

**Michael J. Karcher** is  
an associate professor in  
Counseling &  
Educational Psychology,  
University of Texas at  
San Antonio.  
E-mail:  
michaelkarcher@  
mac.com

# The Cross-Age Mentoring Program: A Developmental Intervention for Promoting Students' Connectedness Across Grade Levels

*In cross-age peer mentoring programs, high school students mentor younger students. Prior research demonstrates the positive effects for mentees as well as for mentors. This context-based, strengths-promoting intervention is designed to help school counselors foster high school students' leadership and collaboration skills while simultaneously promoting elementary and middle school mentees' connectedness, self-esteem, and academic achievement. Using a tiered set of students as intervention agents, cross-age peer mentoring programs provide a unique strengths-based intervention for school counselors at any grade level. Consistent with the ASCA National Model®, but unlike most approaches to youth mentoring, cross-age mentoring programs can be structured by a calendar of connectedness themes that informs school counselors' action and accountability plans and can utilize a connectedness curriculum to guide the delivery of guidance lessons by students to students.*

The fastest growing youth mentoring model is school-based mentoring involving cross-age peer mentors (Karcher, 2005). These programs use older students (usually high school age) to serve as mentors to younger students, typically seventh grade and under (see Karcher, 2007a). Meetings typically take place in the schools, during lunch or after school, and often in a group context. Some involve weekend meetings with parents and most include summer programs as well. Like adult mentors, cross-age peer mentors are paired with mentees for the purpose of providing the younger youth guidance, social support, and, when appropriate, academic assistance.

Cross-age peer mentoring represents one of many types of peer support programs in schools. There are many peer support programs, though not all of them qualify as peer mentoring programs. Peer Assistance and Leadership (PAL, 2007), for example, provides a short-term version of cross-age mentoring, but its emphasis on academics and its place within a host of other roles played by the PAL teens make it much more of a general support model. In

contrast, Peer Helpers (National Association of Peer Programs, 2007) focus on providing one-on-one relationships, but often these relationships are so short in duration and problem focused that they represent counseling more than mentoring.

The most prevalent and perhaps best example of a cross-age peer mentoring program is the rapidly growing Big Brothers Big Sisters' (BBBS) "High School Bigs" program. The number of cross-age peer matches in the High School Bigs program has risen sharply and steadily from just under 5,000 in 2000 to as many as 50,000 matches nationwide in 2007. In fact, BBBS now has more high school mentors than adult mentors in schools. Yet the BBBS's High School Bigs program reflects an almost direct extension of its adult-with-youth mentoring program, and this may be its key challenge.

Until recently, the training provided by BBBS to adult and teen mentors has been much the same. Yet developmental factors present in peer mentoring demand a unique training approach specifically designed to support teen mentors. For example, a forthcoming study of the High School Bigs program reports that mentees felt their high-school aged mentors were less focused on them when in the context of other matches (Herrera, Kauh, Cooney, Grossman, & McMaken, 2008). Yet matches in which high school mentors met with their mentees in the context of other matches lasted longer, suggesting that this format was more appealing to the teen mentors. This may mean that teen mentors get more of their social needs met when their own peers are involved in the program; but these same peer processes may inhibit the program's positive effects on mentees.

Mentor training for high school-aged mentors is important, and it is equally important to structure the mentor-mentee interactions. An elaborate set of training materials is available through YouthLaunch (2007) that allows mentors to complete online training modules. In addition, both PAL (2007) and Peer Helpers (National Association of Peer Programs, 2007) have extensive training materials,

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some of which can be very useful in training teen mentors. Finally, Cox (2007) in New Zealand has developed a short paperback book with 36 activities that mentors can use with their mentees.

Yet, there are few training modules that both provide initial and ongoing training (a mentoring best practice; DuBois, Holloway, Valentine, & Cooper, 2002) and parallel a programmatic structure that includes activities to guide the mentor-mentee interactions. There are thousands of standalone programs as well as programs combined within after-school or tutoring programs that utilize peer mentoring, but these programs often lack materials for guiding their teen mentors' day-to-day efforts. Because of this dearth of "how-to" materials for cross-age peer mentoring, many school counselors develop their own programs (Noll, 1997), unaware of research-based practices for running their programs. This is problematic because school-based mentoring programs will not achieve the outcomes emphasized in both the ASCA National Model® (American School Counselor Association, 2005) and Strengths-Based School Counseling (Galassi & Akos, 2007) simply by involving teens in unstructured peer programs. Research suggests that cross-age peer mentoring has the most beneficial effects for mentees and mentors when the programs are highly structured (Karcher, 2005, 2007a).

One cross-age mentoring program (CAMP; Karcher, in press) provides school counselors with a unique strengths-based intervention for promoting developmental competencies. It has evidence of efficacy and complements the ASCA National Model (2005) in many ways. CAMP uses a comprehensive set of connectedness-promoting materials to guide school counselors' efforts to design a program, train peer mentors, and evaluate the impact of the program on mentors' and mentees' connectedness, self-esteem, and academic skills.

## **A DEVELOPMENTAL STRENGTHS-BASED APPROACH**

Mentoring is one means by which to pass on values and instill students' hope in the future. Children need positive role models and interpersonal connections to help shape their identity development. Reviewers of intervention programs consistently find there are two targets of successful programs: (a) positively shifting the school climate, and (b) creating opportunities for prosocial engagement and interpersonal connectedness (Dryfoos, 1990; Schorr, 1989). These findings suggest that mentoring programs should reflect systematic efforts to foster connectedness to self, others, and society. Mentoring programs can do this when they directly engage the youth in educational, family participation, and

future-oriented activities.

The fundamental question is, how can schools connect youth to people and activities that will foster positive development? Kohut (1977) explained that the first and most primary need in life is for *empathy, praise, and attention* (EPA). Each interpersonal interaction that provides EPA affords social support that helps the youth connect to a given world through successful participation in it. Such experiences are the building blocks of self-development in identity and self-esteem. This, of course, is the mentor's role. Kohut added that in order for experiences of EPA to foster talents, skills, and motivation, youth must experience EPA within environments that provide clearly defined examples of behaviors that are consistently modeled by others whom the adolescent sees as competent and emotionally supportive.

The activities in developmentally supportive environments are important as well, and this is not something commonly addressed by mentoring program staff. Important for youth development are contexts (i.e., interventions) that provide opportunities and the coaching necessary to develop skills just beyond the youth's level of knowledge and competence (Vygotsky, 1978) and activities that foster the perception that engagement in school activities will lead to a more positive future. Although the mentor is the conduit for these opportunities and activities, it is the school counselor who is primarily responsible for providing this clear, consistent structure. Yet for many underachieving youth, the school is not a place where they experience empathy, praise, and attention, nor where adults model clear, consistent, and supportive behaviors.

## **CAMP FORMATS AND COMPONENTS**

Two CAMP models have been evaluated in the literature: (a) the *cross-campus* model, which primarily takes place weekly after school in the same school district; and (b) the *outreach* model, in which mentors and mentees from different school districts interact, primarily one Saturday a month for the full day. Both formats include an intensive 2-week summer enrichment program. The after-school meetings, the Saturday meetings, and the summer program are structured with a variety of prevention and guidance activities. In each, clear, consistent structure is provided by mentors using a balance of three activities: academic skills development activities, connectedness (social skills and interpersonal learning) activities, and unstructured time when the mentees interact with their friends, mentors, and other staff. Elements of CAMP have been described previously (Karcher, 2005), and are available online (Karcher, 2007b; Lakes & Karcher, 2005). The

school counselor who wants to implement this model must first decide from what schools the mentees and mentors will be drawn and when they will be able to meet together.

### **CAMP Formats**

**The cross-campus model for nearby mentees.** This CAMP format is conducted one-on-one in a group format once a week after school for 2 hours. This program takes place at either an elementary school or a middle school (ideally one that includes grades 4 through 8). Meetings take place from September to May after school, usually in the library, gym, or cafeteria. Once every other month a meeting occurs on Saturday for 5 to 6 hours. Both during after-school meetings and on Saturdays the dyads spend half of their time interacting around structured academic or social development activities and half the time engaging in free play activities and sports.

**The outreach model for faraway mentees.** In this model, there are nine daylong Saturday meetings of the mentors and mentees between fall and spring. The Saturday meetings provide academic enrichment classes in the morning and social connectedness activities in the afternoons. The primary goal of the monthly Saturday meetings is to develop the mentoring relationships, to help children become accustomed to the structure and goals of the program, and to provide an ongoing social experience in which interpersonal connectedness and academic studies are integrated.

What distinguishes CAMP from other peer programs is its infrastructure, developmental focus, and emphasis on outcomes. This structure is deemed critical to minimizing the possibly “iatrogenic effects” of deviancy training (Dishion, McCord, & Poulin, 1999), which can occur when peers reinforce delinquent or authority-undermining behaviors. For example, a mentor may suggest to a mentee, “Hey, this activity is stupid, let’s go see who is hanging out in the hallways,” or a mentor, if given unstructured time to interact with his same-age peers, may talk about his smoking or drinking over the weekend while his mentee overhears. CAMP utilizes a host of structural supports, the most important of which may be the initial matching and the eventual termination, to ensure that the program provides mentors and mentees adequate support.

### **CAMP Components**

**CAMPing to promote connectedness to self, others, and society.** CAMP attempts to help connect youth to new ways of thinking, acting, and caring about others, society, and themselves through the use of a connectedness curriculum that is scheduled by the school counselor but implemented, in large

part, by the teen mentors. In order to focus attention on specific types and forms of connectedness, each type of connection is targeted. At the start of the school year the focus is first on connectedness to self, then on connectedness to others, and finally on connectedness to society in late spring.

Connectedness-to-self activities focus on who the youth are uniquely. Erik Erikson (1968) defined *identity* as a stable sense of self, one that reflects unique interests and affiliations with specific groups, and that endures across time and across contexts. The goal of the “connectedness to self” mentor-mentee activities is to help children become more aware of their unique talents, interests, and values. These cannot be separated from the culture, peer group, and society to which the child belongs, yet a child may endorse many interests, values, and habits that do not reflect the norms of their peer and cultural groups. CAMP activities target the child’s ability to make important decisions independently of group norms, which are key to successful identity development.

During connectedness-to-others activities, the focus is on helping children develop interpersonal skills, such as the ability to negotiate effectively with others, to give-and-take appropriately in friendships, to refuse and initiate activities, and to discuss values, needs, and topics openly and effectively. These activities promote interpersonal skills that make the children more effective at working with teachers, parents, siblings, peers, friends, and others. Interpersonal connectedness also requires that children be able to apply their interpersonal skills across the boundaries of difference. Children need to be able to deal effectively not only with those who are like them in age, gender, class, or race, but also be able (and willing) to do so with those who are different from themselves. Activities that foster talking about racial prejudice, affirmative action, class prejudice, and gender bias are challenging (particularly for youth who are just beginning to understand the social implications of difference) but essential.

Connectedness-to-society activities focus attention to the environment: one’s culture, school, community, and family. These curriculum modules involve youth in active commitments to cleaning up litter, recycling, keeping parks safe and clean, and sharing time with those who need it. These activities build on prior activities: an increased understanding of one’s unique abilities and interests, and the capacity to interact effectively in social situations. With a solid foundation of connectedness to self and to others, children-becoming-youth are in a good position to begin to make important contributions to the world. By starting to understand the importance of active engagement in social issues, children are more likely to find such contributions personally meaning-

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ful—in this way, connectedness to society informs connectedness to self.

**Mentor training.** The mentors are given essential ongoing training in how to provide empathy, praise, and attention within a clear, consistent structure. They also are trained to think about the developmental needs of their mentees in order to tailor their interactions and conversations. Each connectedness theme can be addressed with all mentees in the program, but mentors are taught that, developmentally, not all mentees are similarly capable to understand each type of connectedness (Karcher, Holcomb, & Zambrano, 2008). Fifth graders are just coming to understand ways in which people are governed by personalities that define them as different and unique; so working with the fifth graders can be most easily directed toward connectedness to self. Sixth graders are becoming more interested in social interactions and their ability to effectively navigate them. So they may be more engaged by social interactions and skills activities. Not until seventh grade are most children even beginning to think abstractly. This cognitive development is necessary to understand social systems and to see systems of influence, such as those processes of prejudice and discrimination directed to members of specific ethnic, class, and other social groups (Selman, 1980). Therefore, effort must be made by school counselors to ensure that curricular content addresses the mentees' multiple developmental needs.

**Matching and termination: what sandwiches the mentoring relationship.** Although many assume it is “simply” the meetings that occur during the match that determine how well mentoring works, the mentor-mentee meetings are in some ways being held together and supported by two “slices” of programmatic infrastructure. At the start of the year, the mentees and mentors self-select each other (following a 6-hour Saturday orientation) using a “meet and greet” procedure (see Karcher, 2007b) in which potential mentors and mentees interact in small groups using icebreaker activities. Afterward, both nominate up to three people they remember as “interesting and memorable.” Frequently 90% of mentees receive the mentor they nominated first or second. This process can occur over a daylong Saturday event or be compressed into an hour. The point is to start the relationship off by drawing upon an interpersonal attraction to create matches in much the same way as occurs in naturally occurring mentoring relationships.

At the other end, a structured termination is critical, both for prematurely ending relationships and for the planned conclusion of the program each year. The termination ritual (Lakes & Karcher, 2005) is designed to help program staff systematically get the mentor and mentee together to help the mentee

understand that the dissolution of the match is not because of his or her likeability or worth. This ritual also provides an opportunity for both mentor and mentee to reflect on their relationship and perhaps reach a common understanding of its significance. It is one of the main ways to ensure CAMPs “do no harm.”

**Developmental tiers of leadership: lead mentors, advanced mentors, and protégés.** In both formats, the mentoring program has a structure that allows all participants opportunities for development and advancement within the program. While typically there are equal numbers of mentors and mentees—that is, this is not a “group mentoring” program—some of the mentors are more advanced than others. To account for this, first-year mentors are differentiated from advanced mentors.

Lead mentors have been mentors in past years and are selected by the school counselor to assist her in monitoring and supporting the other mentors. Lead mentors collect mentor-mentee meeting forms and take attendance at each of the events. But most importantly, they are responsible for keeping the other mentors informed of upcoming events, facilitating the implementation of the curriculum, and reminding mentors to communicate with program staff if they must miss a meeting. Advanced mentors have at least one full year of mentoring experience in the program, and they volunteer to take on both one mentee and one protégé. Protégés assist when a mentor is absent or struggling. The first-year mentors' sole attention is to their mentees. Eighth-grade mentors also may be included if they are mature, committed, and well supervised. Typically, however, seventh- and eighth-grade students are utilized as “protégés,” seen as mentors-in-training, and serve as mentor assistants.

**The CAMP after-school curriculum.** During the after-school meetings each week, a sequence of daily after-school activities includes an icebreaker, a curriculum activity, a snack, and finally a group game or recreational activity (e.g., playing tag, doing artwork, playing basketball). Mentors and mentees work in a pair for most of the afternoon meeting but are part of a larger group format of up to 15 pairs. A curriculum is used that includes activities to promote connectedness to peers, friends, family, self, parents, school, and reading (Karcher & Judson, in press). Often, however, the curriculum builds on other proven programs that involve peer leaders (e.g., Project Northland; Komro & Perry, 1996).

Two examples of the connectedness curriculum, targeting connectedness to teachers and to reading, are the teacher interviews and reading and role-playing of stories from *The Decision Is Yours* social dilemma books from Parenting Press (2008). In the teacher interview activity, mentors work with their

mentees to plan a teacher interview and they rehearse it before conducting it with a teacher. Afterward, mentees discuss their interviews with their mentors. The mentors help the mentees develop a poster and story about the teacher, which they both present to their peers at a subsequent meeting. The connectedness-to-reading activity uses eight short children's books that mentors and mentees read together. After discussing the story, the pair join the larger group and role-play alternative outcome scenarios in front of the larger group of mentors and mentees.

**The CAMP Super Saturdays.** The CAMP program also includes "Super Saturday" day-long events in which parents spend time with their children's mentors, see the work their children have done with the mentors, and participate in playful activities with their child's mentor. Saturday events may include trips to the zoo, a picnic at a public park, or a mock carnival at the school. These Saturday meetings give the program a way to promote connectedness to family while also moving toward an integration of the worlds of family and school.

**The CAMP Summer Camp.** A camp during the summer also targets promoting connectedness across the adolescents' social, academic, and familial ecologies. As demonstrated in the recent BBBS national study of school-based mentoring (Herrera, Grossman, Kauh, Feldman, & McMaken, 2007), programs that can sustain contact between mentors and mentees over the summer have a far larger impact than those that do not. Providing a 2-week summer camp in which mentees interact with their mentors and peers in a structured setting has been a standard component of these CAMP programs.

Each of these events, like the after-school meetings, is highly structured to promote prosocial activities between the children and mentors, and, on Saturdays, to encourage positive parent-child-mentor interactions. But the possibility of negative effects is always present, which provides an additional reason to conduct yearly evaluations.

### **Evaluating the Impact of CAMPs on Academic Connectedness and Self-Esteem**

The best way to measure change is to utilize a comparison group of youth who are in other ways similar to the mentees and to measure pre-match and end-of-year outcomes. Within-group (that is, without a comparison group) pre-post changes are not useful because some phenomena used to evaluate program impact decline from fall to spring. For example, most youth become less connected to school between the start and the end of the school year (i.e., normal burnout). A within-group comparison will not likely show improvements even when there may have been substantial effects from

the program.

If a comparison group is not available, another way to assess the impact of the program is to see if program elements "mediate" or explain changes. Here outcomes are assessed at the start and end of the year. A multiple regression model can be used to predict end-of-year outcomes from start-of-year assessments. There will be variation in outcomes that is not fully predicted from initial scores. It is this variability that can be explained using variables that capture elements of the program such as duration (e.g., how long and frequently the child attended), measures of match quality, or the percentage of the curriculum completed by the pair. When any of these variables can uniquely explain additional variability in outcomes, then it can be argued that program participation is associated with the intended outcomes. Of course, such a comparison also would need to include other characteristics of the youth (e.g., initial grades, attendance, and self-esteem) to keep from confounding program with child characteristics. There are other ways to evaluate CAMPs more descriptively, such as by using observations and interviews, but a strength of the CAMP program is that it targets academic connectedness and self-esteem and therefore can use measures of these constructs as proximal indicators of outcomes in addition to grades.

CAMPs utilize mentor training and mentoring curricula to promote connectedness to self, others, and society. Therefore the impact of the mentoring relationship should use these outcomes as indicators of change.

**Outcomes: The ecology of connectedness.** There are several available measures of connectedness, but only one that covers the full ecology of adolescent connectedness—that is, connectedness to self, others, and society. The Hemingway: Measure of Adolescent Connectedness (Karcher, 2003) consists of 76 (1–5 rated Likert) items designed to measure adolescents' degree of caring for and involvement in specific relationships, contexts, and activities. It was developed by asking adolescents to explain what they thought it meant to be "connected," and to identify the people, places, and things (i.e., domains of connectedness) to which they thought adolescents were connected. The adolescents identified several domains that became scales in the measure: connectedness to friends, peers, parents, siblings, teachers, school, reading, neighborhood, religion, culture, and two forms of self (future and present). Examples of the Connectedness to School items are "I work hard at school" and "I get bored in school a lot." Two Self-in-the-Future items are "I do things outside of school to prepare for my future" and "I think about my future often."

This scale is freely available, has good psychomet-

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ric properties, and has a variety of uses. Reports of internal consistency and test-retest reliability for the subscales and composite scales are strong (Karcher, 2003; Karcher et al., 2008). Concurrent validity evidence has been reported through correlations with domain-specific self-esteem scales (Karcher). Factor analyses suggest that each of the subscales falls under superordinate categories of either academic, familial, or social connectedness, and there is evidence of cross-gender and multicultural factor structure equivalence across African-American, Anglo, and Latino youth (Karcher & Sass, 2008).

**Outcomes: The ecology of self-esteem.** Another ecological scale that targets domains of self-esteem is the Self-Esteem Questionnaire (DuBois, Felner, Brand, Phillips, & Lease, 1996). It assesses self-esteem using 42 self-evaluation statements pertaining to each of five separate domains (peer relations, school, family, physical appearance, and sports/athletics), as well as global self-esteem. It has demonstrated good reliability and evidence of construct validity.

### **The Effects of Cross-Age Peer Mentoring on Strengths-Based Developmental Outcomes**

There is mounting evidence of the social, emotional, and academic benefits of well-structured cross-age mentoring programs. CAMP mentees have demonstrated improvements in connectedness to school and peers, academic achievement, social skills, behavior problems, and conventional attitudes toward illicit and antisocial behavior (see Karcher, 2007a, for full citations). Effects have not been as large when using older middle school-aged mentors with younger mentees (Akos, 2000), which is why CAMPs utilize high school students as mentors and place middle school students in the role of protégés who serve as mentors-in-training.

There is more limited evidence of CAMPs' effects on the mentors, but what is available suggests that CAMPs also influence the academic connectedness and self-esteem of the mentors. One study (Karcher, 2008a) compared CAMP mentors to same-aged high school students in two intact classes at the end of the year on the ecological connectedness and self-esteem scales described above. In this quasi-experimental posttest comparison (controlling for sex and pretest scores), the CAMP mentors were significantly higher on all school-related connectedness and self-esteem scales after serving as CAMP mentors.

These findings comport with findings by two other researchers. One reported that "a positive experience with the peer mentoring program was predictive of a more favorable connection to school" (Stoltz, 2005, p. 11), while the other noted that "the [Big Brothers Big Sisters High School Bigs] felt mentoring helped them to improve their ability to

communicate with children, to become more responsible, to forge a stronger connection to their community and school" (Hansen, 2006, p. 3). Finally, one randomized study of 129 high school students also found improvements in moral reasoning and empathy after youth served as peer mentors (Ikard, 2001). There have not been any long-term studies of the lasting effects of cross-age peer mentoring for mentors or mentees. But neither are there long-term studies for any other mentoring approach.

## **CONCLUSION**

CAMPs may fill a unique role in a comprehensive guidance program and provide a unique strengths-based approach to addressing aspects of the ASCA National Model. The CAMP program may be more structured than many peer programs. The mentors in CAMPs receive more training than most school-based mentors receive (i.e., Herrera et al., 2007; Karcher, 2008b). The peer mentors' interactions with mentees also are carefully structured using a developmental connectedness curriculum (Karcher & Judson, in press), and specific program practices are used to begin and conclude the matches effectively. It is likely that this level of structure is necessary not only to ensure positive effects for mentors and mentees, but also to prevent negative outcomes from either failed matches (Karcher, 2006) or deviancy training (Dishion et al., 1999). The mentor training, the program curriculum, and the use of high school students as intervention agents likely all contribute to the effectiveness of CAMPs. ■

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