Mentoring Research Roundup

Welcome to the first issue of the Mentoring Research Roundup! This new quarterly newsletter from MENTOR is designed to highlight important new research in the fields of mentoring and relationship-drive youth development. In each issue, we will be highlighting a key new study that we think mentoring professionals can learn something meaningful from, as well as providing brief summaries of additional new research that can lead to better mentoring relationships, stronger programs, and smarter investment by policymakers and funders. We'll also be featuring a video interview each issue, sitting down with leading scholars to explore their work and hear their insights about how we can grow and improve the mentoring movement. From time to time we'll also highlight new resources that can help programs collect better data, evaluate their services, and tell their story of impact.

We hope you find these research summaries entertaining and informative. And if you have a question about mentoring research, drop us a line at research@mentoring.org and we'll try to answer your burning questions in future issues!

- **Mike Garringer, Senior Director of Research & Quality, MENTOR**

NEW STUDY ILLUSTRATES THE IMPORTANCE OF A STRONG MENTOR-CAREGIVER RELATIONSHIP

When examining what leads to successful mentoring experiences for young people, researchers typically focus on the qualities and characteristics of the young person and their mentor and how they spend time together — this is, after all, where the "magic" of mentoring happens. But a growing body of research (Keller, 2005; Keller & Blakeslee, 2013) is taking a more ecological perspective on the mentor-youth relationship, recognizing that while those two individuals are central to the mentoring experience, their relationship is often influenced in positive or negative ways by the other relationships that surround it. That can include the relationship between the youth's parent or caregiver and the program staff, the mentor's own relationship with the staff, and, perhaps most crucially, the relationship between the mentor and the parent or caregiver of the mentee. In fact, one new research study suggests that those mentor-caregiver relationships may be vitally important, and that a breakdown in understanding or trust between the youth's caregiver and their mentor can threaten the mentoring experience as a whole.

A team of scholars at the Center for Evidence-Based Mentoring at the University of Massachusetts - Boston recently published Beyond the mentor-youth dyad: The role of parents and mentoring program staff in predicting volunteer mentor persistence, a secondary data analysis of the perspectives of 120 mentors at a Big Brothers Big Sisters agency whose mentoring relationships had ended. These mentors provided qualitative responses to questions about why they had ended their involvement in the program, their attitudes about the program, their perceptions of their relationship with the program staff assigned to their match, and their relationship with the mentee's parent or caregiver. These responses were then correlated with data around the length of their closed relationships to explore the factors that may have contributed to the persistence of their match.

Check out our interview with scholars Megyn Jasman and Dr. Jean Rhodes where we discuss this new study, the importance of strong mentor-caregiver collaboration, and much more!

The good news is that for most of these mentors, the reasons behind the dissolution of their mentoring relationship were most frequently external factors, such as moving away or an unforeseen change in their availability (e.g., a change in the mentor's work or school schedule). Sixty-five percent of the mentors reported these external factors as the primary reason for their departure. And while other studies (Spencer et al., 2017) have noted that such "unforeseen" factors can sometimes be a cover story for mentor dissatisfaction with the program, it's worth noting that over half of these mentors (53%) said they "never" or "rarely" considered ending their match, suggesting that widespread unhappiness with the mentoring experience was not driving these match closures.

However, for a meaningful number of mentors, challenges in that mentoring "ecosystem" did play a factor in the end of

their mentoring relationship. In fact, "parent or program-related challenges" was the second most common reason cited (41.7%), surpassing challenges with the mentor-youth relationship by a considerable amount (23.3%).

When examining the impact of mentor-caregiver relationships on the duration of the mentoring relationship, the team found that mentor reports of stronger relationships with caregivers corresponded to longer match length. Positive attitudes about the program were also associated with longer matches. Further analysis found that both the relationship with the caregiver and the mentor's attitudes about the program overall both predicted match length, but when both were factored together, only the relationship with the caregiver predicted match length. Neither the relationship with the staff member or the mentor's overall attitudes about the program predicted the length of the match. Beyond those somewhat unpreventable external factors, it seems the mentor-caregiver relationship was a major driving force in whether a mentor stuck with the program — and their mentee — or not. In fact, mentors who indicated they "sometimes" or "often" thought about ending their match were significantly more likely to report challenges with the caregiver relationship.

This research builds on other studies that have examined how the other relationships in that mentoring ecosystem can either enhance mentoring experiences or sow the seeds of their premature ending. Perhaps most prominently, the Study to Analyze Relationships (STAR) from 2018 examined the reasons behind match closure, finding that just over half the mentoring relationships had closed for external factors such as the mentor's personal time constraints or their moving away (Keller & Spencer, 2018). However, additional analyses of a subset of prematurely closed matches found that just over half of these early closures had challenges with the caregiver-mentor relationship (Spencer et al., 2020). These challenges included mentors holding negative or deficit-based views of the youth's family and mentor stress about navigating the circumstances of the youth's family and home environment. These challenges often resulted in a loss of trust on the part of the parent or caregiver, with rising tension and an increasing lack of comfort with the mentor leading to decisions to end the relationship.

Other studies have found that match closures were less likely to occur when caregivers were supportive of the mentor, particularly when they felt like they experienced trust and respect in their interactions with the

mentor (DeWit et al., 2016). Parents are proven to be mediators of good mentoring experiences, especially when mentors show clear commitment, have genuine positive views about the youth they are mentoring, and show respect for caregiver guidelines and input into the match (Spencer, Basualdo-Delmonico, & Lewis, 2011).

Unfortunately, these studies suggest that many mentor-caregiver relationships get trapped in a cycle of perceived slights, unmet expectations, and disappointment. If the relationships with program staff are also frayed or unhelpful, then both mentors and caregivers can struggle to address these concerns and, as frustrations mount, either the mentor or the caregiver can decide to end the relationship prematurely, even if the central relationship between the youth and their mentor is relatively strong.

So, what can programs do to mitigate these concerns? A few things are likely to help:

Setting realistic expectations for the match. The aforementioned STAR study found that when participants had unrealistic expectations for how the relationship would progress or how long it would last that their disappointment at the reality of the experience was a factor in early match closures. Thus, making sure that everyone has clear and realistic expectations for the mentoring experience from the very beginning is a good first step.

Training mentors and caregivers on how they can effectively communicate and how they can address challenges before they spiral to a crisis point. This includes training mentors to show respect and avoid judgmental statements about the youth's home life and caregivers, as well as preparing caregivers on how they can clearly set expectations and build a collaborative relationship with the mentor. Both mentors and caregivers need to understand the importance of getting program support proactively, before that mentor-caregiver relationship turns sour.

And perhaps most importantly, this is an issue that speaks to the need for program staff, whether they are match support "specialists" or "match advocates" as they were in this latest study, to **be diligent about providing check-ins and robust match support**. If there is one thread that runs through all of this research, it is that too often volunteers, caregivers, and youth are left on their own to navigate these challenges when program staff fail to provide adequate, consistent, and timely support. While all participants have a role to play in making this mentoring "ecosystem" function properly, it is the responsibility of the program that connected these individuals to provide as much support as possible to make sure these supportive relationships can bolster the mentor-mentee relationship at the heart of this work.

Those who volunteer in the nation's mentoring programs often face challenges in their service but consistently note that the quality and consistency of the support they receive from the program is the main factor in their decision to stick with the program and their willingness to recommend the program to others (Garringer & Benning, 2018). Ensuring that the mentor-caregiver relationship is working well should be at the top of the list for staff who support mentoring relationships. This important new study suggests that neglecting the health of that relationship may deny young people the mentoring experience they are seeking.

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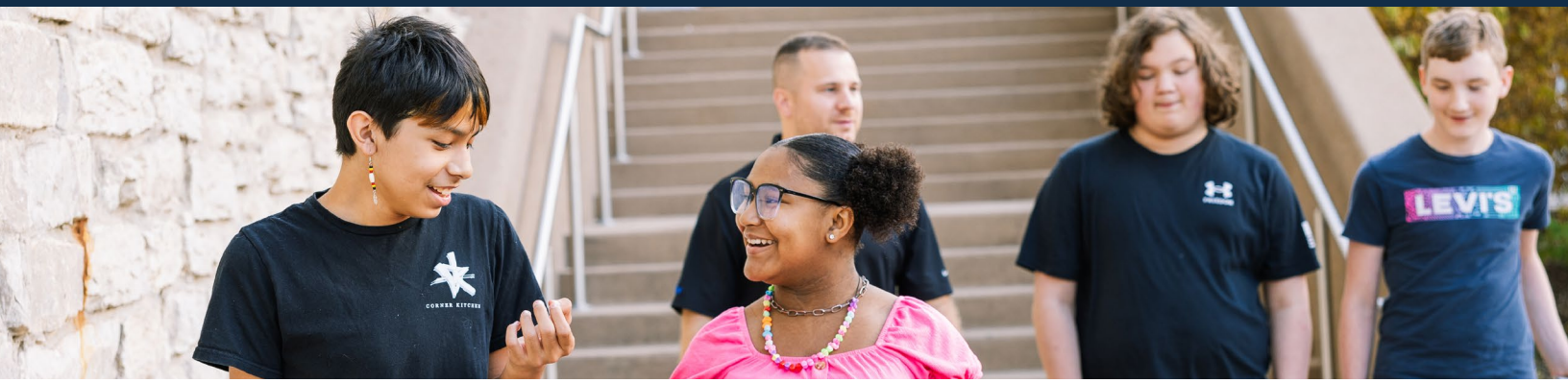

KEY NEW RESEARCH

Been there, done that, and now I'm giving back: Perspectives from mentors and administrators in community violence intervention programs

By Kristian Jones, Jarvis Duckworth, Chloe Fetters, Biruktawit Galoro, Ali Rowhani-Rahbar

ABOUT THIS STUDY

This study considered what aspects may be most important for community-based programs focused on violence prevention and reduction among Black youth. Researchers from the University of Washington's School of Social Work and Center for Firearm Injury Prevention interviewed 20 current mentors and administrators serving in community violence intervention (CVI) programs in Washington state.

FINDINGS

Participants identified several components as central for bolstering protective factors against firearm violence through mentoring. Heavily emphasized in interviews was the importance of recruiting and training a skilled pool of mentors adept at building strong rapport and relating to youth, in part, because of mentors' own lived experience with gun violence. Mentors also work with youth to develop important skills like decision-making, envisioning their future, and self-advocacy. In addition to support provided within the one-on-one relationship with youth, staff also highlighted the significance of cultivating good relationships with the young person's family and professionals like school staff or probation officers for youth involved with the justice system.

WHY IT MATTERS FOR MENTORING

This study illuminates what it takes for mentors to do true violence prevention work well. Beyond the one-to-one relationship, programs need to bear in mind the broad issues (e.g., racism, lack of access to economic resources) that contribute to the disproportionate impact of gun violence on the lives of Black youth. Addressing essential needs or offering connections to resources like mental health support and legal representation are equally important. As one staff member described, "...kids are not carrying guns and stealing or selling drugs or doing the activities where we feel like we need to have a gun to be safe, because they have a full refrigerator full of food and they have a safe place to live, it's usually the opposite."

KEY NEW RESEARCH

Environmental and individual risk as moderators of a site-based mentoring program for adolescents exposed to adversities

By Reagan L. Miller-Chagnon, Jill T. Krause, Megan J. Moran, Shelley A. Haddock, Toni S. Zimmerman, Haoran Zhou, Lindsey M. Weiler

ABOUT THIS STUDY

Authors of this study were interested in parsing out the impact exposure to adverse experiences during childhood may have on the potential benefits of mentoring. 676 young people participating in Campus Connections, a 12-week skills-based therapeutic mentoring program, were enrolled in the study. Researchers measured outcome areas of youth mental health, conduct problems, delinquency, and peer relationships using self-report data from youth and their caregivers.

FINDINGS

As it turns out, youth with more risk factors (like academic and behavior challenges, family and economic stress, or difficulty making friends) tended to benefit the most from the program, reporting improvements in several areas. Youth who endorsed more mental health risk factors saw a 5% reduction in emotional problems after finishing the program while youth who reported more challenges with peers had a 5% improvement in this domain post-intervention. There were also notable improvements in internalizing symptoms and delinquency.

WHY IT MATTERS FOR MENTORING

Targeted programs like Campus Connections demonstrate the potential of mentoring to buffer against individual and environmental risk factors and promote resilience among adolescents, but these outcomes don't just happen by chance. Campus Connections mentors leverage intentionally structured activities and program curriculum designed to help young people build and practice the skills necessary for improved wellbeing – especially for mental health. Mentors also receive robust training and close supervision throughout the program to support their learning and ongoing work with youth in the program.

KEY NEW RESEARCH

Exploring profiles of risk and protective factors among youth mentees: For whom does mentoring work?

By Margaret Meldrum, Michael D. Lyons

ABOUT THIS STUDY

Researchers analyzed data from 494 youth participating in a Big Brothers Big Sisters of America program to examine how risk and protective factors influence the benefits of mentoring on academic outcomes, specifically, self-efficacy, achievement, and educational aspirations. Measures of social support along with demographic data (youth age, gender, racial and ethnic identities) were also used to inform study results.

FINDINGS

Researchers identified two main groups of mentees in their analysis. The first, "Unacknowledged Resilience," included youth with higher levels of risk but also strong pre-existing social supports from parents, peers, or natural mentors. Most mentees fell into the Unacknowledged Resilience group and were more likely to identify as youth of color. The second group, "Masked Vulnerability," included youth with fewer visible risk factors but weaker social supports. Despite these differences in levels of risk, youth from each group experienced similar positive benefits in terms of academic outcomes.

WHY IT MATTERS FOR MENTORING

This study illustrates two especially important lessons for youth mentoring. First, just because a young person may not present as needing support doesn't mean they don't need it, and second, we may overlook significant social assets and strengths that can boost youth outcomes if we focus exclusively on addressing risk factors. Mentoring can benefit every young person, but it is up to programs to carefully consider the unique interconnected web of assets and challenges when tailoring support and services to meet youth needs.

KEY NEW RESEARCH

"I wished I could have said bye": Exploring youth reactions to formal mentoring relationship endings

By Thomas E. Keller, Martha J. McCormack, Miriam Miranda-Diaz, Alison L. Drew, Renée Spencer

ABOUT THIS STUDY

Prior research indicates that anywhere between 30 to 50% of all mentoring relationships end prematurely*. With the aim of exploring the impact of these relationship endings, researchers recruited youth from four Big Brothers Big Sisters sites to participate in their study. A total of 151 matches closed prior to reaching the intended 15-month duration, and youth from these matches were invited to complete a survey. In post-ending surveys, youth responded to a series of questions about how they felt after the ending of their match.

* Learn more about that research here, here, and here

FINDINGS

72 youth completed surveys and though some expressed positive feelings and many said they continued to enjoy good memories of their mentor (71%), responses overwhelmingly reflected a negative effect. When asked how disappointed they felt the relationship had ended, most youth expressed feeling somewhat disappointed (42%) and nearly a third were extremely disappointed (31%). And when youth had to pick one word that summarized how they felt about the relationship ending, the majority endorsed negative or intensely negative feelings e.g., sad or upset.

WHY IT MATTERS FOR MENTORING

Whether planned or not, establishing program policies and practices to navigate the end of a mentoring relationship is critically important to minimize harm and ensure participants are supported through this developmental phase of the relationship. Having planful conversations with youth and caregivers or developing a program exit survey can be a useful first step for programs to gain insights into participants' experience with unplanned endings – and hopefully improve the odds that future matches will sustain. Read more about considerations for program ending and find resources to help in MENTOR's *Elements of Effective Practice for Mentoring™* on RelationshipCelebration and Program Exit.

KEY NEW RESEARCH

To help or hinder: The role of nonparental adults in the sociopolitical development of immigrant-origin Latinx emerging adults

By Wendy de los Reyes, Bernadette Sánchez, Corissa Draper, Rosario Barraza

ABOUT THIS STUDY

With support from MENTOR, researchers conducted one-on-one interviews with youth 18 to 24 years old to learn how nonparental adults had influenced their sociopolitical development. Sociopolitical development refers to the process through which individuals or groups cultivate knowledge of and capacity to resist oppressive political and social systems and work toward a more equitable future. With an explicit focus on using a youth-centered approach, the team of researchers also assembled a youth advisory council to inform several phases of the research process.

FINDINGS

Providing emotional support and opportunities for discussion and action emerged as some of the most important ways natural mentors supported youth. Adults who hindered sociopolitical development tended to shut down opportunities for dialogue (e.g., minimizing youth viewpoints), tried to change youth perspectives or discouraged youth from taking direct action about issues they cared about. Especially when nonparental mentors were extended family members, youth expressed receiving both positive and negative support – highlighting the complex dynamics of familial relationships.

WHY IT MATTERS FOR MENTORING

Emotional support, opportunity and resources to explore social issues that matter to them, and the tools needed to impact positive change – these are direct insights from young people about what meaningful help from adults looks like. Any youth service setting, not just those with a focus on advocacy, can contribute positively to sociopolitical development by increasing opportunity for youth-led initiatives and fostering spaces for open dialogue. Learn more about strategies to honor youth voice and support youth activism in MENTOR's Becoming a Better Mentor resource.

Got a burning question about mentoring research? Wondering what we really know about mentoring young people or running a quality program? Send us your questions at research@mentoring.org and we'll answer them in our "mailbag" feature in an upcoming issue!