RESEARCH SUMMARY

"It Takes a Village to Break Up a Match: A Systemic Analysis of Formal Youth Mentoring Relationship Endings"

What is this study about?

There is a growing movement in the field of youth mentoring to begin adopting a more *systemic* perspective of mentoring relationships. A systemic perspective of youth mentoring encourages us to look beyond the mentor-mentee dyad and begin considering how the people surrounding these relationships, such as staff members and parents, can influence the outcomes of our programs. In other words, the success of any given mentoring relationship depends upon not only the interactions between the mentor and mentee, but also the relationships they develop with primary caregivers and staff members. In support of this movement, this study took a more systemic look at why certain mentoring relationships end prematurely.

Where did the study take place?

This research study took place in the United States.

Who was involved in the study?

This study involved key members of 36 community-based mentoring relationships (e.g., mentors, mentees, parents/guardians and program staff). These participants were recruited from four Big Brothers Big Sisters agencies in the United States. The average age of mentees in this study was 11.6 years old.

How was the study conducted?

The researchers interviewed each participant to learn more about why their matches ended.

What were the key findings?

This study discovered that three different kinds of relationships can either encourage or discourage the success of any given mentoring relationship.

Relationships Between Mentors and Primary Caregivers: Although strong mentor-mentee relationships are a key ingredient for longevity, these bonds are unlikely to continue if the relationships surrounding the match are strained. For example, over half of the mentors and primary caregivers in this study reported that they had challenging relationships with one another, which significantly contributed to the relationship ending. Common challenges between mentors and primary caregivers included mentors holding deficit-based views of their mentees family, not having the required skills to navigate the mentee's personal and family-based issues, and primary caregivers not being satisfied with who their child was matched with.

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Relationships Between Mentors and Staff Members: This study discovered that mentoring organizations play a critical role in match longevity via their program practices, policies, and staffing patterns. For example, just under half of the mentors in this study reported that they had a challenging relationship with

> **"A strong mentor-youth relationship is necessary but not sufficient for match longevity. The mentor-youth relationship, even when relatively strong, is unlikely to withstand disruptions in other relationships in the system" (p. 97).**

their assigned staff member, which influenced the quality of their experience at the mentoring organization. Common challenges in these relationships were mentors feeling frustrated with the nature and quality of the support they received (e.g., some mentors found the regular check-ins to be redundant, repetitive, robotic, and superficial). Due to these challenges, mentors also reported a lack of willingness to reach out to staff members while encountering a challenge in their relationship.

Relationships Between Staff Members and Primary Caregivers: Finally, this study discovered that in almost a third of the relationships, staff members reported negative feelings towards primary caregivers (e.g., deficit-based views of families, which tended to focus on a lack of communication skills and investment in the program).

Why does this research matter?

Based on these results, the researchers made several recommendations for improving the monitoring and support of mentoring relationships.

- Begin broadening the focus of monitoring and support efforts beyond the mentor-mentee relationship. Relationship endings often occur via breakdowns in multiple relationships surrounding the mentor-mentee relationship.
- Begin assessing the broader network of relationships surrounding mentors and mentees. Provide monitoring and support to relationships that pose certain risks and challenges.
- Help staff members build the skills to develop successful relationships with mentors and parents.

Reference

Spencer, R., Gowdy, G., Drew, L. A., McCormack, M. J., & Keller, T. E. (2020). It Takes a Village to Break Up a Match: A Systemic Analysis of Formal Youth Mentoring Relationship Endings. *Child & Youth Care Forum*, 49, 97-120.

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