

CALIBER

**SAME-RACE AND CROSS-RACE  
MATCHING IN MENTORING  
PROGRAMS**

**DRAFT ISSUE BRIEF**

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Mentoring programs across the United States face a shortage of minority mentors. Only about 15 to 20 percent of mentors are from minority racial or ethnic groups, compared to about half of mentees (Rhodes, 2000). Mentoring programs may have significant concerns about issues of cultural competence and promotion of cultural identification in those programs that serve large numbers of minority youth. The shortage of minority mentors raises the question of whether it is necessary or desirable to match minority youth with mentors from a similar racial/ethnic background. A deeper understanding of whether and for whom racial matching matters is critical to aiding programs in making this decision. Programs can also learn from promising strategies for recruitment and retention of minority mentors, and from approaches designed to support cultural competence and diversity, both as a means of supporting cross-race relationships and of benefiting all participants within mentoring programs, regardless of their race or ethnicity.

This brief presents the findings from the “Identification and Development of Effective Models and Implementation Strategies for Same-Race and Cross-Race Mentoring Programs” project, funded by the Family and Youth Services Bureau in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. This project sought to address these important questions via a number of sources, including data gathered from telephone/electronic communications with researchers, other experts, and program directors, as well as telephone interviews with mentors and mentees. These data and a review of the literature were used to create a conceptual model of racial matching, which is presented later in this brief.

## **1. EFFECTS OF RACIAL MATCHING**

### **1.1 Background**

The few studies to date that have investigated racial matching within mentoring relationships have tended to find few differences between youth in same-race vs. cross-race mentoring relationships (e.g., Jucovy, 1999; Morrow & Styles; Rhodes, 2000; Rhodes et al., 2002; Sipe, 1999; Sanchez & Colon, in press; Sipe, 1999). Indeed, in an analysis of more than 55 mentoring studies, Dubois, Holloway, Valentine, and Cooper (2002) found that youth in programs using same-race matching did not fare any better or worse on academic, socio-emotional, behavioral, and career outcomes. In contrast, there have been a few studies indicating differences in the duration of same-race and cross-race mentoring relationships, although the direction of these findings has been inconsistent (e.g., Grossman & Rhodes, 2002; Rhodes et al., 2002).

The existing research is insufficient to support or refute the notion that racial matching is related to relationship quality, relationship length, or youth outcomes. Yet, the few existing

studies were not explicitly designed to examine racial matching and therefore are limited in their ability to assess its impact. Methodological limitations include non-random comparisons of same-race and cross-race matches and the predominant reliance on Big Brothers Big Sisters data, which is not necessarily representative of the experiences of youth and mentors in other types of programs. Outdated data, limited sample sizes, and the lack of distinction between various racial and ethnic groups have further limited findings.

One of the most critical questions left unanswered by extant research pertains to the implications of racial matching for mentees' (and mentors') ethnic identity and cultural attitudes and understanding. Studies on transracial adoption imply that youth who have been adopted by adults from other racial/ethnic groups may experience less positive ethnic identity in adolescence and young adulthood (Alexander & Curtis, 1996; Park & Green, 2000; Phinney, 1990). Given the dearth of relevant research, it is impossible at this point to establish whether a similar effect occurs with cross-race youth mentoring.

From a theoretical standpoint, racial matching is thought to influence mentoring relationships and outcomes through its impact on the development of effective mentoring relationships and ethnic identity in youth. The mechanisms whereby racial matching practices are thought to influence relationships and identity outcomes are described below. Given limited research on this topic, these mechanisms are identified through theoretical and empirical investigations of youth development and relationship development. Yet, it is important to note that existing theories tend to emphasize the potential challenges associated with cross-race matching.

- The development of effective mentoring relationships:

1. *Mutual respect and understanding* may be more likely to flourish amongst youth and mentors who show respect for and understand each other's cultures. A common background may make them better able to understand each other's behaviors and better able to communicate and relate to one another. In addition, mentors from the same cultural/ethnic background may be able to provide more appropriate guidance and support for youth (e.g., Camino, 1992; Ogbu, 1990; Rhodes, 2000; Rhodes et al., 2002; Salzman, 2000; Sanchez & Colon, in press; Spencer, 1999).
2. Role models may be more effective when they are *perceived as more similar* to the youth (e.g., Camino, 1999; Nicholar, 2000; Ogbu, 1990; Sanchez & Colon, in press; Yancey, Siegel, & McDaniel, 2002), although perceptions of similarity are typically based on personalities, interests, and other characteristics more individualistic than race or ethnicity (e.g., Rhodes et al., 2002).
3. *Cultural trust* may be diminished in cross-race relationships, as youths experience stereotype threat, a psychological reaction that some individuals experience when they fear they might be stereotyped. For instance, minority youth who are working with white mentors may fear that they will be judged based on stereotypes of their racial/ethnic group (Cohen, Steele, & Ross, 1999; Sanchez &

Colon, in press). On the other hand, stereotype threat can possibly be overcome and cultural trust built through positive experiences with individuals from another racial/ethnic group (Cohen et al.).

4. *Exposure to own/other cultures* is another factor to consider. Same-race matches might be considered preferable if mentors engage their mentees in cultural discussions and events, presenting positive messages about their group and promoting a more positive ethnic identity and greater ethnic pride (Spencer & Markstrom-Adams, 1990). Conversely, cross-race relationships may also facilitate greater appreciation for and understanding of other cultures, which can in turn enhance ethnic identity development (Spencer & Markstrom-Adams, 1990).
  5. *Perceived competence* may play a role in relationship development as cross-race mentors may doubt their ability to adequately understand their mentee's culture and to serve as appropriate role models (Jucovy, 1999; Morrow & Styles, 1995). Regardless of whether racial matching actually affects mentors' abilities to be successful, they may be less effective if they perceive themselves as incompetent (Bandura, 1986).
- **The development of ethnic identity:** Ethnic identity is central to the discussion of racial matching in mentoring programs. Indeed, identity formation is a key developmental task that provides “meaning, direction, and purpose” to an individual's life, while also affecting individual competence and functioning (Spencer & Markstrom-Adams, 1990, p.290). Ethnic identity, more specifically, pertains to an individual's sense of his or her own race or ethnicity, its meaning, and how race or ethnicity affects the individual's place in society. An individual's ethnic identity influences the way he or she perceives the world, as well as his or her responses to the environment (Camino, 1992; Cross, Strauss, & Fhagen-Smith, 1999; LaFramboise, Coleman, & Gerton, 1993; Laursen & Williams, 2002; Spencer, 1999). Minority youth tend to show less developed ethnic identities than white youth, and African American youth appear to be particularly at risk with regard to their ethnic identity (e.g., Ogbu, 1990; Spencer, 1999). Yet to date, no studies have examined the link between racial matching in youth mentoring and ethnic identity, and few mentoring articles have discussed ethnic identity in any detail (for an exception, see Wallace, 1994).

## 1.2 How do program staff and participants feel about racial matching?

On a more pragmatic level, the existing literature offers little consideration of the perspectives of program directors, mentors, and mentees themselves. Our data, however, indicate the following:

- **Program directors** generally did not believe that it was important to match youth and mentors based on their racial or ethnic background. However, some indicated that they thought cross-race mentoring could be beneficial to both youth and mentors, noting the importance of being able to thrive in a multicultural society, while others were proponents of same-race matching. No program directors, not even the latter

group, felt that it was preferable to place minority youth on a waiting list for a same-race mentor rather than matching them with someone from a different race/ethnicity.

- **Mentors** expressed similar views, although perceptions of the importance of racial matching differed more dramatically between same-race and cross-race mentors. Mentors in same-race relationships were more likely to report that same-race matching was preferable. However, no mentors felt that youth should be placed on waiting lists rather than being assigned a cross-race mentor. Like the program directors, nearly all of the mentors interviewed felt that the benefits or challenges of racial matching would depend upon the circumstances of the individual match.
- **Mentees** also reported that racial matching was not a central factor in the development of mentor-youth relationships. The mentees did not feel that youth should be placed on a waiting list in order to identify a same-race mentor. Yet, like the mentors, the mentees identified circumstances that might make racial matching more important, such as the level of segregation in the community or the youth's own comfort level with a cross-race mentor.

### 1.3 For whom and under what circumstances does racial matching matter?

A common theme in the opinions of program staff and participants, and also in the literature on this topic, suggests that the effects of racial matching likely depend upon individual circumstances associated with the match. The communications with program staff and participants and the review of the literature for this project identified four levels of factors that might alter the impact of racial matching on youth:

- **Youth and family characteristics:** Demographic and developmental characteristics, and cultural attitudes and opinions can affect outcomes linked to racial matching. Risk and protective factors in the youth's immediate environment, such as the family's socioeconomic status or the youth's ethnic identity, can also play a role, as can the family's beliefs and opinions. Indeed, youth and family characteristics were the most commonly identified level of intervening factors throughout this project.
- **Mentor characteristics:** Characteristics of the mentors may also affect the quality of same-race and cross-race matches. As discussed above, race, ethnicity, and culture, and cultural identity and attitudes impact relationships. Many program directors and participants felt it critical to assign youth to mentors who are not prejudiced toward the youth's racial or ethnic group. In addition, mentors who are youth-centered, supportive of the youth's autonomy, reliable, and persistent may be better equipped overcome any challenges associated with their mentoring relationship.
- **Youth and mentor "fit":** Youth and mentor commonalities and style of interaction may also moderate the effect of racial matching on the relationship and outcomes. According to most program directors and mentors contacted for this project, shared interests are more critical to the development of effective mentoring relationships than shared racial or ethnic background. Other important factors include shared

socioeconomic status, shared experiences and shared goals for the relationship, geographic proximity, and the duration and intensity of the relationship.

- **Program characteristics:** The program environment can also affect the reactions of mentors, youth, and family members to same-race and cross-race matching. Key variables include the program’s cultural orientation, demographic characteristics of the program staff, the support provided to matches, and the program’s approach to matching and training.
- **Community characteristics:** Characteristics of the community also may have an impact, to the extent that they influence the cultural attitudes and opinions of youth and mentors. Factors such as the population demographics (e.g., segregation, economic disparity), cultural mistrust or racism, and the social capital and opportunity structures available to youth can also alter the importance of racial matching practices in a given program.

## 2. PROMISING APPROACHES TO RECRUITMENT AND RELATIONSHIP SUPPORT

While more research will be necessary before firm conclusions can be drawn regarding the importance of racial matching, programs are in immediate need of the best available information to help them address this issue. Currently, no empirical evidence exists to identify “promising” or “effective” practices regarding race and ethnicity in mentoring programs. Yet, in the current study, program directors’ comments revealed a number of ways in which programs can recruit more minority mentors and better support their mentors and youth by making their programs more culturally aware and competent.

- Recruiting minority mentors:
  1. A number of program directors stressed the importance of *engaging the community* around the issue of minority mentor recruitment. This can be accomplished through task forces or advisory committees, which assess the challenges associated with minority mentor recruitment and identify solutions likely to work within that community.
  2. A second strategy involves *connecting with community organizations*. Many program directors had approached African-American churches, civic organizations, and social clubs in order to recruit African-American mentors. Indeed, personal connections are particularly valued in minority communities (Amerson, 2000), which may explain why program directors most commonly cited word of mouth as their most effective recruitment tool (e.g., asking existing mentors to wear buttons that said “join me in mentoring” or “ask me about mentoring,” or giving their mentors refer-a-friend cards to increase their success in recruitment). Yet, the program directors indicated that the level of relationship between the program and these organizations is critical – programs that established meaningful relationships with community organizations reported

greater success in recruiting minority mentors. Developing these relationships take times and persistence on the part of the program director.

3. Programs can also be *structured to appeal to target groups*. The location of the program (e.g. whether it is school-based or community-based) may play a role in its attractiveness to hard-to-recruit populations. Another issue to consider is mandatory screening and fingerprinting, which many program directors described as a major barrier to recruitment of minority male mentors (e.g., they might feel stigmatized or stereotyped). Several program directors also noted the importance of having minority and male program staff, who are better able to help recruit minority and male mentors, and who may also make the program environment more comfortable for these populations.
  4. *Marketing to the population of interest* is another key strategy. Several programs emphasized the importance of considering the messages that are being communicated by the program, the medium used to communicate these messages, as well as the individuals who are delivering the messages. Many program directors reported that they developed marketing messages that were targeted to the population they were trying to recruit. Others identified success with advertisements and public service announcements on television and radio stations (see also Amerson, 2000; McRoy & Oglesby, 1997). Likewise, a number of program directors indicated that it was helpful to use minority mentors and mentees to spread the word about the need for more mentors from their communities.
- **Assessment and matching:** The primary goal of culturally competent assessment and matching is to *ensure that youth are not exposed to negative influences* such as cultural mistrust and stereotype threat (Cohen et al., 1999; Ogbu, 1990). Although many program staff indicated that they used various techniques to assess mentors' and mentees' cultural beliefs and attitudes, few used systematic assessments to do so. The majority indicated that they gathered information about beliefs and attitudes through their initial in-person and telephone interviews with mentors and mentees. Program directors almost uniformly noted the importance of assessing the preferences of mentors, parents, and youth before matching with someone from the same or a different racial or ethnic background. In order to build a connection between youth and mentors based on their commonalities, most program directors indicated that they use characteristics other than race to match youth with mentors.
  - **Training of mentees, mentors, and staff:** *Cultural competency training* can also be integrated into program practices, in order to both build cultural competence and foster support and connection between those involved in training. Most of the program directors interviewed for this project indicated that their mentor training addresses issues of preconceptions and judgments, and recognition of biases related to socioeconomic class. Yet few reported that they used cultural competence training or provided training specifically focused on issues of race, ethnicity, or culture with either their mentors and mentees, or their staff. Nonetheless, many program directors indicated their belief that this training was important for both same-race and cross-race matches.

A few programs used what Camino (1992) has termed a “*core approach*” to issues of race ethnicity and culture. That is, these programs include *a cultural focus on every level of the organization*, examining each aspect of programmatic functioning to ensure cultural appropriateness and competence, and implementing cultural approaches such as those described above at all levels of the organization. In a discussion of common features within youth programs with successful multicultural components, Camino (1992) highlighted the importance of striving to *improve youth’s ethnic identity*. In assessing the individual characteristics of a mentor or mentee, successful multicultural mentoring programs consider the individual’s culture and its potential effects on the match. They also recognize and address minority youth’s experiences with racism and oppression. The population of staff and volunteers reflect various cultural backgrounds and receive ongoing multicultural training, so that they can support youth through exploration of the meaning of race and ethnicity. Finally, successful multicultural programs also provide culturally appropriate activities that promote the cultural values of the youth and connect with natural support systems in the youth’s lives.

The current project identified examples of mentoring programs that were developed with the primary goal of promoting ethnic identity among youth and that incorporate cultural values into all levels of the organization. For example, one of the program directors interviewed for the current project described a female rites of passage project based on the seven moral principles of Nguzo Saba, which were developed for the celebration of Kwanzaa and reflect traditional African values (Wyatt, 2000). Girls in this program learn about the seven principles and engage in activities that affirm and reflect upon their meaning. They also learn how to engage in traditional African dance and music and how to care for their skin and hair using African products. Girls are assigned to different levels of the program based upon their age and the length of time they have been in the program. As they move from one level to the next, a rites of passage ceremony is held to celebrate their accomplishments. This ceremony is structured based on African traditions, and participants (including mentors, mentees, program staff, and families) wear traditional dress and perform African dances. The programs that were identified through this project serve minority populations from a single racial/ethnic group. Therefore, they may not be appropriate for implementation in programs with more diverse populations. Yet, they offer examples of methods that mentoring programs have used to target the development of ethnic identity in their youth.

### **3. CONCEPTUAL MODEL**

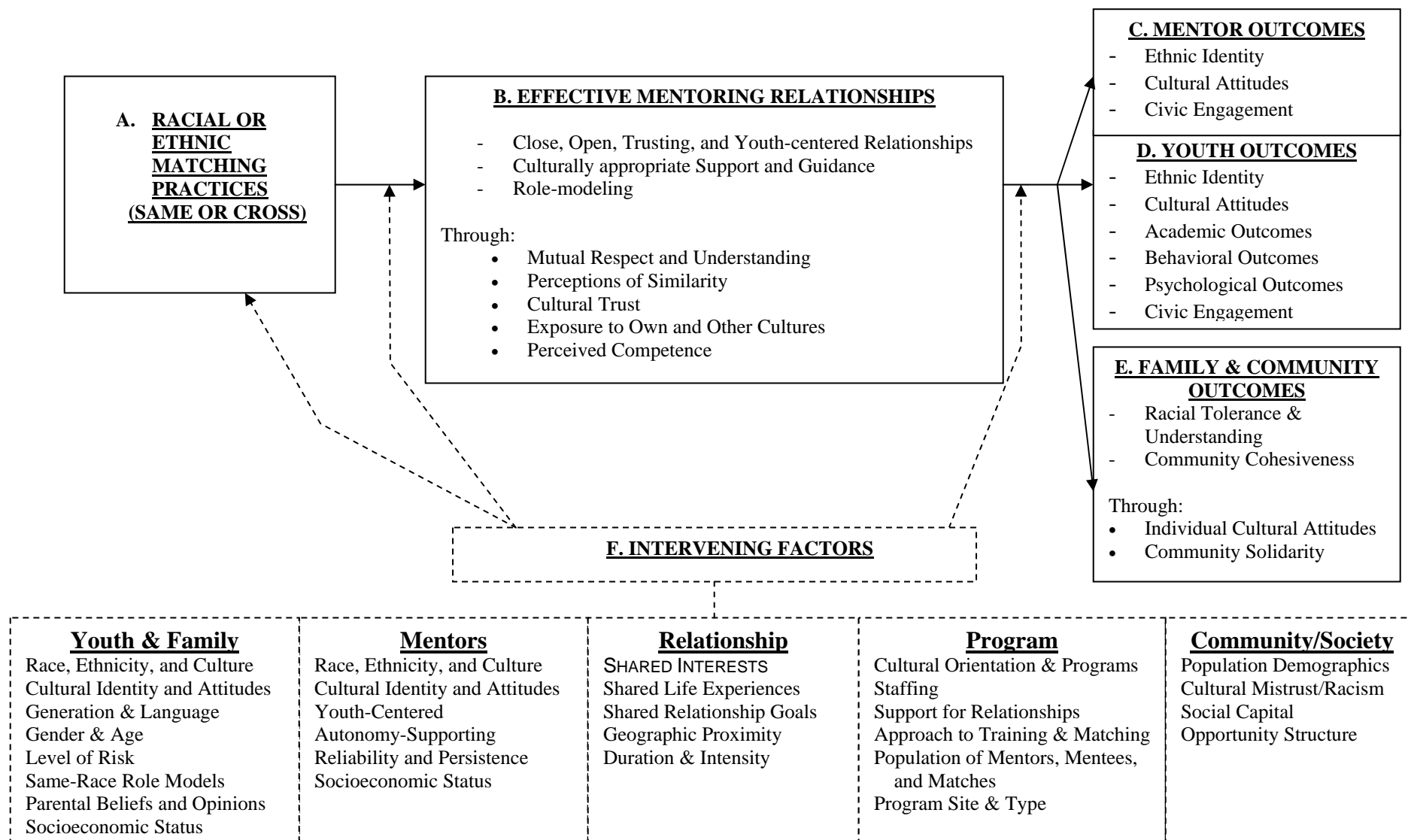
We used our findings and the literature review discussed above to form a conceptual model that was guided by a developmental framework (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). This framework considers the importance of person, process, context, and time for understanding the developmental outcomes of individuals. As such, the model addresses not only the effect of racial matching on outcomes for youth, mentors, families, and communities, but also the



mechanisms through which these effects are thought to come about and the intervening factors that might alter these relationships. This is the first model of its kind to pull together the current theories and research pertaining to the question of how racial matching practices affect mentoring relationships and outcomes

As depicted by the boxes and arrows in the top half of this model, the model's primary focus is the processes through which racial matching affects outcomes for relationships, youth, and – more secondarily – mentors, families, and communities. The model begins with racial matching practices (Box A), linking these directly to the development of effective mentoring relationships (Box B), which in turn are posited to affect youth, mentor, and family and community outcomes (Boxes C, D, and E). Current theories hypothesize that effective mentoring relationships are the primary mechanism through which mentoring programs improve youth outcomes, and a small body of research has shown initial support for this hypothesis (Jucovy, 1999; Morrow & Styles, 1995; Sipe, 1999).

# CONCEPTUAL MODEL OF THE IMPLICATIONS OF RACIAL MATCHING PRACTICES IN MENTORING



#### **4. DISCUSSION**

Overall, the current project reveals that little is currently known about the effects of racial matching practices on mentor relationships and on outcomes for youth, mentors, families, and communities. The few studies that have been conducted suffer from methodological limitations that make it difficult to draw firm conclusions. Moreover, none of the existing studies examines African-American youth independently from other youth, making it impossible to determine the unique implications of racial matching for this population.

Nonetheless, there are a number of reasons why racial matching might be expected to influence youth development. Prior research on youth development suggests that racial matching could affect mentoring outcomes through its impact on the development of effective mentor relationships. Yet the impact of racial matching is likely predicated on a number of factors relating to youths, families, mentors, “fit”, programs, and communities. Thus, it is critical to determine the circumstances under which and individuals for whom racial matching matters, in order to develop a better understanding of how to address the shortage of minority mentors.

#### **5. NEEDS FOR RESEARCH AND TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE**

In order to better understand the impact of racial matching on mentor relationships and outcomes, more studies must be designed to carefully assess the impact of racial matching. This research should seek to answer a number of questions: for whom and under what circumstances racial matching matters; its impact on ethnic identity, cultural beliefs, and attitudes of youth, mentors, and families; and effective approaches for recruiting minority mentors and for incorporating culture into program practices.

While the field awaits the answers to these key questions, program directors are taking active steps to recruit more minority mentors and to address issues of race and culture in their programs. The project has identified a number of areas for training and technical assistance that could be helpful to these programs. Toolkits should be designed for: recruitment of African-American and other minority mentors; assessment and matching based on cultural beliefs and attitudes; education of parents, mentors, and mentees about racial matching; identification of successful cultural competence and diversity training; and promotion of ethnic identity development in youth.

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