Chapter 8
Meeting the Needs of Adolescents and Young Adults with Disabilities: An E-Mentoring Approach

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ABSTRACT
Resilience in at-risk youth is anchored by supportive adults who may be relatives, neighbors, teachers, employers, or other members of the community. Telementoring or electronic mentoring (e-mentoring) is a promising practice for improving transition-to-adulthood outcomes for youth with disabilities through connections with caring adults. E-mentoring supports the development of technological and social skills and also increases their understanding of the employment and educational opportunities that await youth upon completion of high school. Connecting to Success (CTS) is an e-mentoring program for transition-age youth with disabilities. In this chapter, CTS is discussed in the context of healthy youth development and transition to adulthood. An overview of the CTS program model is provided, and a discussion of future directions is identified.

INTRODUCTION
Healthy youth development is an issue of considerable national importance, as evidenced by the many federal and state policies and programs which fund such opportunities for adolescents and young adults (including the Federal Youth Coordination Act, AmeriCorps and other service learning opportunities, and federal and state support for 4-H, after school programs, mentoring programs, and workforce development). We
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know that preparing young people for academic, vocational, and social success takes the proverbial village, yet we also know that many, many youth reach adulthood without the tools, resources, and supports they need to live independently and safely.

There are many “markers” that can predict if youth are increasingly likely to struggle in the transition to adulthood; these include poverty, chronic illness, chemical dependency, teen parenthood, language and cultural issues, and disability. Disability is widespread in the United States — more than eighteen percent of Americans have a diagnosed or undiagnosed disability (U.S. Census Bureau, 2005). This chapter will detail some of the issues related to youth with disabilities, discuss a framework for meeting their needs, and provide an overview of an e-mentoring program for youth with disabilities which has been successfully used in schools across the country.

BACKGROUND

Youth with Disabilities and Transition

In public schools, students may receive special education services and supports under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 if they have an impairment involving one of thirteen conditions—mental retardation, hearing impairments (including deafness), speech or language impairments, visual impairments (including blindness), serious emotional disturbance, orthopedic impairments, autism, traumatic brain injury, other health impairments, or specific learning disabilities—and can show that they need “special education and related services” as a result (P.L. 108-446). A disability may be diagnosed and interventions put into place (through written plans such as an Individualized Education Program) or, in a large number of cases, a disability may be undiagnosed (or not acknowledged) with no interventions in place.

From ages 14-21, special education students are considered to be in “transition”, a period of planning and preparation for life after secondary education. Transition planning was formalized in part because data show that youth with disabilities are at particularly high risk during their transition to adulthood. They are less likely to graduate from high school, find employment, and participate in postsecondary education than their same-age peers (Johnson et al., 2002). More than one in four youth with disabilities leave school without receiving a diploma, and youth with certain disabilities drop out of school at much higher rates (Wagner, Newman, Cameto, Garzo, & Levine, 2005). For example, 44% of youth with emotional disturbances drop out (Wagner et al., 2005). Only about 30% of youth with disabilities attend either 2- or 4-year colleges; this is less than half the rate of postsecondary attendance for their same-age peers (Wagner et al., 2005). Estimates of the prevalence of youth with all types of disabilities in juvenile corrections range from 32% to 50% of the total juvenile corrections population (Quinn, Rutherford, & Leone, 2001).

As a consequence, employment rates for young adults with disabilities are much lower than those of young people without disabilities. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2009), “the employment-population ratio for persons with a disability was 19.9 percent, compared with 64.9 percent for persons with no disability,” which means that many more individuals with disabilities have left the labor market and are not actively looking for work. Timmons, Mack, Sims, Wills, and Hare (2006) contend that “many youth with disabilities have not had the same opportunities as their peers without disabilities to be exposed to necessary career preparation options” (p. 2), such as part-time employment, internships, or mentoring, which also contributes to the disparity in outcomes between youth without disabilities and youth with disabilities.