

# FINDINGS FROM MENTOR'S RESEARCH INTO THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON MENTORING PROGRAMS AND RELATIONSHIPS



The outbreak of the novel coronavirus in the United States in March of 2020 had a substantial impact on almost every industry and profession, including the youth mentoring programs and practitioners who provide such critical human connections for young people striving to achieve goals and overcome challenges. Thankfully, the mentoring field has responded with innovation and adaptation, responding to this crisis with increased support to youth and volunteers and with quickly-developed technology solutions that have allowed many mentoring relationships to keep in contact. It has been inspiring to see this response from the field, but also humbling, because there are many youth whose access to mentors has been curtailed by social distancing and many programs where the impact on staff or organizational finances has created an uncertain future.

At MENTOR, we have worked to support the field in a number of ways to ensure physical distance does not mean social disconnection. We've partnered with **iCouldbe** and **Cricket Together** to offer the Virtual Mentoring Portals, which allow mentoring matches to continue their relationships and connect online. We have led research to understand the impact that the pandemic has had on the mentoring field --- the organizations, volunteers, and dedicated professionals that bring caring adult relationships to so many. **This brief report highlights what MENTOR has learned about the impact of COVID-19 on mentoring and how programs and volunteers are responding to this critical moment.**

## THE IMPACT ON MENTORING RELATIONSHIPS

Perhaps our most broadly applicable research during this time came from MENTOR's participation in a national study of COVID-19 issues conducted by our partners at **Pacific Market Research**. In this survey, we asked a large national sample of adults about whether they mentored (both in formal mentoring programs but also "natural" mentoring relationships with other children in their life) and the impact that the pandemic has had on these relationships and the circumstances of the young people themselves.

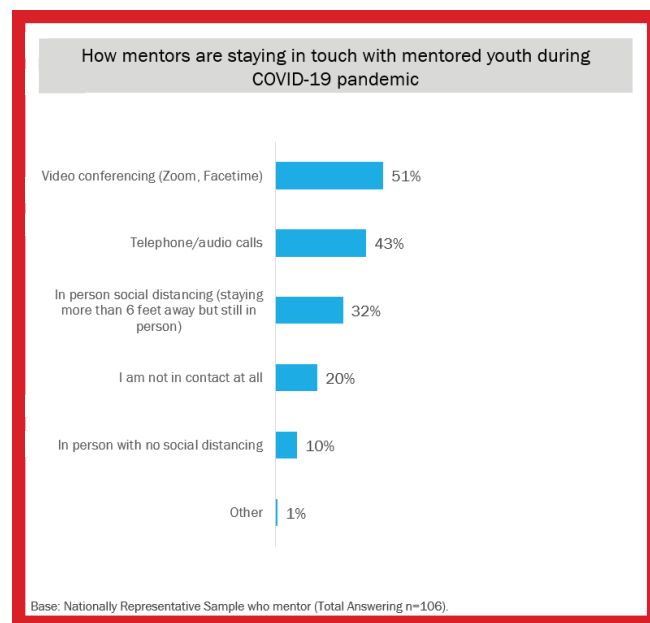
Impact of COVID-19 pandemic on mentoring relationships  
Among mentors



Base: Nationally Representative Sample who mentor (Total Answering n=111).

Among those findings:

- **About a third of mentors report that the pandemic has led to a positive impact on their mentoring relationships**, likely through more frequent check-ins and shifts in the types and amounts of support offered. One in five mentors report spending more time together and offering increased support.
- However, **a quarter of mentors report that their relationships have been negatively impacted**, mostly through program closures and suspended meeting times (29% of respondents).
- **Videoconferencing and phone calls are the most common ways of meeting with mentees** while physically apart, although 1 in 3 mentors report meeting with their mentee in-person while maintaining social distance.
- **Almost half of all mentors report that virtual mentoring meetings have been successful** for them and their mentee.
- However, **1 in 5 mentors has *not* been in contact with their mentee** since the pandemic hit.
- **83% of respondents felt that schools would need to expand the use of mentors** in the fall to offer students increased support and offset the loss of instructional time and enrichment opportunities.



## THE IMPACT ON FORMAL MENTORING PROGRAMS

MENTOR also engaged in two surveys of mentoring programs during the months of March and April in an effort to understand how the coronavirus crisis was affecting the mentoring relationships created and maintained by nonprofits, educational institutions, and other service providers. Unsurprisingly, we found that mentoring organizations are facing challenges with financial and operational uncertainty:

- **65% of programs have had fundraising events cancelled** due to COVID-19
- **30% of programs have had previous financial commitments rescinded** due to the pandemic
- Besides financial challenges, programs are adjusting operations to accommodate for a virtual work environment while also grappling with the uncertainty of in-person mentoring in the fall
  - **29% of programs have had to decrease their staffing capacity**

Programs are also dealing with many challenges related to the digital divide and their efforts to pivot to virtual mentoring meetings for their matches:

- Programs estimate that **only 57% of matches are currently in touch with each other regularly**. This means that a substantial percentage of youth are disconnected from these important caring adults.

- **Only 69% of youth (and their families) are estimated to have access to Wi-Fi** and a device to communicate with their mentor, engage in school work, etc. While this is also true of some mentors, these issues are most pronounced for the youth served by programs.
  - As a result, programs spent considerable time early in the pandemic working to provide free devices and hotspot access through schools or other locations to address this challenge.
- Through these challenges, programs and their matches are brainstorming creative ways to connect both with and without technology:
  - Zoom mentoring sessions, FaceTime, Skype are some of the different tools being used for virtual mentoring.

**“We are facilitating writing letters, sending cards/care packages, dropping off care packages or having a pizza delivered. None of these require technology, but allow matches to stay in contact.”**

Program Administrator, Minnesota

**“We are offering Netflix watch parties, a yoga studio is doing Zoom classes, we did a Facebook Live cooking class, and we are sharing other community Zoom and web-based classes. We are encouraging Facetime, texting, and mailing notes. Mentors can pick up school packets and food to drop off, with appropriate distancing, to their mentees.”**

Program Administrator, Nevada

## USE OF THE VIRTUAL MENTORING PORTALS

Many programs have shifted to virtual mentoring environments and technology solutions during this time. But for many programs, safety considerations and limited technology capacities have made shifting to e-mentoring a challenge. As one effort to mitigate those challenges, many programs have worked to transition their matches to the Virtual Mentoring Portals, offered by MENTOR, iCouldBe, and Cricket Together. 500+ mentoring programs across the country that collectively serve over 100,000 young people have submitted inquiries with the Virtual Mentoring Portals about potentially transitioning their matches.

 **MENTOR**

**Virtual  
MENTORING  
PORTALS**

There is much more to learn about the pandemic’s lasting impact on the mentoring field and the youth and volunteers in programs. Overall, it seems that the mentoring field has responded swiftly and creatively to this challenge with technology solutions, shifted priorities, and effective problem-solving for youth and families. We have also learned, however, that substantial numbers of youth are currently disconnected from their formal mentors and from the institutions where less formal “natural” mentoring relationships form with teachers, coaches, tutors, faith leaders, and other caring adults.

MENTOR will continue to help programs and practitioners respond effectively as this pandemic lingers and is committed to using our research capacities to help the field identify and grow solutions that can help mentoring thrive during this difficult time. We know that the power of relationships persists, even if we cannot be physically together.