Fostering Positive Outcomes: How Mentoring Can Help Children and Adolescents in Foster Care

Each year, over a quarter of a million children are removed from their homes and placed in foster care, usually as a result of abuse or neglect. Perhaps not surprisingly, as compared with other children, youth in foster care experience a range of mental health problems, including depression, aggression and withdrawal. They often suffer grief due to the separation from or loss of relationships with their natural parents. In addition, they may have difficulty adjusting to new and often changeable school and home environments. Children in foster care are also at heightened risk for educational and behavioral difficulties. A distressing 65 percent of the eighteen-year-olds leaving foster care have failed to complete high school. Further, as they "age out" of the foster care system they face a number of other risks, including unemployment, substance abuse, pregnancy and involvement with the criminal justice system.

Far too many youth in foster care lack the adult support that is so necessary to help them through this difficult transition. In this Research Corner, I will examine the role of mentors in the promoting better outcomes for these young people.

Can Mentoring Programs Help?

Mentoring programs have been increasingly advocated as a means of redressing foster care youth's fundamental need for close and caring relationships. Few studies have specifically addressed this important question.

On the one hand, the past experiences of foster youth may present barriers to their establishing close, supportive relationships with mentors.

- Specifically, because foster care youth have often been exposed to inconsistent and inadequate parenting, they may have difficulties forming secure attachments (i.e., positive emotional bonds) with their parents and other adults.
- In fact, researchers believe that as many as three-quarters of foster care youth may experience difficulty forming healthy attachments. Difficulties trusting and forming close bonds may prevent foster care youth from realizing the positive benefits of mentoring.
On the other hand, youth in foster care may be uniquely responsive to supportive relationships with caring adults.\textsuperscript{6}  

- As they negotiate the transition from childhood to adolescence, foster care youth may seek out support and guidance from caring adults. And, to the extent that such relationships develop along different lines than parent-child relationships, earlier dysfunctional patterns of relating to adults might gradually change.  
- In essence, mentors can offer a model of care and support, challenging adolescents’ views of adults as untrustworthy, and of themselves as undeserving of supportive attention and care.  
- In this sense, a relationship with a mentor can become a “corrective experience” for those youth who have experienced neglectful or abusive relationships with their parents. Further, mentoring can facilitate more positive relationships with peers and others.

Drawing on data from the national impact study of Big Brothers Big Sisters, Rhodes and colleagues\textsuperscript{7} examined the influence of mentoring on the peer relationships of foster youth.  

- Foster parents were more likely than non-foster parents to report that their child showed improved social skills, as well as greater comfort and trust with others as a result of having a mentor.  
- Foster youth with mentors showed improvement in their peer support over time.  
- Mentors appeared to provide youth with alternative models of relationships involving trust, support and care, and an opportunity for the development of basic social skills.  
- By comparison, foster youth in the control group (those without mentors) showed a lessening in peer support over time.  

Taken together, the findings highlight the vulnerabilities of foster youth and underscore the important role that mentors can play in redressing some of the interpersonal problems that may be associated with foster placement.

Additional support for the potential of mentoring to positively affect foster care youth comes from the Seattle Mentorship Project.\textsuperscript{8} This project, which targeted African-American young men (aged 7-17 years) in family foster care, sought to address social and job skills, gender identity, self-concept and cultural identity. The mentors (African American males) emphasized the importance of foster parent involvement in youth-mentor relationships. The results of an evaluation of the project illustrated both the success and complexities of relationship-based intervention with this group.  

In light of how important mentors can be for this vulnerable group, and the growing interest in developing programs targeted toward youth in foster care, it is disappointing that so few studies and evaluations have been conducted. Future research should examine how mentoring affects other outcomes for foster care youth, such as their psychological functioning and academic achievement.

**Examples of Programs for Youth in the Foster Care**

A range of programs has been developed to address the needs of youth in the foster care system. Mech and colleagues\textsuperscript{9} surveyed 29 child welfare programs and found that mentor programs for adolescents in foster care tended to fall into several categories:
- Transitional life-skills;
- Cultural empowerment;
- Corporate/business;
- Programs young parents; and
- Group homes with mentors.

The authors concluded that mentoring has the potential to connect youth in foster care with a cross-section of caring adults who can provide an important bridge to higher education and employment. They also concluded that mentoring serves as a resource for transitional problem solving.

For example, Building Futures Community-Based Mentoring Program is based on Big Brothers Big Sisters' traditional mentoring model.

- Youth are referred from foster care agencies throughout New York City. Because many of the youth lack consistency in their lives, the program is designed to provide them with mentors with whom they can have fun, and who can share their life experiences and support the youth in striving for a positive future.

Along similar lines Mentoring USA's Foster Care Initiative ([http://library.adoption.com/mentoring/mentoring-program-targets-foster-care-children/article/4025/1.html](http://library.adoption.com/mentoring/mentoring-program-targets-foster-care-children/article/4025/1.html)) targets youth ages 10 through 18.

- After receiving special training, mentors commit to a minimum of four hours each month for at least one full academic year at one of MUSA's foster care sites, which currently include 10 foster care agencies and one public school.
- Mentors work with foster youth on developing life skills that prepare youth to live independently. Such skills include learning about post-secondary education opportunities, planning for a career planning, conducting a job search and handling basic finances.

The Chafee Foster Care Independence Program ([http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/programs_fund/state_tribal/jh_chafee.htm](http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/programs_fund/state_tribal/jh_chafee.htm)) funds a range of programs with the goal of helping to prepare youth for the transition from foster care to living independently.10

Program models vary across the country, with some teaching tangible life skills, such as budgeting, apartment hunting and finding resources. Other programs provide direct services, such as helping foster youth find transitional housing and other support services. Some programs also provide counseling and address interpersonal skills.

Along similar lines, the Colorado-based Joint Action in Community Service Amicus program ([http://www.snap211.com/org/1872050.html](http://www.snap211.com/org/1872050.html)) serves foster youth between the ages of 16 and 18, who live in the Denver area, most of whom have been in either foster or group homes.

- Mentors are matched with teens that are in the process of being emancipated from foster care. Within this context, the mentors help teens develop a plan for independent living, school and working.
- The matches are intended to last at least one year, with at least one in-person meeting per month.
Policy Initiatives

In 2003, Sen. Landrieu of Louisiana introduced legislation that would help match more foster care youth with mentors. The Foster Care Mentoring Act (S. 1343) (co-sponsored by six senators) supports the establishment, expansion and operation of programs and community organizations that provide mentoring for children in foster care. In particular, the legislation would provide competitive state grants for foster care mentoring programs. The legislation would also provide funding to forgive a portion of student loans for those mentors involved in long-term, intensive mentoring relationships with foster youth.

The Bottom Line

Obviously, mentoring programs cannot entirely redress the needs and circumstances of youth in the foster care system. But, such programs are part of a more comprehensive approach that is needed in order to coordinate service delivery and engage the community in promoting optimal development of youth in foster care. This comprehensive approach includes efforts to prevent child abuse and neglect, and to increase the availability of high-quality professional intervention within a well-coordinated system of care. Along with mentoring programs, churches, schools, businesses, recreation departments and other service providers all have a role to play in fostering better outcomes for this vulnerable population of youth.

Notes


