

## ABSTRACT

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National Youth Sports Program (NYSP) participants (N = 8) were interviewed using a semistructured interview approach concerning their perceptions of mentoring. Five male and 3 female participants ranging in age from 11 to 15 were interviewed. Questions were written using a phenomenological strategy and data were analyzed using content and comparative analyses. Results suggested the characteristics of a mentor, mentoring behaviors, and identified preferences for a mentor. Participants felt it most important that there was someone who was supportive, trustworthy, and willing to talk to them and spend time with them. Participants did not feel that mentors were important in a program such as NYSP yet named several staff members who were possible mentors. Findings suggest that although mentoring may be a part of recreation programs, participants may not be expecting assigned mentors. A conclusion that can be drawn from this study is that mentoring does take place in recreation programs, many times without the mentor and protégé realizing it is occurring.

ADOLESCENT PERCEPTIONS OF MENTORING;  
A PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH IN RECREATION

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I could not have asked for two better parents. My dad has always been there to offer the love, support, and encouragement that I needed, all through school. He and mom were always there to remind me that I could do whatever I set my mind to, and I thank both of them. I would also like to recognize my sisters, Gretchen and Mo. Each in their own way, they were always there to make me laugh, and help keep me humble. My grandparents also deserve special thanks. Poppa Doc taught me that life is about being responsible and learning something, but also having fun. Grandma has always been there to remind me to never lose sight of my dreams, but always take life "inch by inch."

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## INTRODUCTION

Mentoring is a frequently mentioned topic among human services professionals in the 1990's. Included among mentoring organizations that strive to help young people are America's Promise, Cities/Communities in Schools, and The One to One Partnership (American Broadcasting Company Television Network, n. d.). In 1904 Ernest K. Coulter founded an organization that would reach out to children who were in need of "socialization, firm guidance, and connection with positive adult role models. The resulting program, Big Brothers/Big Sisters of America (BB/BS) continues to operate today as the largest mentoring organization of its kind" (Grossman & Garry, 1997, p. 1). Many community youth programs include mentoring components in their activities. Television commercials state that mentors help to lower crime and drug use among children, and urge adults to get involved.

As frequently as the term is used, many definitions exist. One basic, all-encompassing definition comes from Einolf (1995): "being a mentor is defined as accepting responsibility for a specific period of time to guide a lesser skilled or experienced person to mature, develop specific competencies, and reach specific goals" (p. 448). Mentors are widely used in professional settings to help new employees become accustomed to the company more quickly, continue their self-development, and enhance existing skills (Schroeder, 1995). When the relationship is between an adult and a young person the emphasis is more on character development than skill development, specifically the development of social and life skills (Rhodes, 1994).

A mentor is different than a role model. A role model is any individual who influences a young person's behavior. Children and adolescents naturally look for role models to emulate. The influence of role models may be from either a celebrity or another adult they see on a regular basis, and is not always positive. Mentoring, by contrast, is believed to be an inherently positive relationship.

There are different types of mentoring relationships. Assigned mentors may involve a program director matching two individuals. Natural mentors do not involve a third party; the relationship develops naturally with a person already in an individual's existing social support network (Philip & Hendry, 1996). Philip and Hendry also discuss individual-team mentoring in which members of a group recognize the group's leader as someone they can rely upon and trust. The individual may not always realize that they are serving as a mentor for group members. Often teachers, coaches, and recreation leaders find themselves in individual-team mentoring relationships.

Generally speaking, mentoring relationships are characterized by mutual feelings. Typically the young person seeks out an adult for help and guidance, and the adult takes a caring approach to help the young person grow and develop (Katz, 1997). Katz also stated that "the relationship is often a powerful force in helping the younger person make the transition into adulthood. The relationship touches the mentor as well, in an emotional way" (p. 209). However, there is little evidence that adolescents' perceptions of mentoring have been examined. Herein lies the problem of this study.

### Purpose of the Study

This study examined adolescents' perceptions of mentoring, specifically as they pertain to recreation programs. The overall purpose of this study was to help recreation program staff understand the role of mentors and determine if mentors should be included as a part of their programming efforts. The researcher's biases prior to this study included beliefs that all young people can benefit from positive contact with a mentor; all young people can benefit from experience in recreation programs; and recreation programs are appropriate places for mentoring to take place. The literature supports the belief that recreation programs benefit youth participants and the leadership that staff provide may have a positive effect on young people and may possibly serve as mentors for them (Wesner, 1996; Witt & Crompton, 1996).

### Review of Related Literature

#### Adolescence.

In some cultures the transition from childhood to adulthood is a clear and decisive event marked by ceremony and a rite of passage. In American culture the transition to adulthood is slow, creating a long and potentially vague period where young people learn to be independent, functioning members of society (Cummings, 1995). Thus, adolescence is often a misunderstood and ill-defined period of the life span. For example, Dr. David Elkind (1998) writes that:

We have, in effect, all but eliminated this age period as a distinct stage in the life cycle. In our homes we increasingly treat teenagers as equals,

rather than as young people who, despite their physical maturity, are still psychologically immature. (p. 3)

Takanishi (1993), however, describes adolescence as a time of great opportunity in which the adolescents learn how to solve problems and make choices in preparation for adulthood. Adolescence has also been described as a time of great potential in which damaging patterns can be prevented (Hamburg, 1993). If not prevented, patterns of drug and alcohol use, and violent behavior may carry on into adulthood. There are many complex challenges facing adolescents. Some youth who have difficulty navigating the challenges are termed "at-risk youth."

#### At-Risk Youth.

The term "at-risk youth" is variously defined. Witt and Crompton (1996) state that at-risk youth are considered to be "youth who are, or have the potential to be influenced negatively by familial, environmental, peer, and/or social factors that deter their positive mental and social development" (p. 70). Recently adolescence has been complicated by the increased acceptance of activities, such as alcohol use and sexual activity, that appear to the adolescents as attractive (Hamburg, 1993). As a part of their transition to adulthood adolescents learn to make choices; most adolescents negotiate themselves through these choices with little consequence. Although the risk factors that affect adolescents are increasing and becoming more available, the majority of young people do not participate in activities that would characterize them as being "at-risk."

Risk exists along a continuum of four levels: minimal, remote, high, and imminent (McWhirter, McWhirter, McWhirter, & McWhirter, 1993). Minimal-risk

youth, the majority of America's young people, tend to have good home lives, and limited social and environmental stressors. In other words, a minimal-risk youth is typically raised in a supportive family, regardless of family structure; a low-crime neighborhood; and participates in structured activities such as after-school recreation programs. Remote-risk youth may have less positive family lives, and some social and environmental stressors. High-risk youth may come from a challenged home life, and have numerous social and environmental stressors. Some high-risk youth may exhibit negative attitudes and/or skill deficiencies. Imminent-risk youth, like high-risk youth, tend to have economically disadvantaged backgrounds, and have already demonstrated the development of negative behaviors and activities. There is no formula to tell where on the continuum a young person should be placed. Their placement depends upon the group with whom they are compared and who is doing the categorizing. Both risk and opportunity are present in each adolescent's life; how well they negotiate the risk can depend upon many factors, one of which is their level of resilience.

Resilience is another term, somewhat related to risk, which is not well defined. Generally, a resilient person has "beaten the odds" and resisted the negative effects of his/her surroundings. A college graduate originally from a neighborhood where many of his or her peers failed to complete high school could be labeled as resilient. Like risk, resiliency is subjective and relative to others with whom the young person is being compared. A key factor which "contributes to a young person's resiliency is his or her belief that adults care about and are interested in him or her" (Allen, Paisley, Stevens, &

Harwell, 1998, p. 83). It has also been suggested that resilience is a result of the interaction between genetic and environmental factors (Horowitz & O'Brien, 1989).

#### Recreation and At-Risk Youth.

Because of their background, at-risk youth often "lack certain core abilities that would enable them to build and maintain positive relationships" (McWhirter, et al., 1993, p. 89). One reason for their difficulty in building positive relationships may be an inability to trust people. When the youth feel safe enough to express themselves they learn how to trust people, which leads to building and maintaining friendships. These lessons carry over to other areas of their lives such as school and outside peer relationships (McWhirter, et al.). Many factors influence whether or not a young person feels safe. Recreation settings can provide a safe, nonjudgmental atmosphere in which at-risk youth have the opportunity to express themselves (Wesner, 1996). One essential factor is the program staff who help create a safe social environment.

When participants feel that they are in a safe social environment, they are more likely to feel comfortable expressing themselves. The type of staff who supervise a program and the leadership they provide can be a significant factor in the environment of the program (Witt & Crompton, 1996). Recreation staff may be more than supervisors or leaders; they are in important positions as role models and mentors, particularly to high and imminent-risk adolescents (Wesner, 1996).

#### National Youth Sports Program.

One example of a program that gives staff the opportunity to serve as role models and mentors to adolescents is the National Youth Sports Program (NYSP). NYSP is a

free educational enrichment program for youth from low-income families held each summer at 170 college and university campuses in 46 states. It is sponsored by the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) and the Department of Health and Human Services (National Youth Sports Program Committee, 1997). NYSP believes that youth can learn valuable skills by participating in sports, but adds that education in "life skills such as drug and alcohol prevention, nutrition, personal health, and job responsibilities" is also a key component of the program (NYSP Committee, p. 2). The philosophies concerning the interaction of staff with adolescents in a recreation setting made an NYSP program a useful location for adolescents to be interviewed about mentoring.

#### Methods and Procedures

Because this study was designed to explore adolescents' perceptions of mentoring qualitative methods were appropriate for this study. The purpose of the study was to help recreation program staff understand the role of mentors so they could determine if they should include mentoring as a part of their programming efforts. To allow the adolescents an opportunity to directly share their thoughts and perceptions concerning mentoring interviews were conducted. Qualitative research designs, which often include in-depth interviews, allow a researcher the opportunity to explore a topic in more detail than quantitative research (Patton, 1990). By using a semistructured interview schedule the researcher was able to probe topics and obtain information about the youth's thoughts and ideas.

This study was designed as a phenomenological inquiry. Patton (1990) states that phenomenology "focuses on the question: 'What is the structure and essence of experience of this phenomenon for these people?'" (p. 69). Interviews are one of two techniques used in phenomenological inquiry, and are used to give the participants an opportunity to express their own thoughts and ideas. For this study participants were interviewed about their perceptions of mentoring.

### Sampling

Returning participants of NYSP at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse were selected for this study because the researcher believed that they would be better than first year participants in discussing mentors at NYSP. A returning participant has at least one year prior experience in NYSP. During the program's free medical examinations the researcher approached the parents/guardians of returning participants to explain the research study and obtain consent. After consent was obtained, a master list of participants was sorted by age and gender. Twelve participants were selected as potential interview participants, and their enrollment was verified. The researcher then established an interviewing schedule that would not remove a participant from a required activity, such as lunch or swimming.

### Interviews

On the day of each scheduled interview selected participants were approached by the researcher and asked if they would help the researcher with a school project. Further specifics were not given until the participants reached the interview room to ensure that the explanation of the study and the participant's consent would be captured on tape.

Interviews were both audiotaped and videotaped to accurately record participants' responses. Interviews were conducted in a focus group facility at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse during regular NYSP hours.

Once participants had signed the consent form, they selected a pseudonym to protect their identity. Eight participants, profiled in Table 1, gave their consent to be interviewed. Three NYSP participants declined to give consent and asked to be taken back to their group activities.

Table 1. Profiles of Eight NYSP Participants Selected to be Interviewed

Pseudonym	Age	Previous Years at NYSP	Sex	Individual Interview	Dual Interview	Verification Interview
Angle	11	1	Female	Yes	Yes	Yes
Beth	14	1	Female	Yes	Yes	Yes
Brian	15	5	Male	Yes	Yes	Yes
Chad	11	1	Male	Yes	No	No
Dawn	14	2	Female	Yes	No	Yes
George	15	1	Male	Yes	Yes	Yes
Jeff	13	2	Male	Yes	Yes	Yes
Kevin	14	1	Male	Yes	Yes	Yes

Individual interviews focused on learning whether or not the adolescents had people whom they considered to be mentors or potential mentors in their lives. At the

completion of each individual interview, the researcher informed participants that they would be contacted in 2 weeks to participate in a focus group. A focus group, by definition "is an interview with a small group of people on a specific topic. Groups are typically six to eight people who participate in the interview" (Patton, 1990, p. 335). It was not possible to conduct the focus groups as planned because all eight individual interview participants were unable to meet at the same time. Dawn was withdrawn from NYSP by program staff before the scheduled focus group; she did not withdraw from the study. Chad requested not to participate further on the day of the scheduled focus group. As such, participants were interviewed in groups of two (termed a dual interview). In each dual interview participants were able to share ideas with each other and agree or disagree with the others' thoughts and ideas.

The dual interviews focused on the adolescents' perceptions of mentors, particularly their important characteristics and what they could do to help adolescents. Again, a semistructured interview was conducted to probe for additional information. Questions were derived from the analysis of individual interview data and focused on the reasons why mentioned characteristics were important to the adolescents.

### Data Analysis

The researcher transcribed the audiotape of each individual and dual interview. Raw data were extracted from the transcripts by noting key words, phrases, or statements that related to the adolescents' perceptions of mentoring. Two methods of analysis were used: content analysis and comparative analysis. Content analysis, "the process of identifying, coding, and categorizing the primary patterns in the data" (Patton, 1990, p.

381), was used initially to determine the specific categories and patterns that existed between interviews.

After transcripts were analyzed for content they were compared to each other using the comparative analysis method. Comparative analysis involves the re-examination of transcripts to determine if specific patterns or themes were missed (Patton, 1990). Data were analyzed in two formats: each individual transcript was analyzed, and then each individual's response to each question was separated and compared to others' responses. This method of analysis provided triangulation, or "the combination of methodologies in the study of same phenomena or programs" (Patton, p. 187). If only one method of analysis had been used, errors may have occurred in the analysis or themes may have been missed (Patton).

#### Verification Interviews

After the completion of NYSP it was necessary to recontact participants by telephone to verify the themes that emerged from the data. Before speaking to the participants the researcher first secured permission for the additional interview from the initially consenting parent/guardian. All seven parents/guardians gave consent.

The researcher spoke with the interview participants, explained why they were being contacted again, and obtained verbal consent. Responses were recorded with the knowledge of the interview participants. Interviews followed a scripted format allowing additional probing questions to be asked if necessary. At the completion of the interview, transcripts were analyzed.

## Results

The data analysis revealed three components of mentoring as perceived by the adolescents: characteristics of a mentor, mentoring behaviors, and the adolescents' preferences for a mentor. Figure 1 details these three components of adolescent perceptions of mentoring. These categories emerged from examining the frequency of actual responses presented in Table 2. The categories were labeled by the researcher, but whenever possible the specific terms within the categories were words of the participants themselves.

### Characteristics of a Mentor

One common theme in all the interviews was the adolescents' need to feel they have someone they can seek out for support, advice, and guidance. The adolescents spoke about issues affecting youth, the importance of making appropriate choices, and how a mentor can help them make the right decisions. Brian and Beth discussed in detail that one way a mentor could be supportive was helping them learn decision-making. Brian stated "a lot of people have made bad choices and look where it's ended up. I mean the jails are overcrowded and they're building new ones, a lot of people are living on the streets." Beth continued by saying "you see little kids running into schools with guns and killing other kids." When the researcher asked how mentors could help young people with decision-making, possibly preventing problems like these, Beth replied:

You're not alone. Anything you fight, you're not alone. You've got someone who has your back. And it just allows them to stand up for you when you need it, and [someone who] just cares, and who will say to you

Three Components of Adolescents' Perceptions of Mentoring

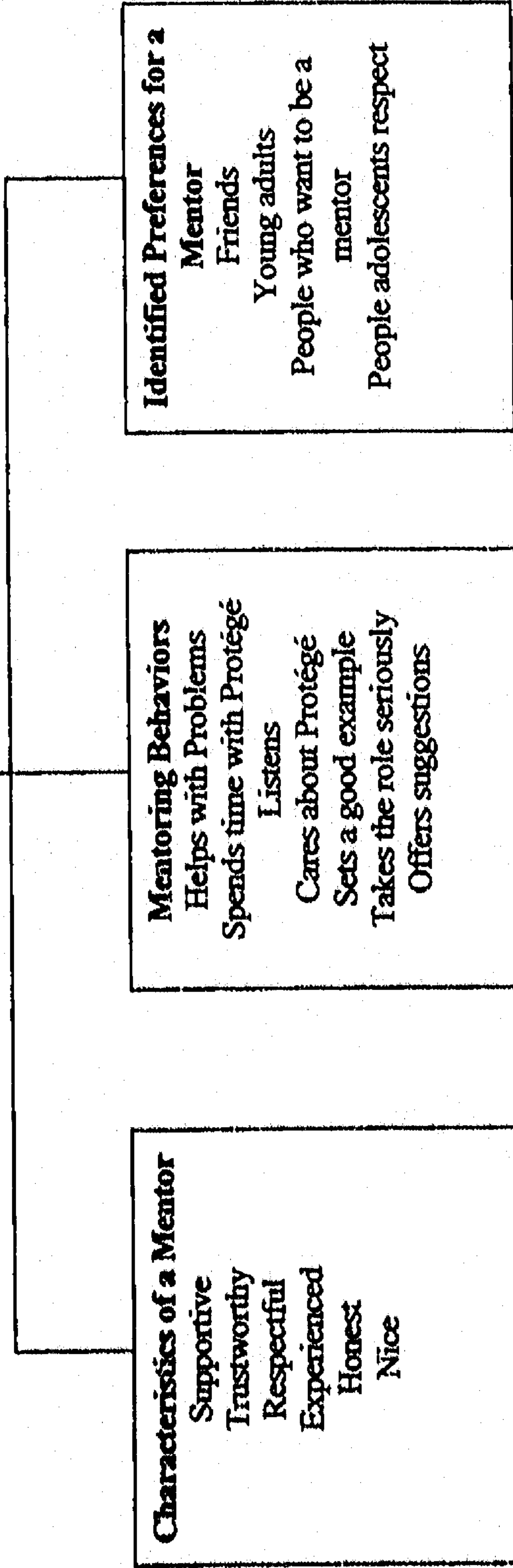


Figure 1

Table 2. Categories Derived from Actual Participant Responses

Category	Individual Interview Response Frequencies	Dual Interview Response Frequencies	Total Frequencies
Supportive	12	18	30
Helps with problems	9	17	26
Talks to them	12	12	24
Spends time with them	2	21	23
Trust	2	16	18
Listens to them	5	13	18
Respect	5	12	17
Helps them think things through	2	13	15
Cares about them	6	9	15
Experienced	9	5	14
Helps with personal or relationship conflicts	0	10	10
Takes a special interest in them	0	9	9
Honest	0	9	9
Helps with day to day things	3	5	8
Helps other people	1	2	3

if it's not always good for you or that it might get messed up if you fall into this. They make you want to care.

It was not enough for the adolescents to have caring adults present in their lives; the concept of trust was significant. Kevin stated, "you don't want to pour your heart out to somebody that you wouldn't be able to trust." George recognized the link between trusting someone and spending time with them when he said "if people can't trust or respect some people they just don't want to hang around with them. So it's pretty important." Trust was also the most frequently mentioned response to the verification interview question "what characteristic is most important?" As a part of the verification interviews participants were asked to define "trustworthy." For most participants the word was defined as "someone who can keep a secret," but Beth defined it as "someone who will also act within the best interests of a person they care for."

Honesty was another important characteristic of the mentoring relationship. The adolescents saw honesty as being distinctly separate from trust, but recognized a relationship between the two concepts. As Beth stated: "if they are going to lie to you about stuff, and they are not going to be totally honest about what they think, then you're just pretty much wasting your time."

A mentor's experience was also important to the participants. They felt that it was very important that a mentor give advice, listen to them, and help them with their problems. In many instances, all of these things related back to the mentor sharing his/her past experiences. In individual interviews George and Kevin both discussed wanting to pursue careers in the military. They each stated that they found it helpful to talk to people

who had served in the military. Participants also spoke about how a mentor's willingness to share past experiences was helpful when dealing with tough decisions, such as whether to use drugs or alcohol. Kevin recognized the value of his mentor's past experience when he explained "he has had a lot of different experiences so he will know how to deal with a bunch of stuff." Characteristics of a mentor are closely tied to their behaviors.

### Mentoring Behaviors

Although the adolescents sometimes found it easier to express what they did not want a mentor to do, they discussed the behaviors of mentors that they felt were supportive. These behaviors included spending time, helping with problems, and listening. When the adolescents discussed people whom they felt were mentors, or potential mentors, they usually named a person with whom they spent a great deal of time. One example was the NYSP Activity Director, a favorite of many program participants. Brian cited her as a potential mentor, saying "in the past when I've had problems, she's always been there to talk." Jeff said "I like her a lot and I see her quite often." Participants mentioned other NYSP staff members, most often current staff members, but sometimes staff from a previous summer.

The participants had many ideas about what it meant to spend time with a mentor. George stated that spending time was not always about talking and learning new things. As he put it, "maybe they could hang out with you, like when they're not actually mentoring you." After further probing, George explained that "mentoring you" referred to the talking and sharing that typically happens in a mentor-protégé relationship. Beth stated that spending time with somebody meant knowing that they were available for help

if you needed it. She illustrated this comment with a personal example: "anytime I called he would drop whatever he was doing if I really, really needed him." Brian spoke of two of his potential mentors, saying "when I need help, they are there to help."

The adolescents placed a great deal of importance on a mentor's ability to help them with problems. The types of problems identified by the adolescents varied. George, for example, mentioned that he would like to get a different perspective of tough issues such as drug and alcohol use. By contrast, Beth said that a mentor should help with life in general, and with whatever problems she could not handle alone.

For some participants, a person who helps with problems would give advice, for others that person would be supportive. Interview participants all mentioned the significance of having a person who would listen to them and help them understand incidents that occurred in their lives. As Beth stated, it is important for her to know that someone is there.

Discussion focused on supportive behaviors when the adolescents discussed what they did want, but at various times the adolescents also discussed negative behaviors. Information obtained when adolescents discussed negative behaviors was analyzed and the more positive behaviors were then discovered. For instance, one participant mentioned that she did not want a mentor who set a bad example. The researcher treated this response the same as if she had said it was important a mentor set a good example. Another instance was when George stated, "if you put two people together and they can't get along because of different views on things, then there's no point in putting them

together because they won't get as much done." Based on George's statement, it could be assumed that he feels it is important a mentor and protégé have similar interests.

#### Identified Preferences for a Mentor

Each adolescent identified unique preferences for a mentor, but common themes existed. For example, the majority of participants specifically stated that parents did not serve as mentors. "They're just too caught up in their lives," Brian said, continuing "I've tried talking to my parents and most of the time they don't listen." Beth declared "I could never turn to my parents about anything." When asked if parents could make good mentors Kevin responded saying "I don't think it would work, it should be somebody that you can relate with."

Two participants did feel that their parents do serve as mentors for them. Angle initially named both her mother and grandmother as mentors during the individual interviews; she took a different perspective in the dual interviews. During that second interview Angle initially stated "if I have a problem I can talk to my mom about any issue and get advice on it." However, after additional probing she said "then if she doesn't agree with me we just get in a big fight and stuff." Nevertheless, Angle held her belief throughout the interviews. George also felt his parents served as mentors explaining that his parents are a "main source of support" and "people to fall back on."

Participants felt that adults, in general, were not preferred mentors. The adolescents instead shared examples of instances when they looked to their friends for mentoring. They used this type of mentoring predominately when seeking advice concerning opposite sex relationships. One specific example was when Jeff spoke about a

time when two girls at school liked him, and he did not know who to ask to the dance. He solved this dilemma after talking to a friend who had a similar experience.

Additionally participants mentioned that young adults, whom they classified as being anyone from "seventeen to their late twenties," were people with whom they could relate. Brian preferred this age group because "technically they are adults when they turn eighteen, but they still act like one of us." Participants associated adults older than their late twenties with their parents. Beth stated that she also had difficulty talking to her parents' friends saying "I'll talk to them, but not about anything." Kevin said:

They're always used to how it was back when they were kids, instead of how it is now, and they might try to say things like 'this is how we solved it when we were kids.' A lot of stuff has changed since they were kids.

The participants stressed the importance of a mentor's age, but were quick to point out that it was more important that a mentor treat them seriously and be able to relate to them. As Kevin stated, "not necessarily older than I am, but somebody that knows what's going on, and they know how to get around things like obstacles and problems." Because staff of recreation programs are typically college students in their twenties, who enjoy working with young people, they may be viewed as potential mentors.

### Mentors and NYSP

NYSP programs are held on college campuses, and staff members are often college students. These NYSP staff members meet the participants' preferences that a mentor be a young adult, and are people who are willing to spend time with adolescents. During the individual interviews the general feeling was that mentors did not belong at

NYSP. During the dual interviews a change occurred. Participants said that mentors were not a vital part of NYSP. However, they might be helpful, particularly when the participants were getting to know each other. Jeff indicated that he would not want a mentor at NYSP, simply because of the limited length of time for the program.

I like it on my own going to this certain place and being with them instead of having someone at NYSP being a mentor just for the summer or for part of the summer, and then all of the sudden you don't have them any more.

Because of the more positive statements about mentors at NYSP during the dual interviews, it was necessary to verify the results of the analysis. Therefore, during the verification interviews the participants were asked, "Are mentors something that belong at NYSP?" Six of seven participants answered this question "yes;" one answered both "yes" and "no." When asked to explain their "yes" answers all seven participants indicated that mentors at NYSP would help in situations where participants were not getting along and they needed someone to talk to. The "no" that was recorded was from Jeff who reiterated his earlier response about the limited length of time.

#### Discussion

This study was designed to examine adolescent perceptions of mentoring. The purpose of the study was to help recreation program staff determine if they should include mentoring in their programming efforts. After data analysis it became clear that the adolescents wanted to feel someone was there for them. One way the adolescents could feel someone was there for them was to spend time with the person. Key characteristics sought in mentors included: supportiveness, trustworthiness, honesty,

caring, availability, and experience. The data also revealed that while recreation programs, which are often short term, might not be the best place for formal, assigned mentoring programs, a type of mentoring does exist.

The concept of mentoring may have been difficult for some adolescents to understand. This difficulty was demonstrated by participants who were able to answer some questions more completely than other participants were. Abstract concepts are more difficult for younger adolescents to understand because they have not yet moved from concrete to formal operations (Piaget & Inhelder, 1969).

When an individual exhibits concrete operational thought they see things in categories and place people in roles (Piaget & Inhelder, 1969). People who are capable of formal operational thought are better able to understand ambiguous concepts and categorize people in different roles. One example of the difference between the two abilities was observed when comparing Angie's interview transcripts to Beth's. Angie, age 11, stated that mentors were not needed at NYSP because there were staff members present. By contrast, Beth, age 14, was able to see that NYSP staff served multiple roles for her, including the role of a mentor.

It may not be important that a young person understand the concept of mentoring in order to benefit from the relationship. When a mentor is a natural one, the young person may not understand the significance of the relationship until much later in life, if at all. Many adults can point to a significant person in their lives who made a difference in an important decision. It is more important that the relationship exists than that the young person understands it.

### Parents and Mentoring

Mentoring was clearly separate from parenting in this study. Angie, one of the youngest participants, was the only one who continued to describe her mother as a mentor throughout all three rounds of interviews. When probed, Angie recognized that her mother retained the power in their relationship. Mentoring is not about power; it is about aiding and guiding the protégé during skill and character development (Rhodes, 1994). If a protégé chooses not to follow his/her mentor's advice there are no threats of punishment, as there may be in a parent-child relationship. Mentors are not supposed to take the place of parents (Dremen, Aldor, & Katz, 1995). In some cases they are supplemental, helping to ease some of the parent's burden (Dremen, et al.). In other cases, young people who have a strong relationship with their parents and may not have formal mentors present in their lives.

### Implications for Recreation Programs

Participation in recreation programs provide youth with an important education. In recreation programs youth may improve their social interaction skills and learn valuable life skills, "needed to succeed, to live with others, and to survive in a complex society" (McWhirter, et al., 1993, p. 270). Recreation professionals may help youth gain these life skills, particularly adolescents characterized as being high and imminent-risk (Wesner, 1996). Not all recreation programs include a formal mentoring component, however the capacity for mentoring relationships exists.

Time restrictions may affect a program director's decision to include a formal mentoring component in recreation programs. Most recreation programs run for a set

period of time; NYSP is a 5-week program. When questioned about the appropriateness of including mentors at NYSP, Jeff recognized the limited amount of time available. Although 5-week programs may not be ideal settings for formal mentoring relationships, it is not inconceivable for a natural mentoring relationship to develop and continue upon program completion.

Witt and Crompton (1996) state that "leadership is perhaps the most important element in determining the positive impact of a program, since it determines what participants derive from their experiences" (p. 16). Enrolled program participants look to program staff to provide the program's leadership. This leadership role provides staff with the unique opportunity to mentor participants. One important component of individual-team mentoring is not only demonstrated leadership, but also familiarity between group members and their leader. This familiarity comes from spending time together.

As the participants stated, spending time with someone allows the establishment of a trusting relationship. However, spending time is not enough. The adolescents interviewed also stressed the importance of feeling that someone was there for them. This type of relationship implies an emotional connection. The adolescents in this study recognized that spending time with someone is only the first step in forming that connection with them. A mentor must also appear open to listen and advise the protégé concerning their problems.

Some of the participants in this study stated that it is difficult to trust adults because adults are "too involved in their own lives and do not understand young people."

Being able to relate to young people is important in not only a mentoring relationship, but also in a recreation setting (Evenrud, 1995). The participants stated that young adults were best able to relate to them, and characterized young adults as being in their late teens or early twenties. Despite the stated preference for young adults as mentors, the Activity Director in this NYSP program was mentioned as being someone to whom the participants could relate and respect. Participants described her as being fun and someone that they could get along with, although she is in her thirties. The participants believed these characteristics to be age related.

It would be expected that adolescents would feel comfortable speaking to their friends about the issues and decisions that are facing them in their lives. Many times adolescents are hesitant to confide in an adult concerning issues related to drugs or sex. They may feel that the adult "will not take the time" to listen to them. Csikszentmihalyi and Larson (1984) stated "with friends, feedback is more positive, goals are more likely to be shared, and teenagers feel more clear, open, and free" (p. 165). Adolescents may feel freer to confide in their friends more than adults their parents' age. They may associate these feelings of freedom and openness with trust (Neulinger, 1974).

Trust is an important factor with adolescents (Mitchell, 1990). Literature shows that the presence of trusting relationships contribute to resiliency for at-risk youth (Werner, 1995) and that trust is an important component of adolescent relationships (Mitchell, 1990). Although trust was a difficult concept for the participants to define, six of seven participants indicated that an individual who was trustworthy would be able to

keep a secret. Recreation program staff should keep in mind the importance of trustworthiness in mentoring relationships.

### Limitations of the Study

There were two limitations of this study: the length and duration of the program, and the time of year during which it was conducted. Because of these limitations, data collection was limited to three somewhat brief rounds of interviews, and there was not enough time to gather observational data, which might have further informed the study. Because interviews were conducted in the summer, adults who might potentially have served as mentors that were "out of sight" (e.g., teachers) may also have been "out of mind."

### Implications for Further Research

Because this study raised more questions than provided answers, it can best be described as a stepping stone to further research. Questions include:

- Was there a difference in adolescents' perceptions of mentoring the longer they had been enrolled in a program? For example, did Brian have a different perspective of mentoring at NYSP because he was a sixth year participant than did the second year participants?
- How do adolescents' perceptions of mentors differ as they continue their life development?
- How does the presence of returning staff affect an adolescent's perceptions of mentoring? Would their perceptions have been different if the NYSP Activity Director had not returned this summer?

- How would the assignment of mentors affect adolescents' perceptions?
- What gender differences, if any, exist in the adolescents' perceptions of mentoring?

Although this study had a small sample size ( $n = 8$ ), some possible implications for staff training were revealed.

#### Implications for Staff Training

This study was designed with the idea that information gathered might help directors of youth recreation programs train their staff to mentor participants. Staff training for seasonal recreation programs is a detailed process of learning the organization's policies and procedures, important characteristics of the enrolled populations, how to plan programs, and team building activities. Recognizing that mentoring does occur in recreation programs, it is important that a discussion of mentoring should be included in staff training. Based on this small study some implications for staff training include understanding that:

- The traits of good mentors include, but are not limited to trustworthiness, honesty, and an ability to listen.
- Staff must learn to observe and recognize participants' needs.
- Adolescents like the reality of mentoring more than the concept, and it is important to recognize that individual-team mentoring does occur in recreation settings.

### Conclusions

Some people feel that adolescent recreation programs are ideal settings for mentoring relationships to be established. This study revealed that these adolescents want supportive mentors who are willing to spend time with them and listen to them. This study also indicated that these adolescents would be receptive to mentoring in a recreation program. Some adolescents may prefer an individual-team mentor, with the understanding that the relationship could change into a one-on-one relationship. Knowing this, it is more important that the staff of recreation programs appear open and willing to help adolescents when called upon but do not force the relationship. Adolescents turn to people whom they trust, and somewhat, whom they respect. One important aspect of youth recreation programs is that they provide a safe, comfortable atmosphere staffed by individuals who can help the young people when asked. Perhaps David Fisher, the former Superintendent of the Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board, said it best when he said:

All of us have a vital stake in the healthy development of today's children and adolescents, who will become tomorrow's parents, workers, and citizens. Young people do not become mature adults without assistance.

(Fisher, 1996, pp. 57-58)

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**APPENDIX A**

**PARENT/GUARDIAN INFORMED CONSENT FORM**

June 1, 1998

Dear Parent/Guardian:

My name is Jennifer Hayes and I am a graduate student in Recreation Management at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse. I am working on my Master of Science degree and will be conducting a study this summer with the National Youth Sports Program (NYSP). I will be studying what adolescents at NYSP think of mentors. I am hoping to learn how to improve staff training programs about mentoring for recreation programs such as NYSP. Mentors and role models are two different things. A mentor is defined as someone a person sees on a regular basis and takes the time to help that child learn new skills and make choices about their future. For some youth, a teacher can be a mentor. A role model is a person the child looks up to and respects, such as a sports star.

I will first conduct one on one interviews with 12 returning NYSP students, to try to learn what they know about mentors and if they think they have one. At the beginning of that first interview, youth will be asked to choose a different name that I will use what discussing my findings. That interview will last about 20 to 30 minutes so your child/ward will not miss a significant amount of NYSP time. A couple of weeks after those first interviews, I will bring the youth back into small groups of about six to find out if I understood them or if they have anything new to tell me. Interviews will be conducted in the Leisure Lifestyle Center located in 112C Wittich Hall on the UWL campus. Interviews will be both video-taped and audio-taped and supervised by a Graduate Assistant Lab Coordinator. At any time your child/ward wishes, he or she may stop the interview. All tapes will be destroyed when this project is completed.

Carefully read the consent form that follows this letter. Please let me know if you have any questions concerning this study at any time. My research is being supervised by Dr. Robin Yaffe (785-8217) in the Department of Recreation Management and Therapeutic Recreation, and Mo McAlpine (785-8698), NYSP Activity Director. You may contact either of them with questions at any time. If you give consent for your child or ward to be interviewed, it does not necessarily guarantee that your child/ward will be chosen, only that he or she might be selected.

Thank you for your time and consideration, and please don't hesitate to let me know if I can be of any assistance to you.

Sincerely,

Jennifer M. Hayes  
Phone: 782-4156

**PARENT/GUARDIAN INFORMED CONSENT  
ADOLESCENT PERCEPTIONS OF MENTORING**

Robin M. Yaffe, Ed. D. (608)-785-8217  
Mo McAlpine (608)-785-8698  
Jennifer M. Hayes (608)-782-4156

I \_\_\_\_\_, parent/guardian of \_\_\_\_\_, a participant in the National Youth Sports Program give permission for my child/ward to participate in a research study involving his/her perceptions of mentoring. I have been informed that my child/ward was selected for this study because he/she is a returning participant of the National Youth Sports Program (NYSP) being held on the campus of the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse from June 10 to July 15, 1998. Participation in this study is not required to attend NYSP. I have been informed that my child/ward will be taught about mentors and will learn why mentors are important in life development. My child/ward will then be interviewed concerning his/her experience with mentors in the past, present, and future.

All interviews will be conducted by Jennifer M. Hayes, a graduate student in the Recreation Management Masters Program under the supervision of Dr. Robin M. Yaffe, assistant professor in the Department of Recreation Management and Therapeutic Recreation, and Mo McAlpine, NYSP Activity Director. Interviews will be both video-taped and audio-taped in the Leisure Lifestyle Center in Wittich Hall for the purposes of having my child/ward's responses recorded accurately. I have been informed that the researcher will respect confidentiality within the full limits of the law. I have been informed that my child/ward's name will be in no way linked to his/her responses and any reports made during the interview. I have also been informed that my child/ward's responses will be assigned to a name not related to my child/ward in any way. I have also been informed that all recordings will be destroyed once my research has been completed.

I have been informed that all interviews will take place during the regular camp activities and no additional time will be required of my child/ward to spend at UWL. I have also been informed that permission will be obtained from my child/ward before the first interview begins, and that he or she has the right to refuse to answer any question during the interviews or end the interviews at any time.

I have been informed that the researcher will be publishing and presenting her research findings. I have also been informed that during any presentation or publication my child/ward's name will be in no way linked to his or her responses.

I have been informed that at any time I may have a question about this study I may contact the researcher or Dr. Yaffe or Mo McAlpine, and I may also request a summary of the final results of her study. I therefore give consent for my child/ward to participate in this study. Furthermore I know that I may withdraw my child/ward from this study at any time with no penalty and may continue to attend NYSP.

Contact Garth Tymeson (608-785-8155), IRB Chair, if you have questions concerning the protection of Human Subjects.

Signed at \_\_\_\_\_ (time) this \_\_\_\_\_ day of \_\_\_\_\_, 19\_\_\_\_, in the presence of the witness whose signature appears below mine.

Parent/guardian: \_\_\_\_\_

Witness: \_\_\_\_\_

**APPENDIX B**

**YOUTH PARTICIPANT INFORMED CONSENT FORM**

**YOUTH PARTICIPANT INFORMED CONSENT  
ADOLESCENT PERCEPTIONS OF MENTORING**

Robin M. Yaffe, Ed. D. (608)-785-8217  
Mo McAlpine (608)-785-8698  
Jennifer M. Hayes (608)-782-4156

I \_\_\_\_\_, a participant in the National Youth Sports Program agree to participate in a research study to learn what I think about mentors. I have been informed that I was selected for this study as a returning participant to the National Youth Sports Program (NYSP) at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse from June 10 to July 15, 1998. Participation in this study is not required to attend NYSP.

All interviews will be conducted by Jennifer M. Hayes, a graduate student in the Recreation Management Masters Program under the supervision of Dr. Robin Yaffe, assistant professor in the Department of Recreation Management and Therapeutic Recreation, and Mo McAlpine, NYSP Activity Director. I have been informed that interviews will be done in two parts. First I will be asked questions individually, and then, on another day, I will be a part of a small group to answer additional questions. I have been informed that confidentiality will be maintained within the limits of the law. Interviews will be conducted in the Leisure Lifestyle Center and will be both video-taped and audio-taped to make sure that my answers are recorded accurately. All recordings will be destroyed upon the completion of the study.

I have been informed that it is the researcher's intent to publish and present her findings and I give consent for my responses to be used in both instances. I have been informed that at the beginning of the interview I will be asked to pick a different name that the researcher will use when writing her report. I have been informed that any answers and/or reports made during the interview will be kept strictly confidential and my real name will not be linked to my responses in any way. I have also been informed that I have the right to refuse to answer any question during the interviews, and that I can stop the interviews at any time.

I have been informed that any time I have a question about this study, I may contact the researcher or Dr. Yaffe or Mo McAlpine. I have also been informed that I may request a summary of the final results of her study. I therefore give consent to participate in this study examining my perceptions of mentoring. Furthermore, I know that I may withdraw from this study at any time with no penalty and may continue to attend NYSP.

Contact Garth Tymeson (608-785-8155), IRB Chair, if you have questions concerning the protection of Human Subjects.

Signed at \_\_\_\_\_ (time) this \_\_\_\_\_ day of \_\_\_\_\_, 19\_\_\_\_, in the presence of the witness whose signature appears below mine.

Participant: \_\_\_\_\_

Witness: \_\_\_\_\_

APPENDIX C  
METHODS AND PROCEDURES

## Methods and Procedures

Qualitative research allows a subject to be studied in greater detail than quantitative research (Patton, 1990). Qualitative research is particularly effective when learning about the nature of a person's experience with a phenomenon (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Because qualitative research is largely interpretive, the researcher must carefully select his or her methodological approach. Methodology is chosen with regard to what the researcher hopes to learn and what types of data are available (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). This study was designed using the phenomenological strategy, which explores the essence of a particular phenomenon and the experiences of people affected by it (Denzin & Lincoln). This section will provide more detail concerning methods and procedures of data analysis.

### Content Analysis

"People who do content analysis study a set of objects or events systematically by counting them or interpreting the themes contained within them" (Reinharz, 1992, p. 146). Once prepared, transcripts need to be analyzed for data. The analyst first reads the transcripts looking for and coding important concepts in the participants' statements. Coding is a process in which the pieces of text contained within transcripts are analyzed by extracting key words, phrases, or sentences from the text (Holsti, 1969). For example, one of the participants initially defined a mentor as "someone that you can look up to and trust, who you respect a lot." That statement was coded by extracting the words "look up to," "trust," and "respect."

Whenever possible coding was done emically, or with a term originally used by the participants (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). If the coded term is one of the analyst's own design it would be referred to as etic coding (Denzin & Lincoln). Emic coding is preferred to etic because the term used by the analyst may not have the same meaning as intended by the speaker (Denzin & Lincoln). For example, one interview subject defined mentor as a "leader, or somebody that somebody looks up to. An older person that helps the younger person understand what is going on in the world." The analyst coded this statement as "leader," "someone to look up to," "older person," and "understand what is going on." If the term "older person" had been coded as "adult" meaning may have been missed. Results showed that participants in this study were mistrustful of adults in general and preferred "younger adults." Coding this term as "older person" made it possible to more accurately compare the feelings of the different interview subjects to each other.

After each transcript had been analyzed for content and coded words were recorded in a table format for each transcript. Transcripts were read multiple times to ensure that nothing was overlooked. Each transcript was analyzed individually, and then compared to the other interview results using methods of comparative analysis.

#### Comparative Analysis

Comparative analysis is the process of comparing individual transcripts to one another while looking for common themes. The process of comparative analysis begins with the analyst looking for regularities in the data (Patton, 1990). If one participant felt

that it was important that a mentor be trustworthy the analyst looked at the bits of data from other transcripts to determine if others did.

One way this comparison was done was by determining if a topic was mentioned by multiple participants or several times by the same participant. If a topic was mentioned several times by only one person it was clear that the person considered it important. However, this topic was not treated with the same significance as if it had been mentioned by multiple subjects. For example, after analysis was completed the analyst observed that "help with money concerns" had been mentioned twice. After comparing the results of all transcripts the analyst determined that only one participant had discussed financial issues. Because only one participant felt strongly about it, "financial concerns" does not appear in Figure 1.

Another part of comparative analysis involves examining whether two subjects had slightly different terms for the same thing. For example, one participant stated that it was important that a mentor "offer options [for how] to solve problems." Another participant stated that it was important for a mentor to "give advice." After re-examining the transcripts it became clear that "offer options" and "give advice" had similar meanings. Once meanings were determined clustering could begin. Clustering is a process in which concepts are determined to be so similar they can be considered as one (Krippendorff, 1980). Clustering in this study allowed over two hundred emic terms to be condensed into 15 categories, listed in Table 2.

The use of two data analysis methods provided the triangulation necessary for this study. Triangulation ensures that data is not missed or misinterpreted during the analysis

procedures (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). Triangulation also allows a more "in-depth understanding of the phenomena in question" (Denzin & Lincoln, p. 2). Content analysis worked to extract the data from each individual transcript, gathering as much information as possible from the participant's dialogue. Comparative analysis worked to determine what similarities and differences existed between one participant's perceptions of mentoring and another's. Comparative analysis provided the opportunity to link the interviews and the information provided.

APPENDIX D  
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

### Questions asked during Individual Interviews

1. Have you ever heard the word mentor before?
2. Do you know what it means?
3. Is there anyone in your life who you would consider to be a mentor for you? Who?
4. What makes that person special?
5. What kinds of things does your mentor help you with?
6. What about being here at NYSP, is there anyone here who could be a mentor for you?
7. Do you wish that there were anything different about NYSP that would make it easier for you to have a mentor here? (What could we do differently to allow you to develop a mentoring relationship?)
8. Have you ever thought about what you would like to be when you are older?
9. What would that be?
10. How do you think that a mentor could help you prepare for the future?
11. How do you think that NYSP is going to help you prepare for the future?
12. Do you think that a mentor is someone that you would like to seek out?

### Questions asked during Dual Interviews

1. What characteristics are important for a mentor to have?
2. What is the most important part of the mentor definition?
3. What do mentors do for a person?
4. Who do you look to be a mentor to you?
5. Does everybody need a mentor? Why or why not?
6. What are some things that a mentor can help you with?

7. What's the most important thing a mentor can do?
8. Is trust an important thing for a mentor to have? Why?
9. Is sense of humor an important thing for a mentor to have? Why?
10. How important is it for a mentor to be smart?
11. How can a mentor help you when you're older?
12. Would you want a mentor at NYSP? Why or why not?
13. Why are listening skills an important part of mentoring?
14. How important is it that a mentor be understanding?
15. How important is it for a mentor to give advice?

#### Questions asked during the Verification Interviews

1. The thing that was mentioned most often during the two-people interviews was that it is important that a mentor spends time with the adolescent they are working with.  
Why is that important?
2. What is important that take place when a mentor is spending time with you?
3. What does the word supportive mean to you?
4. Why is it important that a mentor help you with your problems?
5. What does it mean when a person is trustworthy?
6. Why is it important for adolescents have someone to talk to?

7. Of all of the following things which is most important? (Spends time with you, Supportive, Help with problems, Trustworthy, Help think things through, Respect, Talk to them, Listen to them, Help with personal conflict, Cares about them, Takes a special interest in them, Honesty, Help with day to day things, Experienced, Help other people)
8. Why is that the most important thing?
9. Do mentors belong at NYSP? Why or why not?

APPENDIX E  
REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

## REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

This section serves as a supplement to the literature review provided in the manuscript of this document. This review of related literature will provide a more in depth discussion of previous research findings concerning mentoring, adolescence, and at-risk youth recreation programs.

### Mentoring

Much research has been done concerning mentoring. Several types of mentoring have been described: assigned, classic, friend-to-friend, individual-team, natural, and peer group (Phillip & Hendry, 1996). Assigned mentoring occurs any time an outside person pairs a mentor and a protégé. Classic mentoring is a type of assigned mentoring in which the mentor is always an adult and the protégé always a young person (Phillip & Hendry). Peer group mentoring exists when a group formed to deal with a specific issue determines the values and behaviors for group members (Phillip & Hendry). A celebrity fan club may be a group that exhibits peer group mentoring. In this study the most important mentoring relationships are assigned, natural, and individual-team.

Natural mentoring relationships often exist without the protégé being aware that he or she is being mentored. Many young people can point to an adult whom they trust and turn to for support and guidance; these adults often serve as mentors. Rhodes (1994) states that the two essential components in a natural mentoring relationship are the young person's perception of identification and trust in the adult as a mentor. Wright and Werther (1991) state "a true mentor relationship exists when a mentor feels comfortable proffering help and the protégé feels comfortable accepting or rejecting it. Mutual

feelings of trust, respect, and caring emerge" (pp. 28-29). Trust is key in adolescent relationships, but many adolescents find it difficult to trust others (Mitchell, 1990). "The development of interpersonal trust has been recognized as an initial step in forming healthy human relationships" (Mitchell, p. 847).

Along with trust often comes feelings of support. Adolescents need not only to feel that they can trust the adults in their lives, but that the adults will support them during the difficult times. "Effective mentoring programs in the social services focus on helping adults and youth establish supportive relationships" (Payne, Cathcart, & Pecora, 1995, p. 4). The key word in the quote is supportive. It is not enough to be physically present; young people have many adults physically present in their lives, but may not have an adult with whom they emotionally connect. The presence of supportive adults, who serve as protective influences, help lower the level of risk in a young person's life.

Children exposed to the potentially adverse effects of multiple risks who show problems early on in their lives may continue to show problems years later because the risks they have to contend with never went away . . . . It is imperative that we provide protective influences that can shield children and families from the potentially harmful effects of exposure to these conditions. (Katz, 1997, p. 205)

Professionals who work with young people may provide protective influences by assigning mentors to young people in their programs. Mentors are asked to listen to the young people and share past experiences with them. There are many agencies, both nationwide and at the community level, that include mentoring programs as a part of their

activities. Mentoring is included in many youth recreation programs. The Youthline program in Minneapolis, Minnesota is one example of a city recreation department providing mentors for community youth (Fisher, 1996). Youthline is a program for youth ages 12 to 16 that provides opportunities for involvement in positive leisure activities, program planning, and mentoring from assigned community members (Fisher).

Assigned and natural mentors are not the only types of mentors observed in youth populations. Young people frequently report "friend-to-friend mentoring" (Phillip & Hendry, 1996). This type of mentoring provides young people who are extremely mistrustful of adults an opportunity to test sensitive information and rehearse beliefs and values with people their own age (Phillip & Hendry). The opportunity to determine beliefs and values is an important part of adolescent development.

### Adolescence

Adolescence is best defined as the transition between the dependence of childhood and the independence of adulthood. Adolescence is also a time during which a large part of an individual's identity formation occurs. Adolescents are responsible for learning the behaviors required for participation in adult society (Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1984). One particularly important behavior is the ability to make life-affecting decisions. Hamburg (1993) states that adolescents must be provided with a basis to make "informed, deliberate decisions rather than ignorant, impulsive ones" (p. 467). Elkind (1998) cautions, however, that adolescents must have adequate time and guidance to practice making these decisions. If denied this guidance, both Hamburg and Elkind warn, there may be interference in healthy adolescent development.

Popular opinion holds that teens look to their peers for guidance and direction. When parents are absent or withdrawn from their children's lives, peers gain a greater influence on important decisions (Cummings, 1995). Takanishi (1993) states that typically peers are looked to concerning fashion and entertainment issues, but that "American adolescents continue to look to their parents for guidance and direction in their lives regarding important decisions involving moral values and career choices" (p. 461). Adolescents requiring help beyond that offered by their parents often turn to adults in social organizations such as school, community and youth organizations, and religious organizations (Hamburg, 1993).

The peer group does take on increased importance during adolescence, and is an important part of adolescents' search for independence and autonomy (Cummings, 1995). When adolescents are with their friends they report that they receive more positive responses, are more likely to share their goals, and feel more open and free to share things (Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1984). Adolescents generally feel that adults offer opinions from a largely historical perspective (Cummings, 1995). In other words, an adolescent may feel an adult would help a teen by sharing how he or she solved it when the teen's age, rather than listening and offering suggestions of how the problem can be solved today. Adults who are successful dealing with adolescents often educate young people by focusing on the future and present rather than the past (Cummings).

Leisure activities during adolescence most frequently take place in the presence of friends; if friends are not available, many teens substitute the radio or television (Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1984). Increasingly youth are turning to inappropriate

activities as an alternative to boredom because they lack leisure interests (McCready, 1997). In response to the problems facing young people many community recreation departments are developing after school programs which offer alternatives to inappropriate activities for elementary and middle school youth (Witt & Crompton, 1996).

#### Recreation and At-risk Youth

As previously stated, the literature describes risk as existing along continuum. It is very difficult to place a young person on the continuum and label what level of risk they experience. Many factors are involved when speaking about an individual's risk, one of which is socio-economic status. Adolescents in low-income neighborhoods are not immediately labeled high-risk, but socio-economic status is a significant contributing factor (McCready, 1997). For this reason it is important that communities wishing to offer a program for at-risk youth consider how they will fund their program. Whenever possible, user fees must be eliminated when programs target at-risk youth; program fees often eliminate large numbers of youth that would normally benefit from participation (Foley & Pick, 1995).

Many communities do have recreation programs that include at-risk youth. Over 600 communities with at-risk youth recreation programs responded to a national survey conducted by Schultz, Crompton, and Witt (1995). Twenty-eight percent of responding communities reported that their programs were in place before 1989; 31% began between 1989 and 1991; and 41% have begun since 1991. The survey also addressed the issue of funding these programs. Fifty-six percent of respondents reported offering discounts in

program fees to at-risk youth; 76% offer discounts to low-income residents. Many communities fund at-risk youth recreation programs with private and/or government grants. This allows the community to offer programs free of charge (McCann & Peters, 1996).

Besides program fees, another major concern for participants is the "labeling" of youth based on ethnic background and/or apparel choices (trademark clothing). In park settings there is a strong need for positive role models to set clear and age appropriate boundaries for youth behavior" (Evenrud, 1995, p. 50). Often at-risk youth turn to recreation programs to escape the labeling and other pressures that exist away from the recreation center. If an adolescent is concerned about being labeled a gang member or being approached by a drug dealer they may not participate fully in a recreation program.

Because of the nature of recreation programs large numbers of youth are attracted to participate, offering community leaders a method to help youth improve their social skills (Crompton & Witt, 1996). The opportunity to form and maintain relationships in a relaxed environment (e.g., recreation settings) has a positive impact on "social and psychological adjustment and achievement" (Estrada, 1995, p. 174). Additionally, participation in group activities helps young people learn how to communicate with others without intimidating them (Wesner, 1996). When young people act prosocially towards their peers there are often positive, observable influences on their healthy development (Estrada, 1995). Evidence also exists that positive social interaction carries over into classroom performance (McWhirter, McWhirter, McWhirter, & McWhirter, 1993).

In addition to social skills, young people also have the opportunity to develop and learn life-skills, or "skills necessary to succeed, to live with others, and to survive in a complex society" (McWhirter, et al., 1993, p. 270). Skills taught may include positive uses of free time, job hunting, or budgeting. Social interaction and life skills often contribute to the resiliency of a young person. Resilient people "have learned to be productive, learned how to make connections, and learned socially accepted rules and procedures of daily life" (Scott, Witt, & Foss, 1996, p. 43). With a little bit of thought and consideration it is possible for recreation programs to address significant social issues, and teach significant life lessons without altering the fundamental nature of the experience (Allen, Stevens, & Harwell, 1996).

### Conclusion

Adolescence is a complex developmental stage during which an individual learns to be an independent functioning member of adult society. While parents retain influence on major issues such as moral values and career choices, peers take on an increased importance. Typically, peers influence fashion, entertainment, and leisure activities. Leisure time also takes on an increased importance during adolescence providing recreation departments a unique opportunity to influence at-risk adolescents' social and life-skill development. Mentors may be particularly useful in helping recreation program leaders influence adolescent skill development.

Many different types of mentoring are described in the literature. Regardless of the type of mentoring that exists, it is generally described as a supportive relationship that affects both the mentor and the protégé. When an adult mentors a young protégé the

emphasis is largely on helping the young person negotiate the risks of adolescence. Research has shown that positive contact with mentors help young people learn to trust others and offers them a supportive adult to turn to for guidance (Payne, et al., 1995; Katz, 1997). Mentors and recreation programs are just two influences on an adolescent's life but both have the potential of significantly influencing an individual's development.

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