Is Mentoring Worth the Investment?

Welcome to the Autumn 2013 edition of the Research Quarterly. Each quarter, we aim to provide you with a summary of recent research articles on youth mentoring as well as provide a more detailed article which looks at research in a particular area of youth mentoring.

This month, we take a look at studies focusing on outcome for school-based mentoring and mentoring as an intervention for children in foster care. We also look at outcomes for young people with varying risk profiles and mentoring of siblings of gang members.

We spotlight the issue of whether or not youth mentoring programs deliver value for money to the funders.

Articles in this edition:


Impact of a Mentoring on Mental Health Outcomes for Maltreated Children in Foster Care


The objective of this study from the University of Colorado was to evaluate the efficacy of the Fostering Healthy Futures program in reducing mental health problems and associated issues. The participants in the study were children aged 9 to 11 years who had been maltreated and placed in foster care.

The study, conducted among more than 150 children, found that children had fewer mental health problems six months after completing a nine-month program that included skills building and mentoring, compared with children who did not get the intervention.

After analysing the results of the study, the researchers concluded that a 9-month mentoring and skills group intervention for children in foster care can be implemented with fidelity and high uptake rates, resulting in improved mental health outcomes.

However, the authors caution that the study has some limitations, including imbalances between the groups at baseline with the intervention group having higher IQs, experiencing physical abuse, and having mothers with a criminal history. Although the researchers controlled for those differences, other confounding factors might have gone unmeasured, they noted. The researchers concluded that “although this study needs replication, it may be a promising model, not only for children in foster care but for other high-risk youth populations as well.”
Mentoring Experiences and Outcomes for Youth with Varying Risk Profiles.


Having the guidance of a caring adult mentor may help overcome symptoms of depression among young people, according to a five-year study of 1,300 young people.

The study, funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, sheds a new and encouraging light on the effects of a positive adult role model in the lives of higher-risk youth. The Role of Risk: Mentoring experiences and outcomes for youth with varying risk profiles focuses on youth from seven community-based mentoring programs serving youth in Washington. It was authored by leading national researchers, Drs. Carla Herrera, David DuBois and Jean Grossman.

"In recent years, there has been increasing pressure on many mentoring programs to serve higher-risk youth," says Dr. Herrera. "But there were a lot of unanswered questions: Could programs reach these youth? Could they benefit them? Did they need to alter their practices to work with them effectively?"

The Role of Risk presents findings from the first large-scale study to examine how the levels and types of risk youth face may influence their mentoring relationships and the benefits they derive from their program involvement. Participating programs served youth facing a wide range of challenges. The vast majority lived in difficult home environments, and about half had trouble in school or with peers or had mental health concerns. Programs reached these youth with very little effort beyond their normal outreach strategies, suggesting that such "higher-risk" youth are fairly typical of the youth they serve.

The study followed youth for 13 months, comparing mentored youth to a group of similar youth who had not been offered mentoring. Mentored youth reported fewer symptoms of depression, greater acceptance by their peers, more positive beliefs about their ability to succeed in school and better grades. The strongest findings were related to depression which is linked to a host of short- and long-term cognitive, behavioural, and social problems. The findings are particularly salient given that almost one in four of all the youth in the study reported worrisome levels of depressive symptoms at enrolment.

While youth from all backgrounds benefited from mentoring, it is noteworthy that higher-risk youth, who are often considered "hardest to serve" in mentoring and other social programs, had gains that were at least as strong as those for youth from less challenging backgrounds. The findings further suggest that program practices such as mentor training and regular support calls from program staff can help strengthen matches. Training and support may also be most effective when tailored to youth's risk profile.

According to Dr. Herrera: "Mentors described very different challenges and training needs and reported different reasons why matches ultimately ended, depending on the risk profile of the youth with whom they were matched. If programs tailored their training and support to address specific match needs, they may be able to have an even stronger impact on young people's lives."

The Role of Risk stands to have a lasting impact on the mentoring field, showing that with the right kinds of programmatic support, volunteer mentors can help youth make gains in a number of key areas for their development. Most notably, they can help ameliorate symptoms of depression in youth facing a wide range of challenges.
Spotlight

Is Mentoring Worth the Investment? The “Jury is Out”

This quarter, we look at whether youth mentoring deliver value for money. We will be looking at the following articles:


It seems counter intuitive that those working in the youth mentoring sector should question if youth mentoring is worth the investment directed toward the programs they work in and the young people they support. And even more so when there is much evidence that quality mentoring programs benefit young people in a myriad of ways, including academic benefits, improved mental health, attendance and punctuality, their communication, and their social skills. However, David DuBois, professor of Community Health Sciences and co-editor of the Handbook of Youth Mentoring argues in an opinion piece that the “jury is out,” regarding the question of whether mentoring is a good investment.

DuBois opens his argument by quoting Michael Foster, an expert in the economic evaluation of prevention programs, who suggest that “existing research demonstrates that the costs of mentoring programs are variable and rather modest, at least in comparison to the high costs of delinquency, school dropout and substance abuse (Cohen, 1998). Simple comparisons reveal that the latter dwarf the former. Nonetheless, at this point, the literature does not offer the sorts of comprehensive economic analysis that are required to judge mentoring cost-effective and to suggest that public funds should be expended on such programs.” (Foster, 2010, p. 24).

This however begs the question, what is required of an organisation to develop the sort of ‘comprehensive economic analysis’ that would allow youth programs to demonstrate value for money? According to DuBois “any such analysis needs to rest on a rigorous assessment of the benefits of mentoring, the kind that would normally be obtained from a rigorous, large-scale random assignment evaluation”. He further suggest that short of this happening that any mentoring program which makes strong claims as to how much money it is saving the community, but lacks this type of evidence base, is on shaky ground at best.

However, even for programs who have reliable estimates of economic benefits DuBois says there are still further hurdles to clear before making your case.

One of the most fundamental of these is that even a favourable benefit: cost ratio (i.e., benefits exceed costs) does not translate into an indisputable case for investment in a mentoring program. The reason for this he argues, is that there are always many
alternatives available for investment of public dollars and, in the case of mentors, their personal time.

In order to illustrate this, DuBois highlights research showing a comprehensive analysis of the costs and benefits of prevention and early intervention programs by Aos and colleagues (2004). Aos et al estimated that for each youth served, there was a net benefit of $1.01 for each dollar invested. However, eighteen other youth development or substance abuse prevention programs were also examined and many estimated to provide better return on investment than the mentoring program sample, in some cases by a large margin – for example, 5 of the 6 youth development programs offered estimated benefits of between $3 and $28 per dollar of cost.

DuBois says his point in highlighting these data is not to argue that mentoring programs are in fact less worthwhile investments than other programs. Rather, his aim is to demonstrate “how challenging it can become to construct a compelling argument for investment in mentoring programs in the context of an array of competing options for use of the same resources”.

So where does this place us? In DuBois’s summation he leaves us with his position on youth mentoring, “to be clear, I personally believe that mentoring programs for youth are a highly worthwhile investment” and that in order to better demonstrate this, mentoring programs need to “expand evaluations of mentoring programs to include measures of outcomes that capture the monetised benefits of program participation”.

He suggests that programs also should “include expanded measurements of more immediate outcomes that can be monetised such as reduced levels of involvement in the juvenile justice system, utilisation of health care and social services, and need for special education within schools”.

DuBois continues that organisations should “push the envelope as to what can be counted as monetised benefits of mentoring”. For example, if youth as a result of mentoring are happier and more content with their lives (“life satisfaction”), DuBois argues that there should be a way to attach some value to this.

He also suggests that as a sector we need to do much more to factor in the “ancillary benefits that mentoring programs may offer to mentors, the parents of youth (e.g., through reductions in parental stress), and communities as a whole (e.g., through increased availability of positive peer role models for other youth), none of which will be reflected in simple summations of benefits to participating youth”.

All in all it seems that there are significant in-roads can be made in demonstrating that value of youth mentoring in the future, which should allow our sector to giving the jury more than enough information to feel confident in reaching a verdict regarding the merits of investment in mentoring.
Mentoring siblings of gang members


This study investigates some of the larger issues surrounding these mentoring interventions for gang involvement in the UK.

The Gang Mentoring pilot was a 4 month (later extended to 8 months) intensive mentoring intervention with the goal of ‘building resilience’ among younger male siblings of gang members at high risk for gang membership. The program focused on the following:

- ensure the younger siblings attended school regularly
- engaged the mentee group in positive activities at peak times of risk
- provide information, advice, and guidelines to the young person and their families

School staff had a positive view of the intervention. They reported improvement on young person’s school attendance, punctuality, communication, and social skills. Staff noted how mentors were helpful mediators between the families and the schools – with this increased communication being a very important outcome. Overall, the program received strong support from the both the school and the families involved.

The young people reported positive relationships with their mentors, satisfaction with the activities, and viewed the project as providing them with activities (sporting and leisure) that they otherwise would not be able to attend.

The study also identified the danger that may be associated with being identified as a potential gang member and the lasting stigma that accompanies that. It was a challenge to maintain appropriate communication between the school and staff while still maintaining confidentiality regarding family gang affiliation.

The parental satisfaction with the program and the strides in communication with the mentors and school are very impressive outcomes given the long history of negative experiences and general mistrust of statutory agencies and interventions reported by the families.

It is important to note that despite the satisfaction with the mentoring program, it is limited by its short duration and the scarce availability of activities for the young people to engage in after school or on the weekends, especially upon completion of the program. Thus, future interventions could benefit from a longer duration of the mentoring relationship as well as increased access to positive group activities for the young person upon termination of the program.
The influence of meeting time on academic outcomes in school-based mentoring


Some school-based mentoring programs offer mentoring after school or during lunch, while others offer it during the school day. Given that pulling participating students from class could potentially disrupt academic instruction, this study considers how these differences in implementation influence academic outcomes.

The aim of this study was to examine the effect of the timing of mentor-youth meetings on academic performance within school-based mentoring. The study employed data from the national evaluation of Big Brothers Big Sisters school-based mentoring program. Approximately half of the 1,139 participants had been randomly assigned to receive mentoring at their schools. Forty four per cent were in programs in which matches met after school, 25% were in programs in which matches met during the school day excluding lunch, 6% were in programs in which matches met during lunch, and 26% were in programs in which matches met at various times during and after school.

The findings showed that among academically at-risk youth, the impact of school-based mentoring on academic outcomes was moderated by the time during which matches met. Specifically, academically vulnerable youth derived significant academic benefits from mentoring in programs that met after school or during lunch. In programs that met during school as a pull-out program, there was some evidence of negative effects on academic outcomes.

“... academically vulnerable youth derived significant academic benefits from mentoring in programs that met after school or during lunch...”

More research articles on youth mentoring can be found on the AUSTRALIAN YOUTH MENTORING NETWORK Website visit www.youthmentoring.org.au/Research.html
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