

Impact of Mentoring Relationships on Decreasing Emotional and Behavioural Problems in Youth

KEYWORDS

positive youth development, youth mentoring, risk behaviours, ecological assets

RESEARCH SUMMARY

DESCRIPTION

Little is known about how mentoring decreases behavioural and emotional problems in youth living in situations of risk and disadvantage. The intent of this study was to a) examine if positive youth development (PYD) accounts for, i.e. mediates, the link between mentoring support and emotional/behavioural problems, and b) explore how this association differs between youth in ongoing vs. terminated mentoring relationships. The study found that PYD does mediate this association, though only in the case of youth who are in ongoing mentoring relationships.

PYD is a strengths-based theoretical assessment of youth development, which the authors operationalize according to the 5 C's model: PYD is characterized by the 5 key developmental assets of Competence, Confidence, Connections, Character, and Compassion.

The findings from this study may be helpful for youth researchers and those involved in the development of youth mentoring programs.

METHODOLOGY

This study used data from a longitudinal study of Big Brothers Big Sisters (BBBS) Canada, a mentoring organization that provides youth with one-on-one mentoring offered by community volunteers. The BBBS study conducted follow-up assessments at 6, 12, 18, 24, and 30 months after the baseline assessment. As it was the first assessment which included all relevant variables, the present study used data from the 18-month follow-up, with the exception of mentoring dose (meeting frequency and duration). This variable was averaged from all available assessments up to the 18-month follow-up.

There was a total of 997 participants, of which 501 were youth, with the remainder being parents of youth. The youth were an average of 11 years old, with a large proportion from single-parent, low-income families. 52% were female, while 31% were from a minority group. 66.5% were in an ongoing mentoring relationship with their original mentor. 33.5% reported being in a match that had terminated.

Participants were given questionnaires to measure mentoring intensity and support, the 5 C's of PYD, and

emotional and behavioural problems. The following measures (either subscales or the entire test) were utilized: Quality of Mentoring Relationship Engagement Scale, Coping Scale for Children and Youth, Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire, Self-Esteem Scale, Wills Parental Social Support Scale, School Attachment Scale, and Social Skills Scale for Youth. Assessments took place in the family's home or a preferred location, with youth interviewed separately from parents. Youth assessments lasted about 2 hours, while parent assessments were approximately 45 minutes in length. The data was analyzed using structural equation modeling.

Limitations of the study are as follows: a) findings are correlational and therefore don't indicate causality, b) data from youth-report measures may have a self-report bias, c) findings come from a particular mentoring program for urban youth and cannot be generalized to other mentoring programs, and d) some measures had low reliability.

KEY FINDINGS

The study's findings are consistent with, and build upon, previous research which suggests that mentoring relationships can act as ecological assets that increase PYD for youth living in contexts of risk, which, in turn, decreases risk behaviours and emotional symptoms.

As predicted, levels of PYD accounted for the relationship between mentoring support and emotional and behavioural problems, for both youth- and parent-reported youth outcomes. Having supportive relationships with mentors was associated with PYD but only for youth in ongoing mentoring relationships, not for those in terminated relationships. The model with youth-reported outcomes had a stronger fit by adding paths from mentoring support to both outcomes, which had an unexpected positive direction. The findings suggest that mentoring programs focusing on skills development and long-term support, in conjunction with other ecological resources, can be helpful to youth in situations of disadvantage.

WHY THIS MATTERS

Aside from findings being relevant to PYD researchers, the study offers implications for practice. The authors advise that, overall, mentoring program effectiveness may be improved when programs aim to ameliorate specific developmental assets (5 C's) and positive developmental outcomes, such as mentees' social and emotional competence, rather than focusing directly on improving or preventing emotional and behavioural issues. Additionally, consistent with other research,

ABOUT THIS SUMMARY

This study explores how mentoring programs help to prevent emotional and behavioural problems in youth. It examines if positive youth development (PYD) accounts for the link between mentoring support and decreasing emotional and behavioural problems, both for youth in ongoing and terminated mentoring relationships.

the study confirms that it is crucial to ensure strong and continuous mentor-youth relationships.

RECAP

For youth in active mentoring relationships, promotion of indicators of PYD was found to explain the link between mentoring support and emotional and behavioural problems, regardless of outcomes being reported by youth or parents. These results provide preliminary support to the notion that focusing on strengthening the 5 C's of PYD (Competence, Confidence, Connections, Character, and Compassion) can be one path by which mentoring relationships can decrease emotional and behavioural problems in low-income youth.

“...when mentoring relationships are able to cultivate youth's developmental assets (i.e., 5 C's), it appears that such improvements may also facilitate reduced levels of problems.”

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APA CITATION

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