

Putting Research to Work for Families



Focus:
Civilian

“A Positive Guiding Hand”: A Qualitative Examination of Youth-Initiated Mentoring and the Promotion of Interdependence among Foster Care Youth

Spencer, R., Drew, A. L., Gowdy, G., & Horn J. P. (2018). "A positive guiding hand": A qualitative examination of youth-initiated mentoring and the promotion of interdependence among foster care youth. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 93, 41-50. doi:10.1016/j.chilyouth.2018.06.038

SUMMARY: Mentoring programs have been shown to be effective for many youth; however, youth in foster care sometimes have difficulty engaging in these program. Youth-initiated mentoring (YIM) is a type of mentoring where youth select the person to be their mentor, typically someone they already know, with the goal of creating successful mentor-mentee relationships with a high level of engagement by both parties. This study examined the impact of a YIM pilot program with results demonstrating a positive impact.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Both youth and mentors reported strong relationships with their matches; youth indicated mentors filled roles similar to friends, role models, or parents.
- Mentors offered mentees a variety of supports such as appraisal, companionship, emotional, informational, and instrumental, with multiple forms of support in all relationships: mentees particularly appreciated the nonjudgmental aspect of mentor support.
- Mentors particularly focused on providing a sense of stability for their mentees, which they perceived as lacking in many youth's lives.
- Mentors and youth reported positive impacts by the mentor on the youth's psychological well-being, relationships with others, and future orientation.

IMPLICATIONS FOR YOUTH DEVELOPMENT PROFESSIONALS:

- Collaborate with youth's social networks to develop formal mentoring relationships for youth
- Educate potential youth mentors on concrete ways they may provide support for their youth mentees

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAM LEADERS:

- Offer support groups for mentors after matching in order to help them manage concerns or conflict
- Coordinate between mentoring programs and agencies serving youth in foster care in order to facilitate successful mentoring programs

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY MAKERS:

- Encourage the development of youth mentoring programs that provide youth with the autonomy to develop their own mentorship opportunities
- Continue to provide support for youth mentoring programs for youth aging out of foster care

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METHODS

- The pilot YIM program lasted for one year; program staff provided match facilitation and mentor training.
- Matches were one-on-one, community-based relationships that met at least monthly and chose their own activities.
- Youth and mentors each participated separately in one in-depth, semi-structured interview at the end of the one-year pilot program. Interview questions addressed experiences of the mentoring relationship, strength of the relationship, and what support the mentor provided the youth.
- Interviews were transcribed and coded by a coding team that met weekly to discuss and ensure consistency.

PARTICIPANTS

- Participants were nine mentors (66% female) and 12 youth (66% female) from 13 different YIM matches; not all youth or mentors from each match participated.
- Youth were 16-25 years old (M = 19.17, SD = 2.59) and were 42% White, 17% Black, and 42% multiracial; mentors were 21-56 years old (M = 34.78, SD = 10.15) and were 89% White, 11% Black.
- Mentors were people with whom the youth already had a relationship but wanted to spend more time, such as a teacher, social worker, church activity leader, or former foster parent.
- At the time of the interview, youth and mentors had been formally matched for average 2.5 months (range 0.5 - 8).

LIMITATIONS

- The study was cross-sectional and retrospective which limits validity.
- Some of the matches had only been made a few weeks prior to the interviews, limiting the types of support and depth of relationship that could have occurred.
- Staff reported to researchers that many youth who declined to participate in the program believed they could handle aging out of foster care on their own; this suggests that youth who participate and youth who do not may have differed in qualities such as self-determination or autonomy, which could affect generalizability of the study.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

- Collect data from youth and mentors at the beginning of the mentoring relationship and conduct several interviews throughout the program to understand the way the relationship develops
- Evaluate the actual length of engagement in the mentoring relationship compared to the youths' and mentors' expectations of length of relationship at the beginning
- Study the impact of youth's beliefs about independence on their willingness to participate in the mentoring program

ASSESSING RESEARCH THAT WORKS

Design



Appropriate
Research Plan
and Sample

Methods



Appropriate
Measurement
and Analysis

Limitations



Several

For more information about the Assessing Research that Works rating scale visit:
<https://reachfamilies.umn.edu/content/assessing-research-that-works>