What is mentoring?

Every child or young person needs a role model to look up to other than parents. When children have committed crimes, having this type of person is even more critical. A mentor can be described as an experienced and trusted friend, big brother or sister for the child or young person and can be a guide, a friend, a coach, a responsive adult, a positive peer and a listener.

This is a person who gives to a child, in a sustained and supportive relationship, wisdom, friendship, guidance and caring. The Youth Development Outreach (YDO) in Pretoria defines a mentor as:

"a loving older brother or sister wanting what is best for the younger brothers or sisters. He or she looks for ways to help them develop from childhood into adulthood, by making his or her personal strengths, resources, and networks of friendships and contacts available to them in order for them to positively reach their full potential".

Mentoring can be summed up as the presence of a caring individual who offers guidance, friendship and understanding and who provides a child or young person with opportunities where coping mechanisms develop, where personal goals can be achieved and where personal growth at all levels can take place.

Mentoring can also be defined as the commitment of a mature peer or adult to the growth and well-being of a child through long-term personal relationships. Often these relationships are defined by the duration of the relationship and the frequency of interaction.

To children, mentoring means having a trusted friend who cares about them, who listens to them, who is a role model they can look up to and who is there to help them negotiate their way around the challenges of daily living. The relationship between the child and the mentor is “informal but also professional” in that the mentor has to adhere to ethics and has to be accountable for the work done with the child.

It is important that we differentiate between a role model and a celebrity. Too often there is a blurred distinction between a famous personality and a role model. A celebrity does not necessarily equal a positive role model. For a celebrity to qualify as a role model for children and young people she or he must exhibit some positive elements in her or his character, conduct, values and behaviour that stand out to be emulated by other children. The behaviour, conduct, attitude and values of a mentor are those that when emulated by children, promote positive behaviours, positive character development, development of a sense of responsibility, and development of core values that make children positive contributing citizens in the society. A role model can be an ordinary person in the community who has achieved a lot against all odds, it can be a teacher, it can be a person with a disability, it can be a cousin, a sister or brother and all these persons need not necessarily have the fame of television personalities, for example.

Critical elements of mentoring

• Young people being part of the solution and helping their peers.
• Young people listening to their peers, older brothers and older sisters – more than they do to adults.
• A special one-to-one relationship that provides guidance, advice and support to children.
• Mentors serve as role models for younger people who need support and help.
• A mentor can also simply be someone a child hangs out with.

When properly and carefully designed and well implemented, mentoring programmes provide positive influences for younger people who may need a little extra attention or who do not have a good support system within their families.

What does it take to keep a mentoring programme going for the child justice system?

• Selection and screening of mentors.
• Training and competency
development for mentors.

- Matching and pairing a mentor and a young person.
- Frequency of meetings between mentor and the child – greater success relies on significantly greater time commitment.
- Community support is a strong ingredient for an effective mentoring programme. Community members (teachers, leaders, elders, etc.) can play a supportive role to mentors – in an advisory capacity they can offer ideas and serve to link mentors with resources in the community and may offer advice on how best to support and guide children who are being mentored.

**Duration of mentoring services**

Research conducted on mentoring programmes and lessons from South Africa indicate that the average duration for mentoring services is six months. This means that mentors should commit themselves to working with the child for six months and sometimes more, as after-care support and reintegration services are critical. This is very important because mentoring is not a “hit-and-run” affair. This is about the growing needs of the child and is certainly about developmental and transition issues in the life of the child. The duration of services becomes even longer when the child has been involved in the criminal activities for some time.

Equally important is the time spent with the child. Without regular contact, mentoring has no effect. Face-to-face contact, consistency and continuity of contact are important during the intense phase of the programme.

**Accountability**

Although the mentoring relationship is often described as “informal” in nature, accountability is very important. For use by courts for instance, mentors should be able to account in writing what has happened to the child, what growth or changes have taken place as well as the degree to which the child has complied with any conditions set by the courts.

**The role of mentors in the new child justice system**

- Mentors can supervise level one diversion options and can be used in conjunction with a positive peer association order.
- Mentors, if properly trained and skilled, can run level one and level two structured programmes.
- Mentors can organise and arrange community service and ensure compliance with such service, whilst offering the child some support in other areas.
- Mentors can successfully run level two diversion options as demonstrated by Youth Development Outreach (YDO) in Pretoria, which runs an intensive six-month life skills programme, with family group conferencing as an integral part of their intervention.
- Through the creativity afforded by a mentoring programme, it can be a crime prevention/reduction programme and reduce recidivism. Research on mentoring has shown that youth involved in mentoring programmes are less likely to experiment with drugs, less likely to be physically aggressive and less likely to skip school than those not involved in mentoring programme.
- Mentors could also be used effectively to reintegrate children back into their families and communities.
- Mentoring can be used as a pre-trial alternative to detention and can also be used as an intensive alternative sentencing option.

**Challenges facing the mentoring programmes**

- Time and self-investment on the part of a mentor. Failure to follow through with the relationship, cancelling and not keeping appointments.
- Failure to give the child the attention and support needed.
- Compatibility between the child and the mentor.
- Lack of skills and competencies on the part of the mentor – patience is important.
- Relationship between mentors and the child’s parents. Sometimes parents may want to impose their ways of dealing with the child on the mentor. Some parents want to see the mentor as “being on their side”, or some may simply feel threatened by the mentor. Parents need to be helped to understand that mentors are not competing with them, and mentors on the other hand need to respect and support positive parental rules and concerns while building their own relationship with the child.
- In South Africa, mentoring has not been used much in relation to the criminal justice system, and therefore there is a serious challenge in ensuring that mentoring programmes are credible and have the desired effect. Mentoring programmes have to be properly evaluated based on clear indicators that are critical for the child justice system.