

How are non-professional relationships associated with outcomes for children with a social worker?

Evidence Summary

The Evidence Summaries have not been conducted or written as rapid reviews, systematic reviews or comprehensive literature reviews. Instead they were designed and written as brief notes intended to give the Independent Review of Children's Social Care a quick overview of some of the evidence on a particular topic or question. They are only being published for transparency and given their limited scope, are not intended as a resource for wider purpose.

This short summary is meant to add to the existing What is the impact of high-quality relationships on the development and outcomes of a child who has experienced adversity and/or trauma? Evidence Summary. Due to a short turnaround time, this addendum primarily draws from quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods systematic reviews.

Introduction

Youth in foster care are less likely to be able to hold meaningful long-term relationships with unfamiliar adult mentors because of their unique experiences of relationship trauma, disrupted relationships, and placement moves (Thompson et al., 2016). This finding is highlighted by a recent meta-analysis of peer relationships amongst youth involved in foster care, which showed that foster youth have lower quality peer relationships compared to youth who were raised by their biological family ($g = -0.35$, $p = .007$), though this was a small effect (Deluca et al., 2019). Only 73.5% of youth involved in foster care reported having a close peer relationship ($p = .003$), which, although not directly comparable, is considered notably below the percentage of youth raised by their biological family (*exact number not available*) (Deluca et al., 2019).

Mentoring through formalised interventions

One particular way youth form relationships with mentors are explicitly designed social interventions. These mentoring programmes have been created and evaluated with the express purpose of aiding children and young adults associated with the foster care system. A recent meta-analysis of mentoring programmes found that mentoring programmes have a small-to-medium statistically significant positive impact on foster care involved youth (*Hedge's g* = 0.342, $p < 0.001$) (Poon et al., 2021). The outcomes included in these analyses were internalising symptoms and mental well-being, academics, career outcomes, externalising symptoms and behavioural issues, service utilisation, and social competencies. Moderator analyses did not find differences of impact between these outcomes, suggesting that all of the listed outcomes were at least near equally positively impacted by the programmes included in the meta-analysis.

Moderator analyses found that programmes were less effective for youth who had experienced emotional abuse, and were more effective when there was a combination of shorter programme duration, shorter expected mentoring length, and lower *expected* mentor support. Of particular interest is that programmes that involved near-peer mentors were over twice as effective as programmes that involved inter-generational mentors ($b = 0.359$, $p = 0.024$) (Poon et al., 2021). One particular example of a near-peer mentoring programmes was the programme 'Better Futures.'

The Better Futures programme was developed with the purpose of increasing higher education participation amongst youth involved in foster care by enhancing self-determination through older peer coaches through both learning activities and information distribution (Phillips et al. 2015). The programme explicitly focuses on mental health issues by encouraging resiliency and normalising mental health issues. This took the form of discussions around working with foster parents and children's social care professionals who may question youth's capabilities, how to take their experiences into strong applications for higher education, and figuring out how and when to disclose their care status to others, while also doing relationship building and celebrating achievements. The programme also allowed flexibility for coaches to aid participants during life stressors by highlighting youth strengths, aiding them in making decisions, and continuing to help youth try to achieve their higher education goals (Phillips et al. 2015). A list of the other included interventions in this systematic review is available in an appendix at the end of this document.

Natural mentoring

Natural mentoring, or mentoring that is done outside of formal and organised programmes may be more promising in that youth select for themselves familiar adults or peers that they can create a lasting and quality bond with. Natural mentors can include non-parental relatives, neighbours, teachers, counsellors, or members of the community who can advocate for youth, and also be their confidant. They provide support by providing social capital youth may not receive otherwise (e.g. college applications, job searches) and by providing emotional support during stressful events or day-to-day stressors. From a developmental perspective, natural mentors can help demonstrate to youth how to model healthy relationships and function as a secondary attachment figure (van Dam et al., 2018).

Qualitative studies found that natural mentorship is important for foster youth transitioning to adulthood, where four studies emphasised the importance of viewing mentors as 'caring' or 'like a parent' (Thompson et al., 2016). This sentiment is echoed in a recent qualitative systematic review, where 38 studies carried a theme of the need for a genuine caring relationship that allowed for *natural* response and a feeling of respect, in contrast to overly professional relationships (NICE, 2021). That being said, natural mentoring as a single concept seems to be poorly defined, with a lack of general agreement between systematically searched studies (Thompson et al., 2016; van Dam et al., 2018).

A wider meta-analysis of natural mentoring, across all youth demographics, found that having a natural metro was associated with positive academic and vocational, social-emotional, physical health, and psychosocial outcomes ($r = .106$). There was a larger effect size ($r = .208$) where there was higher quality relationships with natural mentors defined by relatedness, social support, and autonomy support. Risk-status was not related to effects, suggesting that natural mentorship is equally as beneficial for foster care involved youth as it is for the general youth population (van Dam et al., 2018).

The authors of this particular study emphasise that since natural mentoring relationships require less infrastructure and investment compared to formalised mentoring programmes, it may be beneficial to strengthen 'relational capacity' in foster youth settings by increasing the

ratios and trainings of adults in educational, health, juvenile justice, and other settings where foster care involved youth may frequent.

Conclusion

It is well established in the evidence base that youth involved with foster care have difficulties forming and maintaining quality relationships, which can play a significant role in improving outcomes across many different domains. Research on mentoring has demonstrated positive effects on foster care involved youth, particularly where there were high quality mentoring relationships, which can be a challenge to develop for foster care involved youth due to previous episodes of abuse. Formal programmes may be more effective where mentors are closer to foster youth's age and experience in the foster care system, and natural mentoring may be facilitated through increased interaction opportunities between foster care involved youth and adults in their day-to-day settings.

References

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Appendix: Programmes involved in Meta-analyses

Study	Programme Name
<i>Poon et al. 2021</i>	<p><u><i>Transition to Independence Programme</i></u></p> <p>Ayna, D. (2017). Program evaluation of The Wayne State University (WSU) Transition to Independence Program (TIP). Doctoral Dissertation, Wayne State University. ProQuest Dissertations & Thesis Global</p>
	<p><u><i>My Life</i></u></p> <p>Blakeslee, J. E., & Keller, T. E. (2018). Extending a randomized trial of my life mentoring model for youth in foster care to evaluate long-term effects on offending in young adulthood: Final technical report. Portland State University.</p>
	<p><u><i>TAKE CHARGE</i></u></p> <p>Geenen, S., Powers, L. E., Powers, J., Cunningham, M., McMahon, L., Nelson, M., Dalton, L. D., Swank, P. & Fullerton, A. other members of Research Consortium to Increase the Success of Youth in Foster Care. (2013). Experimental study of a self-determination intervention for youth in foster care. <i>Career Development and Transition for Exceptional Individuals</i>, 36(2), 84 – 95</p> <p>Powers, L. E., Geenen, S., Powers, J., Pommier-Satya, S., Turner, A., Dalton, L. D., Drummond, D. & Swank, P. (2012). My life: Effects of a longitudinal, randomized study of self-determination enhancement on the transition outcomes of youth in foster care and special education. <i>Children and Youth Services Review</i>, 34(11), 2179–2187</p>
	<p><u><i>Better Futures</i></u></p> <p>Geenen, S., Powers, L. E., Phillips, L. A., Nelson, M., McKenna, J., Wings-Yanez, N., Blanchette, L., Adrienne, C., Dalton, L. D., Salazar, A. & Swank, P. (2015). Better futures: A randomized field test of a model for supporting young people in foster care with mental health challenges to participate in higher education. <i>The Journal of Behavioral Health Services & Research</i>, 42(2), 150 – 171</p>
	<p><u><i>C. A. R. E.</i></u></p> <p>Greeson, J. K. & Thompson, A. E. (2017). Development, feasibility, and piloting of a novel natural mentoring intervention for older youth in foster care. <i>Journal of Social Service Research</i>, 43(2), 205 – 222</p>

Fostering Healthy Futures

Taussig, H. N. & Culhane, S. E. (2010). Impact of a mentoring and skills group program on mental health outcomes for maltreated children in foster care. *Archives of Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine*, 164(8), 739 – 746

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