

Mentoring Youth in Foster Care

The Technical Assistance and Training Program for Mentoring System-Involved Youth



Each year, more than 500,000 children are placed in foster care in the United States, with adolescents representing about half this population. The average stay in foster care is 12 months, although some youth may be in foster care as little as a few weeks and others as long as five or more years.

A positive relationship with a kind, trustworthy adult is an important factor in child and adolescent development. Older youth (ages 16–18) in foster care are especially likely to be placed in a group home or institution, where they are less apt to form lasting relationships with compassionate, responsible adults who stimulate their emotional and cognitive development and model critical life skills.¹ Mentoring by a caring, well-trained adult can provide children and adolescents in foster care with adult support to develop the skills they need to make a successful transition to independence.

The purpose of this brief is to highlight the strengths and challenges of youth in foster care, discuss best practices for mentoring these youth, and outline the components of effective training for mentors working with youth in foster care.

Challenges and Strengths of Youth in Foster Care

Challenges

Youth in foster care face unique challenges, regardless of the reason for or the length of their stay in the foster care system.

Family Environment

Most children enter the foster care system because of abuse or neglect, rather than delinquency. After they are removed from their biological home, youth may change foster care placements multiple times. Each placement brings a new community and culture for the youth to navigate. Young people in foster care have suffered multiple losses—their biological family, friends, neighbors, and teachers, possibly even their pets and their favorite toys—in addition to the abuse or neglect that brought them into foster care in the first place.

Developmental Issues

Children have different developmental needs at different ages. Involvement in the foster care system impacts children in diverse ways, partly depending on how old they are. For example:

- Elementary school-age children (ages 6–10) can have difficulty forming relationships with adults when they experience a significant transition (such as entrance into the foster care system). Some children may be very clingy in their interactions with adults, while others may be distant and dismissive; both behaviors stem from a fear that the adult will leave.
- Early adolescents (ages 11–14) begin to develop relationships with their peers but are still very dependent on their families. Youth in this stage are beginning to explore their personal strengths and identity, and without positive adult encouragement may seek recognition from others, including negative peer groups.
- Middle adolescents (ages 15–17) depend more on their peers than on family members. However, multiple placements may interfere with the ability of these youth

to develop supportive, positive peer relationships, leaving them more vulnerable to negative peer influences.

- Older youth (18 to early 20s) want independence but may not have had sufficient education or work experience to be able to live independently. Lacking an understanding of how to get and keep a job, what healthy relationships look like, and how to set appropriate relationship boundaries can cause these youth to lag behind their peers developmentally.²

Mental or Emotional Stability

Because of the trauma they have experienced, children in foster care are more likely to have physical, mental, behavioral, emotional, and substance abuse problems, to engage in risky sexual behaviors, such as early initiation of sex, and to experience early pregnancy.³

Education

Children in foster care often change schools numerous times. As a result of regularly missing school, having to change schools frequently, and having their enrollment delayed every time they enter a new foster care placement, young people in foster care are often academically behind their peers. Many find it difficult to form relationships with school staff who could support their academic success and/or help them to maintain the motivation to work hard in school. Less than 60 percent of students in foster care graduate from high school; of those who do graduate, only 3 percent attend post-secondary education.

Employment

Many adolescents in foster care lack adult support to learn critical job or work-related skills. Lacking these capabilities, their employment options suffer—12 to 18 months after “aging out” of the foster care system, only 38 percent of youth are employed, and less than half have held a full-time job.⁴

Transitional Challenges

Increasing numbers of older adolescents, approximately 20,000 per year, age out of foster care, transitioning from foster care placement to independence. This can happen

any time from age 18 to 21, depending on state policy. Outside of the system’s care, with no financial supports or resources other than their family or peers, these youth often return to the same high-risk environment they came from.

Assets of Youth in Foster Care

Despite these challenges, many youth in foster care demonstrate resiliency. For example, many are persistent and determined, with a strong sense of hope for the future, despite the obstacles they have faced. In addition, many youth in foster care are able to quickly “read” the emotions and mood of an individual or group of people, rapidly adapting their response to the context at hand.

A young person’s resiliency is not fixed; it can be enhanced by methods—such as mentoring—that emphasize shoring up a youth’s protective factors. One study suggests that single events in a child’s life, such as a new attachment relationship or the discovery of a child’s special talents, have the potential to alter the child’s life in a positive direction.⁵ Mentors must be trained to recognize mentees’ strengths and challenges and help youth to build their resilience to adversity.

Mentors can help to mediate the challenges of the foster care experience for youth, demonstrate critical skills and strategies, and connect mentees to appropriate community services and programs. Research has identified two processes associated with resiliency in system-involved youth that mentoring programs can support.^{6, 7}

1. **Create opportunities to increase self-esteem and self-efficacy:** Resilient youth feel that they have control over their lives. This internal sense of control is the result of repeated success mastering life tasks, often with the support of others. Opportunities and support to master skills reinforce young people’s self-confidence and faith in themselves. The skills that young people need to master may be academic, athletic, or, as a study by the Urban Institute revealed, social/emotional, such as participating in sibling care, mentoring younger children, or providing language support for others with limited English skills.⁸
2. **Provide new openings that can become turning points:** Many resilient young adults retrospectively identify turning points in their lives, frequently stemming from a new opportunity or relationship that changed the

trajectory of their life. Turning points typically involve making a significant change that serves as a catalyst for pursuing a different path or developing a new perspective on one’s life.⁹

Mentoring Programs for Youth in Foster Care

A caring and well-trained adult can inspire and guide a youth in foster care to pursue a productive future and reach his or her full potential. One study found that after a year in a quality mentoring program, youth in foster care exhibited improved social skills, were more able to trust adults, and had greater self-esteem. Mentoring programs can also help youth overcome the challenges of the many transitions they have endured by providing consistent, caring support and modeling of important life skills.

Mentoring programs for youth in foster care are different from traditional youth mentoring programs. Some of the unique characteristics of effective foster care mentoring programs are:

- mentors who understand that their mentee may have trouble developing a close, trusting relationship with an adult as a result of having experienced neglect or abuse
- a great deal of support for mentors and mentees from program staff
- a program focus that goes beyond building mentoring relationships to helping youth develop life skills, such as problem-solving and goal-setting
- linkages to community resources to enable youth to successfully reenter their family or transition to independence when they age out of the foster care system

“When youth [in foster care] are able to form close and trusting relationships with caring adults . . . who act as gatekeepers for their futures, they can be effectively buffered from the stresses and disorder of their own families and the disruption of shifting foster care arrangements.”¹⁰

Components of Effective Mentoring Programs for Youth in Foster Care

Mentoring programs for youth in foster care should incorporate a focus on positive youth development, youth-driven activities, and the development of core competencies and skills (e.g., decision-making and problem-solving skills, how to access community resources). Programs should include structured activities that address young people's needs and developmental stage. For example, younger children may benefit most from educational support and an opportunity to develop healthy relationships with their mentor. Middle adolescents need opportunities to interact positively with peers in a structured group setting. Mentoring of older youth in foster care typically focuses on developing life skills, such as job training, managing finances, and securing a living arrangement.

There are a number of mentoring models for youth in foster care,¹¹ for example:

- **Transitional life skills:** Mentors in these programs focus first on developing a trusting friendship, offering support, and being a role model. Once the relationship has been established, mentors help older youth develop independent living skills, such as budgeting, applying for a social security card or driver's license, conducting a job search, filling out a medical application, and finding housing.
- **Cultural empowerment:** These programs recruit role models from a youth's racial, ethnic, or cultural group to provide a positive influence on the young person's self-identity and hopes for the future. This is especially important for African American, Latino, Asian, and American Indian youth, who may have encountered prejudice and negative stereotyping
- **Career development:** Mentors from the business community are matched with motivated older youth in foster care to focus on career development and job opportunities.

Regardless of the approach selected, the program must be continually evaluated to determine how well it meets the

needs of youth. Evaluation includes identifying aspects of program implementation that need improvement (process evaluation) and tracking program effectiveness (outcome evaluation).

Key Best Practices of Mentoring Programs for Youth in Foster Care

The following best practices are vital for mentoring programs that serve youth in foster care:

- Developing effective partnerships with key organizations and individuals
- Ensuring that youth are connected to the services and resources they need
- Providing comprehensive training for program staff
- Screening youth and gauging their readiness to participate
- Delivering orientation and ongoing training for mentors
- Providing mentor support, supervision, and monitoring

Developing Effective Partnerships with Key Organizations and Individuals

Since mentoring programs alone cannot guarantee successful outcomes for youth in foster care, they must build partnerships with the systems and individuals active in mentees' life, such as child welfare agencies, caseworkers, placement staff, parents, foster parents, group home directors, school staff, mental health providers, substance abuse treatment professionals, health care providers, faith-based organizations, and recreational facilities.

Program staff should collaborate with child welfare agencies to ensure that information about the mentoring program is included in training for all caseworkers, supervisors, and independent living staff, emphasizing that a strong mentoring relationship can help the youth in their care achieve significant life goals. It is important to clarify for caseworkers the kind of information that can and cannot be shared with mentor program staff and with mentors.

Mentoring programs that serve youth in foster care must reach agreement with relevant child welfare agencies about how information on mentor-mentee matches will be maintained and shared, so that if a young person transitions to a new placement or a new child welfare agency, the mentoring relationship is continued.

“When a mentor develops linkages with key persons in the youth’s social network, such as parents or peers, effectiveness is enhanced.”¹²

Ensuring that Youth Access Necessary Resources and Services

Youth in foster care typically need a variety of services and programs to help them succeed—in areas such as job preparation, academic support, mental health, structured leisure activities, crisis intervention, and making the transition from foster care to independent living. Mentoring programs must help youth in foster care access these services. Helping youth to connect to services can be facilitated by creating a directory of relevant community services for staff use, hiring a resource coordinator for youth, and teaching older youth how to complete critical tasks such as obtaining a birth certificate, or finding out how many credits are needed for graduation.

Providing Comprehensive Training for Program Staff

An essential component of mentoring programs is ensuring that program staff are well-trained in issues related to mentoring, the foster care system, and cultural competence. Program staff should be trained to:

- maintain regular contact with mentors and mentees in order to identify potential challenges and provide support
- equip mentors with the skills to model good decision-making and problem-solving
- give mentors opportunities to gain insight into their own behaviors and to practice replacing negative habits with new, positive behaviors

- coach mentors on communication skills, in particular, how to ask questions and listen intently to a mentee

Screening Youth and Gauging Their Readiness to Participate

It is important to screen youth to determine their need for and expectations of a mentor and their level of commitment. The screening process may include a referral from the youth’s case manager, a signed consent letter from the family or case manager, and a needs assessment regarding the youth’s physical and mental health, education, vocation, and peer and family issues. Once these steps have been completed, a mentoring staff person should conduct an in-person interview with the youth—to understand his or her temperament and preferences for a mentor, and to prepare the youth for the mentoring process.¹³ This interview should accomplish several things:

- **Assess the youth’s ability to have a close relationship with an adult.** Some youth in foster care have had such negative relationships with adults that they are unable to benefit from a one-to-one mentoring relationship. These youth may profit more from meeting with adults in groups, so they are not required to get “too close.”
- **Explain what a mentor is.** The staff member should describe the positive role that a mentor can play in a young person’s life and how that role differs from the youth’s relationships with other adults.
- **Have youth describe their view of a “good relationship.”** This may clarify what the youth is looking for in a mentor. The staff member should then assess whether a mentoring relationship is likely to meet the youth’s expectations.
- **Describe appropriate boundaries in a mentoring relationship.** Youth in foster care often have difficulty with boundaries in relationships. It is important to define appropriate and inappropriate behaviors, such as not calling a mentor in the middle of the night, not asking a mentor to help with financial problems, and not expecting a mentor to intervene in conflicts with foster parents or social workers.

- **Review with youth how to keep themselves safe in relationships with adults.** The staff member should discuss what “safe touching” means and explain child abuse reporting requirements.
- **Describe how the mentoring relationship will be monitored and supported.** It is important to explain that program staff will check in regularly with the young person and the mentor, that the young person has the right to end the relationship at any time, and what steps the youth should take if he or she ever feels uncomfortable with a mentor. It is also essential to review the program’s ground rules and the reasons that a mentoring relationship might be terminated.

It is ideal for the mentoring program to have an agreement with the relevant child welfare agency(ies) that a designated caseworker will actively assist in the match process, facilitate the continuation of the match regardless of the youth’s placement, and help the youth’s new caregivers understand the importance of the mentoring relationship and how it works.

Delivering Orientation and Ongoing Training for Mentors

Orientation and training can ensure that mentors are prepared for their role. Research on matches that end prematurely suggests that the most important objectives of mentor orientation and training are to clarify the expectations of youth and mentors and to identify and address differences in culture or values.¹⁴ Mentor orientation and training should:

- clarify the goals of the program
- provide an overview of the foster care system
- increase mentors’ understanding of the issues faced by youth in foster care
- assist mentors in setting realistic expectations for the relationship
- recommend strategies for building a relationship with a young person in foster care
- help mentors identify the challenges and strengths of their mentee
- review program policies about contact between the mentor and the youth’s biological or foster family as well as the requirement to keep program staff informed of such contact

Research has shown that mentoring relationships can be enhanced by training that helps mentors identify their cultural and class-based values and beliefs, become more culturally competent, and develop strategies to effectively engage cross-cultural youth.

Ongoing trainings for mentors working with youth in foster care may address the following topics:

- having appropriate expectations of youth in foster care and regarding reciprocity in the mentoring relationship
- addressing challenges that arise in the relationship
- identifying cultural and class-based values and beliefs and effectively engaging youth in a cross-cultural relationship¹⁵
- building on young people’s strengths and interests
- enhancing mentees’ skills in communication, conflict management, goal-setting, and limit-setting
- identifying potential warning signs and making appropriate referrals for neglect, abuse, behavioral or emotional problems, and substance abuse^{16, 17}

For more specifics on mentor orientation and training see:

- *Retaining Mentors of Youth Involved in the Juvenile Justice or Foster Care System by the Technical Assistance and Training Program for Mentoring System-Involved Youth*

Good resources for mentors include:

- *Building Relationships: A Guide for New Mentors*¹⁸
- *Fostering Close and Effective Relationships in Youth Mentoring Programs*¹⁹
- *SEARCH Institute Tools for Mentoring Adolescents*²⁰ (especially tools 4-9).

Providing Mentor Support, Supervision, and Monitoring

Structured, ongoing support for mentors increases the likelihood that mentors will stay with the program and contributes to greater success in mentoring relationships. Staff need to monitor each mentoring relationship to track its progress and success (e.g., how the youth is doing, any challenges the mentor is facing with the mentee, the comfort level of the mentee's family/foster family with the relationship). Program staff should observe mentoring relationships, especially when they are first established. It is important to help mentors become more competent in their role, assess the relevance of their work, and enhance their sense of belonging to a worthwhile effort.²¹ The National Faith-Based Initiative found that when case managers provided regular advice and encouragement to mentors during the early stages of building the relationship, the result was longer lasting matches.²²

Mentors working with youth in foster care need to pay special attention to issues of commitment, trust, and boundaries. Challenges are likely to arise, for example:

- reluctance of the youth to trust the mentor
- unrealistic expectations on the part of the mentor and/or the youth
- youth asking a mentor for money
- mentor feeling overwhelmed by and/or trying to fix the youth's problems
- parents or caregivers who feel threatened by the mentoring relationship and try to impede it
- transitions in the youth's life (e.g., new placement, new case manager) that jeopardize the mentoring relationship

Because system-involved youth may have deep relationship wounds that surface in unpredictable ways, it is recommended that mentoring programs for system-involved youth provide mentors with clinical support through a social worker, psychologist, and/or a professional with extensive experience working with youth in foster care.²³ Matches involving older youth with more complex problems may require even more support. Another option is peer support groups for mentors, which can provide a safe place for mentors to discuss the challenges they experience and

share solutions. Mentor peer support groups should be overseen by an experienced professional, such as a social worker, to ensure that best practices are reinforced.

Early Termination of Matches

Some matches end early. They may be terminated due to a change in the mentor's or youth's circumstances, such as a reunification with family, aging out of foster care, or a personal crisis. Early match termination can also be due to difficulties in the match relationship (e.g., lack of compatibility, family disapproval or interference), lack of cooperation from or contact with the mentor or youth, and/or a violation of program policies. Mentoring programs should have a written policy regarding how to handle match terminations, whenever they occur.

A mentoring relationship with a well-prepared, nurturing adult can change the trajectory of young people in foster care by offering a positive role model, facilitating access to community services and supports, and providing a buffer from the stress and disruption of the foster care experience. Structured mentoring programs and well-trained mentors can help young people in foster care develop the skills they need to overcome challenges and reach their goals.

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