



## SOCIAL SUPPORT FROM ADULTS AND PEERS IN EARLY ADOLESCENCE: IT'S A BALANCING ACT

The period of transition from childhood to adolescence is a challenging time for many young people. Even in the best circumstances, it can be daunting for adolescents to cope with the biological, cognitive, emotional, and social changes that are unfolding in their lives. Supportive relationships are vital for ensuring the continued healthy development of young people as they journey through adolescence. To design interventions and policies that enhance the availability of appropriate supports for young adolescents, two key questions must be addressed: First, who is best equipped to offer assistance? Second, what are the ideal amounts of assistance that should be obtained from each type of support provider?

Our recent research finds that support from both peers and adults is important to the healthy development of young adolescents. Adjustment during the transition to adolescence is affected by whether or not youth receive

balanced amounts of support across peer and adult sources. The finding that adolescents need a mix of support from peers and adults is not surprising. After all, this is an age group known for its gravitation toward peer companionship, as well as its complicated and sometimes ambivalent stance toward help from parents and other adults. Our findings highlight promising directions for innovation in interventions for young adolescents, and have noteworthy implications for both practice and policy.

### Research on Social Support During Early Adolescence

In one of our recent studies, we investigated the levels of social support that 350 young adolescents (grades 5-8) received from both peers and adult sources (e.g., parents, teachers) over a two-year period (DuBois, et al., 2002). Findings revealed that youth who reported receiving higher overall levels

of combined support from peers and adults exhibited significantly better behavioral and emotional adjustment throughout the course of the study. We found that those youth for whom there was a lack of balance in the direction of greater peer- versus adult-oriented support were at heightened risk for behavioral problems such as aggression and delinquency. When youth receive support predominantly from peers, this may be an indication of estrangement or conflict in their relationships with parents and other adults. Under these circumstances, young adolescents are less likely to obtain the adult guidance and encouragement that they need to cope with different challenges they encounter in areas such as schoolwork or friendships. We also found in a follow-up study (DuBois & Silverthorn, 2004) that youth who relied on peers as their main source of support were more likely to associate with other youth who were exhibiting problem behav-

ior, thus amplifying their own risk for engaging in such behavior.

At the same time, other research we have conducted points toward an equally troubling downside for those young adolescents who have imbalanced relationships with adults accounting for a disproportionately large source of their social support. The absence of support from peers appears to leave youth susceptible to emotional difficulties, including symptoms of anxiety and depression (DuBois, et al., 1999). Such liabilities likely stem at least in part from the premium placed on peer group acceptance during early adolescence. Peers may be especially qualified to offer support in many of the areas of greatest concern to this age group, such as their friendships and appearance.

#### **Application to Interventions for Young Adolescents**

The research findings that we have summarized have important implications for the design of effective interventions for young adolescents. To be optimally beneficial, our results indicate that programs, policies, and interventions for this age group should be devised with the goal of promoting support from both peers and adults. It is not uncommon for current interventions to focus predominantly on promoting support from only peers or adults (e.g., social skills training to improve peer relationships, family interventions to strengthen parent-child relationships).

In our own research, we are exploring the value of introducing innovations focusing on social support in mentoring programs for youth. Mentoring programs currently enjoy widespread popularity, with approximately 4,500 youth mentoring programs operating in this country (Rhodes, 2002). Mentoring programs have focused most directly on increas-

ing the access of youth to social support through a relationship with a caring adult volunteer. It is noteworthy that youth participating in mentoring programs have also demonstrated improvements in their relationships with peers (Rhodes, Haight, & Briggs, 1999). Evaluations of mentoring programs reveal that they can provide benefits to youth in several areas, including emotional, behavioral, social, and academic adjustment (DuBois, et al., 2002). However, the magnitude of



these benefits has typically been modest. It thus appears that there is potential to strengthen mentoring programs through promoting both adult and peer support.

#### **A Model for Integrating Adult and Youth Support**

Our current research is focused on the development and evaluation of a community-based mentoring program for girls, GirlPOWER!, in partnership with Big Brothers Big Sisters of Metropolitan Chicago. The program is consistent with the findings of our earlier research in that it aims to foster support from both adults and peers. The GirlPOWER! program is designed to promote socially supportive relationships between youth and their mentors as well as to promote supportive relationships between other sources of adult support and participating youth (e.g., parents). An adult volunteer is matched with a child with a commit-

ment to meet one-on-one two to four times per month for at least one year. Youth-mentor pairs structure their own time together and may choose to participate in agency-wide activities. Each pair is also supported by ongoing monthly contact with agency staff. These innovations are complemented by several strategies directed toward enhancing access to peer support.

The GirlPOWER! program features a series of 12 psychoeducational workshops that are attended by a group of 10-15 participating girls (ages 10-13) and their mentors. During each workshop, active learning strategies are used to help the group explore topic areas that have important implications for healthy development (e.g., self-esteem, nutrition and exercise, romantic relationships, substance use). Each session has a MatchBuilder segment, in which a volunteer Match role-plays a challenging interaction

between a hypothetical girl and her mentor, and the group then discusses ways to resolve the situation that is depicted in the role-play. Other activities for youth-mentor pairs are linked thematically with workshop content. Youth and mentors are asked to continue these activities for a 3-month period after the workshop series concludes, leading up to a group reunion at the end of the year. "POWER" is used as an acronym for five core concepts (Pride, Opportunity, Women-in-the-Making, Energy and Effort, and Relationships) that are interwoven through all program components. The "Relationships" concept reflects the program's focus on the cultivation of supportive relationships between girls, their mentors, other adults, and peers. The joint participation of mentors and girls in the sessions gives girls and mentors an "opening" and common language to talk about topics that are difficult due to their sensitive or challenging nature. Through

this process, the program seeks to enable mentors to move beyond companionship to providing girls with guidance and emotional support in dealing with a wide range of issues. The activities provide structured opportunities for mentors and youth to talk about workshop topics and begin to incorporate relevant activities into their relationships (e.g., regular exercise, healthy eating). There also is a session early in the program that is devoted specifically to developing the Match relationship by having youth and mentors set goals together and then plan for how they can support each other in reaching these goals.

Parents attend a program orientation and the final workshop in which girls and their mentors perform a talent show and graduate from the program. Parental involvement is encouraged throughout the program by having girls bring home an informational handout after each workshop. The handouts summarize session activities and provide parents with tips and suggestions for how they can support their daughters' healthy development in areas related to the workshop topic. Throughout the program, both girls and mentors also are encouraged to identify other adults in the girls' social networks and to invite them to join in activities where appropriate. In this way, the youth's mentor may be able to work cooperatively with other important adults in the youth's life. Likewise, through connections to the mentor's social network, the youth may be exposed to new positive adult role models and sources of support.

Several features of the GirlPOWER! program are designed to help girls establish supportive relationships with peers. These include the group setting for sessions in which girls are able to meet and spend time with other girls their age. The sessions are structured to foster positive interactions among girls through activities such as games in which they compete as a team against their mentors. The sessions also allow girls to practice interpersonal skills helpful to healthy re-

lationships with peers. These include, for example, skills for support-seeking, dealing with peer pressure, and assertiveness in dating relationships. The active involvement of mentors in sessions ensures that youth have access to adult support as they learn these skills. This involvement provides the mentor, too, with a valuable opportunity to deepen her understanding of the issues that influence the quality of the youth's peer relationships, enhancing her capacity to offer effective guidance regarding peer-related issues both in and out of program sessions.

### Conclusions

Research indicates that young adolescents who receive social support from peers and adults are significantly better equipped to cope with challenges. An imbalance in the direction of over-reliance on either peers or adult

lence. *Developmental Psychology*, 38, 822-839.

DuBois, D. L., Felner, R. D., Brand, S., & George, G. R. (1999). Profiles of self-esteem in early adolescence: Identification and investigation of adaptive correlates. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 27, 899-932.

DuBois, D. L., Holloway, B. E., Valentine, J. C., & Cooper, H. (2002). Effectiveness of mentoring programs for youth: A meta-analytic review. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 30, 157-197.

DuBois, D. L., & Silverthorn, N. (2004). Do deviant peer associations mediate the contributions of self-esteem to problem behavior during early adolescence? A 2-year longitudinal study. *Journal of Clinical Child and Adolescent Psychology*, 33, 382-388.

*Youth participating in mentoring programs have demonstrated improvements in their relationships with peers.*

sources of support places youth at risk for problems in their emotional and behavioral adjustment as they transition into adolescence. There is a need for interventions and policies that are designed to ensure that young adolescents benefit from supportive ties with both peers and adults in equal measure. The GirlPOWER! program described in this paper illustrates the types of innovation to existing models of practice that may prove successful for achieving this important goal.

### References

DuBois, D. L., Burk-Braxton, C., Swenson, L. P., Tevendale, H. D., Lockerd, E. M., & Moran, B. L. (2002). Getting by with a little help from self and others: Self-esteem and social support as resources during early ado-

Rhodes, J. E., Haight, W., & Briggs, E. (1999). The influence of mentoring on the peer relationships of foster youth in relative and nonrelative care. *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, 9, 185-201.

Rhodes, J. M. (2002). *Stand by me: The risks and rewards of mentoring today's youth*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

**Naida Silverthorn** is a post-doctoral fellow at the Institute for Health Research and Policy at the University of Illinois at Chicago.

**David DuBois** is Associate Professor in the Division of Community Health Sciences in the School of Public Health at the University of Illinois at Chicago.