

book reviews

Helping Hands: A mentoring program guide, training manual and mentor manual

Lisa Lodge-Hayeslee

Ballarat, 2002

Mentoring is not a new idea but it is one that is currently undergoing a resurgence in a broad range of fields, from being a vehicle for career development, to a supplement to kith and kin for marginalized children and youth.

In child welfare, mentoring programs are rapidly gaining popularity for a number of reasons.

1. The research on resilience has demonstrated the importance of children growing up in adversity having an ongoing, supportive relationship with at least one significant adult, be that a parent, other relative, a neighbour or a football coach.
2. The limitations of a professional-client relationship in terms of availability and continuity are increasingly apparent, especially in large human service organizations.
3. Mentoring programs based on volunteers are seen as enhancing 'social capital' in increasingly fragmented communities and offering a new way in a field hungry for hope.

Like so many trends in child welfare, there are dangers that mentoring programs will be seized upon as yet another quick-fix panacea, and that the resources required to deliver good programs will be underestimated. Mentoring programs for vulnerable children and young people are risky. Apart from the obvious risk of attracting adults who are sexually attracted to minors, mentoring relationships that do not work out can leave young people feeling let down, and leave mentors feeling exploited. That is, they have the capacity to harm as well as help. Mentoring programs are resource intensive, and should not be embarked upon unless the necessary expertise and financial resources are in place.

Helping Hands is a highly practical manual for trying to ensure positive outcomes in mentoring programs. Produced by the staff of Lisa Lodge-Hayeslee, a small community organization in the Victorian regional city of Ballarat, it is based on their highly acclaimed and award winning 'Champions Mentoring Program' for high risk adolescents. They are committed to disseminating what they have learned from their successes and their failures so that it may be of use to others. This is admirable in a field in which we do this less often than we should. The staff continue to break new ground and in the next stage of the evolution of their work, they are collaborating with another agency to adapt the program to meet the needs of high risk infants and their families.

The set of volumes – a Program Guide, a Training Manual and a Mentor Manual (for mentors to retain) – is superb in both content and presentation. Simple yet sophisticated, reader-friendly and beautifully presented and produced, this

set will be a real asset to others, and the price being asked is fully justified by its quality.

So often it is in the fine detail of the description of professional interventions in the human services that one finds the gems of practice wisdom, and this is certainly true in this case. The authors have used brief anecdotes from their own experience, highlighted in italics, to illustrate the general principles they espouse. It puts the flesh on the bones and gives depth, richness and authenticity to the manual.

The authors do not claim to have produced a 'one size fits all' recipe and they openly acknowledge from the outset that what they found necessary in their program may not be the case for all settings. The great challenge in the transfer of innovation in the human services is that each context is unique in terms of the particular characteristics of the client population, the community, the agency and the wider service network. Therefore it is likely that some adaptation will be necessary if successful program models are to be transplanted from their original context to new settings. On the other hand, one can easily throw out the baby with the bathwater, reducing program integrity by diluting or deleting core components of its success. Modifications should therefore be undertaken in a cautious and systematic manner.

In classifying their possible interventions as necessary, optional or 'to be avoided', those who have written *Helping Hands* have given the reader a strong indication of the margin of safety involved in adapting different elements of the guidelines. This is most unusual to find in such a manual, and it is extremely helpful to those seeking to replicate the model in a way that suits their own setting.

The first volume, the Mentoring Program Guide, sets out with great detail but never in a wordy way, the recommended guidelines for each stage of a mentoring program:

- recruitment;
- training;
- screening of applicants;
- selection and accreditation;
- matching;
- mentor support;
- evaluation.

Each stage is broken down into its component steps, with very practical suggestions and, where appropriate, checklists or forms. For example, the recruitment section explores how to:

- adopt a meaningful name;
- create a logo;

- have posters and pamphlets printed;
- prepare an information booklet;
- prepare an application form;
- prepare a register;
- liaise with the media;
- place advertisements in the local press;
- make personalized approaches to various, appropriate groups;
- network with other agencies;
- employ good 'customer relations';
- continue liaison with media.

It also adds some optional extras: enlist a patron; print business cards; set up a website, organize a formal launch and use marketing products. Sounds complicated? Well, mentoring programs are, and the recruitment stage, as vital as it is, is the least complicated stage of all. Selection, Matching and Supporting the Mentors are all about micro-managing very subtle social processes – artificially creating a relationship which, hopefully, will evolve into something that is natural and nurturing. A mentor in a program I once evaluated aptly described the relationship as 'an arranged friendship' and this captured the contradiction and the complexity of it very well indeed. Highly charged issues about power, attachment, dependence and reciprocity, as well as 'rescue fantasies' on both sides of the relationship, can permeate mentoring programs for at risk children and young people.

With high risk adolescents, for whom the Champions Mentoring Program was developed, there are added issues relating to safety, substance dependence, existing family and peer relationships and complex service systems. Safety and substance dependence can be confronting for mentors and this manual handles these issues in a very balanced and informative manner. Managing existing family and peer relationships could perhaps have received a little more attention, although I imagine this is something mostly dealt with on a one-to-one basis through the follow-up support of mentors.

There is sometimes a tendency to see mentoring programs as dyadic interventions but a significant new relationship between two people always affects and is affected by the pre-

existing social networks of each party. With high risk children and adolescents, mentors need to be very mindful about their relationships with others in the lives of the young people they wish to assist, avoiding usurping roles and adding strains in fragile families. At the same time they need to be mindful of the impact of mentoring on their own relationships and well-being.

Feeling fatigued and frightened at the very thought of setting up a mentoring program? Well, that may not be such a bad thing as thinking twice about setting up, and most importantly, how to sustain a mentoring program, is very wise. But this manual does not induce fatigue or fear. To the contrary, from reading this manual one gets the sense of enormous joy and deep satisfaction derived from developing and delivering the program.

Having had the privilege of talking with those who wrote the manuals, I can attest that they are among the most hope-inducing practitioners I have encountered. One of the powerful themes in what they have written, reflecting the principles and the people behind this particular program, is that of enhancing hope in the lives of young people who see themselves, and are often seen by others, as hopeless. This involves sustaining one's own hope. Successful mentoring programs are 'positive feedback loops' of hope for young people, mentors and agency staff. I trust that these materials will help those who read them to sustain their hope and inspire it in others.

Reviewed by: Associate Professor Dorothy Scott
School of Social Work, University of Melbourne
Currently on secondment as the
Executive Director of The Ian Potter Foundation

The Helping Hands Mentoring Package is available from:
Lisa Lodge, PO Box 695, Ballarat, Vic 3353
Tel: 03 5331 3838 Fax: 03 5331 7771
Website: www.lisalodge.org.au
Email: lisaball@b160.aone.net.au
COST: \$286 (including postage & GST)

In the shadow of the law: The legal context of social work practice

Phillip Swain (editor)

The Federation Press, 2nd edition, 2002. 312pp. \$49.50

Complexities in professional decision-making have made it increasingly important for social workers to know when and how legal interventions and remedies can be effective in their areas of practice. Although this has been acknowledged for some time in child and adult protective and correctional services, the exercise of power by social workers around allocation of scarce resources or their intervention as an agent of the state, requires knowledge of the law and an understanding of the legal constraints upon practice.

This is the second edition of an earlier book published to provide students, trained social workers and other practitioners in the human service sector, with an overview of the legal context of their practice and how to understand and interpret their work within a legal framework.

Some chapters have changed little since the first edition, but there have been some additional contributions and more use of case studies to highlight some of these issues.