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**Mentoring Program for Youth in Foster Care:
An Evaluation**

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Mentoring Program for Youth in Foster Care: An Evaluation

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to report on the findings of an evaluation of a youth in foster care mentoring pilot program. The pilot program and evaluation of its effectiveness were mandated by the Texas 80th Legislature through the passing of HB 3008. Big Brothers Big Sisters of North Texas (BBBSNT) implemented the pilot to match youth in foster care age 14 years and older, who participate on a voluntary basis and who have been screened for participation by the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS) with an adult mentor. As part of the pilot, youth were to receive 8 hours of face-to-face time, and at least 1 hour of phone, email, or text contact with their mentor. Though there were problems with implementation of the mentoring pilot, responses on the confidential youth survey suggest that those who did participate had positive experiences. Based on responses on the survey from the youth and based on the existing empirical literature on the benefits of mentoring programs for trouble youth and following the recommendations presented in this article the mentoring programs should be encouraged for youth aging out of foster care.

Keywords: Foster Youth, Mentoring, Foster Care, Outcomes

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Ninety-six percent of youth in the United States live with one or both parents, yet 1.4 million youth live with neither a parent nor a grandparent. Foster care youth make up about 40 percent of this number, the rest living with other relatives or “fictional kin” (US Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), 2003). The number of youth in foster care increased from 302,000 in 1980 to 423,000 in 2009. Teenagers make up about 30 percent of all foster care youth. About 30,000 adolescents leave foster care each year because they reach eighteen years of age, with 30 percent being in care for over 9 years without a permanent placement (DHHS, 2010). Youth aging out of foster care have significant difficulties transitioning into independent living across all areas of their lives.

To address these issues in Texas, the 80th Legislature passed HB 3008, mandating the Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS) facilitate the establishment of a youth mentoring pilot program to match youth in foster care with volunteer adult mentors in order to foster relationships of support and guidance in preparation for the youth’s transition to adult living. The pilot program was initiated in four counties, representing urban, suburban, and rural. The local Big Brothers Big Sisters implemented the program to match youth in foster care age 14 years and older, who participated on a voluntary basis and who had been screened for participation by DFPS, with an adult mentor. Big Brother Big Sisters (BBBS) is the nation’s largest provider of youth mentoring services. The mission of BBBS is *to help youth reach their potential through one-to-one relationships with mentors that have a measurable impact on youth*. (Tierney, Grossman, & Resch, 2009).

This paper will present a review of the literature on mentoring and findings of an evaluation conducted on the mentoring pilot program for youth in foster care. Included are referral data, demographic data, and contact data between youth and their mentors. Next, data are provided from the BBBS Report on Match Survey and BBBS youth and mentor satisfaction surveys followed by findings of two independently conducted surveys, one conducted with youth participating in the mentoring program and a second survey conducted with their mentors. Additionally, study limitations, conclusions, and recommendations for implementation of a mentoring program are presented.

Mentoring Literature

Successful mentoring programs carry great promise for helping youth aging out of foster care to achieve independence (Osterling & Hines, 2006; Spencer, Collins, Ward, & Smashnaya, 2010). Young adults who transition from foster care with limited support systems have notoriously poor outcomes on psychosocial and vocational measures. Poor physical and mental health, high rates of homelessness and incarceration, minimal educational achievement, and low employment too often characterize youth who age out of foster care (Antle, Johnson, Barbee, & Sullivan, 2009; Spencer et al., 2010). Mentorship based on “best practices” may assist transitioning youth to establish relationships with caring individuals who will ideally support them to develop productive adult lives (Spencer et al., 2010).

Existing research on mentoring programs identifies commonalities as to what constitutes best practices. Interventions and activities designed to sustain consistent contact between the mentor and the youth over a long period of time seem to achieve greater efficacy in terms of well-being outcomes (Grossman & Rhodes, 2002; Wandersman, Clary, Farbush, Weinberger, Coyne, & Duffy, 2006; Rhodes & Dubois, 2008; Rhodes & Lowe, 2008; Spencer et al., 2010). Specifically, mentoring relationships that last for a year or more in duration likely have stronger benefits (Rhodes, Haight, & Briggs, 2000; Rhodes & Lowe, 2008; Spencer et al., 2010).

Practices that appear to support relational endurance typically include screening out mentors who have little prior experience as helpers, ongoing training and supervision for mentors related to the unique needs of foster youth, defined expectations for frequency of contact between the mentor and foster youth, program-sponsored activities between the mentor and the youth, and parent involvement (Rhodes et al., 2000).

Empirical evidence on mentoring is incomplete, however, and does not provide precise protocol for effective mentorship (DuBois, Holloway, Valentine, & Cooper, 2002; Spencer et al., 2010). Research specific to mentoring for foster youth is even more limited. Nevertheless, purposeful implementation of known best practices in any mentoring program appears critical, and is perhaps uniquely important for foster youth. While high quality mentorship appears to increase the magnitude of the benefit, poor programs may actually be harmful to an already vulnerable group of young adults (Spencer et al., 2010). Longevity of the mentoring relationship appears to provide foster youth with protection against psychosocial stressors (Osterling & Hines, 2006). The unfortunate irony is that foster youth are uniquely at risk of attachment disruption, meaning past experiences may prevent or interrupt their ability to successfully develop or maintain helpful connections with adults (Rhodes et al., 2000). At the same time, mentors may be ill-equipped to manage youth's negative behaviors, and many mentoring relationships end prematurely – which appears to have more adverse consequences for youth when compared to those who received no mentoring at all (Spencer et al., 2010).

A youth's present relationship with his/her biological family must also be considered for beneficial mentorship to occur. Mentors who inadvertently fail to support constructive relationships between foster youth and their family members may bring about conflicted feelings for youth or generate disengagement of the parent from the youth (Rhodes et al., 2000). Training for mentors should include positive strategies to respond to youths in order to minimize the potential for yet another disrupted relationship, either between the mentor and youth or between the youth and his/her family (Spencer et al., 2010).

Existing data reflects a number of implications for improving mentoring programs, each with the ultimate goal of supporting a helpful mentoring relationship. Clearly, managing attrition of mentors is crucial for prevention of untimely termination of the relationship between mentors and youth (DuBois, Doolittle, Yates, Silverthorn & Tebes, 2006; Wandersman et al., 2006). Clinically-oriented supervision for mentors may be one method to minimize relational disruption (Rhodes & Lowe, 2008).

Strengthening mentoring programs for foster youth will also require researchers and practitioners to join forces to prevent "model drift" (Wandersman et al., 2006; Rhodes & Lowe, 2008). To accurately examine what works in mentoring programs, services must be carried out with fidelity to defined models. Mentoring models should include ongoing training and supervision in addition to identification of both program content and the sequential progression of interventions (Rhodes & Lowe, 2008).

Additional research specific to mentoring programs for foster youth is also necessary to ensure that mentorship is advantageous rather than harmful. More information regarding distinctions in mentoring for youth in relative versus nonrelatives' care would be particularly timely (Rhodes et al., 2000). This is particularly true in light of recent federal legislation supporting kinship foster care.

BBBS Mentoring Pilot Program Overview

Big Brothers Big Sisters of (BBBS) was to match youth referred by the Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS) who were in alternative care with mentors for the support and guidance which comes from the positive youth development instilled through one-to-one mentoring relationships. Mentors selected, trained, and matched through BBBSs vetted and lauded service delivery model address problems in a youth's life before they culminate in serious problems, such as failing to complete high school, pregnancy, or contact with the juvenile justice system. For most youth served by BBBS it is the first time they have been exposed to a positive adult role model, a sustained and loving source of guidance. In this environment, positive change quickly occurs and increases as the mentor-youth bond strengthens over time. Evaluation has found a strong correlation between the strongest effects and better outcomes for mentoring for youth who meet with their mentor face to face for an hour or more a week over the course of at least one year (Tierney et al., 2009). BBBS reports that the average mentor-youth match lasts 2.2 years.

Limitations of Study

The findings of this report should be viewed within the context of the significant study limitations. Fidelity to the intensity of the mentoring pilot (8 hours of face-to-face meetings per month and 1 hour of phone/text/email contact per month) was not met. Four youth of the 45 (less than 9%) received 8 hours per month of face-to-face time with their mentor. One matched pair met the 1 hour of phone/text/email contact a month. No matched pair met the criteria for both face-to-face and non-face-to-face contact while in the pilot. Twenty youth (44%) were in the program for 6 months or less. Due to the lack of fidelity to the pilot, no inferences can be made on its effectiveness or non-effectiveness.

Another serious limitation to the study is the lack of available valid and reliable pre-post data to use for comparing the youths in the mentoring pilot to a matched group not receiving mentoring. Many attempts were made to find existing DFPS data. Unfortunately, no valid and reliable pre-post data could be located. In addition, evaluation did not start at the beginning of the pilot; therefore, evaluators were not given the opportunity to incorporate any pre-post measures into the evaluation. A comparison was attempted using pre-post data collected on youth participating in PAL services. The majority of mentoring youth (all but 6) did not have this data available. The difference in sample sizes between the groups and the small sample of mentoring youth is a serious study limitation, resulting in the inability to draw any conclusions from the data.

All youth and mentors that could be located were invited to participate in a confidential survey regardless of the level of contact between them and length of their participation. With the exception of one youth, respondents on both surveys were those with higher levels of contact and participation. The overall response rate of the surveys was less than 25 percent. Twenty-five percent is considered a very low response rate in survey research. Thus, findings cannot be generalized to all of the youth and mentors in the pilot.

Evaluation Results

Youth Characteristics. A total of 45 youth were matched with a mentor. Of those, 62 percent were female and 38 percent were male. African American youth made up 58 percent of the referrals, with White, non-Hispanic comprising 24 percent, Hispanic or Latino 16 percent and 2 percent identified as multiracial. The age of the youth at time of removal ranged from 5 to 16 years of age. The majority of youth were

removed from their homes due to neglectful supervision (51%), with refusal to assume parental responsibility (31%) as the second most frequent reason. On average, youths referred to the program experienced 6 placements and had been in foster care for 7 years. More than half (56 %) of the youth experienced 7 or more placements, with 1 youth experiencing 22 placements. The majority of youth (62%) have been in placement 5 years or more.

Characteristics of the Mentors. As with the youth, 62 percent of the mentors were female and 38 percent were male. The average age of the mentors was 34.4 years, with a range of ages from 22 to 54. Of the mentors, 42 percent identified as African American, 8 percent as Hispanic, 40 percent as White, 4 percent as Asian, and 4 percent as multiracial. Thirty-three mentors (73%) were single and 12 were married (27%). The majority of the mentors (73%) did not have prior mentoring experience. The mentors' educational attainment included 7 with Master's Degrees, 15 with Bachelor's Degrees, 13 had some college, 5 had an Associates or Technical School Certification, and 5 had a High School Diploma.

Summary of Results

Two-hundred youth were anticipated to participate in the mentoring pilot. According to DFPS, over 200 youth were referred to the program by DFPS. Of those referred, 46 were matched with a mentor, with one of those youth dropping out of the program without participating. Three youth (7%) participated in the mentoring program for a year, with one youth participating for 13 months. No youth stayed in the program over 13 months. Sixty percent of the youth either participated for less than 6 months or had very little contact with their mentor.

The majority of youth (42 of 45) did not spend the expected 8 hours of face-to-face contact with their mentor; therefore, it is impossible to draw any conclusions on the effectiveness of the pilot. The amount of time spent between youth and mentors in many instances was brief, less than 2 hours per month of contact. The youth identified the top reasons for not meeting with their mentor as being due to either their having a busy schedule or their mentor having a busy schedule. The mentors also reported that either their busy schedule or the youth's busy schedule sometimes interfered with their ability to spend time together. However, mentors also reported that other reasons included conflicts with the foster parent's schedule or the foster parent not allowing the youth to spend time with their mentor. Youth moving from foster home to foster home also appears to be a significant barrier both to enrolling youth and maintaining youth in the program.

Analysis of amount of contact indicates that African American, Hispanic, and Mixed Race youths whose race did not match their mentor were more likely to fall into the low service category and this result was significant ($p < .05$). Seventy-nine percent of those minority youths who did not match had low hours or length of service versus only 45 percent of those who matched. These findings suggest a need to further investigate this issue and to recruit minority mentors to ensure youth are matched with a mentor of their same race or ethnicity.

Practice Implications

Though there were problems with implementation of this foster youth mentoring pilot, responses on the foster youth survey suggest that those who did participate had positive experiences. All but one of the youth completing the survey reported that he or she enjoyed spending time with a mentor and felt their mentor helped them gain self-confidence, experience improvement in school, and experience

improved relationships with their foster parents. Though the evaluation of the pilot has serious limitations; based on responses from the few participating youth and based on the existing empirical literature on the benefits of mentoring programs for trouble youth, mentoring programs for foster youth appear to have a positive impact on the lives of foster youth when the program adheres to best practices for youth mentoring.

Development of a mentoring program should be slow and well-planned; and, policies and procedures must be in place that allow for successful implementation. It is not enough to announce a new program without engaging all the necessary stakeholders and spending time in the front end to ensure success. It is important during development to identify the unique issues and needs of youth in foster care and adapt the mentoring services accordingly. Inclusion of foster youths or former foster youths on the planning team can lend valuable input on these unique issues and needs.

A barrier noted in this foster youth mentoring pilot was the lack of understanding of its purpose and importance by foster parents. Foster parents are vital to the success of a mentoring program. This can only happen if foster parents truly understand the benefits of a mentoring program to both themselves and the youth they foster. It is important to educate foster parents on the importance and benefits as a way to increase their *buy-in* to the program. In addition, the development of relationships between the mentor and other key persons in the youth's life to include family members and foster parents should be encouraged, as this has been shown to increase the likelihood of mentoring to have a positive impact.

Another barrier noted in this pilot was the referral of youth considered by BBBS to be inappropriate for the program. A set criterion for foster youth participation that is agreed upon by all involved is vital to success. Child protective staff from top down must be knowledgeable and "bought in" to ensure ongoing success of a mentoring program. On-going training and on-going reminders to key child protective services staff and mentoring program staff about the program, its benefits, the referral process, and the criteria for youth participation is key to program success. One method to maintain "buy-in" of stakeholders is the use of success stories in training so stakeholders can hear from youth the impact of the program to their lives.

Other barriers noted in this study include disruption of the mentoring relationship and mentors who were not prepared adequately on the unique issue of foster youth. It is important to reduce the number of placements of foster youth to allow them time to settle in and have a chance to develop positive relationships with mentors; or, if a move is imminent, move youth to families within the same general vicinity to allow for continued cultivation of stable relationships. As noted earlier, positive impact of mentoring is more likely to transpire if the youth and mentor develop a relationship that lasts at least one year. Contact between a youth and mentor should continue while a youth is in juvenile detention, hospital, or other facility. On-going positive interaction with a stable adult through these difficult moments in a youth's life has the potential to further cultivate the relationship and maintain a bond.

When recruiting mentors to work with foster youth, they should be screened to ensure they have both the knowledge and skills to engage youth and are able to make a long-term commitment and have the time and willingness to commit to spending face-to-face, quality time with the youth each week. On-going training, supervision, and support to mentors are important for mentors to ensure they are knowledgeable and prepared to address the unique issues with their mentee. Training, supervision and support, should include how to intervene with a youth experiencing a behavioral or

emotional problem as these youths should not be discharged or excluded from receiving mentoring. These youths are the most in need of stable relationships. As some evidence emerged in this study that suggested that more contact and engagement occurred when the mentor and youth were of the same race or ethnicity, further evaluation of this issue is needed. Often, evaluation of a program is an afterthought. Evaluators should be included in the planning stages of a mentoring program to allow for a more rigorous study design to be developed and implemented. Data should be collected and analyzed on-going for continuous quality improvement. Implementation of a program is not a one-time activity. On-going evaluation is vital to continued success.

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