

Mentors and mountainboarding

The development and delivery of an innovative program for rural adolescent males at risk of mental health problems

Candice P. Boyd, Evan Kemp,
Toula Filiadis, Damon Aisbett and Martin Markus

Sense of belonging to a community offers protection against depression (Glover et al. 1998); however, rural adolescents with mental health issues often feel isolated, lonely and socially excluded (Aisbett et al. 2007). This is exacerbated by the stoic attitudes and fear of social stigma which prevent many rural adolescents from engaging with mainstream mental health programs (Boyd et al. 2006). With this knowledge, we aimed to engage at-risk rural adolescent males who would otherwise not seek psychological help in an innovative program which would link them to a broader sporting community. The project also aimed to strengthen leaders of this community to act as mentors for these young people. In this article, we describe the development and delivery of the mentoring component of this innovative program. The outcomes for the youth involved in this program are described in the subsequent article by Kemp and colleagues in the next edition of Children Australia.

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Dr Candice P. Boyd

Course Coordinator, Graduate Diploma in Youth Mental Health
Centre for Youth Mental Health, University of Melbourne
(formerly Rural Adolescent Mental Health Group, Centre for Health
Research and Practice, University of Ballarat)
Email: cboyd@unimelb.edu.au

Evan Kemp

Rural Adolescent Mental Health Group
Centre for Health Research and Practice, University of Ballarat

Toula Filiadis

Coburg Primary Mental Health Team, Melbourne Health

Damon Aisbett

Rural Adolescent Mental Health Group
Centre for Health Research and Practice, University of Ballarat

Martin Markus

Department of Social Work, University of Melbourne

Although formal mentoring programs for youth have been in existence for several decades, it is only recently that 'a science of mentoring' has emerged which emphasises the inter-relationships between theory, research and practice (DuBois & Karcher 2005). The first edition of the *Handbook of Youth Mentoring* was published in 2005 and with it has come a more concerted effort to identify the theoretical perspectives that inform the development of mentoring programs and to determine the components of mentoring programs that make them effective.

Mentoring programs for at-risk youth aim to minimise risk factors and increase protective factors through positive social interactions between the mentors and mentees (Britner et al. 2006). However, there are numerous approaches to mentoring which seek to achieve this same fundamental objective. In order to introduce the present study, we will consider the four overlapping approaches to youth mentoring that we sought to incorporate into our program; these are cross-age peer mentoring, field mentoring, developmental mentoring and e-mentoring.

MENTORING APPROACHES

In *cross-age peer mentoring* relationships, the mentor is an 'older and wiser' peer, at least a few years older than the mentee (Karcher 2005). The mentor is also someone who the mentee can look up to and admire. Rhodes (2002, 2005) identified three factors of effective youth mentoring relationships: (1) improvement of cognitive skills through dialogue, (2) enhancing social skills and empathy, and (3) role modelling/advocacy. One of the arguments against cross-age peer mentoring has been that older youth lack the maturity to establish effective mentoring relationships. Karcher (2005) noted, however, that several studies have shown that older siblings provide supportive contexts for younger ones and that a similar principle applies in formalised cross-age peer mentoring relationships.

Peer mentoring is distinct from 'tutoring' in that it is not focused on improving discrete behaviours, such as academic performance, but is focused on facilitating youth development more generally (Karcher 2005). This is in keeping with the accepted definition of mentoring,

regardless of age. However, in cross-age peer mentoring there may also be a focus on the development of the mentors as well as the mentees, as it may be the first time that the mentors have performed such a role (Karcher & Lindwall 2003). Program practices that enhance the likelihood of success of cross-age peer mentoring relationships include: (a) emphasising the importance of the relationship rather than the task, (b) training adolescent mentors to use positive practices and encouragement rather than punitive or coercive behaviours, and (c) actively monitoring the relationships and ensuring the mentors use assertive, rather than aggressive, communication (Bandura 1982; Karcher 2005).

Mentoring may take place in a variety of contexts and these often reflect varying degrees of structure and control over the mentoring relationships on the part of the sponsoring agency. *Field-based mentoring* is an approach in which

... the sponsoring agency coordinates and supports mentor-mentee matches but mentors and mentees typically interact at mutually convenient times and locations (Karcher et al. 2006, p.711).

This approach affords the mentors and mentees the greatest amount of freedom.

Psychosocial mentoring or *developmental mentoring* involves mentors engaging in some form of recreational activity with their mentees as well as talking with them about mutual interests (Karcher et al. 2006). This differs from other forms of mentoring which are more instrumental and focused on specific behavioural outcomes such as increased school involvement or decreased risk-taking behaviour. The ultimate goal of programs based on developmental mentoring is increased social support which has a proximal influence on the development of self-esteem and social connectedness; this may in turn have a distal influence on instrumental outcomes such as academic achievement or pro-social behaviour, but this is not the program's main goal (Karcher et al. 2006).

Finally, with the increase in the availability and use of electronic means of communication, *e-mentoring* has developed as either an adjunct to face-to-face mentoring or, in some cases, an alternative to traditional mentoring programs (Miller & Griffiths 2005). E-mentoring may involve the use of several forms of electronic communication including e-mail, teleconferencing, chat rooms, message boards, and/or text messaging in circumstances when a face-to-face relationship would be impractical (O'Neill, Wagner & Gomez 1996). The use of electronic communication to connect rural youth, as well as improve their access to services, is well-documented (Boyd et al. 2006).

MENTORING IN THE AUSTRALASIAN CONTEXT

In the development of our mentoring program we took on several unique challenges in order to meet the needs of a special and previously neglected group of youth – rural Australian adolescent males at-risk of mental health problems. We drew on the theory of adolescent development, recent research and knowledge gains in the field of mentoring theory and practice, as well as our own training in clinical psychology, to design an innovative program that would also be culturally relevant to these young people.

In consideration of the cultural context, Evans, Jory and Dawson (2005), in a review of mentoring programs in Australia and New Zealand, noted that we have a tendency in the Australasian region to build mentoring programs around outdoor activities, particularly sport and wilderness experiences. Evans and colleagues characterise young people in Australasia as 'risk takers, challenged by physical danger' and argue that this cultural attribute could '... provide the basis for the types of novel activities that can most appropriately be facilitated by mentoring relationships with young volunteers' (p. 418).

Evans and colleagues (2005) also reflected upon the impact of local values on the development of mentoring programs within the Australasian context. They discussed the notion of 'mateship' in Australian and New Zealand culture as being a highly valued characteristic of mentoring relationships and suggested that the differential power in the more traditional, program-based, mentoring relationships from overseas may be viewed unfavourably in Australia. They noted that it is more acceptable within Australian culture to seek and receive support from a person who is perceived as being within one's social group. As such, feeling connected to one's social group should be considered as a more favourable outcome within the Australasian context than the improvement in an individual's self-esteem. In a similar way, there is a fundamental value in Australian and New Zealand culture to ensure a 'fair go', that people should have equal chances, and that the 'server is no lesser an individual than the served' (p.411). This implies that the mentoring relationships within Australasian programs may be tacitly different to those of overseas programs.

The aim of this study was to design and evaluate a training program to enable members of the mountainboarding community in Australia to act as mentors for a group of ten at-risk youth. The article by Kemp et al. in the next edition of *Children Australia* reports on the outcomes of the program for the ten adolescents. The purpose of this article is to report on the findings from the pre-program interviews with the mentors, the content of the mentor training night and the mentors' subsequent participation on the program day, and the outcomes of the post-program evaluation with

Figure 1: Downhill (or freeride) mountainboarding on a bordercross track



the mentors. In discussing the findings, we reflect on the lessons learned.

METHOD

THE ACTIVITY

Mountainboarding was originally developed in Colorado in the United States of America as an alternative to snowboarding during the summer months (MUNROBoards, n.d.). The sport resembles snowboarding, skating and wakeboarding in its feel and can be likened to downhill mountain biking on a board. Figures 1 and 2 illustrate the two modes of the sport – downhill and freestyle.

PARTICIPANTS

The mentors were five mountainboarders ranging in age from 21 to 25 years. All were male. All had been involved in the sport of mountainboarding for a minimum of three years and some had competed in national and international competitions. One of the mentors is recognised as a professional mountainboarder being in receipt of corporate

Figure 2: Freestyle mountainboarding, popular in competition and demonstrations



sponsorship. This mentor took a leadership role in the teaching of mountainboarding skills to the adolescent participants on the program day. Of the five mountainboarding mentors, one had completed an undergraduate university degree, two were in the process of completing a university qualification, one was an automotive mechanic, and the other was a landscape gardener by trade.

EXPECTATIONS OF MENTORS

Although they were not formally screened, there were several requirements of the mentors as part of their participation. All mountainboarders underwent a police check and agreed to abide by a written code of conduct ¹. They also signed a legal release prior to their participation in the program. The mountainboarders were then required to attend and participate in a three-hour training session on mentoring skills as well as participate on the program day as mentors. Participants were also expected to maintain a minimum level of contact with their mentees after the program as well as participate in the program evaluation. Monitoring and support were provided to the mentors post-program by the first author who made contact with them on a weekly basis by phone or email during the first month after the program day.

PROCEDURE

Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Ballarat's Human Research Ethics Committee prior to data collection. Participants were recruited using a snowball method as three of the five mentors were already known to the first author who has been a member of the mountainboarding community in Australia for the past five years. The first author conducted all interviews with the mountainboarders one month before and one month after their participation on the program day. Participants were interviewed individually in their homes or at a private location that was convenient to them, e.g. a room in a university library. Interviews varied in length from 30 to 90 minutes. The pre-program interviews were more open in structure than the post-program interviews to allow for exploration of the mountainboarders' ideas about mentoring as well as their training needs. The post-program interviews were semi-structured, focusing on the mentors' experiences of participating in the program.

DATA ANALYSIS

Interviews were recorded on a digital recording device and transcribed prior to analysis. Transcripts were initially analysed by the first author using a constant comparative

¹ We adapted a code of conduct for mentors provided to us by the Reach organisation in Australia which has a well-established mentoring program for youth. The code covers all aspects of conduct within the mentoring relationship and can be supplied on request by the first author of this article.

method (Flick 2002). Rigour was introduced into the analysis by subjecting coding decisions to the scrutiny of the co-authors who were fellow members of the Rural Adolescent Mental Health Group at the University of Ballarat. The analysis resulted in a series of themes which are reported below.

RESULTS

The results of this study are presented in four parts. First, we present the results of a thematic analysis of the pre-program interviews. This analysis informed the content of the mentor training program. Second, we describe the development and delivery of the mentor training followed, thirdly, by a description of the mountainboarders' participation on the program day. Finally, we present the results of the post-program evaluation.

PART 1: PRE-PROGRAM INTERVIEW

The pre-program interview data were summarised as three master themes: (1) participants' understanding of mentoring, (2) the characteristics of good mentors, and (3) the mentors' training needs. The themes are presented below and accompanied by a brief thematic description and direct quotations that illustrate these themes.

Master Theme: Participants' understanding of mentoring

Participants appreciated that mentees have something they seek to gain from a mentoring relationship. In line with this, participants believed that the mentor needed to possess knowledge and experience that would be desirable to the mentee. For instance:

[A mentor is] ... somebody who has been through a situation or experience that the mentoree is looking to go through themselves so somebody that's ... basically already done some thing and can act as a guide or a big brother so to speak to the inexperienced or to the person who just hasn't had the opportunity in life to go do that situation.

... if you put yourself in a role as a mentor to someone and it's a matter of providing them with the best advice, you do I suppose, and if you don't have the best information, you put them in the right direction.

However, there was also a strong belief among the mentors that the mentoring relationship had to be mutually beneficial and that the mentor and mentee needed to be friends. For example:

I think it has to be a two way street, if I'm possibly going to somebody for advice or for help, unless it's a paid service or unless its set out in a way that it's a one way street, then it could be probably abusing the relationship ... It's not all give, it's some take as well, ... vice versa, you know what I mean, give and take.

... you get back what you give, you can't expect people to do all the work and you to sort of go along for the ride so to speak.

... to be able to be a mentor to someone, you have to have something in common with them, if you can find something in common then people will often open up to you and trust you and relate to you and it's a lot easier to work together knowing that.

Master Theme: Characteristics of good mentors

There were two main components to participants' ideas about the characteristics of good mentors. A mentor in the eyes of these participants needs to have drive, charisma, passion, competence, energy, patience, responsibility and leadership. Ultimately, the participants believed that a mentor needed to be someone that the mentee looked up to and respected. For instance:

I think a mentor has to have a golden status. They have to be unique in a sense that that they've done something with their life or achieved something that is a bit above par than most other people.

On the other hand, and consistent with the notion of friendship, participants believed that a mentor also had to be caring and trustworthy. Participants stated:

There has to be a trust between the two people to instigate that whole mentor relationship cos if you didn't trust the person then why would you be going to them for help?

Trust is massive, yeah, that's it these days, trust is everything

Master Theme: The mentors' training needs

Overwhelmingly participants expressed the need for training in communication skills, particularly those which would assist them in communicating with a younger age group. Participants also asked for training on how to establish trust, instil respect, deal with conflict, and set appropriate boundaries. In addition, the participants wanted to gain a better understanding of the issues facing the mentees and how these might affect their ability to relate to them. For example, one participant expressed concerns regarding ...

... being close to somebody who's in a pretty awkward situation, awkward like something I haven't experienced like family issues of violence in the home or drug or alcohol abuse.

PART 2: THE TRAINING NIGHT²

The mountainboarders attended a three-hour training evening, which included dinner, at a function room in Ballarat the night before the program day. The program was delivered by Dr Candice Boyd, a clinical psychologist, Toulia Filiadis, a family therapist and social worker, and

² Readers of this article who are interested in obtaining copies of the training materials can contact the first author. Copies will be provided free of charge.

Evan Kemp, a psychology honours candidate with a background in sports science and human movement. The program commenced with an analysis of the pre-program data collected by interview, i.e. the mentors were presented with a summary of their own understanding of mentoring and the characteristics of good mentors. An introduction to the process of mentoring was then provided. Following on from this introduction, Evan Kemp presented a personal account of his experiences at giving and receiving mentorship in the context of sport.

After an evening meal, Dr Candice Boyd worked through a series of handouts covering a range of basic communication skills for mentors; these were: active listening, basic questioning, giving feedback, and building trust. Participants then completed an exercise to discover their own personal learning style. Toulia Filiadis then provided participants with an overview of the developmental tasks of adolescence and how developmental trajectories are influenced and interrupted by family conflict. Dessert followed. The training concluded with an overview of the code of conduct for mentors and the expectations of them in terms of their role and the research component. The remainder of the evening was spent socialising.

PART 3: THE PROGRAM DAY

The program day commenced with mentees arriving at the Caro Convention Centre at the University of Ballarat via pre-arranged taxi rides from their homes. They were invited to join mentors and supervisors in a meeting room in the convention centre for an introduction to the program day. Evan Kemp briefly provided an overview of the day's activities and then handed over to two of the mountainboarding mentors to work through a presentation that they had prepared on mountainboarding. These mentors took the role of instructors, providing the mentees with first-time information on the sport and how to get started on a board. They were then given mountainboarding and protective equipment to keep. After morning tea, the instruction by mentors continued outside and then mentees, mentors and supervisors moved to a hillside location on the university grounds. Mentees boarded for the first time under guidance from the mentors over the course of the morning. Lunch was provided and this gave mentees, mentors and supervisors the chance to interact on a social level.

Following lunch, mentees and mentors engaged in another session of mountainboarding which included the construction of an obstacle course. At the end of this session, the mentors provided a demonstration of advanced mountainboarding skills, including freestyle. The day ended with a series of three talks. The first was a talk on safety given by Allistair McCoy, a qualified paramedic; the second was a talk on respecting the environment given by Martin Markus; and the third was a talk on the use of the internet and the austatb.org site to keep in touch with the

mountainboarding community. This last talk was given by one of the mentors. The day concluded with mentors and mentees exchanging contact details and mentees being given a 'show bag' containing mountainboarding paraphernalia.

PART 4: POST-PROGRAM INTERVIEWS

Post-program interviews were conducted with the aid of an interview schedule (see Appendix). In terms of their experience of the program, the mentors' evaluations were highly positive. Negative comments related to aspects of the program day which could be improved upon in future, as well as the barriers the mountainboarders experienced in carrying out their mentoring role.

When asked what they had enjoyed most about the program, participants indicated that there had been great pleasure in seeing the mentees enjoying themselves. For instance:

... seeing their enjoyment on the day and seeing how much they enjoyed it. I really got a buzz out of seeing how much fun they had and how much they appreciated everything.

I think more seeing them when they got the boards and that they were trying to be tough but you could see how excited they were and I thought that was pretty cool ... it was a good feeling of doing it.

When participants were asked whether their understanding of mentoring had changed as a result of their participation in the program, they suggested that the role had been less formal than they had originally expected and their relationship with their mentees had been characterised by a sense of friendship. For example:

I've got a clearer understanding of what being a mentor's about. It's definitely more of an informal relationship than I expected. It's more of a friend, peer to peer sort of relationship ... it's more like the sort of a relationship you have with a friend simply with the added emphasis on providing a point of contact and someone that the person can speak to about whatever.

Figure 3: A mentor and mentee on the program day



Participants felt that the training was beneficial and had met their needs and expectations. They thought that having the training the night before the program was helpful as the material was fresh in their minds. They indicated that the training had influenced their behaviour on the day and that they had made an extra effort to engage their mentees based on what they had learned the night before. The talk on developmental issues in adolescence was perceived to be particularly helpful in this regard. Participants also thought that the extent and frequency of the follow up support provided by phone and email was at an ideal level for their needs.

In terms of barriers to the mentoring role, participants residing outside of the Ballarat area believed that geographical distance was a major problem. This was exacerbated by difficulties in making contact with their mentees via mobile phone as many of the mentees did not have mobile phone credit. The ausatb.org website's message board appeared to be the most successful means of communicating with mentees.

In regard to improving the program for the future, mentors would have preferred to have been given more time to meet together as a group as well as to spend some individual time with their mentees during the program day. As it was, mentoring on the day took place on a group basis and individuals would have liked more time to connect with their mentees on a one-to-one basis. Apart from this, participants felt that the program had been a great success and each of them indicated that they would be keen to participate in similar programs in the future. For instance, one participant said:

I thought it was really positive and I really enjoyed giving my time and being able to teach people and stuff so it was really good, I'd definitely do it again.

DISCUSSION

SUMMARY AND INTERPRETATION OF FINDINGS

With respect to the limited body of research on youth mentoring relationships, this study in the context of its methodological limitations makes several unique contributions to the field. First, the findings of this small, interview-based study suggest that cross-age peer mentors are capable of carrying out a mentoring role with a great sense of responsibility, maturity and purpose. The mentoring relationships between the cross-age peer mentors and their mentees in this study were clearly characterised by friendship and camaraderie. This supports the arguments of Karcher (2005) with respect to the potential benefits of cross-age peer mentoring. Second, the study provides additional support for the Australasian practice of basing mentoring programs on participation in adventurous, thrill-seeking activities (see Evans, Jory & Dawson 2005). The

ability of our program to successfully engage at-risk youth was made easier by their enjoyment of mountainboarding as a recreational activity. Third, this study also provides support for the use of e-mentoring to connect mentors and mentees across geographical distances. This last point is particularly relevant to programs aimed at rural youth where finding mentors in close proximity to the mentees might be challenging.

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LESSONS LEARNED

First and foremost, our most important lesson in developing and delivering the mentoring component of this program was that these mountainboarders were ideal mentors for this group of at-risk youth. We found that not only was the activity of mountainboarding a perfect fit for the adolescent participants, but also the mentors had the right mix of attributes to allow them to be accepted by this very marginalised and sceptical group of young people. On the program day, one of the mentors mentioned how thrilled he was that his mentees were 'rough as guts'. In many ways the mountainboarders were themselves 'rough' but for this very reason, the young people accepted them. The youth involved in this program had faced several systematic disappointments in their lives, but they enthusiastically and wholeheartedly welcomed the mountainboarders as mentors and treated all those involved in the program with respect and consideration. The lesson learned here was that mentors do not necessarily need to fit a conservative mould. Mountainboarding, and the subculture that surrounds it, has definite appeal to adolescent males from disadvantaged backgrounds – the exclusivity of community membership and the shared identity that mentors and mentees had as 'risk-takers' was also integral to the success of these mentoring relationships.

We also learned the importance of training to prepare 'idealistic' young men to act in a mentoring role. Despite being quite natural at mentoring, the mountainboarders expressed considerable concern and anxiety as first-time mentors. The training provided them with the reassurance and guidance they needed to be confident on the program day. Karcher (2005) noted that there is no research on the role of training in outcomes of cross-age peer mentoring. Our experiences of developing and delivering this program

are that it is an essential component. In a similar vein, we also found that there was a need for monitoring and on-going support for mentors to feel confident to continue in the role after the program day.

On the downside, although participants indicated that the timing of the training was helpful (i.e. the night before the program day), an obvious disadvantage of this approach is the lack of a 'cooling off period'. The participants were not given the time to change their minds about participating and, in hindsight, this would have been prudent given the fact that this was their first experience of this type of program. Furthermore, we cannot know whether the success of the program was due to the 'insider' status of the principal researcher. Being a mountainboarder herself, she had a certain degree of credibility with the mentors. We suspect it would be more difficult for an 'outsider' to work cooperatively with this particular sporting community.

Our results also highlighted the need for geographical proximity of mentors to mentees. This will always be a challenge for mentoring programs designed for rural youth. The incorporation of e-mentoring into the program design attenuated this to a certain extent but notably mentors still cited this as a major barrier to acting in the role.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In conclusion, we would recommend to our colleagues in the field that cross-age peer mentoring programs based on adventurous activities such as mountainboarding have great potential to engage rural adolescent males at-risk of mental health problems, and that non-conservative, young adults such as mountainboarders have great potential as cross-age peer mentors. ■

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APPENDIX

POST-PROGRAM INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What have been the positive aspects of being a sporting mentor for this program?
2. What have been the barriers to you acting in this role?
3. Have you perceived any benefits to the mentees through their participation in the program?
4. Was the level of support adequate (too much or too little)? [Did you prefer phone or email contact?]
5. Was the training helpful? Was there anything that occurred in your mentoring that you felt unprepared for?
6. Have your attitudes or ideas about mentoring changed as part of your participation in this program?
7. What improvements would you make to the program, and would you be prepared to participate in a program like this as a mentor again?