Mentoring programs for at-risk youth are growing at a rapid pace across the United States. Youth mentoring programs differ in their curricula, but most emphasize the relationship between a disadvantaged or troubled youngster and a caring adult. The relationship generally involves spending quality time together and providing support and guidance, with the aim of helping the young person better negotiate life's difficulties. To date, the literature on mentoring is mixed and little research has adequately assessed the efficacy of mentoring programs.

The term "at-risk" is generally used to describe youth who come from single-parent homes, who show signs of emotional or behavioral problems, and who lack the support to navigate developmental tasks successfully. As adults, they have a disproportionately high incidence of divorce, chronic unemployment, physical and psychiatric problems, substance abuse, demands on the welfare system, and further criminal activity (Patterson, DeBaryshe, & Ramsey, 1989). The toll of these problems is costly not only to the individual but also to society in terms of health care, welfare, and legal costs. Conversely, the average cost per child per year for a well-run mentoring program is approximately $1,000 (Grossman & Garry, 1997), and is believed to prevent or minimize a need for other social services in the future. The U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, estimates that between 5 and 15 million children could benefit from being matched with a mentor (Grossman & Garry, 1997).
There are many theoretical reasons to expect that mentorship will help troubled youth, mostly within a social support framework. Kashani, Reid, and Rosenberg (1989) found that youth who reported lower levels of social support were more withdrawn, hopeless about their future, inattentive, and harmful to others than were youth who reported higher levels of social support. Mentoring may provide some of this social support and, hence, improve youth functioning. In addition, some theories of juvenile delinquency suggest that youth develop delinquent behavior patterns because they have not identified with appropriate role models in their environment (Hawkins & Weis, 1985). Mentors can serve as models with whom youth might identify, leading to increased socially appropriate behavior and reduced delinquent behavior. Furthermore, the resiliency literature suggests that the children who are most likely to survive abusive and neglectful upbringings are those who seek healthier relationships outside the home (Stein et al., 2000; Rutter, 1987, 1995). Mentoring may provide resilient youth with such relationships.

However, the research to date has produced discrepant findings about the effects of mentoring (Royse, 1998; Grossman & Garry, 1997; Tierney & Grossman, 1995; Slicker & Palmer, 1993; Frecknall & Luks, 1992). The inconsistent results may be attributed to the fact that the mentoring movement is still in its infancy, and that research in this field is also relatively new. Additionally, much of it is methodologically flawed and limited in its conclusions, relying exclusively on self-report data or using instruments that do not have adequate reliability and validity. Most mentoring programs rely on volunteers and donations, and the cost of funding well-run research often exceeds a mentoring program’s limited budget. Further, some programs require mentors to meet with mentees only one to two times per month, which perhaps is insufficient to provide at-risk youth with the support they need. Programs requiring more frequent face-to-face contact may be more likely to be effective. Or, as some have suggested, perhaps mentoring simply does not work.

Big Brothers/Big Sisters may be the best-known volunteer mentoring program in the United States, matching at-risk youth with adult mentors. In one of the largest studies in the field (Tierney & Grossman, 1995), 959 youth who asked to be matched with a Big Brother/Big Sister during 1992-1993 were randomly assigned to one of two groups: a mentoring group or a control group (the latter youth were put on the 18-month waiting list). Both groups were interviewed when they applied for the program and 18 months later, and completed self-report indices. The study examined several broad areas that mentoring might affect: antisocial activities, academic performance, attitudes and behaviors, relationships with family, relationships with friends, self-concept, and social and cultural enrichment. The results indicated that "littles" (mentees) who met with their "bigs" (mentors) regularly for about a year were 46% less likely than the control group to start using illegal drugs, 27% less likely to start drinking, 52% less likely to skip a day of school, and 37% less likely to skip a class. In addition, the mentees were likely to be more trusting of their parents or guardians and less likely to lie to them, as well as to feel more supported and less criticized by their peers and friends. More than 70% of big-little matches met at least 3 times a month for more than 3 hours at a time, and nearly half met once a week. Tierney and Grossman (1995) concluded that high-intensity programs can work, specifically those with more one-on-one
contact (typically meeting 3 times per month for 4 hours per meeting, with additional contact by phone).