

JUST SIX  
QUESTIONS

RESEARCH  
SUMMARY



# Qualitative Exploration of Relationships with Important Non-Parental Adults in the Lives of Youth in Foster Care

## Key Details

### KEY WORDS

Foster care, mentorship, non-parental adults, relationships, transition, mentor

### POPULATION GROUP

Youth in and leaving care

### STEPPING UP THEMES

Strong, Supportive Friends and Families

### RESEARCH ORIGIN

USA

### SOURCE

Academic article

**“Proposed intervention strategies include systematic incorporation of important non-parental adults into transition planning, enhanced training and matching procedures within formal mentoring programs, assistance for youth to strengthen their interpersonal awareness and skills, and the targeting of specific periods of need when linking youth to sources of adult support.”**

### 1. What is the research about?

This research aims to understand the factors that support the creation and maintenance of successful natural mentoring relationships for fostered youth. Natural mentoring relationships can be formed with extended family members, professional youth service workers like case workers, counsellors or teachers, and adults who may play more of an informal role, such as team coaches or neighbours. This study hypothesized that natural mentoring relationships, rather than programmed mentoring relationships, would be less susceptible to breakdowns.

Understanding the impact that naturally forming non-parental mentoring relationships have on fostered youth is important because when compared to their peers, these youth face additional challenges transitioning healthily to adulthood. For fostered youth, there is more at stake in their mentoring relationships; both benefits from a successful relationship and risks from an unsuccessful relationship come with greater impacts.

### 2. Where did the research take place?

The research took place in Seattle, Washington. In order to access participants, the researchers worked with four non-profit organizations that provide services to formerly fostered youth.

### 3. Who is this research about?

This research is about foster youth transitioning out of their involvement in the child welfare system into adulthood. This study involved 23 18-25-year-old young adults who met this criterion. Over half of the participants identified as female and many were from various diverse ethnic backgrounds. Youth had various placement experiences: half had stable placements and the other half had been in multiple placements.

### 4. How was the research done?

The researchers conducted semi-structured in-person interviews recruited participants. The interviews lasted approximately 1 hour, and the participants were compensated for their time. The researchers interpreted the interview data through a conceptual model of mentoring and youth development (Rhodes, 2002, 2005; Rhodes et al., 2006).

## 5. What are the key findings?

The researchers identified barriers and facilitators for youth forming and maintaining mentoring relationships with non-parental adults.

Barriers to forming a relationship include an inability of the mentor to understand or appreciate the young person's background or culture. Additionally, foster children often have a hard time overcoming distrust of others based on previous relationship failures.

Facilitators to forming a relationship include having something in common, a shared interest or experience, and the ability of the mentor to be adaptive and responsive.

Barriers to maintaining the mentoring relationship include basic logistics of staying in touch. Often fostered youth will disengage out of fear of disappointing their mentor. They may also disengage due to high levels of anxiety or worry. If a youth is feeling high levels of anxiety this impacts their perceptions of whether their needs are being met by the relationship.

Facilitators that support a mentoring relationship to last are similar to those that help a relationship to emerge: the mentor connects with the youth over a shared experience or interest and the mentor is flexible and responsive to the youth.

The researchers found that mentoring relationships have developmental impacts on youth in foster care. Successful mentoring relationships contribute to: socio-emotional development, life skills (problem-solving), and identity development.

The researchers also found that the role and need for mentors is particularly acute during vulnerable periods like transitions into and out of care.

## 6. Why does this research matter for youth work?

Foster youth must rely on non-parental supports. Based on the positive developmental outcomes of successful mentoring identified in this study, the researchers recommend that non-parental mentoring supports are more formally incorporated into care planning.

The researchers further recommend intentional mentor matches so that mentors share similarities with the youth. They also recommend training for mentors related to asset-based youth engagement strategies. For youth who may benefit from mentorship, the researchers recommend workshops or training to help them deal with barriers to initiating and maintaining relationships. Finally, the research recommends paying attention to timing and ensuring that mentoring supports are in place prior to transitional periods.



Ahrens, K. R., DuBois, D. L., Garrison, M., Spencer, R., Richardson, L. P., & Lozano, P. (2011). Qualitative exploration of relationships with important non-parental adults in the lives of youth in foster care. *Children and youth services review*, 33(6), 1012-1023.