

Intergenerational Volunteering Case Study*

BoysTown Mentor One

MentorOne (M1) is a mentoring program operated by BoysTown in the eastern and southern suburbs of Brisbane. Mentoring programs are designed to provide support for youth as they move through adolescence, as well as being beneficial and satisfying for the adult mentors. Mentoring is a means by which young people can benefit from the life experience and wisdom of an interested adult who regularly spends time with them, developing a supportive and caring relationship. The benefits of these relationships are apparent as many successful people across the globe have attributed much of their success to having a stable, caring mentor at some point during their life. There is an old proverb that states:

“It takes a village to raise a child”,

and this is much of philosophy that underpins the MentorOne program. Indeed, MentorOne prides itself on making a difference in the lives of youth by bringing individuals in the community together.

MentorOne began in February 2006, devoting the first few months of its existence to developing a cohesive and practical system which would provide the foundation for a strong and sustained mentoring program. M1 held its first training session for mentors in July 2006, with the first mentor/mentee match occurring in September.

MentorOne receives funding from the Commonwealth Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations which is vital for the operating of the program. Although the M1 office is located at Winter Memorial Park on Mt Cotton Road, the mentor/mentee relationships happen away from the office at schools and in BoysTown community programs.

These mentoring relationships occur in six schools throughout Redlands and Logan City-Cleveland, Alexandra Hills, Victoria Point, Wellington Point, Mabel Park and Dunwich; as well as three BoysTown and community programs. MentorOne currently has around 80 mentors building relationships with youth from the various schools and communities. Although fluctuations occur in the number of mentoring relationships at any one time due to the fluidity nature of mentoring, M1 estimates that there are around 70 mentor relationships at this point in time. In addition, M1 mentors are supported by six mentor supervisors.

Mentors

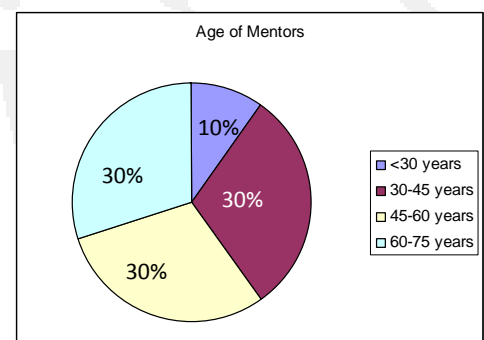
The ages of mentors varies significantly with four generations (Gen Y, Gen X, Baby boomers and Silent generation) represented. Gen Y encompasses approx 10% of mentors whilst each of the other generations represent 30% respectively.

Mentors receive extensive training prior to working with mentees. The initial 24 hours of training (four full days) is run in conjunction with Metropolitan South-East TAFE. The training also provides the opportunity for mentors to begin to form supportive networks with each other. An additional 10 professional development days are run through the year to support mentors in their role with topics chosen by mentors as required. Some of these in the past have included cross-cultural issues, domestic violence, bullying, drugs and alcohol issues.

There are a range of programs in the community that offer opportunities for different generations of individuals to interact. Many organisations facilitate specific intergenerational volunteering programs which can be through one of 3 approaches.

1. Seniors and youth volunteering together
2. Senior volunteer working with youth recipient
3. Youth volunteer working with senior recipient

This case study represents an example of older volunteers working with youth recipients.

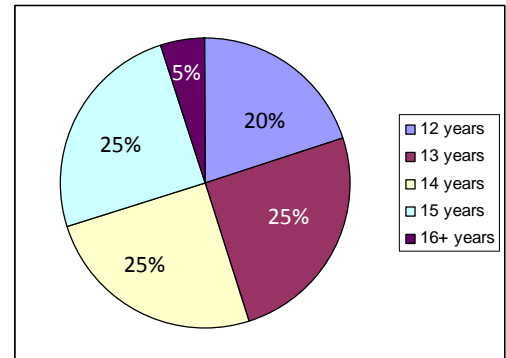


Mentees

The ages of mentees range from 12-16+ years (high school aged children), with the majority of mentees aged between 13 and 15 years.

Mentors are recruited through advertising placed in the local newspaper and word of mouth. Although some mentors are recruited via the website, there is no specific data available on the actual numbers, but the website enquiries are for contact only. Volunteers are initially asked to commit to 2 hours per week for a period of 12 months in the M1 mentoring program. During the time with the M1 program, mentors may go through multiple relationships, with the average length of tenure being 12-18 months. Mentees are initially chosen for the program by the school. *'They tend to be kids who have come in contact with the schools support team... whatever that might be'*. Each school has its own site coordinator, who is generally a senior member of the school staff, and works in conjunction with the M1 team to deliver an effective and rich mentoring program. The site coordinator *'funnels the referrals and is also the trouble shooter on the ground'*.

Age of Mentees



Mentor-1 is a very helpful program for me, and I find everyone who participates, most kind and giving. I think Mentor-1 has benefited me by giving me time to talk to other people and let off my emotions while relaxing instead of worrying about all the problems in my life. It has also helped me achieve better work in class by teaching me to get along with more irresponsible people instead of fighting with them and wasting time that could be better spent improving my marks in class. There are quite a few people I know who could benefit from Mentor-1 and all the wonderful staff and mentors who lead it. Brady, Mentee, Oct 2008

The Program

The mentors and mentees meet for 2 hours on a weekly basis in the school setting. The majority of this time (around 90%) is spent just talking and building the relationship. Although mentors are mentally prepared with a variety of tools and things they can do, most of the students just want someone to talk to about issues and topics that are important to them.

'When kids have had the opportunity to do activities [with the mentor] they do them for a little while, but a lot of the time, they just talk.'

In Australia, research has indicated that the average teenager spends less than 2 hours a week talking to adults. This lack of adult conversation and opportunities for conversation has various implications for young people including lower self esteem and self worth. There is a popular belief that kids don't want to talk, but MentorOne certainly has different experience.

"Kids want to talk. However they don't always feel that they can talk to their parents, regardless of the quality of parenting which occurs. Parents have a job to do in being their parents and this means there is a history with that role. A mentor then is an independent person that kids can start to build a connection to and thus learn to talk more openly with them. When this happens they learn that talking over things with adults isn't so frightening, and learn to be more honest and open with their parents."

Although mentees are eager to talk about a range of issues during the mentor/mentee time, including body image and various ecological issues, the most frequently talked about topic is family relationships.

'The number one topic is family relationships. It drops a little bit off past the age of 17/18 because that's when they're starting to think about personal relationships with a partner, but prior to that it's... 'How do I get on with everyone? Am I loved?' That's the kind of stuff that comes up. It's not as explicit as that but it's talking about relationships'.

Mentors are trained in various topics such as career investigation activities, and this is often one of the initial ways to build the relationship by exploring possible options and pathways together. The mentor might ask the mentee questions such as 'What do you want to do when you grow up? How are you going to do that?' and then spend quality time exploring websites and learning together. It's through these kinds of rich interactions and role modelling exposure that mentees learn different ways of managing their own attitudes towards learning, and enables youth to re-engage with school, adults and the community.

'Mentors aren't meant to have all the answers to the stuff....it's an exploration that they [mentors and mentees] can do together....that kind of guided learning and debriefing aspect is really valuable.'



The schools that are involved with Mentor-One speak highly of the program and the benefits to the young people.

*The Mentor-One program is one of our most loved outside agency programs!! Flexibility and understanding of the high school context is essential for a healthy and productive relationship between agency and school, and Mentor-One has this by the bucket load. I cannot speak highly enough of the professionalism of the facilitators of this wonderful program, especially when one considers the range of personalities, procedures and predicaments they are confronted with every week in our busy school. However, more importantly, some of our students need that one positive relationship with a responsible and positive adult who doesn't bring the authority baggage with them that we as teachers will always carry....and for us at Victoria Point High, that's Mentor-One. **Mark Pears, Victoria Point High Middle School Coordinator***

*For some kids the significant others in their lives are not necessarily a very good role model. The influence of a stable adult in their life can be very important. The fact that the program runs through the school gives status to the program and confidence to the parents, that we provide a kind of Q&A role. Anything we do is not 100% effective but it makes a difference to half a dozen kids a year, then it's worth it. **Gail Armstrong, Principal, Alexandra Hills High School (1,400 students)***

Kids comments (they were asked to answer the question) "What is mentoring?"

- time to relax
- FUN!!!
- someone to talk to about stuff I do that I cant always tell my friends.
- someone who helps me with my homework sometimes
- someone who wants to hear what I have to say
- a smile when they see me.
- a lady that tells me what my mum is thinking when I do a dumb thing!
- is trusting another person with my real self
- being honest about screwing up
- someone who made mistakes when they were my age
- someone who doesn't mind getting beaten at scrabble
- a time to ask for help
- looking at what I can do after I leave school
- how I stopped being bullied.
- chatting to this old guy instead of doing science
- a chance to paint pictures my way
- trying Bonsai. I had never had even thought about having one before my mentor bought his in

There are 20 students in the program now. I believe it's been running for a couple of years.

The program is excellent! It provides calming influence. A constructive adult who is not telling them what to think but who will set challenges for them when appropriate and gently encourage them to step up to the mark.

They can provide a stress-free, relaxed environment with an adult when there may be screaming and yelling at home. Or the student may be taking on a lot of responsibility at home and just holding it together. It's a time for them to be supported. It's important for them to meet with an adult who is not threatening, who is not seen as being in a position of authority.

It all happens within the school grounds. There is a room in the library and a contained space outside. They will often work on a project together like scrap-booking or a basketball competition or they might listen to music or read books or do an activity.

Some students volunteer for the program and others are recommended for it by someone on the welfare team or the chaplain. In the end it is 100% their choice. They need to prove they are not just doing it to get out of a double lesson!

If the adult wants to contact the student they must go through BoysTown and then the school. No one has each others contact details.

The students find the program rewarding, calming and something to look forward to. One of our kids who is in every program going says it is the only thing at school that he likes.

They feel listened to and valued by the mentor.

For some of the students you don't see a result in the classroom because there isn't a problem there. They might be quiet and achieving well. But maybe they are the main caregiver.

This program is catching the kids who are at risk of being at risk. Not the ones at risk. The effect on them happens over time.

*Our challenges are that we need a larger space for them to meet. And that kids are not wanting to leave the program, yet others want to come into it. It is a staffing issue. 20 to 25 at one session is a good number. To do more we would need another session time. WE could easily double the numbers if we had the resources: there is a need. **Michelle Lockwood, welfare officer, Alexandra Hills High School***



Testimonials

Wonderful to see through someone else's eyes

I am enjoying interacting with an enthusiastic and caring Mentee. It is a wonderful experience to be taken into someone's world to see the world through their eyes. The Mentee is 14 years old, enjoys being with young children, and her future career goal is that she would like to teach in a primary school. It is pleasing that she is also environmentally aware and has a respect for animals living in the wild.

*Each week I enjoy the conversations that we have. Her favourite subjects are drama and art plus home economics. Her schoolbooks are very neat and she draws beautiful pictures which are a good example of her artistic talent. The student belongs to a Youth Group, enjoys their outings, and also likes to go surfing at the Gold Coast. In the technological era that we live in it is so worthwhile for the different generations to have the opportunity to spend time together - we can learn so much from one another. **Helen, Mentor, Wellington Point High***

Time together simply a sharing of interests

During my first session, I was a little nervous, hoping that I wouldn't say the wrong thing. It looked like it was going to be a real long session, with nothing much being said, and then my Mentee brought out his Nintendo DS. He was away, explaining how it worked and showing me some of his games. I had never seen a Nintendo DS, but it was the one thing that this young man felt comfortable with, and was somewhat of an expert at, so I am getting an education in its finer points.

The difference in our sessions has been significant, he now talks freely and in between talking about the game, we actually talk about other slightly more personal stuff. I see the game as being the window that lets me into his world, and I feel privileged to have been invited. As well as mentoring this young person at lunch time, I Mentor another young man straight after, and surprisingly enough, we also talk a little, or maybe a lot, about computer games. He is giving me a fairly good education about an on line computer game Flyff, and I spend a bit of time boring him about World of Warcraft.

My role is not to offer them a quick fix, just to listen to what they have to say. To me our whole point of being there as Mentors, is to be that older someone who a young person can talk to, bounce ideas and feelings off, without any fear of being judged or lectured.

*I have been able to broaden my understanding of things that our young people face. This has made me a better person into the bargain. **Chris, Mentor, Wellington Point High***

Good mates communicate openly with each other

LAST June I was asked by a fellow Rotarian if I would be prepared take part in the Mentor-One training and Mentor a young high school person. As I am retired and have a strong interest in the younger generation, I said yes and completed the course last July.

My first Mentee this year is a young man of 13. We have been meeting every school Monday since. What a lot we have been through in that time! When we first started it took some time to gain respect for each other. Now we are good mates and can communicate very openly about a whole range of issues. I enjoy our Monday session together and I am sure he does. He says "It's cool".

*During this time together I have noticed, and others too, his attention span has improved significantly. When asked what he thought of our time together he said "What a good experience it has been." I intend to keep Mentoring him for as long as he requires and hope I can affect his life as he has mine. **Phil, Mentor, Alexandra Hills***

One secret is we all want to be listened to

There is a genuine satisfaction in working with young people who are clearly in need of Mentors / Role Models. While one should not expect dramatic success in the short term, though I have no doubt that it can and will occur in some cases, mostly it is a slow and steady process, sometimes with no significant gain.

*We all want to be listened to and the other day when I queried my Mentee on something he was going to do the previous week, which was important to him, he said, you remembered! The only reason I remembered was because I had written it down. The noting down of insignificant comments for later feedback will build trust and improve communication between Mentor and Mentee. **Don, Mentor, Alexandra Hills High***

Summary

Mentoring programs are just one example of Intergenerational Volunteering programs in which individuals of different generations come together to address various issues. One of the great benefits of mentoring is the breaking down of stereo-typical barriers when different generations start to understand each other at a deeper level. It is through these unique relationships that clearly have benefits for mentees and mentors alike that we are able to ultimately create cohesion and a less fragmented society.



This case study was derived from a transcribed interview with Paul Stewart, Mentoring Coordinator, and testimonials generously provided from Mentor-One, BoysTown. Case study by Leonie Bryen, July–October 2008

*The photos provided are **not** of actual BoysTown mentors or mentees.