

A Qualitative Study of Forms of Social Support in Youth Mentoring Relationships

KEYWORDS

emotional well-being, qualitative research, social support, youth mentoring

RESEARCH SUMMARY

DESCRIPTION

Though there have been various studies examining what constitutes a quality mentor-youth relationship, there has been less focus on the nature of support provided within youth mentoring relationships. The aim of this study was to analyze the forms of social support in successful, formal mentor-youth relationships, and to explore how this support impacts the emotional and behavioural well-being of youth mentees. Formal mentoring relationships should foster the characteristics present in natural mentoring relationships. Therefore, this study used as its framework the types of social support found in supportive relationships (concrete, companionship, emotional, esteem, and advice support).

Each mentor-youth pairing was examined from the perspectives of the youth, parents, mentors, and caseworkers, via semi-structured interviews. The findings suggest that close mentoring relationships lead to enhanced well-being in youth.

METHODOLOGY

The present qualitative study was part of a larger mixed-methods study of the Big Brothers Big Sisters program in Ireland.

Semi-structured interviews about the mentoring relationship and the young people's experience in the program were conducted with youth, their parents, mentors, and caseworkers, at the beginning of the mentoring relationship and six months later.

21 young people and their parents agreed to participate. A representative sample of 10 was selected. One person decided not to participate, so there was a final sample of nine matches. Mentees were an average of 12 years old (five males and four females), from rural areas or towns in West Ireland, and coping with various personal and family challenges.

Interviews were transcribed and coded. Types of social support were categorized according to the five categories identified in the social support literature.

KEY FINDINGS

The findings are consistent with previous research demonstrating that emotionally supportive, close mentoring relationships can positively impact youth. Support functions within the nine mentoring relationships were well illustrated by the following categories of interpersonal social support.

Concrete (practical acts of assistance) and Companionship Support (giving people a sense of social belonging): In mentoring relationships these types of support are intertwined and can occur even without a close bond. The most evident example was mentors enabling youth to do something different each week. Mentors also often introduced youth to broader social networks. These supports led to enhanced feelings of well-being and acted as a foundation from which the other types of support could emerge.

Emotional Support (information that leads one to believe they are cared for): This was expressed by listening, having personal conversations, empathy, and emotion coaching. Youth opened up to varying degrees. Even youth who did not confide at all seemed to benefit from the support and encouragement offered for normative issues like exam stress.

Esteem Support (one person expressing love and concern for another): The relationships demonstrated encouragement, praise, and reciprocity. This type of support can contribute to identity development. Esteem support was more prominent in relationships characterized by reciprocity and where the mentor took genuine pride in the mentee's achievements.

Advice Support (the provision of information or guidance): Participants described how offering advice was easier and more effective when the relationship was closer.

The findings suggest that youth gained an increased sense of emotional and behavioural well-being. Parents and youth consistently reported that youth had become happier, more confident, and calmer (especially in cases where the youth, usually male, were described as hyper). The relationships also led to youth being more settled at school.

Mentors reported some challenges, such as finding suitable activities (particularly in rural areas) and communication issues. Participants described how program staff helped overcome these challenges. However, the challenge of matches terminating prematurely was more difficult to overcome.

ABOUT THIS SUMMARY

This study uses youth, parent, mentor, and caseworker interviews to examine the degree to which certain types of social support are found in supportive, formal mentor-youth relationships.

WHY THIS MATTERS

This study contributes to the literature on youth mentoring relationships by focusing specifically on the types of social support in such relationships. The findings are also relevant from a policy perspective as they illustrate how mentoring programs can improve the quality of life for vulnerable youth. Mentors and mentoring program managers might find this research helpful for mentor training.

“This research indicates that many young people use the match as a ‘space’ in which to express themselves and allow their own interests and aptitudes to emerge, providing further evidence that mentoring relationships should be non-directive, emphasizing the development of a supportive relationship rather than prioritizing the achievement of specific goals.”

Brady, Dolan, & Canavan, 2017

RECAP

Nine mentoring relationships were examined from four perspectives in order to explore the presence of social support forms (concrete, companionship, emotional, esteem, and advice support). The results reinforce the knowledge that close mentor-youth relationships can enhance well-being.

APA CITATION

Brady, B., Dolan, P., & Canavan, J. (2017). “He Told Me to Calm Down and All That”: A Qualitative Study of Forms of Social Support in Youth Mentoring Relationships. *Child & Family Social Work, 22*(1), 266-274.