
The Good Life Mentoring Project in Metropolitan Dade County, Florida¹

Presenter:

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Background

In January 1993 Metropolitan Dade County Park and Recreation Department was joined by the Greater Miami Chamber of Commerce, the City of Miami, Dade County Public Schools, and Florida International University in endorsing implementation of the Good Life Mentoring Program. Doctors Laura Blitzer and Robert Wolff of Florida International University designed and wrote a *Program Manual* (1993) for the program. The following information is taken in whole or in part from the manual.

The initial Good Life Mentoring Program concept grew from a conversation between internationally renowned tennis players Arthur Ashe and Butch Buchholz about their own favorable experiences with sports and the people who had positively impacted their lives. Both Ashe and Buchholz were concerned that many school-age children in Dade County were not receiving exposure to the opportunities they had experienced in their youth.

Estimations suggested that 3,000-5,000 youth ages 11-24 were involved with one of over 80 active gangs identified in the area. Of these youth, 75% came from single-parent households, 91% had prior arrest records, and 80% were high-school dropouts. An alarmingly high number of these youth (94%) reported they were bored with nowhere to go and nothing to do. They filled their time by turning to drugs and gangs. Given the costs to society of

incarceration and healthcare, prevention programs were seen as a sound investment. Prevention as opposed to punishment makes more sense when you factor in the following cost figures. The state of Florida spends \$40,000 per year to maintain just one youth at a correctional facility, but it costs less than \$7,000 yearly to provide that same youth with intensive community-based programs. According to the Florida Prevention Association, for every \$1 spent on preventive measures, such as preschool education and recreational services, more than \$15 is saved in future healthcare and criminal justice costs.

Ashe and Buchholz believed that the energies of urban at-risk youth could be redirected with a comprehensive sports program, heavily endowed with aspiring mentors who would serve as successful role models. Butch Buchholz took this idea to the Deputy Director of Metro-Dade Park and Recreation and to the Executive Vice President of Sun Bank who is also Chairman of the Sports Council of the Greater Miami Chamber of Commerce. They worked collaboratively and involved others to further refine and develop the original idea.

From its inception, the Good Life Mentoring Program has emphasized collaboration. Its Board of Directors represents many of the affected, potentially affected, and concerned organizations of Dade County. The program's major participants include:

- Greater Miami Chamber of Commerce
- Dade County Public Schools

¹ Material is taken edited by Witt, P.A., & Crompton, J.L. (Eds.). (1996). *Recreation programs that work for at-risk youth: The challenge of shaping the future*. State College, PA: Venture Publishing, Inc.

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- Metro-Dade Park and Recreation Department
- City of Miami Park and Recreation Department
- Miami Police Department
- Florida International University
- YMCA of Greater Miami
- Greater Miami Services Corps
- Professional Sports Organizations:
 - Miami Dolphins
 - Doral-Ryder Open Golf Tournament
 - Lipton Tennis Tournament
 - Miami Heat
 - Florida Marlins
 - Toyota Grand Prix

Each of these organizations has contributed expertise, personnel, and/or resources to help address the needs of at-risk youth through the Good Life program.

Program Description

The Role of Schools

The program's major goal is to identify a pool of high school athletes and other students interested in volunteering as mentors who are willing to serve as positive role models and tutors for pre-high-school at-risk youth. The program targets youth from elementary and middle schools which serve as feeder schools for the high schools which supply the mentors.

Prehigh-school youth are involved in educational and recreational extracurricular activities that will help them develop new school-related interests while reversing the trends that propel them toward behaviors of social irresponsibility and poor school habits. The high-school athletes and other students who volunteer to instruct, supervise, and coach their pre-high-school counterparts develop leadership skills. Both groups are involved in year-round sports and academic programs at park and recreation facilities located near each school. The ultimate goal is to involve 400 volunteer students at each of the high schools and a total of 2,000 students from the elementary feeder schools.

The Role of the Park and Recreation Department

The park and recreation staff's primary responsibility is to assist in the development, facilitation, and operation of sports programs for the pre-high-school youth. Good Life Mentoring sport cycles have been developed for the parks system and include flag football, volleyball, soccer, basketball, swimming, tennis, track and field, baseball and softball, bowling, badminton, wrestling, water polo, diving, and golf.

Recognition awards are utilized to reward participation, improvement, and success both during and at the end of each sport cycle. The park and recreation department and public schools are in the process of developing arts programs through their drama and art departments.

Program Objectives

The goals of the Good Life program are:

- (1) to provide opportunities for individual and group development (mentoring skills);
- (2) to demonstrate a willingness to accept and respect individual differences and the need to address them through accepted program goals (tolerance for diversity);
- (3) to acknowledge the beliefs, goals and assumptions of all who participate in the program and integrate those beliefs in accepted program goals (empowerment);
- (4) to demonstrate a long-term commitment to the program through a willingness to revisit and possibly change existing program goals, thereby making the program self-renewing (commitment);
- (5) to maintain strong communication links with all participating organizations and stakeholders (interdependence);
- (6) to establish geographic service regions using selected high schools as hubs of operation;
- (7) to contact, establish, monitor, and maintain centers of operation at six selected high schools with plans to engage other schools as time and resources permit;
- (8) to utilize the services of professionals associated with public schools, park and recreation departments, and other agencies and a local university to maintain these centers of operation;
- (9) to establish a volunteer mentoring program involving professional athletes, university, and high-school students (including athletes and artists) to work with pre-high-school youth;
- (10) to establish a business, school, and community partnership that will encourage the participation of corporations and their employees, school faculty and staff and other community organizations and their personnel in the Good Life project; and
- (11) to develop a system of evaluation that will assess program goals and objectives, centralized goals and objectives, outcomes measures for all participants, long-term effects of treatments, and an analysis of costs and benefits.

Early Accomplishments

Dade County Public Schools have helped organize centralized committees at the six high schools included in the program. Programs have been implemented at three schools. These committees have involved administrators from the high schools and feeder schools, teachers and coaches, park and recreation personnel, parents, students and student athletes, business and community representatives, extracurricular club members, guidance personnel, and police officers. In-service training was conducted for counselors in each of the pilot schools to assist in development of the student mentoring program. Workshops for coaches, the development of mentoring techniques, and Summer Peer Counseling courses have been planned. Sports, self-esteem classes and academic tutoring programs have been developed to promote and supplement the sports-park program.

The Greater Miami Chamber of Commerce has developed a network of private, public, and not-for-profit agencies which provide volunteers to train, coach, mentor, umpire, and prepare both youth participants and mentors to accomplish program goals. The Chamber also participates in fundraising activities to support the program.

The program is currently operating at three school sites, with approximately 150 youth participating at each site daily. A total of 12 leaders have been hired; four work at each site. A budget of \$350,000 funds the program. The Good Life Mentoring Program runs year-round, after school from September through May, and all day during the summer months.

Principals in the local schools coordinate monthly meetings between the police, community-based organizations, Optimist Clubs, YMCA, the Boys Clubs, and area businesses to provide services in a local area with the school serving as the hub. In some cases, this responsibility is delegated to the school athletic director.

Preliminary Evaluation Results

Interviews with program administrators and participants indicate that the aims, goals, and objectives of the Good Life program are valued and appreciated by the surrounding communities. Several sites have taken the Good Life message of “youth helping youth” and personalized it in such a way that the program is now a “fixture” in the community. The program is most successful in those schools where there is a strong commitment by the school administration. Support from feeder schools, and surrounding park and recreation staff, is also critical

for success. Some sites reported difficulties with transportation, personnel, and financial issues. Leader hiring and retention is difficult, due to the salary level of \$18,000 and an inadequate benefits package. The issue is being addressed by hiring qualified youth mentors and helping them view this type of work as a viable career option.

The Good Life program is still in its infancy and is growing slowly. Although support from community agencies is significant, there is no particular plan in place at this time that addresses how best to allocate available resources. The development of such a plan is essential as contacts and support increase.

Those who have participated in the Good Life program feel positive about their involvement. This is particularly evident among the high-school mentors and the feeder school students. The mentors expressed some surprise at how well they have been received by the mentored youth. They feel they have gained the respect and admiration of the younger youth and are proud to report that they are “looked up to.” The self-esteem issues that are being addressed on both sides of the mentoring relationship are significant.

References

Blitzer, L. E. & Wolff, R. M. (1993). *The Good Life Mentoring Project Program manual: A guide for developing, implementing, and evaluating a localized Good Life program with the assistance of established community agencies*. Department of Health, Physical Education and Recreation, Florida International University, Miami, Florida.