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Mentoring with Purpose

By Jamie Sokolik | Photo: Tom Vangel

The Cities Project mentoring program helps children living in poverty cope with the stress of their everyday lives so they can stay in school and graduate from college.

Kathryn Grant, director of The Cities Project at DePaul, is on a mission to help impoverished children cope with the extreme stress that negatively affects their mental, and sometimes physical, well-being, as well as their ability to learn. As a result of this stress, children living in Chicago's poorest neighborhoods rarely graduate from a four-year college.

"Poverty is the mother of all stressors, especially for kids," Grant says. "It makes it more likely that their parents will break up or that they'll experience abuse and neglect. That's in addition to the daily stressors, such as inadequate education, generally poorer schools and teachers who have too much to deal with. It also erodes their ability to cope with everything. These kids are just getting it from all angles."

In her research, Grant found that the typical coping strategies professionals teach children often aren't effective for those living in poverty. Instead, The Cities Project teaches methods, such as distraction, self-soothing and problem-solving, that Grant hopes will help them escape the cycle of poverty.

"Different types of coping are needed for different types of stressors," she explains. "When you're experiencing things like gang violence, actively engaging with the problem can sometimes backfire. We discovered it was better to connect these kids to a trusted and supportive adult who can help them avoid these stressors as much as possible and immerse them in a protective setting, like a religious center or after-school program."

The project runs as a three-tiered system. Psychology and social work graduate students working at DePaul Family and Community Services, an on-campus behavioral health clinic, make a one-year commitment to mentor undergraduate students in the College of Science and Health. These undergraduates also make the same one-year commitment to mentor elementary and middle-school students in the Englewood and Auburn Gresham areas. Before the program begins each school year, **Sophia Duffy (CSH MA '09, CSH PhD '12)**, clinical project manager for The Cities Project, trains the DePaul students on

the coping mechanisms they'll teach their young mentees.

"My mentee is nine, and she's really cute. We get along really well," says **Caterina Salzano (CSH '16)**, who was involved with the project for three years and can't help but gush when speaking of her mentee. "She was guarded at first, but now she'll even call me when she's home and say something like, 'My brother just smacked me, and I want to smack him back!' I'll talk her through why she shouldn't retaliate, and she listens. It's a good feeling to know that she trusts me and respects me as a role model, but she can also talk to me as a friend and will open up about the big stuff when she needs real help."

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—Kathryn Grant

Conversation helps establish a rapport between mentor and mentee, which is crucial when the group gets into more serious work. Denaye Harris, a fifth-grader at Joplin Elementary School, says that the program has helped her in many ways. "It actually helps a lot with my anger," she says. "I talk to my mentor, and I tell her what happened during the day. She's calming, fun and nice. She's my friend. She taught me how to let go of little stuff." Salzano recalls one session during which they showed the students a short scene from the movie "The Color Purple" that evoked feelings of concern or distress. Afterward the mentors had one-on-one conversations with their mentees about how they felt before watching the clip versus how they felt after.

They then discussed what to do when they experience similar feelings in real life and shared their thoughts with the whole group. It was a powerful experience for all involved.

"Being part of The Cities Project was one of the most enjoyable and eye-opening times of my life," says **Andrew Devendorf (CSH '16)**. "I thought I would go in and form this wonderful relationship right away, but it took a good three or four months for my mentee to start opening up and feeling comfortable. These kids haven't always had positive relationships with adults. It was good to realize these things take time."

Grant hopes to extend The Cities Project to more public schools in Chicago and to start projects and partnerships with other area universities. She is also working toward adding a mentoring tier to the system that will include eighth-graders who mentor fourth-graders, a suggestion that came directly from one of the community advisory boards that helps guide the program. Grant has gotten such input from the community since the project was first introduced.

"When we started, we spent a lot of time making sure the project we were building was right for the community it was intended to serve," Grant says. "We had highly involved advisory boards and held focus groups. We realize how important it is to incorporate this firsthand information."

The community insight is beneficial for both mentor and mentee. Senior health sciences major Maher Budron says it's helped him guide his mentee in a more organic way. "The mentors in The Cities Project don't just impose the views of traditional psychology," he says. "It's based on research done and conversations had in the communities. We support the existing avenues and then add to their ability to self-advocate."

Salzano agrees, adding that though it's a big undertaking, commitment is essential to the program's success. "Sometimes, we are the only people who are there for these kids with any consistency," she says. "We can't become another traumatic experience in their lives. Everyone on the team is committed to building positive relationships and helping our mentees know they're important and that we'll always be there to support them." •