

JUST SIX  
QUESTIONS

RESEARCH  
SUMMARY



# Mentoring in the Time of COVID-19: An Analysis of Online Focus Groups with Mentors to Youth

**“[R]esearch indicates that participation in formal mentoring programs can positively impact youth in a number of ways, including protection against aggression, depressive symptoms, delinquent behaviors, victimization, and substance use, as well as advancing cognitive and identity development ... Mentoring has demonstrated the potential to benefit youth in times of crisis” (p. 2).**

## 1. What is the research about?

This study examines youth mentorship during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic, when programs pivoted to virtual formats – referred to as **e-mentoring** – to maintain peer-to-peer and adult interactions that contribute to positive learning experiences and youth outcomes. Mentoring programs typically operate using a one-on-one approach (matching one mentor to one mentee) or a group model (matching one or more mentors with more than one mentee at a time).

The questions the researchers intended to answer were:

- What was the impact of the pandemic on mentor-mentee interactions and relationships?
- How could mentors be supported during the health crisis to better meet youth needs?

## 2. Where did the research take place?

The study took place with multiple youth subpopulations across the United States; the state of Maryland, however, disproportionately represents a quarter of the geographic data.

## 3. Who is this research about?

The study examined the impact of the pandemic on mentor-mentee interactions from the perspective of mentors from schools, community-based programs, and one-on-one and group mentoring models. Their mentees ranged in age from 4-25 years.

## 4. How was the research done?

The researchers recruited 39 mentors through outreach to mentoring organizations, emails to mentoring research and practice listservs, and outreach through public Facebook groups, Twitter, and LinkedIn. Text-based qualitative data were collected in April 2020 using **online focus group conversations** conducted in private Facebook Groups. Each focus group lasted about 60 minutes, providing an opportunity for participants to comment on questions posted by the facilitators. Written comments were **coded** (categorized) and analyzed by researchers.

## 5. What are the key findings?

This study identified **four themes** that summarize mentor challenges and concerns as a result of the pandemic:

### i) Communication with mentees.

Many mentees lacked access to a phone or computer, internet, and privacy. These challenges affected the frequency of conversation and the ability to communicate freely in confidence.

### ii) Health and wellbeing of mentees.

Mentors shared concerns relating to the wellbeing of their mentees and their families, including challenges around mental health, food insecurity, and physical health.

### iii) Range of supports provided to mentees.

The types of support mentors needed to provide ranged from instrumental support (groceries, masks, laptops, school supplies), emotional support, and creative companionship (online activities).

### iv) Access to supports.

Mentors were interested in more non-tech ways to engage mentees and in creating mentor support groups to stay connected with other mentors.

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

This research suggests that virtual mentorship, or e-mentorship, stimulates positive development for mentees, especially those who feel isolated due to reduced social-emotional interaction during the pandemic. There is a great need for **adaptive programming** and **adequate mentor training and supports** so that mentors can continue to support mentees as their needs evolve and new difficulties arise.

Existing mentorship programs should **continue e-mentoring beyond the pandemic** as further exploration of best practices to promote meaningful virtual mentorship and the impact of virtual relationships is needed. Also, youth who have been more receptive to virtual platforms to connect can still do so even when there is no longer a need to physically distance.



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