Deconstructing serendipity: Focus, purpose, and authorship in lunch buddy mentoring

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In this article, we describe lunch buddy mentoring and the reasons that it might be an effective form of youth mentoring. We review research examining the benefits of lunch buddy mentoring for highly aggressive children and consider whether relationship quality predicted those benefits. Potential change mechanisms are viewed in light of existing theories that place primary emphasis on close, lasting relationships. We situate lunch buddy mentoring within the proposed typology of focus, purpose, and authorship, and consider this typology in light of recent efforts to pair lunch buddy mentors with chronically bullied children.

A tale of two mentoring programs
The positive effects of lunch buddy mentoring emerged serendipitously from a randomized clinical trial evaluating a school-based prevention program for highly aggressive school-age children.¹
Aggressive children are at risk for many difficulties, including delinquency, school failure, and substance abuse. Based on research supporting a combination of parent- and child-focused skills training interventions, we developed a program, PrimeTime, that sought to expand and improve on that combination.2

**PrimeTime**

PrimeTime was a three-semester intervention (spring, fall, spring) that combined community-based mentoring with parent and teacher consultation and problem-solving skills training for children. Mentors were college students who earned course credit, and all were carefully screened and trained. In fact, training entailed a three-credit course that included opportunities to practice skills for interacting with troubling children, for example, in resolving conflict. PrimeTime mentors were well supervised, meeting each week as a small group with a case manager who also consulted with parents and teachers and conducted the skills training for children.

**Lunch buddy mentoring**

Because we identified children at risk for serious difficulties, participating schools were reluctant to allow a no-treatment control condition. As we looked for a control condition that was appealing but inert, we were influenced by writing and research emphasizing the quality of the relationship as the key mechanism in youth mentoring.3 We reasoned that mentoring devoid of opportunities for developing a close, lasting relationship would offer few benefits to aggressive children. We devised a control condition that limited mentoring to the school cafeteria (twice each week for a thirty-minute visit), offered minimal training to mentors, and matched children with a different mentor for each of three semesters. We assumed that a succession of mentors, restricted to meeting in noisy lunchrooms, would dampen the quality of the mentoring relationship. Early reports from lunch buddy mentors were that it was hard to build a relationship when nearby lunch-mates were constantly interjecting themselves into mentor-mentee conversations.
Outcomes

We were correct that lunch buddy children would view their mentors as less supportive than PrimeTime mentors, but we were wrong about the inert nature of lunch buddy mentoring. We found that children in both conditions showed gains, and when there were group differences, they favored the less intensive lunch buddy program. We also found that lunch buddy mentoring was more effective in schools with greater adversity (for example, more children on free or reduced-price lunch or higher playground aggression), whereas PrimeTime was more effective in schools with less adversity. For both conditions, children’s ratings of conflict in the mentoring relationship were a significant positive predictor of child externalizing problems. The correlation between children’s ratings of conflict and support in the mentoring relationship was also significant (and negative), but only for lunch buddy children. Thus, for these children, the greater the conflict, the less support they felt from their mentors. These findings suggest that minimizing conflict between mentors and mentees was critical.

The findings in support of lunch buddy mentoring were unexpected and require replication. Nevertheless, promising outcomes prompted us to look more closely at this novel approach to school-based mentoring.

Deconstructing lunch buddy mentoring

Theories about youth mentoring place clear emphasis on the relationship as the critical determinant of youth outcomes. Parra et al. described the mentoring relationship as “a final common mechanism of influence.” Empirical support for this view is found in studies that link youth outcomes to relationship quality. One indicator of relationship quality is the time span of a relationship. Grossman and Rhodes found that relationships lasting twelve months or longer were associated with positive outcomes, whereas those lasting less than six months tended to have negative
outcomes (for example, decreased self-worth). These findings have been used to promote the goal of long-term mentoring relationships.

Youth mentoring can involve a range of activities, and these activities can occur in a variety of settings, so it seems reasonable to assume that factors apart from the quality of the mentor-mentee relationship could also produce beneficial change. There is also evidence that a close mentoring relationship affects youth indirectly through changes in variables such as their attitudes about school or their relationships with parents. Thus it is reasonable to ask what other proximal variables are likely operating as change mechanisms in youth mentoring. These could be operating either separately from or in addition to the quality of the relationship itself. Certainly the unexpected findings in support of lunch buddy mentoring led us to consider the kinds of provisions that are afforded youth who are visited by a lunchtime mentor.

The term provisions is often used by developmental psychologists when referring to supportive and growth-promoting conditions that children receive in the context of interpersonal relationships. Cavell and Smith discussed a number of provisions that could accrue from children’s experiences with youth mentoring: (1) new knowledge, skills, or scripts; (2) more adaptive social cognitions, such as greater self-efficacy or positive outcome expectancies; (3) enhanced mood; (4) reduced exposure to stress; and (5) instrumental aid such as transportation. In some mentoring programs, the provisions are reflected in a structured curriculum or a purposeful agenda; other programs are less structured, and the provisions emerge more naturally and in ways that are less obvious and perhaps more variable across mentor-mentee dyads.

A potentially important but overlooked provision is a change in the external contingencies that govern youth behavior. Critical to understanding this provision is the matching law and its application to child behavior. According to the matching law, the probability that youth perform a given behavior will match the probability they are reinforced for that behavior relative to all other behaviors. So if coercive behavior, such as defiance, leads to
more reliable “payoffs” (parent giving in) than prosocial behavior (negotiating, cooperating), then they are more likely to use coercion in the future. But an affirming mentor could alter those contingencies or youths’ expectations of them. For example, children who enjoy a supportive mentoring relationship might be less likely to whine and pester their parents because the expected value of whining and pestering has been lowered relative to the payoff for more positive behaviors that their mentor reinforces. This scenario could explain why youth mentoring can enhance the parent-child relationship. For similar reasons, a supportive mentoring relationship might benefit youth who are living in homes or neighborhoods where the reinforcement for prosocial behavior is quite low relative to the rewards for deviant behavior. Support for this hypothesis comes from evidence suggesting that youth whose lives are marked by environmental risk tend to benefit more from mentoring than youth who suffer individual risk factors.

Provisions of lunch buddy mentoring

To the extent that lunch buddy mentoring is an effective form of mentoring, by what mechanisms does it lead to positive outcomes? In our view, there are several possibilities, including many of those already listed. We base our speculations on related research as well as on statements that mentors make in their weekly log sheets or end-of-term papers. For example, lunch buddy mentors often report that lunchtime visits seem to lift mentees’ mood and bolster their self-esteem. Also possible but less common is for lunch buddy mentors to provide material aid to mentees. An obvious possibility here is lunchtime meals or snacks; however, lunch buddies are discouraged from doing this because of costs and because treats brought in from the outside can disrupt lunchtime decorum and run counter to schools’ nutritional goals. A better example involves a mentor who reported giving her mentee a small packet of stickers on a day when the school was having a special celebration. Students were to dress in ways that fit the theme of that
celebration, and the mentor suspected (correctly) that her mentee would arrive without any special attire. The stickers she gave her mentee were a modest material provision that allowed her mentee to be part of the fun.

Mentors routinely describe instances where their presence serves to alter the contingencies that govern lunchtime behavior and peer interactions. Mentors report using extinction (that is, ignoring) or verbal reprimands when children use deviant or hurtful behavior and when peers reinforce that behavior with laughter. It is also common for mentors to report using praise and other social rewards when children engage in appropriate behavior, especially when that behavior is directed toward other children. Mentor-induced changes in the contingencies that govern children’s lunchtime interactions do not mean that children are learning new, more adaptive skills; rather, it means they are being rewarded for skills they already have.

Nevertheless, on occasion, mentors try to promote mentees’ social and emotional skills, for example, identifying and correcting biased social cognitions or teaching specific skills for getting along interpersonally. Potential topics include strategies for resolving conflict and making new friends, the importance of not assuming hostility in others’ actions, techniques for coping with stress and negative affect, and ways to systematically solve difficult social dilemmas. Some mentors also report deliberate attempts to model these kinds of skills and cognitions. When lunch buddy mentors teach new ways to relate to peers, they are serving what Karcher and Nakkula in the first article in this volume call the conventional purpose of helping children develop important life skills; such teaching, however, is not the primary goal of the program.

We also believe that consistent visits from college student mentors can boost mentees’ social reputation at school. Hymel found that peers tend to attribute the positive behavior of disliked children to external or isolated causes while viewing any negative behavior as due to internal or stable traits. The opposite seems true for liked children: negative behaviors are benignly interpreted, with peers giving liked children the benefit of the doubt.
This affective bias serves to maintain cognitive consistency when children with a negative reputation display positive behaviors. Positive behaviors are not seen as evidence for changing attitudes about disliked children but are dismissed as unimportant. Because of this affective bias, Bierman and Furman included an adult coach and two well-liked “peer partners” in their social skills training groups. With repeated opportunities to observe target children’s positive behavior, peer partners shifted how they viewed and treated target children.

Lunch buddy mentors are not social skill coaches, but their presence at a school lunch table could enhance peers’ attitudes about the children being mentored. We routinely heard that nearby lunch-mates inserted themselves into mentor-mentee interactions, and mentors often complained that building a stronger bond with their mentee was being undermined by interfering lunch-mates. Because we designed the lunch buddy program as a control condition, we welcomed these reports and assumed that diluting the quality of the mentor-mentee relationship would limit the potential for positive outcomes. We failed to recognize the potential impact that mentors might have on peers’ attitudes toward or interactions with mentored children. In hindsight, it seems obvious that reliable visits from a college student would generate such positive attention.

**Implications for understanding the role of the relationship in youth mentoring**

The most important implication from our study of lunch buddy mentoring is a greater appreciation for the multifaceted ways that mentoring can benefit children. Traditional wisdom and findings from correlational (nonexperimental) studies suggest that mentoring will have its greatest yield when matches are both strong and long. But we must be careful in assuming that a close, lasting relationship is the sine qua non of youth mentoring. High-quality relationships do offer many advantages, but mentoring can involve
other provisions that will vary across mentors, mentees, and the contexts of mentoring.

Another important implication pertains to the context of youth mentoring. We suspect that critical to any gains achieved by lunch buddy mentoring are the peer and school contexts in which it is embedded. Thus, we would expect few gains from a lunch buddy program that was conducted away from school and away from lunchtime peers. The term context can refer to many things, including physical setting (home, school), the presence and significance of other individuals (friends, siblings), and the culture and language of the participants (Latino/Spanish). The context of mentoring can also involve youths’ age, gender, developmental history, family circumstances, and current concerns. Mentoring a fifteen-year-old boy who lives with foster parents and has a history of antisocial behavior is likely to be very different from mentoring a nine-year-old girl whose mother recently lost her battle with cancer. Although it might seem obvious that developmental context can affect both the process and outcome of youth mentoring, rarely has this been studied.

A final implication pertains to the critical role of conflict in mentor-mentee relationships, a topic that few researchers have studied.21 We (inadvertently) designed the lunch buddy program in ways that minimized conflict by restricting visits to the lunchroom, and we used a new mentor each semester. We also had in place structures such as weekly logs and course grades for ensuring that mentors consistently met with their mentee. Thus, we avoided the very damaging impact of inconsistent visits and premature endings.

Collectively, our findings suggest a model of lunch buddy mentoring that can be expressed as follows: (Consistency – Conflict) Context = Outcomes. Consistent mentor visits, minus the damaging impact of conflict, are the minimal conditions for a positive mentoring relationship; however, the influence of that relationship is amplified by the peer and school contexts in which in which the lunch buddy mentoring occurs.
Reconstructing lunch buddy mentoring as selective prevention for bullied children

We recently began to examine the value of lunch buddy mentoring as selective prevention for chronically bullied children. Universal, schoolwide antibullying programs can reduce overall levels of school bullying, but it is unclear whether chronically bullied children benefit from these programs. Interventions for bullied children are also complicated by a peer context that supports school bullying. Even when peers espouse antibullying attitudes, they are often constrained by group norms that discourage standing up for bullied children. Selective interventions that are capable of addressing negative peer contexts must also avoid the harm that can come when bullied children are identified and treated.

We believe lunch buddy mentoring has the potential to be an effective intervention for bullied children in the elementary school grades. Our pilot data reveal near-uniform satisfaction with the program and few, if any, concerns about harm to bullied children (based on child, teacher, and parent data). Preliminary findings also support the potential for lunch buddy mentoring to decrease target children’s level of peer victimization as reported by peers. Future studies will evaluate more systematically the benefits for bullied children and measure changes in hypothesized mechanisms such as social reputation and peer interactions.

Focus, purpose, and authorship in lunch buddy mentoring

We no longer view lunch buddy mentoring as inert and have specific hypotheses about its mechanisms of change. Thus, we are more deliberate and explicit in what we ask of mentors. We have moved from a strategy of minimal training with very few guidelines toward the development of a detailed training manual with specific mentoring goals. In this section, we situate the lunch
buddy program within Karcher and Nakkula’s typology of mentoring interaction, a typology that considers focus, purpose, and authorship.

**Focus**

The focus of lunch buddy mentoring is both goal directed and relational. It is goal directed in that mentors are told explicitly that their goal is to contribute to the social reputation and peer interactions of bullied children. Mentors are given specific advice as to how they might achieve these goals. They are told to be open to interacting with nearby lunch-mates and view these interactions as opportunities to promote mentees’ integration into the peer and school ecology. The overall structure of the lunch buddy program is also predetermined, with restrictions on the kinds of activities mentors can pursue. Mentors are expected to make two visits per week and each visit is to last roughly thirty minutes, the usual length of the lunch period. All visits are to take place in the school cafeteria, and mentors are to abide by the school’s lunchtime rules. Mentors are asked to sit at the same table with mentees and their lunch-mates, and mentors are discouraged from sitting alone with their mentee. As the end of the semester approaches, lunch buddy mentors are asked to prepare their mentee for the close of the match and devote time to reviewing shared experiences and to say good-bye.

Lunch buddy mentoring is also highly relational in that interactions between mentors and mentees, between mentors and lunch-mates, and between mentees and lunch-mates are allowed to unfold naturally within certain limits and with the program goals in mind. Hurtful or deviant behavior among lunch-mates is discouraged or reported, and negative actions directed at bullied children are corrected or deflected. But beyond these exceptions, mentors are given considerable latitude in how they build and maintain their mentoring relationships. Individual differences among mentors and mentees, as well as the mix of personalities at a lunch table, likely exert substantial influence on the depth and quality of the relationships that emerge. We have been impressed
with the strategies that mentors use to promote positive interactions between bullied children and their lunch-mates. Mentors often use their interactions with lunch-mates as a way to model and reinforce appropriate social behavior or as an opportunity to identify and challenge biased perceptions that one or more children might have toward another child. We offer one mentor’s description of these kinds of interactions: “One specific instance I remember is [another girl] saying, ‘[You’re lucky you] don’t have to spend eight hours a day with [my mentee].’ This reference was made at how annoying and overbearing [my mentee] could be. I looked at this girl and told her that I would be happy to spend eight hours a day with [my mentee]. The encouraging thing is that this girl sat with us the rest of the semester, and it seems as though their relationship has improved.” This example illustrates the power of being focused on the relationship and on the youth, which enabled the mentor to take advantage of the developmental processes that unfolded.

**Purpose**

The stated purpose of the lunch buddy mentoring program is conventional and future oriented. We view it as a possible prevention tool for children at risk. Currently the specific purpose of lunch buddy mentoring is to alter the negative developmental trajectory associated with chronic peer victimization, thereby preventing bullied children from experiencing later maladjustment. In other words, lunch buddy mentors have a specific job to do, and we as the developers and coordinators of the program have defined that job.

On the other hand, the moment-to-moment interactions that are the building blocks of lunch buddy mentoring are largely playful and present oriented. There is an explicitly playful side to what it is that lunch buddy mentors do. Twice a week they sit at a school lunch table with a group of elementary school students. They do not work from a prescribed curriculum or arrive with a planned activity. Instead, they are given overarching goals of enhancing the social reputation and peer interactions of their mentee that can be
achieved only if their own contribution to the lunchtime mix is positive and affirming. More important, it is only through changes in the behavior and attitudes of the peer group that mentors can achieve their goals. Lunch buddy mentors can better achieve their purpose when interactions with the mentee and nearby lunchmates are playful, supportive, and enjoyable. This comment illustrates one mentor’s approach to being playful: “It’s okay to relive some of those fourth-grade moments. If you can respect the kids and not act like you are mature and they aren’t, they will love you. Let loose, have fun, and be a tad bit goofy. Also, don’t be straightforward with life lessons. Just sneak them in every now and then, and they are smart enough to catch on.”

**Authorship**

The quotation at the end of the previous section also illustrates that at times, mentors deliberately choose the activity in which they and their mentees engage. Mentors often choose activities with a specific goal in mind, such as learning more about children’s background, inquiring about their day, or discussing an issue that arose in a previous visit. But there is also a great deal of give-and-take in these visits, the constraints of the school lunchroom notwithstanding. Seldom, it seems, are mentors the sole determiners of what activities or topics of conversation are pursued. An effective lunch buddy mentor recognizes that too many unilateral decisions about activities or topics could undermine the larger goal of promoting a mentee’s social reputation and peer interactions.

It is also important to recognize that lunch buddy mentoring is not a purely dyadic experience. More often, lunch-mates are actively participating in conversations between mentors and mentees, and there are many times when neither the mentor nor the mentee has authorship over what happens. Indeed, we hypothesize that the modal activity in which mentors and mentees engage is driven by the collective input or preferences of the nearby peer group. This makes the lunch buddy program somewhat unique in its inclusion of the larger peer ecology in the authorship of activities. One mentor described the process in this way: “I made sure
that while the majority of my conversations were solely focused on my little girl, I included the other children in the conversations we were having. At first, I noticed each of the girls at the table tried to outtalk one another in attempts to get my attention. Slowly but surely, however, the girls and my mentee started taking turns to say what they needed to say. Although they still sometimes interrupted one another, they improved greatly.”

**Conclusion**

By studying lunch buddy mentoring, we learned we could dilute the quality of mentoring relationships if we restricted when, where, and for how long mentors met with mentees. But we also learned that factors other than a close, lasting relationship could benefit children. Our current research focus is to assess mentor-induced changes in bullied children’s social reputation and peer interactions, as well as the impact that mentoring has on their later development. Systematically gathering the data necessary to understand how mentoring works can be costly, time-consuming, and complex, and at times the results challenge our strongly held notions about youth mentoring.\(^2^6\) When that happens, it is wise to remember that the facts are always friendly. For those who believe in the promise of youth mentoring, it is vital to embrace the available facts so we can build “a more nuanced understanding of what it takes to deliver high quality, effective youth mentoring.”\(^2^7\)

**Notes**


5. Parra et al. (2002).


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