

EMCC Research Review

Issue 8: Youth Mentoring



Introduction

Dear Reader,

In this issue of the EMCC Research Review, we will divert from our usual emphasis on organisational mentoring and instead zoom in on youth mentoring. In youth mentoring a non-parental adult help promote positive development in young and adolescent individuals at risk of developing psychological, social and behavioural problems.

The first study is a large meta-analysis by Elizabeth Raposa and colleagues. Drawing on an analysis of 70 studies, they show that youth mentoring has a positive impact on a range of different outcomes. This is a quite an uplifting start!

The second study is brand new, and was published by McKenna Parnes and colleagues in Journal of Community Psychology earlier this year. Their paper investigates an oft neglected but key stakeholder in youth mentoring, namely caregivers. Based on an impressively large amount of data, they show how caregiver-mentor relationships have a significant impact on youth-mentoring relationship quality and duration.

The final study addresses the often neglected aspect of saying goodbye. In their paper, Renée Spencer and colleagues illustrate how important proper goodbyes can be and how remarkably seldom they are actually done. Their study goes a long way in showing the importance of training mentors, and maybe even mentees as well, how to properly end a mentoring relationship. And while the study was conducted in a youth-mentoring setting, the point might be equally important in other mentoring settings.

I hope you enjoy reading the current issue.

Sincerely
Content writer
Leo Smith, EMCC Denmark



Youth mentoring outcomes – does it work?

Study: The effects of youth mentoring programs: A meta-analysis of outcome studies

By: Elizabeth B. Raposa, Jean Rhodes, Geert Jan J M. Stams, Noel Card, Samantha Burton, Sarah Schwarz, Laura A. Yoviene Sykes, Stella Kanchewa, Janis Kuperschmidt & Saida Hussein

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Introduction

This study is a meta-analysis, meaning an analysis of the published quantitative studies of youth mentoring. We therefore get a quantitative summary of the existing literature and an overview of what we know and what we need to know more about. The authors focused specifically on studies pertaining to outcomes associated with youth mentoring.

What did the researchers do?

The researchers started out by identifying all potentially relevant studies on the topic which amounted to a total of 16,455 studies. From this foundation, studies were then screened in if they lived up to 2 criteria. First, the relationship had to be formal and comprise a non-professional, non-parental adult or older youth in the capacity of a mentor helping a specific younger person. Second, the study had to be either a randomised controlled trial or a quasi experiment to ensure a proper basis for causal inference.

Then, a second round of screening was used to screen out studies on the basis of a number of exclusion criteria. These included:

- Similar-age peer mentoring
- Only group mentoring
- Adult (+18 years of age) mentees
- Insufficient treatment versus control group differentiation, that is, if the differences between the two groups were not substantial
- Cases in which mentoring was not the primary or secondary component of the initiative

- Outcome measures did not fall into the following categories: psychological, social, school, health, or cognitive
- Insufficient information to allow for effect size computation
- Written in a language that was not English

Following these two rounds of screening the authors ended up with a total of 70 studies comprising 25,286 youth with an average age of 12 years. A rather impressive sample size!

Main Findings

- Overall youth mentoring had a positive impact on at-risk youth although the effect size was small to moderate depending on assessment criteria
- The positive effects were found across 5 broad domains: School, Psychological outcomes, Health, Cognitive Functioning, Social
- The outcomes were significantly better for male mentee, whereas mentee age and ethnicity had no influence on outcomes
- Programmes targeted at specific groups of youth were not significantly different from programmes that were broadly targeted in terms of outcomes
- Programmes with a higher percentage of male mentors were significantly more effective
- Programmes with a higher percentage of mentor working in the helping professions were significantly more effective as well
- Ethnic background, student status and mentor age did not result in differences in effect sizes
- Whether the programme was school- or community-based did not make a difference in terms of outcomes
- Program length, programme expectations pertaining to meeting frequency, number of pre-match mentoring training hours, and incentives for participation also made no difference in terms of outcomes



Why is this interesting?

Meta-analyses are always interesting in their capacity to summarise the state of the literature. The conclusion seems fairly clear: Youth mentoring had a small but significant positive on all the expected parameters, that is, psychological, social, school, health, or cognitive areas.

The effects of mentoring were also significantly larger for male mentees and when there was a higher proportion of males mentors. The authors note however, that since mentees are often matched with mentors of the same sex, it is difficult to tease apart the effect of either. They also note the at-risk female youth might enter the mentorship with a more complicated relational history which may hinder progress.

Considering potential personal and societal costs of at-risk youth continuing their troubled trajectory, and the relatively low cost of mentoring, structured mentor programmes should be considered a viable tool in the community service toolbox. However, mentoring does not create miracles as demonstrated by the modest effect sizes.

How can you put this into practice?

Due to the granularity of the study, we can infer quite a few practical recommendations, the first of course being that mentoring is very likely to have a positive impact, so get started setting up a formal programme. The study also indicated that mentors working in the helping professions are likely to improve outcomes.

The study also showed that a lot of things matter less than we might have expected, such as ethnicity, age, and mentor specificity of mentor programme focus.

Drawbacks

While meta-analysis are quite useful in summarising the existing literature in field of research, they are not without limitations.

As it is always the case with meta-analyses, the results rely on the quality and availability of papers in the field. However, the rigorous screening large and large sample size



mitigate this risk substantially. There is also the risk of publication bias, which means that the publication of studies is biased by the results obtained in the studies, typically in favour of studies that find significant effects. The researchers check for this by doing a so-called funnel plot analysis which showed that publication bias was unlikely.

Another limitation pertains to the fact that only studies written in English were included. However, English is by far the dominant language in scientific publications and therefore the analysis also included several studies done in non-English speaking countries.

A final weakness stems from the fact that country-specific contextual factors were not included in the analysis.



Youth mentoring and the role of caregiver-mentor collaboration

Study: Formal youth mentoring relationships in the context of risk: what is the role of caregiver-mentor collaboration

By: McKenna F. Parnes, Carla Herrera, Thomas E. Keller, Manolya Tanyu, G. Roger Jarjoura & Sarah E. O. Schwarz

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Introduction

Understandably, most research has focused on the mentor-mentee dyad, as illustrated in the previous meta-analysis. This study expands the scope relevantly, by including what is arguably the most important other stakeholder in the relationship, namely parents or caregivers. More specifically, they investigate the extent to which the relationship between parent/caregiver and the mentor impacts on the mentor-mentee relationship.

What did the researcher do?

The study is based on data collected from a large-scale evaluation of the Mentoring Enhancement Demonstration Program (MEDP). The aim of the programme was to test the efficacy of an enhanced mentoring program including more formal training compared to a “business as usual” set-up. The study tapped into 27 different, existing mentoring programs across 12 states in the USA. Matches were then randomly assigned to either the enhanced program or the control condition (business as usual). MEDP was supported by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, part of the U.S. Department of Justice.

At the initiation of the mentorships, caregivers were asked to evaluate baseline risk using a validated questionnaire. In the follow-up round of data collection 12 months after the initiation, caregivers were asked to evaluate mentor effectiveness and caregiver-mentor collaboration. Based on a factor analysis, the authors concluded that mentor-caregiver relationship had two separate components:

- Collaboration-Caregiver Involvement, which pertains to the engagement between the caregiver and mentor
- Collaboration-Mentor Backing, which
- pertains to the perceptions of support given by the mentor to the caregiver

In addition, mentees evaluated the degree of closeness to the mentor and the relational health of the match in the follow-up round.

A total of 2165 young individuals participated in the evaluation, about half of which were in the enhanced program. Finally, the study also included data on the relationship length by calculating the number of days from initiation to relationship closure dates reported by the participating agencies.

Main findings:

- Collaboration-Mentor Collaboration had a direct positive association all outcomes, that is, more collaboration was associated with longer mentorships, higher level of mentee-perceived closeness, higher levels of relational health, and higher caregiver-evaluations of mentor effectiveness
- Collaboration-Mentor Backing had a direct positive association with caregiver-evaluations of mentors advocating for the youth
- A higher baseline individual risk evaluation was associated with higher caregiver perceptions of mentors' effectiveness in supporting youth behaviour

Why is this interesting?

The study is interesting because it offers quantitative evidence of the effect of caregiver-mentor relationships. The remarkably consistent findings across a range a positive outcomes suggest that mentor-parent collaboration ought to a central consideration in all youth mentorship programs.

In addition, it is highly encouraging that higher individual risk is associated with higher caregiver involvement and better mentoring relationship outcomes. Mentoring seems like a particularly valuable tool to curb the risk of youth getting in trouble.

How can you put this into practice?

It may not be natural for mentor in youth mentoring programs to engage with parents as such, as their primary concern is likely the mentee. However, this study goes some way in showing the importance of allocating some resources to mentor-caregiver relationship building. Taking it one step further, one could argue that this is something that should be considered a basic building block in any youth-mentoring programme.

Drawbacks

One weakness addressed by the authors is a fairly broad measurement of risk in the employed survey. Another weakness stems from the fact that the data was from the USA only, and therefore it may be somewhat difficult to generalise the finding to other countries.

Finally, the study is unable to determine the direction of causality, that is, we cannot say that caregiver-mentor relationships cause the outcomes described above, or whether it is the other way around. Nevertheless, this study offers a valuable contribution to both the literature and the practice of running youth-mentoring programmes.

Ending youth mentoring relationships

Study: How youth mentoring relationships end and why it matters: a mixed-methods, multi-informant study

By: Renee Spencer, Thomas E. Keller, Meghan Perry, Alison L. Drew, Hyuny Clark-Shim, John Paul Horn, Miriam Miranda-Díaz & Martha J. McCormack

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Introduction

Most formal mentoring relationships are terminated at some point, but why? This study investigates why youth-mentoring relationships come to an end, which is a topic that has been left surprisingly under-investigated. The study both investigates who takes the initiative to the relationship and the specific causes.

What did the researcher do?

The study is quite interesting as it followed a data-triangulation method, that is, it is based both on quantitative surveys and in-depth interviews. The data was gathered from the well-known Big Brother Big Sister mentoring programme in which volunteer mentors are matched in 1-to-1 mentorships typically with same-gender mentees.

Prior to relationship initiation, the researcher gathered data on factors known to predict early ending (the relationships were expected to last 12 months).

After each closure, they gathered data from both mentees, caregivers, mentors and programme staff in the form a survey. A total of 124 programme supervisors, 104 caregivers, 95 mentors and 72 youths participated in the survey. A subsample of the adults (caregiver, mentors, and programme staff) were selected for in depth interviews. A total of 36 mentorships were evaluated using qualitative, semi-structured interviews with all 3 adult respondents, resulting in an impressive amount of data, which was analysed using a multistep thematic analysis.

Main findings:

- Around 30 % of the relationships ended earlier than the expected 12-months
- In the vast majority of cases (69-74%, depending on which group the respondent belonged to) there was no goodbye
- In more than half the cases (54-60%, depending on which group the respondent belonged to), the mentor initiated the ending
- Nearly one third of mentees were left uncertain as to why the relationship ended
- For mentors, the main reason for relationship ending was lack of response from mentees and/or their caregivers
- Another common reason for both mentors' and mentees' perspective was that they simply lost contact and stopped communicating
- Finally, in some cases (~10%) the mentors actively chose not to do a formal goodbye either because they could not handle it or because they felt disrespected or unappreciated by the mentee and/or caregiver

Why is this interesting?

In addition to the combination of data employed in the study, the phenomenon itself is quite interesting. The qualitative data in particular reveals how emotional and stressful relationship endings can be. Also, bearing in mind that the youths participating in such programmes are already at risk, proper goodbyes are all the more important. Another relationship that ended on uncertain terms is hardly going to do them any good.

How can you put this into practice?

In most formal mentor programmes, the vast majority of resources are invested in match-making and programme preparation. The study shows how important it is to invest in proper mentor relationship endings. The authors note that there were guidelines in place, and although such standards are necessary, they are also insufficient as a stand alone solution. More specifically, the authors point to the need to train staff properly to handle mentor relationship endings. Programme staff could consider themselves coaches or mentors for the mentors in the ending phase.



Drawbacks

Like the previous study, that data was collected from an American-only sample, which again makes it somewhat difficult to generalise to other countries. Moreover, the data was collected from a single programme, the Big Brother Big Sister initiative, which again may limit the generalisability of the findings. Finally, given the sensitive nature of the topic, there may be a risk of a slightly skewed sample, since some participants may be too upset, or feel too embarrassed about ending the relationship to participate in the study.



Conclusion

The first conclusion that we can draw is that youth mentoring works across several outcome domains. Given the relatively low cost of implementing mentoring programs and the potential gain both personally and societally, it seems like very reasonable tool for authorities to consider.

However, mentoring programs are not without costs. From the studies in this review, it is clear that underlying programme structures and processes that ensure proper management of caregiver relationships is important in proper implementation.

Moreover, it is most likely a good idea for programme administrators to assist both mentors and mentees in the adjourning phase where the mentorship comes on end. All parties seem to recognise the importance of proper goodbye, yet most struggle to get it done.