seeking to develop an Individualized Psychosocial Rehabilitation Model for children and adolescents who are living in institutions under government care. Relevant programs and social policies are regarded to be inadequate, while there is an increasing need to meet the psychosocial needs (aggression, addiction, neglect and abuse), of these youth. As a response to a request from the Ministry of Family and Social Policies (2013), Üsküdar University proposed an 8-week Individualized Rehabilitation Model where medical and clinical treatments were provided to a sample of 78 children. Similarly, an Evidence Based Mentoring Program sponsored by the Ministry of Youth and Sports (2014), targeted 45 teenage girls who were neglected and abused. Our rehabilitation approach includes an assumption that “the brain is built over time from the bottom up.” Therefore, trauma treatment should focus on repairing attachment bonds, assuming that relationship building is at the core of therapeutic change. Consequently, it is important to provide supportive social relationships to help reduce the outcome of adverse childhood experiences. The Evidence Based Mentoring Program was designed to fulfill this goal where Üsküdar University undergraduate students served as mentors for one year. The outcome of the study has promising evidence that the program is effective. It would be judicious to consider these findings when designing future programs and making policies on the psychosocial rehabilitation of neglected and abused children living in institutions.

Sincerely,

References