

Mentoring Relationships and the Mental Health of Aboriginal Youth in Canada

KEYWORDS

mentoring relationships, Aboriginal youth, mental health

RESEARCH SUMMARY

DESCRIPTION

Formal youth mentoring programs have a positive impact on young people's well-being. However, little is known about their impact on Aboriginal youth. Using data from a Canada-wide survey of Big Brothers Big Sisters community mentoring programs, this study compares Aboriginal (i.e. First Nations, Inuit, or Métis) youth with non-Aboriginal youth before being matched with a mentor, and 18 months later. The objectives of this study were to assess: a) the mentoring relationship experiences of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal youth, and b) the impact of mentoring on the behavioural, psychological, and social functioning of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal youth. Results show that mentored Aboriginal youth reported fewer emotional problems and less social anxiety relative to non-mentored Aboriginal youth. These effects were not found among non-Aboriginal youth. This study offers insights for youth mentoring researchers and directors of mentoring programs supporting Aboriginal youth, particularly regarding programming implications.

METHODOLOGY

Big Brothers Big Sisters staff recruited families from 20 agencies across Canada. 859 youth between the ages of 6 and 17 (of which 125 identified as Aboriginal) participated in the study, along with their parents or guardians.

Before the youth were paired with a mentor, parents and youth completed baseline assessments at home. The parent assessment consisted of a 40-minute self-administered questionnaire regarding their children's mental health and behaviours, and their own social relationships and health. The youth assessment included a two-hour interview focused on mental health, behaviour, and academic and social functioning.

After the youth participants were paired with a mentor, five follow-up assessments were conducted with both parents and youth. These included additional questions regarding the characteristics, agency, and environmental supports of the mentoring relationship.

Data was also collected on living arrangements, number of siblings living at home, number of family moves in the

past five years, presence of a diagnosed chronic health condition, use of mental health or social services, parent age, parent education, depth of family economic deprivation, family functioning, parent depressed mood, parent social phobia, and neighbourhood problems.

Structural equation modeling was used to compare longitudinal data on mental health and behavioural outcomes between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal youth, based on whether they were mentored or not.

Limitations of this study are as follows: the sample is not representative of all families who apply for an adult mentor; it is not definitive that mentoring caused reductions in youth mental health problems; differences in the perspectives of mentors paired with different groups of youth and group differences in perceptions of agency practices were not examined; comparisons were only descriptive so it is unclear which characteristics most influenced young people's mental health; relying on parent reports is problematic as they may be biased or otherwise inaccurate; and data was not collected regarding preferences for culturally similar mentors.

KEY FINDINGS

- Mentored Aboriginal youth were less likely to be in a long-term (longer than 12 months) continuous mentoring relationship, and more likely to be in a mentoring relationship ending in dissolution, compared to mentored non-Aboriginal youth. However, mentored Aboriginal youth were also significantly more likely to report a high-quality mentoring relationship, greater weekly contact with their mentor, and greater participation in various mentoring activities, compared to mentored non-Aboriginal youth. Additionally, mentored Aboriginal youth were slightly less likely to report similarities between themselves and their mentors, and significantly more likely to have been mentored by a female adult.

- After controlling for baseline emotional problems, mentored Aboriginal youth had fewer emotional problems and less social anxiety compared to non-mentored Aboriginal youth. This pattern was not found among non-Aboriginal youth. Mentored Aboriginal youth were also slightly more likely than mentored non-Aboriginal youth to report peer-related difficulties.

WHY THIS MATTERS

This study will be of interest to anyone invested in the well-being of Aboriginal youth in a mentoring context, particularly youth mentoring researchers

ABOUT THIS SUMMARY

This study examines the associations between mentoring status and mental health challenges of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal youth. It suggests that mentoring can positively impact the mental health of Aboriginal youth.

and mentoring program directors.

The authors present implications for programming to provide more effective mentoring to Aboriginal youth, including recruiting more Aboriginal mentors and accommodating requests for shared cultural backgrounds.

Prior research has shown a higher rate of mental health challenges among Aboriginal youth. The results of this study are therefore noteworthy as they address this concern.

"...mentoring may have positive effects on the mental health of [Aboriginal] youth and may in fact be more beneficial to [Aboriginal] than non-[Aboriginal] youth, particularly in regard to decreasing emotional and anxiety difficulties."

DeWit, Wells, Elton-Marshall, & George, 2017.

RECAP

This study compared the mentoring experiences and mental health and behavioural outcomes of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal youth, before they were matched with a mentor and at an 18-month follow-up. Results suggest that one-on-one mentoring may improve the mental health of Aboriginal youth, more so than the mental health of non-Aboriginal youth, particularly in terms of decreasing parent-reported emotional problems and social anxiety.

APA CITATION

DeWit, D. J., Wells, S., Elton-Marshall, T., & George, J. (2017). Mentoring Relationships and the Mental Health of Aboriginal Youth in Canada. *The Journal of Primary Prevention*, 38(1-2), 49-66.