

## Mentors and Protégées

This section presents the important role that scientific and community mentors have in the Girls in Science program.

### Mentoring Young Women

Mentoring—from the Greek word meaning enduring—is defined as a sustained relationship between a youth and an adult. The *Girls in Science* program focused on a mentoring component to help support, nurture and encourage the girls. We were fortunate to be able to work with local groups who assisted in recruiting mentors. Each girl had one mentor from the scientific community at the University of Kentucky and one mentor from her local community.

### Why Do We Need Mentors?

Research on mentoring demonstrates that participants increase their academic performance (Cragar, 1994; Pringle et al., 1993; Sipe, 1996), have higher college enrollment rates and higher educational aspirations (Floyd, 1993), and have enhanced self-esteem and self-confidence (Sipe, 1996). The year-round mentoring program was designed to reinforce summer sessions' learning and offer support during the school year. University mentors met with their protégés during the summer sessions at the University of Kentucky and maintained contact throughout the year via email, phone calls, and letters. Community mentors were expected to contact their protégés at least monthly in their local communities, help solve problems, and provide support for pursuing less traditional academic paths.

### How to Find Mentors

There may be several groups in your community with women involved in science fields. We were able to recruit mentors from the University of Kentucky. We recommend finding researchers in related areas—such as medicine, psychology, behavioral sciences, social sciences, and pharmacology. Keep your eyes open for women who have jobs that use science or math. This might be the female doctor or the female researcher. It could be the female dentist or the person who just opened the computer store down the street. Work with local groups such as “Women in Engineering” to assist in recruiting mentors. It is ideal if mentors are involved in the particular field of research that you are promoting; however, many women in science related fields can support young women equally well. Community mentors can be involved in a science field or simply be willing to encourage a girl to pursue careers in this area. We recruited mentors that were from local hospitals, schoolteachers, parents of participants and local leadership groups.

### Training Mentors

Training should focus on developing strong support systems for the young women. Training can assist mentors to individually outline their responsibilities, to clarify expectations, and to delineate roles. It is important to discuss how long relationships will last, and when, where and how often mentors will meet. Relationships take time to develop so it is important to be clear about this at the beginning.

## Matching Mentors and Protégées

For greatest success, consider the following when pairing students with mentors:

- Student needs: *Matches should be made with each student's individual needs in mind. Mentors should be able to empathize with their protégée and tailor activities according to the protégée's interests and goals.*
- Common interests: *While it is not necessary for students and mentors to have similar personalities, it is important that they share some common interests. Use the hobbies checklist as a starting point for identifying similar interest.*
- Convenience: *Students and mentors must be available to meet at the same times and live within reasonably close proximity of each other or their meeting place.*
- Gender: *Same-race and same-gender matches often make parents feel more comfortable and avoid cultural misinterpretations and misunderstandings between students, mentors, and parents.*
- Background: *In programs designed to provide protégées with successful role models, it is best to match students with mentors who are from similar backgrounds or who have successfully overcome obstacles similar to those the protégées are facing.*

It is important to match as carefully as possible, but sometimes some matches just will not work out. If, after the first few meetings, a mentor and protégée still do not seem to "click," program staff should meet with both parties separately. The problem may be worked out by providing the mentor with more training or simply by reminding the pair that it takes time and effort to build a relationship. However, if it seems that the pair will not work—or if there is any evidence of inappropriate behavior on the part of the mentor—do not hesitate to find a different mentor. It is important that the mentoring relationship be positive and productive, even in the early stages as mentors' and protégées' begin to get acquainted.