

## CASE STUDY

# ACROSS AGES\*: AN INTERGENERATIONAL MENTORING APPROACH TO DRUG PREVENTION

*ACROSS AGES, a comprehensive, intergenerational mentoring program designed to reduce adolescent drug abuse among 9- to 13-year-olds was developed in 1991 by Andrea Taylor at Temple University's Center for Intergenerational Learning. ACROSS AGES has been designated as a Model Program by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) that is being replicated in more than 30 sites in 17 states.*



## ACROSS AGES in Action

**K**ayla, a talkative sixth-grader, was open to the idea of working with an elder mentor when her school counselor suggested it. The local program, called JUMP ACROSS AGES, is run by Bridges...A Community Support System in Milford, Connecticut. After getting her mother's support and approval, Kayla participated in a couple of workshops to learn more about mentoring and to gain a deeper understanding of older adults. She was surprised to discover that she had a lot of mistaken ideas about what older people are like. The next step in the process was a series of weekly workshops which both the mentors and the mentees were to attend. During these sessions, the adults and the youth interview one another, talk about what is "best" and "worst" about being their current age, and discuss the histories of their neighborhoods and communities.

In one of the early joint sessions, Kayla noticed that a mentor named Donna was wearing the same shirt as she was. They started talking, found out that they had bought the shirt at the same store, and they bonded right away. Kayla requested Donna as her mentor and the staff was happy to accommodate her.

\*Across Ages is a member of Generations United

Donna had decided to become a mentor after reading about JUMP ACROSS AGES in her local paper. Giving back some time to the community was nothing new for her; she had been a camp counselor, taught Sunday school, and coached soccer. But when it came to mentoring, Donna felt a little insecure. She was relieved to find out that Bridges required a 2-day pre-service training for all mentors. There she learned a great deal about what it is like to be a young teenager today and practiced ways of communicating and building trust in a new relationship.

Now Donna and Kayla get together once or twice a week for anywhere from 2 to 5 hours. They have gone to movies together, eaten out at restaurants, spent time at the local library, and attended a Build-A-Bear workshop. Donna gets a small monthly stipend that reimburses her for the money she spends on their various outings. Once they participated in a charity walk to raise money for leukemia as a part of Kayla's community service. They are both avid readers, so sometimes they choose a book to read and then discuss it. Kayla says, "It's weird but Donna is like a version of me, only older. She's really nice, and she's funny. She makes up jingles. And she's caring, too. If I ever got hurt, she would be right there when I need her. In an emergency, I would call her second, right after my mother."



For Donna, who committed to mentoring Kayla for the full school year, the experience has been equally fulfilling. "I look forward to seeing Kayla. It keeps me young. I feel like we're sharing something important. I've even made a photo scrapbook for her with pictures of our times together." Donna attends a monthly in-service workshop which keeps her connected to the other mentors in the program, and provides staff support and supervision.

Kayla's mother has also expressed her satisfaction with the program. "The JUMP ACROSS AGES social workers work hard and do a good job. And having Donna around is a wonderful experience. Sometimes kids don't want to talk with a parent, and my daughter can turn to Donna in a time of need. I appreciate all that she's done for Kayla." The program has also held some weekend activities that Kayla, her mom, and Donna attend together.

## Key Components

- **Intergenerational Mentoring:** The program fosters one-to-one relationships between middle school age youth and mentors age 55 and older. Mentors are carefully recruited, screened, and trained before being matched with a young person, and the matches are based on the interests and needs of both parties. The mentors commit to the relationship for a full school year and agree to spend at least 2 hours per week with their mentees.
- **Community Service:** Youth spend 1 to 2 hours per week performing community service such as working at a homeless shelter or visiting a nursing home. These activities are carefully planned by program staff—students receive some kind of advance training or preparation, they carry out the activity, and then have structured time to reflect on their experience.
- **Classroom-Based Life Skills Instruction:** ACROSS AGES youth participate in the Social Competence Promotion Program for Young Adolescents, which helps them gain problem-solving skills they can use to resolve conflicts and resist different kinds of pressures. The program consists of role plays, which utilizes problem scenarios to give students opportunities to practice ways of getting out of negative situations including those that involve drugs, alcohol and tobacco. The curriculum does not focus specifically on educating youth about the dangers of drug use but rather provides them with skills that can be applied to a range of challenging situations.
- **Parental Support and Family Involvement:** The program also provides support to the participants' parents and teachers through workshops and special monthly event, and informal counseling/referral.

## What's unique about ACROSS AGES?

ACROSS AGES is more than just mentoring—it is mentoring plus community service, plus development of specific drug prevention skills and support for the parent-child relationship. Its main goal is to help young people in adverse circumstances avoid drugs and grow as individuals. The program is based on a growing body of research suggesting that the most successful drug prevention programs focus on the many risk and resiliency factors that increase youths' susceptibility to substance abuse. Risk factors include biological, psychological/behavioral, and social/environmental characteristics such as depression or antisocial personality disorder, a family history of substance use, or residence in a neighborhood where substance use is tolerated. Having a relationship with a caring adult, performing meaningful work through community service, developing the skills to resist various pressures to use drugs, and maintaining a strong bond with parents are all factors that contribute to young people's resiliency. Furthermore, recruiting retired adults as mentors makes use of an untapped resource in many communities.

## Goals and Desired Outcomes

The primary goals of the Across Ages program are to decrease the incidence of alcohol, tobacco, and other drug (ATOD) use and to build resistance to drug abuse in youth by:

- Increasing knowledge of health/substance abuse issues and fostering healthy attitudes, intentions, and behaviors regarding ATOD use;
- Increasing knowledge of and improving attitudes toward older adults;
- Improving school attendance, academic achievement, and in-school behavior;
- Increasing problem-solving skills and feelings of self-worth.

## The Research Design

**The evaluation of ACROSS AGES was conducted by Dr. Leonard LoSciuto, Director of Temple University's Institute for Survey Research.** The design included a classic randomized pretest-posttest package with a comparison group. Nine different classes in 3 public middle schools were randomly assigned to 3 groups: 1) a comparison group that did not receive any program components; 2) a program group that participated in all program activities except for mentoring; and 3) a mentoring group that participated in all program activities including mentoring.

Evaluators administered a battery of 11 surveys—1) Attitudes Toward School, Future, and Elders; 2) Attitudes Toward Older People; 3) Rand Well-Being Scale; 4) Facts on Aging; 5) Reactions to Situations Involving ATOD; 6) Attitudes Toward Community Service; 7) Frequency of Substance Use; 8) Reactions to Stress; 9) Self-perception; 10) ATOD Knowledge; and 11) Problem-solving Efficacy—both before and at the end of the program. Evaluators also reviewed student records, and analyzed mentor activity logs and mentor-youth goal plans to determine the degree of intensity of each mentor-student relationship. Finally, they reviewed student records obtained from the 3 participating schools.

## Making a Difference!

ACROSS AGES has demonstrated the following outcomes:

- The mentoring group scored significantly better than the comparison group on the following 4 measures: Attitudes Toward School, Future, and Elders; Attitudes Toward Older People; Attitudes Toward Community Service; and Reactions to Situations Involving ATOD.

- The mentoring group also scored significantly better than the program group on 2 measures: Attitudes Toward School, Future, and Elders and Attitudes Toward Older People.
- The program group showed significantly greater improvements than the comparison group and the mentoring group on the Knowledge about Older People scale.
- Youth in the mentoring group had significantly fewer days absent than those in the other two groups.
- The mentoring group reported significantly less substance abuse over the previous 30 days than the comparison group.

## Program Tips

- Make it a priority to recruit those students who exhibit the greatest need for mentoring—for example, children in foster care, children of incarcerated parents, children living in single-headed households, teen mothers and fathers, gang members, and children living in low-income housing developments.
- Recognize that recruiting mentors is probably the biggest challenge that ACROSS AGES sites face, despite the fact that older adults are the fastest growing segment of the population. Today's older volunteers are looking for choice, flexibility and an experience that will both benefit the community and be meaningful for them. The recruiting message should emphasize the mutuality of enjoyment that occurs in a mentoring relationship and the flexibility inherent in the time commitment. It can be especially difficult to identify male mentors. It is important to develop recruitment materials that feature men and having men assist with recruiting.
- Monitor and support matches carefully, especially in their earliest stages. ACROSS AGES developer Andrea Taylor says, "It takes about six months for a good mentoring relationship to develop. If you want to see any outcomes, youth and mentors must be together for at least a year and the time they spend together has to be consistent. An hour a week, every single week, is better than three or four hours one week and then no contact with the mentor for a month. Especially in the beginning, the



consistency is the key to getting the relationship established. Then, as in any friendship, the relationship can sustain some periods of less regular contact. If mentoring is not done well, if it doesn't have the necessary infrastructure, and if matches are not sustained for at least 6 months, kids actually do worse. They tend to get more involved in drug activity and their schoolwork suffers.”

- Once matches are made, it is imperative for program staff to follow up with each pair in a systematic manner. Call the mentors every week, hold monthly in-service meetings, and identify and help resolve any problems as quickly as possible.
- While it is advisable to recruit mentors from the same racial and ethnic backgrounds as the youth in your program, it is more important for students to have a mentor who is understanding and can work with them to solve problems than one who merely looks like them.
- It is important to provide stipends. Most of the mentors in ACROSS AGES are living on low—often fixed—incomes and never made a lot of money even when they were employed full-time. Free tickets to recreational events will not suffice; it also costs money to take a child to McDonald's or to the movies.
- Careful screening of mentors is essential. In addition to the usual mechanisms, such as interviews, references and criminal background checks, use the 2-day pre-service training as another opportunity to screen mentors. Occasionally, mentors with good references exhibit attitudes or behaviors that cast doubts on their ability to perform well in the program. In those situations, record your observations and give clear and specific feedback. Remember that your first responsibility is to serve the best interests of the youth.