



The Mentoring Effect: Youth Experiencing Disabilities



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Supportive relationships with adults, including mentoring relationships, foster young people's positive development and can provide significant psychological protection in the face of adverse life circumstances¹. In the winter of 2020, MentorCanada surveyed 2,838 young adults between the ages of 18 to 30 in Canada to learn more about how mentors supported them while they were growing up. In total, 42% of the survey respondents indicated that they have or previously had a physical or mental condition or health problem that reduced the amount or kind of activity they could perform (functional disability) and 26% of the respondents indicated that they received a professional diagnosis of a disability or disorder.

Mentoring relationships can play an important role offsetting some of the adverse life circumstances children and youth experiencing disabilities face in Canada. Close to half of youth with a functional disability and youth with a diagnosed disability reported facing at least two risk factors during their teen years. However, 38% of respondents with a functional disability and 40% of respondents with a diagnosed disability did not have a single mentor between the ages of 6 and 18. Early intervention to help more young people who experience disabilities access informal and formal mentors in their communities and through mentoring programs is critical.



What is the effect of mentoring for youth experiencing disabilities?

The Mapping the Mentoring Gap study determined that survey respondents who were mentored growing up were statistically more likely to report several positive outcomes as young adults compared to their peers who did not have a mentor².

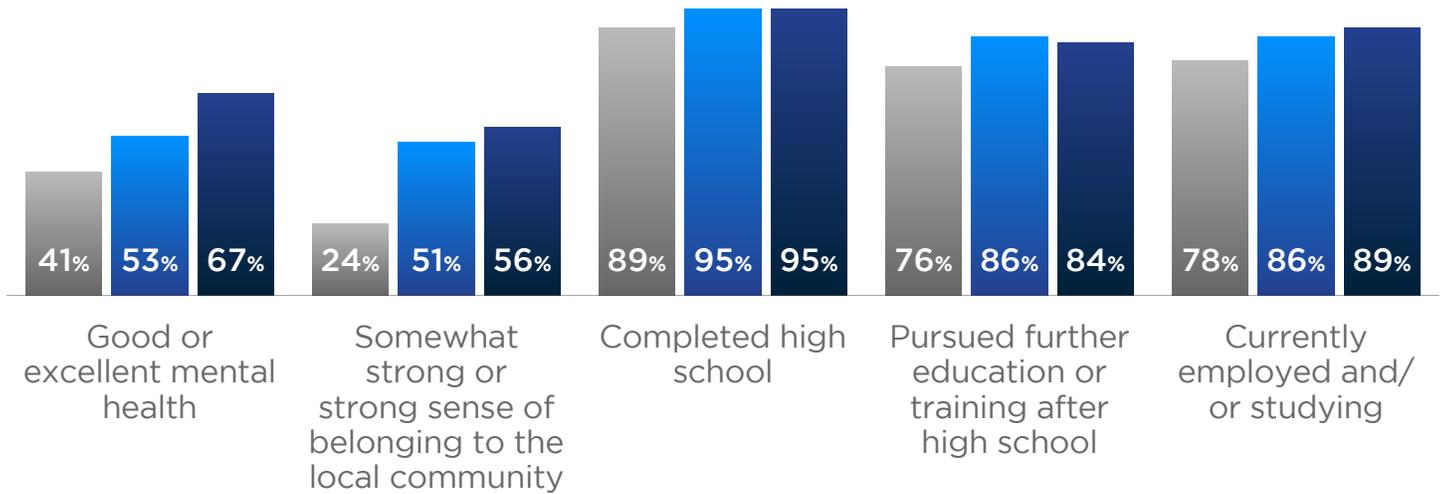
Overall, 62% of respondents who experience a functional disability and 60% of respondents who experience a diagnosed disability had at least one mentor at some point between the ages of 6 to 18. Respondents who experience a functional disability were statistically more likely to have been mentored compared to respondents who do not have a disability.

Many young people experiencing a disability developed natural mentoring relationships with adults in their environments. However, a slightly higher proportion of youth with a disability participated in a formal mentoring program compared to all survey respondents: about 20% of respondents with a disability (both functional and diagnosed) had at least one formal mentor between the ages of 6 to 18 compared to about 16% of all survey respondents.

Youth experiencing disabilities who were mentored growing up reported positive outcomes related to mental health, education, and employment in greater proportion than their peers who were not mentored. However, in some areas, they reported these positive outcomes in lower proportions than all the survey respondents who were mentored.

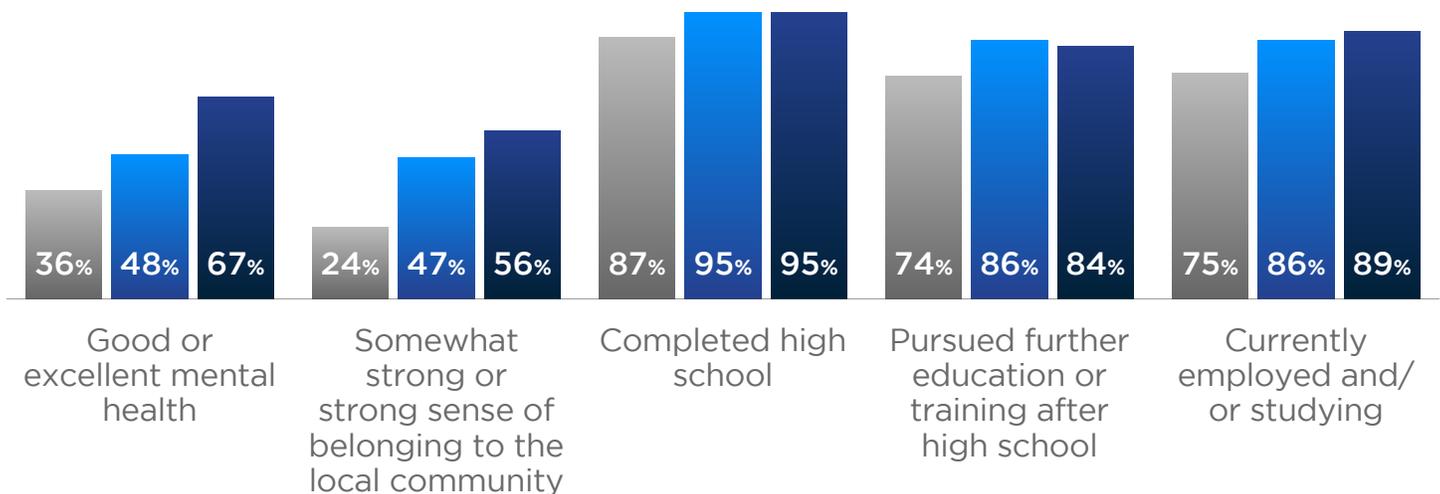
Youth with a functional disability

- Non-mentored youth with a functional disability
- Mentored youth with a functional disability
- All mentored youth



Youth with a diagnosed disability

- Non-mentored youth with a diagnosed disability
- Mentored youth with a diagnosed disability
- All mentored youth



How do mentors support teens experiencing disabilities?

In total, 41% of respondents experiencing a functional disability and 47% of respondents experiencing a diagnosed disability had at least one mentor between the ages of 12 to 18. Mentored youth with disabilities reported that their mentors supported several areas of their lives and development. Their most meaningful mentors helped them manage interpersonal relationships, build connections, acquire essential skills, and navigate the transition to adulthood.

Relationships

- 56% of mentored youth with a functional disability and 59% of mentored youth with a diagnosed disability talked about their relationships with their parents or guardians with their most meaningful mentor;
- 53% of mentored youth with a functional disability and 54% of mentored youth with a diagnosed disability talked about their relationships with their friends with their mentor.

Connections

- 42% of mentored youth with a functional disability and 45% of mentored youth with a diagnosed disability connected to services and supports with the help of their most meaningful mentor;
- 38% of mentored youth with a functional disability and 41% of mentored youth with a diagnosed disability took part in community events or offerings with their mentor;
- 37% of mentored youth with a functional disability and 39% of mentored youth with a diagnosed disability connected to their culture with their mentor's help.

Skills

- 48% of mentored youth with a functional disability and 49% of mentored youth with a diagnosed disability acquired academic or school-related skills with the help of their most meaningful mentor;

- 45% of mentored youth with a functional disability and 46% of mentored youth with a diagnosed disability acquired job-related skills;
- 45% of mentored youth with a functional disability and 45% of mentored youth with a diagnosed disability acquired essential life skills.

Transitions

- 43% of mentored youth with a functional disability and 45% of mentored youth with a diagnosed disability reported that their most meaningful mentor helped shape their job or career aspirations;
- 33% of mentored youth with a functional disability and 37% of mentored youth with a diagnosed disability reported that their mentor helped them stay in or go back to school;
- 31% of mentored youth with a functional disability and 35% of mentored youth with a diagnosed disability reported that their mentor helped them establish independence from their parents or guardians;
- 29% of mentored youth with a functional disability and 30% of mentored youth with a diagnosed disability reported that their mentor helped them apply to trade school, college, or university;
- 28% of mentored youth with a functional disability and 29% of mentored youth with a diagnosed disability reported that their mentor helped them get their first job.

Young people experiencing disabilities who had a mentor during their adolescence reported that their most meaningful mentor had a significant influence on several areas linked to their mental health and resilience:

- 72% of mentored youth with a functional disability and 74% of mentored youth with a diagnosed disability reported that their most meaningful mentor influenced their confidence in their abilities;
- 70% of mentored youth with a functional disability and 71% of mentored youth with a diagnosed disability reported that their mentor influenced their hope and optimism for the future;
- 68% of mentored youth with a functional disability and 68% of mentored youth with a diagnosed disability reported that their mentor influenced their sense of pride and self-esteem.



What prevents children and youth experiencing disabilities from accessing mentors?

Over two-thirds (69%) of respondents with a functional disability and 72% of respondents with a diagnosed disability could recall a time growing up when they wished they had a mentor but did not have one. Survey respondents experiencing a functional disability were nearly three times more likely to recall having wanted a mentor and not having had access to one than respondents who did not experience a disability.

Just over half of youth with a functional disability and youth with a diagnosed disability faced barriers accessing mentors during their adolescence compared to 38% of all survey respondents. The top barriers they faced were:

- Not knowing how to find a mentor;
- Not understanding what mentoring was or the value of having a mentor;
- Not having access to a mentoring program.

Additionally, a slightly higher proportion of youth experiencing disabilities reported that the mentoring programs that were available to them did not seem relevant to their lives.



Closing the mentoring gap for youth experiencing disabilities

Schools, communities, mentoring programs, and policymakers must work together to address the barriers youth experiencing disabilities face accessing mentors.

Policymakers and philanthropists

Intentional and targeted investment by government, philanthropists, in partnership with communities, to support youth mentoring programs are necessary to help close the mentoring gap and bring more opportunities to young people experiencing disabilities.

- Invest in quality mentoring programs which help children and youth who experience disabilities connect to adults and peers who can help them reach their personal, educational, and professional goals;
- Invest in the development of tools, resources, and accommodations to improve the mentoring experiences of young people with disabilities;
- Invest in efforts to tackle the digital divide to allow more children and youth with mobility challenges and those in remote communities to participate in virtual mentoring programs.

Schools

Partners with organizations offering mentoring programs to meet children and youth with disabilities where they are at and bring mentoring opportunities to them in schools.

Mentoring programs

Increasing the access of children and youth who experience disabilities to relevant mentoring opportunities is critical. A greater proportion of respondents experiencing disabilities faced barriers accessing mentoring programs compared to all survey respondents.

- Include youth with disabilities in program design and improvement efforts to ensure that programs are relevant to their experiences and accessible;
- Provide training and resources on mentoring children and youth experiencing disabilities to mentors and program staff;
- Ensure that programs are accessible (e.g, website, recruitment materials language and imagery, activities, etc.);
- Provide accommodations for mentors and mentees who experience disabilities such as offering in-person and virtual meeting location options so that people with mobility challenges can participate in mentoring programs as mentees and as mentors.

Communities

Empowering more caring adults in communities to step up and become mentors can bring more opportunities to young people who experience disabilities. Informal mentors such as teachers, coaches, neighbours, and extended family members, play an important role supporting young people's positive development. Caring adults can:

- Adopt a mentoring mindset in everyday interactions with children and youth who experience disabilities;
- Learn more about how to become an effective mentor and a true partner to support the journey of a young person experiencing a disability.



Coming Soon!

Mentor Canada has partnered with Partners for Youth with Disabilities to create e-learning modules on disability inclusion and disability inclusive mentoring practices.

[Subscribe to our newsletter to hear about it first!](#)

Youth experiencing disabilities who have benefited from the support of a mentor understand the value of mentoring and are committed to paying it forward:

- 73% of youth experiencing disabilities (whether functional and/or diagnosed) who were mentored growing up are interested in becoming mentors in the future.
- Over 40% of youth experiencing disabilities have already mentored another young person.

Ultimately, increasing the access of children and youth experiencing disabilities to formal and informal mentoring opportunities can support their healthy development and help them thrive.

About Mentor Canada

Mentor Canada broadens and deepens access to quality mentoring for youth in Canada through capacity building, tools and resources, research, network building and knowledge exchange. *Mapping the Mentoring Gap* is one of three studies conducted by Mentor Canada as part of the State of Mentoring Research Initiative. Between January and March 2020, we surveyed 2,838 young adults aged 18-30 about their mentoring experiences growing up and their current lives.

Learn more about Mentor Canada and our research at [MentoringCanada.ca](https://mentoringcanada.ca).

With contribution from:



The Canadian Association for Supported Employment (CASE) and MentorAbility Canada

The Canadian Association for Supported Employment is a national association of community-based service providers and stakeholders working towards employment inclusion of people experiencing disability. Our association strives to promote full citizenship and personal capacity through the facilitation of increased labour market participation. Through workforce participation, CASE also promotes social inclusion for Canadians who have a disability. Learn more about CASE at supportedemployment.ca.

MentorAbility Canada is a national supported employment initiative that facilitates unique, short-term mentoring opportunities between employers and people experiencing a disability. By providing and celebrating successful mentoring experiences in communities across Canada, this initiative is part of a national effort to promote the employment of Canadians experiencing disability. Learn more about MentorAbility Canada at supportedemployment.ca/mentorability.

Research supported by:



The Social Research and Demonstration Corporation (SRDC) is a non-profit research organization, created specifically to develop, field test, and rigorously evaluate new programs. SRDC's two-part mission is to help policy-makers and practitioners identify policies and programs that improve the well-being of all Canadians, with a special concern for the effects on the disadvantaged, and to raise the standards of evidence that are used in assessing these policies.

- 1 Resnick, M. D., Harris, L. J., & Blum, R. W. (1993). The impact of caring and connectedness on adolescent health and well-being. *Journal of Paediatrics and Child Health*, 29(Suppl. 1), S3-S9. Werner, E. E. & Smith, R. S.(1992) *Overcoming the odds: High risk children from birth to adulthood*. Cornell University Press.
- 2 Our analysis determined that there was an association between having had a mentor and positive outcomes (correlation) but could not determine if having a mentor caused or led to these positive outcomes. See the [Mapping the Mentoring Gap study](#) for more details.