



# Youth Mentoring: diverting young people from justice involvement

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## Snapshot


- Youth mentoring, a consistent and prosocial relationship to support positive youth development, is a popular diversion approach in youth justice.
- The University of Sydney and the Department of Communities and Justice conducted an evidence review on youth mentoring programs that prevent young people from coming into contact with the criminal justice system.
- The evidence review identified five evidence-informed youth mentoring programs.
- Key outcomes for these programs include reduced risk of entry (or re-entry) into the youth justice system, anti-social behaviour, and criminal activity.
- These programs share a common focus on ensuring mentors are carefully screened and selected and are guided and supported throughout the program.
- We also identified five core components that are common across mentoring programs and are recommended as standard program components that should be delivered by youth mentoring programs:
  - Mentor screening and matching
  - Mentor training and supervision
  - Engagement
  - Personal and life skills development
  - Social networks and community engagement

## Introduction

Youth mentoring is defined as a consistent, prosocial relationship between a young person and an older peer or adult intended to support positive development of youth<sup>1</sup>. Quality mentoring is associated with a range of positive outcomes, including enhanced mental health and reduced delinquency.

This Evidence to Action note describes research on mentoring programs aimed at preventing youth justice involvement. It builds on a similar study conducted in 2013, synthesising 164 rigorous studies published between 1970 and 2011.<sup>2</sup> Drawing on published peer reviewed and grey literature from 2011-2021, the research team





critically assessed the strength of evidence for interventions. After a comprehensive quality assessment of the selected studies was completed, core components and flexible activities of the mentoring programs were identified. These are the key practices embedded in programs that are understood to be significant for effectively delivering positive outcomes for young people.

## Why is this important?

Adolescence is a period of the lifespan marked by change and challenges. The decisions, actions and quality of support that young people have in this period of their life can significantly shape their future, for better or worse. With the right supports and healthy role models, young people can effectively navigate higher education, employment, and family and community involvement.


Young people are more likely to be in criminal proceedings for an offence than adults, as likelihood of being involved in criminal activity peaks in adolescence and early adulthood and diminishes with age.<sup>3,4</sup> The developmental status of adolescence creates inherent vulnerability, because of the lag in their psychosocial maturation, in particular their impulse control, future orientation, and resistance to peer influence, all crucial in their decisions to engage in risky and criminal behaviours. These processes continue to develop into their early 20s.<sup>5</sup>


Diverting young people away from criminal justice involvement is a key principle across all legal jurisdictions in Australia. This approach is integrated into NSW law, through the *Young Offenders Act 1997*, which establishes the use of youth justice conferences, cautions and warnings for certain offences. Strategies for diversion take various forms; mentoring is a popular type of intervention. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people, who are significantly over-represented in the youth justice system,<sup>6</sup> cultural mentoring can strengthen connection to culture, a protective factor associated with positive life pathways.<sup>7</sup>

## What did the evidence review find?

### Background

This evidence review builds on a [Campbell systematic review](#), 'Mentoring interventions to affect juvenile delinquency and associated problems' by Tolan et al (2013), which synthesised 164 rigorous studies published between 1970 and 2011.<sup>8</sup> The Tolan review investigated the moderating effect of four key processes on the effectiveness of mentoring programs:

- 1) Modelling/Identification Promotion
  - 2) Teaching
  - 3) Advocacy
  - 4) Emotional Support.
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Mentoring programs were found to be more effective when emotional support and advocacy were emphasised and when professional development was a motivation for becoming a mentor.

## Method

The evidence review sought to find and critically appraise research from the last ten years (2011-2021) on mentoring programs in the youth justice context. After searching for academic and grey literature, nine studies, each evaluating a different program and all from overseas, met the screening criteria and risk of bias assessment. Of these nine, two studies were outside the year range but were included as they were drawn from a high-quality systematic review and met all other inclusion criteria.

Key information was extracted from each study, including sample, study design, program details and outcomes. Each program was then evaluated and rated using the Evidence Rating Scale.

A content analysis was then conducted of each program to identify core components and related flexible activities common across the evidence-informed programs. Core components are defined as “the fixed aspects of an intervention or program” while flexible activities “are the different ways the intervention may be implemented, according to the local context.”


For more information about how the evidence review was conducted see: the [Evidence Portal Technical Specifications](#).

## Evidence-informed programs

[Five evidence-informed programs](#) were identified (see Table 1). All programs, except ‘Project Arrive’, are community-based and operate outside of school hours. All programs target youth aged 10 to 18. Most of the programs have a duration of one year and feature weekly mentoring meetings lasting for around an hour. Most programs recruit volunteer mentors with the exception of the TAKE CHARGE program, which serves young people with more complex needs and therefore hires qualified workers.

**Table 1. [Program descriptions](#)**

<b>Program name</b>	<b>Country</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Mentor Type</b>	<b>Format</b>	<b>Program duration</b>	<b>Meeting length and frequency</b>
<b>Campus Corps<sup>9</sup></b>	USA	11-18	Volunteer	Group and Individual	12 weeks	4 hours per week
<b>Reading for Life<sup>10</sup></b>	USA	11-18	Volunteer	Group	10 weeks	2 hours per week



<b>TAKE CHARGE<sup>11</sup></b>	USA	16-17	Paid	Group and Individual	1 year	60-90 minutes per week
<b>Mentoring Program for At-Risk Youth<sup>12</sup></b>	USA	10-17	Volunteer	Individual	6 months-1 year	3 hours per week
<b>Project Arrive<sup>13</sup></b>	USA	13-14	Up to organisation	Group	1 year	50 minutes per week

Reduced risk of entry (or re-entry) into the youth justice system, anti-social behaviour, and criminal activity were identified as primary outcome domains. Secondary domains related to substance use, self-perception and autonomy, school participation and engagement, prosocial behaviours and peer/family relationships emerged during the data extraction process.

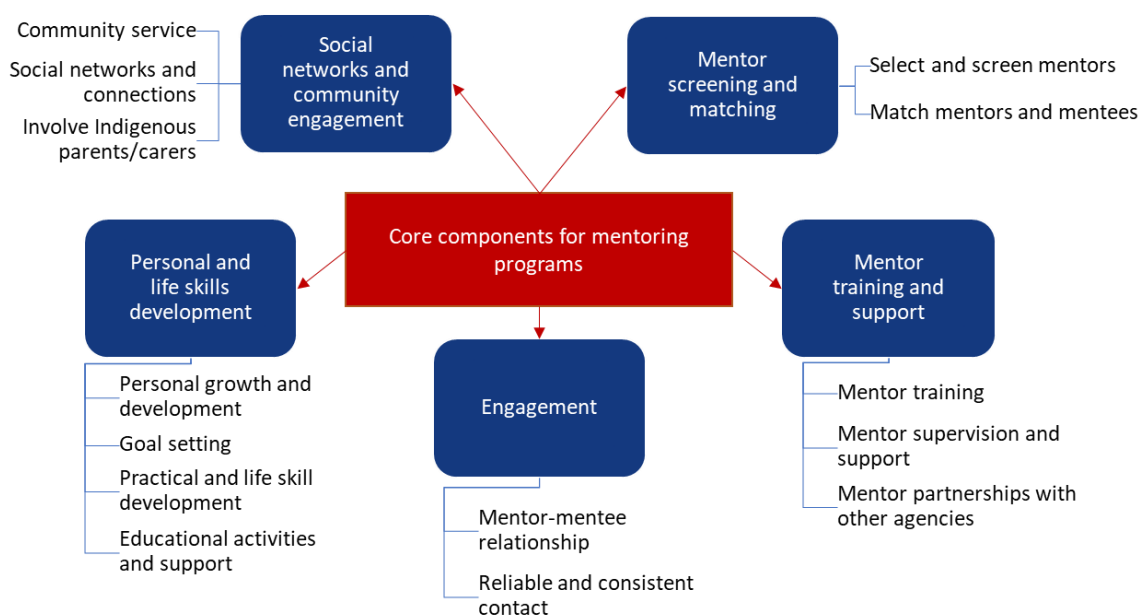
**Table 2. Outcome domains and evidence ratings by program**

<b>Program name</b>	<b>Outcome domains</b>	<b>Evidence rating</b>
<b>Campus Connections</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Antisocial behaviours</li> <li>• Self-perception and autonomy</li> </ul>	Mixed research evidence (with no adverse effects)
<b>Reading for Life</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Juvenile justice involvement</li> </ul>	Mixed research evidence (with no adverse effects)
<b>TAKE CHARGE</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Juvenile justice involvement</li> <li>• Self-perception and autonomy</li> </ul>	Mixed research evidence (with no adverse effects)
<b>Mentoring Program for At-Risk Youth</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Antisocial behaviours</li> <li>• Self-perception and autonomy</li> </ul>	Mixed research evidence (with no adverse effects)
<b>Project Arrive</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Peer and family relationships</li> <li>• School participation and engagement</li> </ul>	Mixed research evidence (with no adverse effects)

## Core components and flexible activities


Five core components (see Figure 1) are common across these mentoring programs for diverting young people from youth justice involvement and/or further criminal activity. They are recommended as standard program components that could be delivered by youth mentoring programs addressing outcomes identified in Table 2. While the core components are defined, the flexible activities can be tailored to local contexts and client needs (see Table 3).

**Figure 1. Core components and flexible activities for mentoring programs**



**Table 3. Core components descriptions**

<u>Core components</u>	<u>Flexible activities</u>
<b>Mentor screening and matching</b>	Screening and matching prospective mentors with potential mentees is an important preliminary step to ensure a meaningful mentor-mentee relationship can be fostered.
<b>Mentor training and support</b>	Equipping prospective mentors with the knowledge and skills to be a mentor is crucial. This involves becoming aware of the needs of the mentees and issues that are likely to arise.
<b>Engagement</b>	The quality and meaningfulness of the primary mentor-mentee relationship is critical to a successful mentoring program.
<b>Personal and life skills development</b>	Mentoring programs should consist of structured activities to allow mentees to set goals and trial new skills in a safe environment. They should also be intentional and tailored to the needs and interests of mentees.



<b>Social networks and community engagement</b>	In addition to the mentor relationship, promoting connections with other prosocial individuals and communities helps to build social skills and establish and extend prosocial support networks.
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The evidence-informed programs that the core components are derived from have not been evaluated with Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander young people. As such, descriptions of the core components and flexible activities were supplemented with additional evidence about mentoring programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people.

To do this, we used an evidence review published in 2013 by the Closing the Gap Clearing House on the effectiveness of mentoring programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people<sup>14</sup>. We then conducted an additional search for relevant papers that had been published since 2013. This helped us identify activities, practices and approaches that should be used when working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people. For example:

- Where possible, local Elders should be involved in the program as mentors or in other activities.
- Contact may need to be more frequent and more intense for Aboriginal young people (e.g. up to 10-20hrs a week)
- Involving parents/carers in the mentoring relationship can help improve parent-child relationships.


## Limitations

This evidence review is subject to some limitations. All studies were conducted overseas, primarily in the United States. None have been trialled within the Australian context, so effectiveness with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and culturally and linguistically diverse populations in Australia is unknown. The significant variation in youth mentoring program design complicates judgements on effectiveness. These differences include paid vs volunteer mentors, mandated vs voluntary and brief interventions vs open-ended mentoring programs<sup>15</sup>.

Due to the strict inclusion criteria that guided the process, only a very small number of studies were reviewed. Those included were randomised control trials and quasi-experimental studies. While our search did identify systematic reviews and meta-analyses, they were excluded from the review due to risk of bias.

## Where to from here?

While the success of mentoring interventions varies, those rated as having some evidence of effectiveness share a common focus on ensuring mentors are:

- carefully screened and selected
  - supported through training and reflection
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- guided to offer meaningful activities that build education and skills and expand social networks.

These findings have implications for recruitment, training, and design of mentoring interventions aimed at diversion from youth justice.

**Recruitment** – The person who mentors matters, as the bond they create with the young person enhances sustainability. When recruiting, consider the mentee population and look for attributes which encourage rapport through shared experience and interests.

**Training** - Prepare the mentor for the flexible roles they may play, in response to the youth, such as coach, advocate and even case manager. Provide ongoing opportunities for reflection and supervision to allow them to share their journey.

**Design** – A mentoring program model can be enriched by integrating activities that build the young person's skills in preparation for adulthood and expand their network of prosocial adults and peers. This may be achieved through group mentoring.

## More Information

For more on the evidence and practice of mentoring for youth, see:

1. Campbell Collaborative systematic review: [Mentoring interventions to affect juvenile delinquency and associated problems](#)
2. [U.S. National Mentoring Resource Center](#)
3. Government of Canada: [Mentoring and essential skills](#)
4. [MENTOR: The National Mentoring Partnership](#)
5. Closing the Gap Clearinghouse: [Mentoring programs for Indigenous youth at risk](#)

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