

JUST SIX  
QUESTIONS

RESEARCH  
SUMMARY



# Relationships are the heart of the work: Mentoring relationships within gender-responsive programs for Black girls

## Key Details

### KEY WORDS

Youth; Gender-Responsive Programs;  
Mentoring; Young Black Women

### POPULATION GROUPS

Racialized Youth; Youth Workers

### STEPPING UP THEMES

Coordinated & Youth-Friendly  
Communities; Diversity, Social Inclusion  
& Safety

### RESEARCH ORIGIN

USA

### SOURCE

Academic

**“Positive mentoring relationships between Black girls and adults within gender-responsive programs could offer corrective experiences in contrast to the experiences many Black girls have in educational and mental health systems” (p. 19).**

### 1. What is the research about?

This research is about the importance of positive mentor relationships. Programs engaging young Black women can learn from this research and train their staff members to think about trust-building as an interactional process, one that is fundamental to building positive mentor relationships.

The research was guided by three questions (p. 8):

- i) How do positive mentoring relationships develop between staff members and Black girls within a gender-responsive program?
- ii) What are the challenges/barriers to developing positive relationships between staff members and Black girls within a gender-responsive program?
- iii) What are the similarities and differences between Black girls’ and staff members’ perceptions of positive mentoring relationships within a gender-responsive program?

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

This research took place in Pennsylvania, in the United States, at the main location of a non-profit agency that predominantly serves young Black women. The agency offers after-school and residential group home programs.

### 3. Who is this research about?

This research is about 10 Black girls who were participating in a program at the agency, and 10 staff members working at the agency. The young women ranged in age from 13 to 18, and most self-identified as Black or African-American. Staff members ranged in age from 24 to 59, and most self-identified as Black or African-American; three of the staff members identified as White.

### 4. How was the research done?

This research used a community-based approach, designed to equitably involve community members, organizational representatives, and researchers throughout the process. More specifically, a feminist community-based research approach was used, which focused on issues of diversity while highlighting the point of view of oppressed groups.

Research comprised semi-structured interviews with the staff and young women. Data from these interviews were analyzed and categorized into themes.

### 5. What are the key findings?

A number of themes were identified within two major domains: **a) Positive Mentoring Relationships**; and **b) Challenges/Barriers**.

### a) Positive Mentoring Relationships

Despite some differences in views, the staff and young women interviewed identified what contributed to a positive relationship, including engaging in conversations about sensitive/ personal topics, which helps to let girls know that they can go to staff when they have a problem. Staff believed that listening to girls, getting to know one other, and using self-disclosure were important practice strategies. The young women emphasized the importance of staff who listen, build a connection, and demonstrate their investment in the relationship.

#### **Integrity and trustworthiness.**

Trust is an integral part of a positive relationship. Both the staff and young women agreed that honesty and authenticity were vital for creating and maintaining trust. For most of the girls, it was important that staff kept their word, and that the staff made it clear that trust was mutual.

#### **Perceived support.**

Many of the girls stated that they believed the staff were supportive. Rather than seeing mentors as authority figures, the girls often described their relationship with staff using terms connected to family; many stated that the mentors made them feel “at home,” which helps to boost feelings of supportiveness.

#### **Role-modeling.**

Most of the staff believed that being a positive role model was integral to their roles as mentors. When responding to what a mentor or role model should do, staff indicated that modelling appropriate and healthy behaviours was essential. Having an impact and providing resources were also mentioned. The girls expressed qualities of mentors that focus on their role as an authority, pointing out that a mentor should teach right from wrong and push girls in the right direction. A few of the girls also noted that it is important for them to have role models who have learned from struggles in their own pasts.

### b) Challenges/Barriers

The majority of staff interviewed believed that girls’ challenging behaviours were the main barrier to creating trust. Girls’ negative attitudes, attending to the unique needs and challenges of individual girls, and past traumas were also mentioned by staff as barriers to trust. Staff did acknowledge that there is a need to understand that challenging behaviours are often rooted in past negative experiences with systems and authority figures. Staff also pointed out that it can be difficult to build trust when there are cultural differences between girls and staff. This is particularly important for agencies that serve Black girls exclusively but employ non-Black staff.

#### **Perceived judgment.**

Girls interviewed mentioned that they do not want to be judged by staff. When girls sense that staff have expectations for their behaviours, those who feel they are not meeting these expectations may feel judged, which has an impact on their relationships with staff. Girls want to know that they will not be judged for how they are dealing with the difficult situations they may be going through.

#### **Giving advice.**

This was identified as a challenge because of the differing views of staff and girls. For many of the girls interviewed, giving advice was part of the role of a mentor, whereas some staff believed that giving advice should be limited.

#### **Confidentiality.**

Confidentiality can either help to build mentoring relationships, or it can create barriers. Half of the girls interviewed talked about the importance of mentors keeping information confidential. While staff also recognized the importance of confidentiality, one staff member pointed out that mandated reporting can interfere with building trusting relationships.

## 6. Why does it matter for youth work?

Youth-serving organizations should focus on creating and maintaining strong relationships between young people and adults. This research shows that the relationships between staff and young people are part of the foundation for creating effective programs.

This research provides important insights about specific dynamics that are important for mentoring Black girls. It contributes to our understanding of how positive mentoring relationships develop, and the aspects of these relationships that girls and staff find most important.

For programs that are gender-responsive, relationships between young women and staff should be a central feature. Programs working with young Black women can support their empowerment through positive, supportive relationships. Mentors must be trained to be culturally-sensitive in order to establish trust and effective communication channels with mentees.



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