



# *Unlocking Doors*

*Mentoring to Strengthen Skills  
and Support Career Pathways*

**Spotlight on Youth with Disabilities**



Mentor Canada





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In partnership with the Canadian Association for Supported Employment.

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## About this Study

In 2024, Mentor Canada and the Social Research and Demonstration Corporation (SRDC) surveyed 3,110 youth aged 18 to 30 in Canada to examine how mentorship in early adulthood strengthens skills and supports career development.

*See Appendix 1 for Research Methods details.*

A total of 432 survey respondents self-identified as persons experiencing a disability. Within the survey, a disability was defined as “a physical or mental condition that has affected the activities you can do.” Among respondents with a disability, 71% (317 respondents) disclosed that they have an invisible disability, 17% (74 respondents) indicated having a visible disability, and 6% (26 respondents) identified as having both an invisible and visible disability.

Slightly over half of the respondents (53%) identified as women. Over half of the respondents with disabilities identified as 2SLGBTQIA+.

*See Appendix 2 for complete demographic information for respondents with disabilities.*

Mentoring relationships have been shown to support youth experiencing disabilities during multiple life transitions, including navigating their educational and career journeys. (Lindsay et al., 2016). A caring, trusted, more experienced person, such as a mentor, can provide guidance, support, and advice to help a young person develop the skills, knowledge, and confidence to navigate life transitions. According to a 2020 national study conducted by Mentor Canada and SRDC, youth with disabilities who had a mentorship experience during adolescence reported that their mentors helped them build their confidence in their abilities, self-esteem, and hope for the future. Mentors also frequently helped youth acquire school and job-related skills and essential life skills (Mentor Canada, 2022). Research has shown that mentoring can improve self-determination, self-advocacy, positive identity, social skills, and education and employment outcomes, and community participation for persons with disabilities (Milbourn et al., 2020; Hillier et al., 2018; Chen & Chan, 2014; Kramer et al., 2017; Mentor Canada, 2024).

### **CATEGORIES OF ANALYSIS: VISIBLE AND INVISIBLE DISABILITIES**

Two categories were created for the analysis:

- 1) Respondents who solely experience an invisible disability. In the survey, invisible disability was defined as being invisible to others, such as having a mental health condition or a learning disability (71% of respondents with disabilities).
- 2) Respondents who experience a visible disability, defined as being visible to others, such as being a wheelchair user or having a limb difference (23% of respondents with disabilities). This category also includes respondents who disclosed having both a visible and an invisible disability (6% of respondents with disabilities).

# Key Recommendations

## Improving Quality Mentoring for Youth with Disabilities

Mentors, mentoring programs, educational institutions, workplaces, and policymakers can all play a crucial role in improving the landscape of mentoring for youth with disabilities. Inclusive policy frameworks and mentoring practices can increase youth's access to natural and programmatic mentorship opportunities that effectively support their successful transition into adulthood.

### For Mentors

Mentors can support youth with disabilities and strengthen their self-determination, well-being and employment preparedness. The following simple actions can have a significant, even transformative, impact on a young person's journey:

- Adopt a mentoring mindset that centres on a young person's goals, practice active listening with intention, and approach every interaction as an opportunity to support their growth.
- Provide emotional support, encouragement, and a judgment-free space to help youth build their confidence, pride, and self-esteem.
- Encourage youth with disabilities to exercise their agency and stand up for themselves. Offer to help them explore their options related to disclosure and accommodation processes. Help them navigate the processes if they decide to disclose their disability status and seek accommodation. With their consent, advocate for them when appropriate.
- Offer career and skills development support that aligns with their needs and goals, including transversal skills such as problem-solving, collaboration, innovation, adaptability, and communication skills.
- Broaden youth networks and horizons by connecting them to people, opportunities, and experiences they may not otherwise access.
- Engage in continuous learning opportunities that will strengthen your skills and knowledge to provide meaningful support for youth with disabilities.

#### RESOURCE ALERT



##### **Adopting a Mentoring Mindset**

**This tipsheet offers supportive individuals with four actionable strategies on how to adopt a mentor mindset in everyday interactions with youth.**

#### RESOURCE ALERT



##### **Pathways to Inclusion: Empowering Youth with Disabilities through Career Mentoring**

**This online training equips mentors with the knowledge and skills to develop inclusive and effective career mentoring relationships with youth experiencing disabilities.**

## For Mentoring Programs

Mentoring programs can demystify mentorship and provide opportunities that complement the natural mentoring relationships many young people develop with supportive individuals in their social networks. To ensure that youth with disabilities have access to quality mentorships, programs are encouraged to consider the following recommendations:

- Proactively communicate the reciprocal benefits of mentoring to address the widespread uncertainty and misconceptions among youth with disabilities. Demystify mentorship by highlighting its reciprocal nature, with mentors and mentees learning from each other and growing together. Challenge misconceptions about mentorship that portray youth as passive recipients of mentors' "wisdom". Share these benefits to persuade persons with disabilities to become mentors by emphasizing mentoring's transformative potential.

- Provide robust mentor training and offer on-going support to ensure they are well-equipped with the knowledge and skills to support youth with disabilities effectively and engage in a youth-centred and -led relationship. Offer training to mentees as well, equipping them with the knowledge and skills they need to take charge and lead the mentoring relationship.

- Help youth build their webs of support! Implement mentorship activities that help youth expand their connections and support networks. One mentor alone is unlikely to have every single skill, expertise, and connection youth need as they navigate early adulthood. Consider multi-mentor models that reflect youth's intersecting identities and diverse needs. Added benefit: this approach alleviates the pressure some mentors may feel to figure out everything on their own.

- Develop mentoring initiatives that support youth through the many transitions of early adulthood. For example, bridge the gaps between school and work, or from supported to independent living.

### RESOURCE ALERT



#### Online Training Catalog

**Mentor Canada has developed and continues to develop several online training modules for mentors.**

### RESOURCE ALERT



#### **Career Conversations and Building Webs of Support**

**This guide for youth helps them explore career paths and build a strong support network through mentoring.**

### RESOURCE ALERT



#### Inclusive Mentoring for Persons with Disabilities

**This three-part online training for mentoring programs introduces foundational concepts for utilizing an inclusive approach to designing mentoring opportunities for persons with disabilities.**

- Involve young people with disabilities in program design and improvement to ensure programs are relevant and support young people's self-determination.
- Create an inclusive environment. Promote available accommodations and reduce logistical, structural, or attitudinal barriers to mentorship.

## For Schools and Workplaces

Schools and workplaces serve as a crucial source of potential mentors and role models for youth with disabilities. By fostering mentor-rich environments, these spaces can encourage the development of natural mentoring relationships. They can also be important sites for implementing mentoring programs, reaching youth where they are.

Recommended actions for schools and workplaces include:

- Introduce the concept of mentorship early in young people's education journey. Highlight its benefits and how to access it as an additional source of support for their personal and professional growth. Demystify mentorship and underscore its reciprocal benefits, challenging outdated notions of mentorship as a hierarchical relationship which is unappealing to youth.
- Connect new students and new hires to mentors to help navigate school or the workplace and ensure they are set up for success.
- Introduce policies and practices that foster a mentor-rich environment. Provide a pathway for adults in natural helping positions (e.g., teachers, guidance counsellors, work supervisors and managers, senior leadership) to adopt mentoring and disability-affirming mindsets, including training opportunities to strengthen their skills and knowledge.
- Facilitate networking activities to provide youth with disabilities with opportunities to build connections, expand their horizons, and build natural mentoring relationships.
- Consider implementing structured mentoring initiatives to supplement natural mentoring relationships. Consider partnering with community organizations to support implementation.

### RESOURCE ALERT



#### **Building Inclusive Career Mentoring Opportunities for Youth with Disabilities**

**This online learning resource equips employers and schools with the knowledge and skills to build and sustain inclusive career mentoring opportunities for youth with disabilities, whether they are short- or longer-term opportunities.**

## **For Policymakers**

Strategic policies and funding priorities can increase the availability of high-quality mentorship opportunities and remove barriers for youth with disabilities. Supportive policies and funding create favourable conditions for the development and scaling of mentoring.

- Invest in public education efforts that demystify mentorship and highlight its benefits for youth with disabilities and for mentors.
- Fund initiatives that expand inclusive mentoring programs, especially those supporting youth through the transitions of early adulthood and youth employability. Support initiatives to recruit and train mentors with disability experience.
- Promote policy frameworks that encourage mentor-rich environments in schools, workplaces, and communities.
- Support research to continue identifying barriers, promising practices, and mentorship outcomes for youth with disabilities.

# Research Findings

## How youth with disabilities define success in school and work

Just under half of respondents with a disability are working full-time (32%) or part-time (14%), and 11% are looking for work. One quarter of the respondents are in an education or training program full-time or part-time. More than half of the respondents had pursued further education or training after high school.

Many young adults with disabilities define success in the context of school and work as being mentally and physically healthy (53%), achieving work/life balance (45%), and having a stable job (40%). Freedom (39%), having a job that pays them fairly (37%), and having meaningful relationships (37%) are also commonly included in their views on success.

Interestingly, the response distribution differs according to disability experience. Among youth solely experiencing an invisible disability, a larger percentage define success as being mentally and physically healthy, achieving a work-life balance, having a reliable or stable job, and having meaningful relationships. Youth with a visible disability define success in ways that are more evenly distributed among response options.

### Youth with Disabilities' Definitions of Success in School and Work



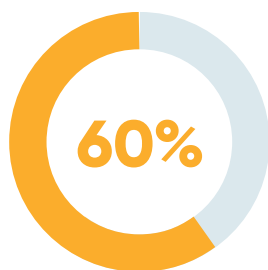
These findings on youth's views of success shed light on what matters to young persons with disabilities. They offer important insights for mentors and mentoring programs seeking to provide relevant support and experiences.

## ***Mentorship in Early Adulthood***

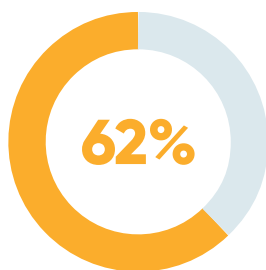
### **KEY FINDINGS**

- Over three-quarters of youth with a disability have had mentoring experiences at some point during their childhood or early adulthood. Respondents with a visible disability report more mentoring experiences compared to those with an invisible disability.
- Many young adults with disabilities meet their mentors at school or at work and share similar education or career interests with their mentors. Less than 20% of youth share similar disability experiences with their mentors.
- Nearly 3 in 4 youth with disabilities reported facing at least one barrier to mentorship.

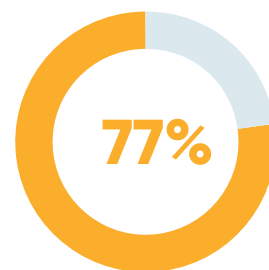
## ***Who has access to mentoring?***



of youth with a disability  
**had a mentoring experience  
before turning 18**



of youth with a disability **had a  
mentoring experience since  
turning 18**



of youth with a disability **had a  
mentoring experience  
before and/or since turning 18**

More than three-quarters (77%) of surveyed youth with disabilities reported having at least one mentor either during their childhood or early adulthood (between 18 and 30 years old):

- 60% reported having had at least one mentor before the age of 18
- 62% reported having at least one mentoring experience since turning 18.

Youth who have been mentored before they turn 18 are more likely to also have mentorship experiences in early adulthood. Interestingly, nearly two-thirds (68%) of youth with disabilities who have mentorship experience in early adulthood report having multiple mentors.

It is important to note that survey respondents were aged 18 to 30, with a majority aged 26 or younger. As such, the findings suggest a high prevalence of mentoring for youth with disabilities in the early years of adulthood, providing support during a critical transition period.

The findings on the prevalence of mentorship experiences during childhood and adolescence are consistent with Mentor Canada and SRDC's 2020 study, which found that 62% of youth with disabilities reported having at least one mentor before the age of 18. The 2020 study also found that youth with disabilities were statistically more likely to have mentorship experiences before 18 compared to their peers without disability experience (Mentor Canada, 2022).

Compared to youth with visible disabilities, youth with invisible disabilities report a slightly lower prevalence of mentorship experience across childhood and early adulthood (74% compared to 84%).

### Mentorship Experiences Based on Disability Type

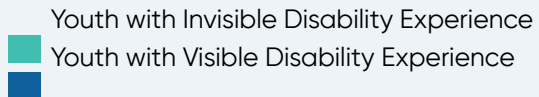
Before turning 18 years old



After turning 18 years old



At least once before and/or after turning 18



#### CATEGORIES OF ANALYSIS:

#### MENTOR, NATURAL MENTOR, AND PROGRAM MENTOR

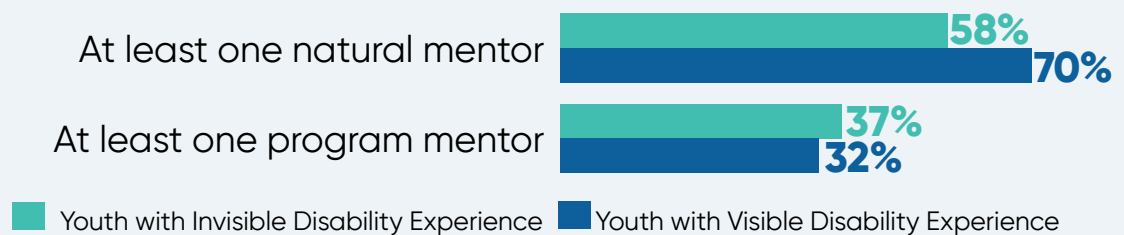
In this study, we defined a **mentor** as a caring, trusted person, who is more experienced, and provides guidance, support, and advice. A mentor can help youth develop skills, knowledge, or confidence, and support youth as they navigate various aspects of their life.

A **natural mentor** organically develops a mentoring relationship with a young person without a formal or assigned arrangement. This type of mentorship develops naturally through personal relationships in everyday life. A natural mentor could be someone like an extended family member, teacher, community leader, co-worker, or other individual who provides guidance and support, without being part of a specific mentoring program.

A **program mentor** is part of a structured mentoring initiative that follows a specific set of guidelines, goals, and often has a specific duration. This type of mentoring is typically offered by organizations (such as workplaces, schools, or community organizations) that match youth with a mentor they typically did not previously know, to provide support, guidance, or skill development. In mentoring programs, a mentor works with youth in a purposeful and organized way to help them achieve personal, academic, or professional goals.

In early adulthood, the majority of mentored youth with disabilities had a natural mentor (62%) instead of a program mentor (36%). Mentored youth with visible disabilities reported a high frequency of natural mentoring relationships in childhood (74%) and early adulthood (70%). A possible explanation for the higher prevalence of natural mentoring relationships among youth with visible disabilities compared to those with invisible disabilities is that individuals in their surroundings, especially teachers and school staff members, may perceive a greater need for support and develop mentoring relationships with them to provide it. Youth with invisible disabilities may be hesitant to disclose their disability and seek support from mentors.

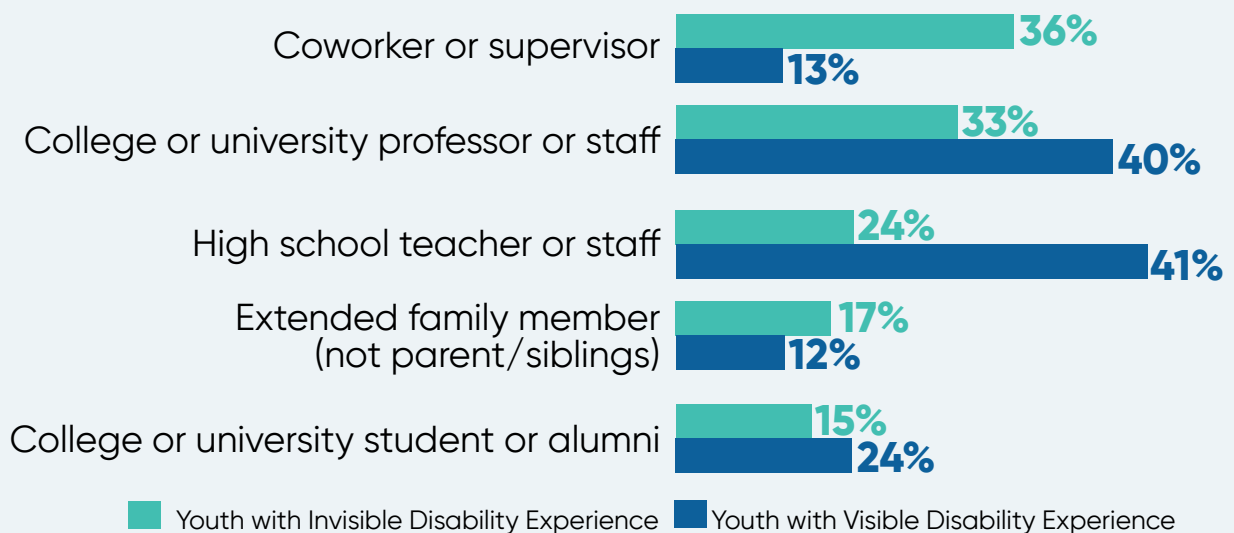
### Types of Mentorship Experience in Early Adulthood



## Who are the mentors?

Educational settings are a crucial source of mentors for youth with disabilities, with 34% of mentored respondents reporting that their mentors are post-secondary educators or staff members and 29% reporting that their mentors are high school teachers or staff members. Youth with disabilities also access mentorship in the workplace, with 29% reporting that their mentors are coworkers or supervisors. Extended family members, neighbours and family friends, community or spiritual leaders, coaches, and youth program staff members or volunteers also act as mentors, albeit less frequently.

### Types of Relationships Youth with Disabilities Have with Mentors

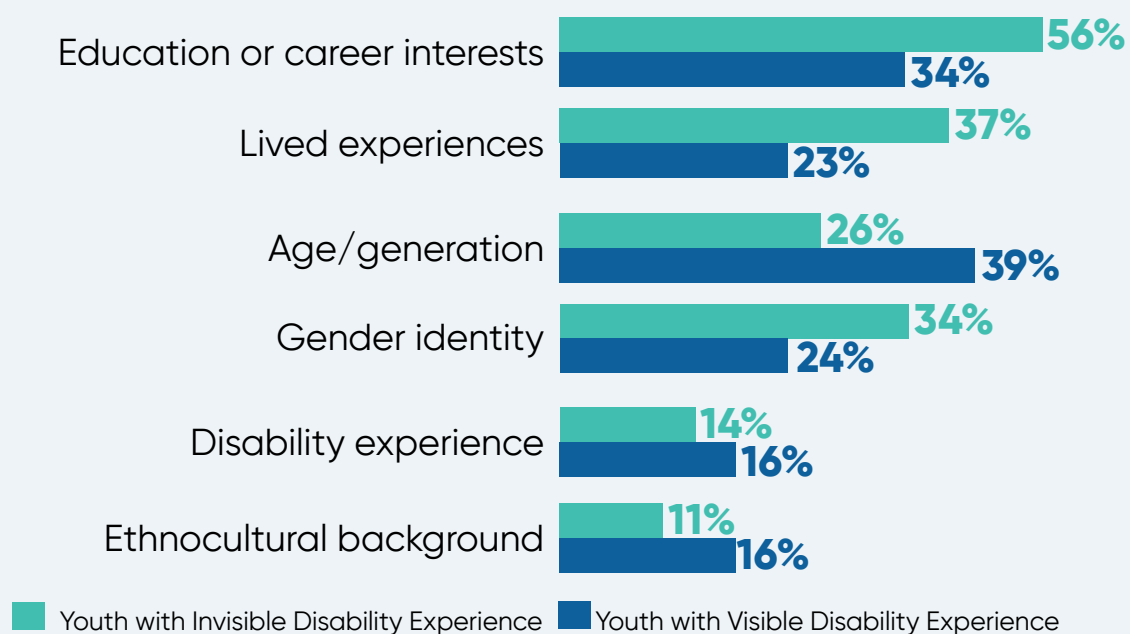


Educational settings are a particularly significant source of mentors for youth with a visible disability. A higher proportion of mentored youth with a visible disability reported meeting their mentors in either post-secondary education (40%) or in high school (41%) compared to youth with an invisible disability (33% and 24%, respectively). Youth with an invisible disability more commonly reported meeting their mentors through their workplace (36%) compared to those with a visible disability (13%).

Nearly half of the mentored respondents (49%) reported shared education or career interests with their mentors. This finding is consistent with the overall survey responses and other demographic groups, which show that young adults express a strong preference for these similarities when seeking mentorship during a life stage when education and career are often priorities. However, a smaller proportion of youth with a visible disability reported that their mentors shared their educational or career interests (34%) compared to over half of youth with an invisible disability (56%).

Interestingly, only 14% of respondents with mentorship experience in early adulthood indicated that at least one of their mentors was a person with a disability. One-third of mentored respondents reported shared lived experiences with their mentors. Lived experiences refer to the direct knowledge individuals gain from their personal identities and life circumstances, particularly in relation to experiences with bias and discrimination. However, the study did not provide a specific definition of lived experience, allowing participants to interpret the item in ways that made sense to them. A smaller percentage of respondents with a visible disability reported that their mentors had similar lived experiences.

### Similarities Between Youth and Their Mentors

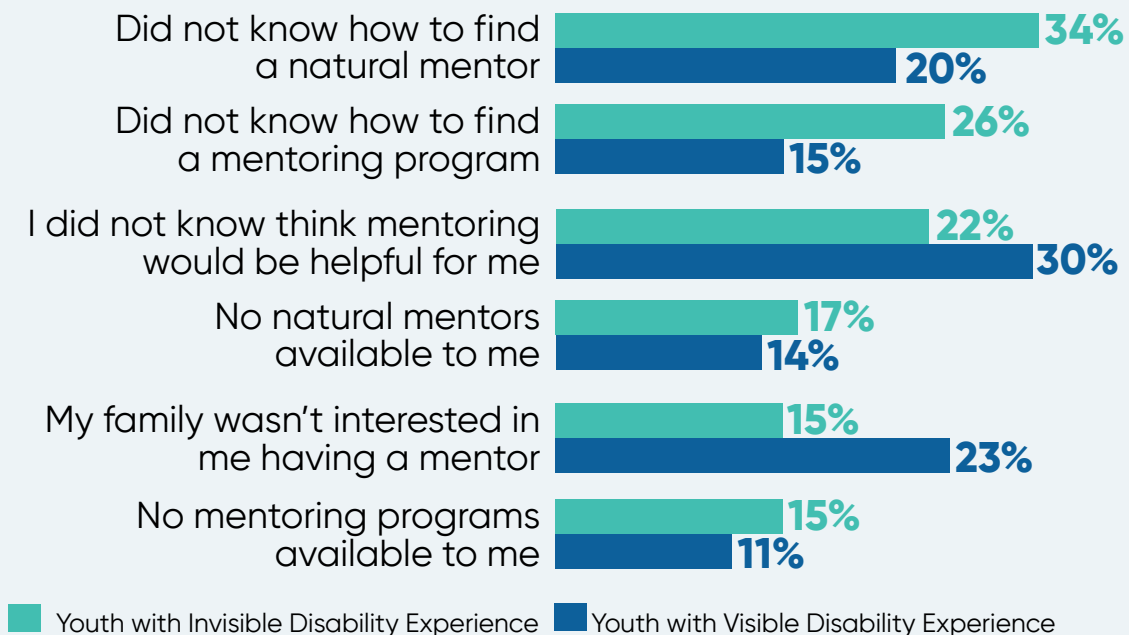


## Barriers to Mentorship

Survey results reveal concerning barriers and negative mentorship experiences for youth with disabilities. Nearly one-quarter (23%) of respondents with disabilities have not had a single mentorship experience either in childhood or in early adulthood. Findings from the 2020 study showed that over two-thirds of respondents with a disability could recall a time before the age of 18 when they wanted a mentor but did not have one (Mentor Canada, 2022).

Among respondents with a disability, 74% reported experiencing at least one barrier to mentorship in early adulthood. The most frequently reported barriers were not knowing how to find a natural mentor (29%), not thinking mentorship is helpful (25%), and not knowing how to find a mentoring program (22%). Respondents with a visible disability more frequently reported that they did not think that mentoring would be helpful to them compared to respondents with an invisible disability. This finding, along with others outlined below regarding negative experiences and the extent to which youth with visible disabilities report that mentoring had a significant impact on their lives, underscores that mentoring alone is unlikely to address the barriers that they encounter and raises questions about how they perceive the helpfulness of mentoring.

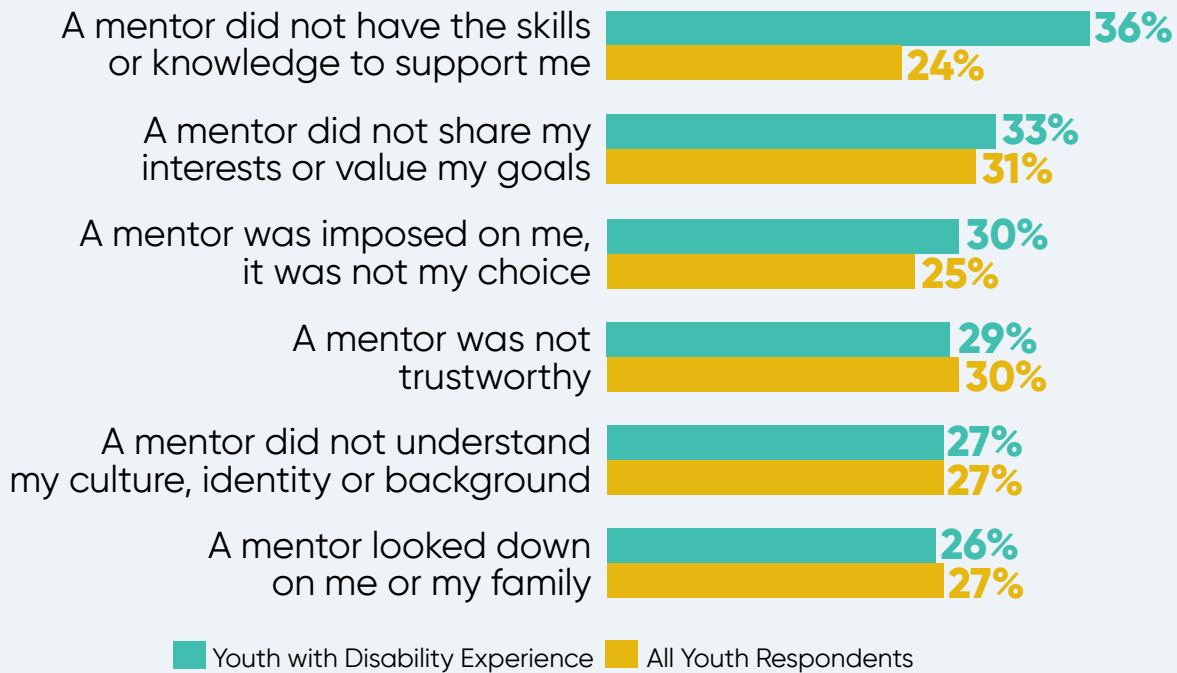
### Barriers to Mentorship Experienced by Youth with Disabilities



Nearly one in five (21%) of the overall study participants who had access to mentorship in early adulthood reported a negative experience. However, the proportion of negative experiences is noticeably higher among mentored youth with disabilities, with 40% reporting at least one negative experience. Nearly a third of respondents with a disability who were mentored in early adulthood reported at least one of the following negative experiences:

- A mentor lacked the skills or knowledge to support them,
- A mentor did not share their interests or value their goals,
- A mentor was imposed on them, and it was not their choice.

## Negative Experiences with Mentorship Among Youth



These findings reveal a need for better training and support for natural and program mentors who aim to provide effective mentorship for young adults with disabilities. It also highlights concerning gaps related to respecting the self-determination and agency of youth with disabilities, including valuing their interests and goals and their choice to seek mentorship or not.

### RESOURCE ALERT



#### **Pathways to Inclusion: Empowering Youth with Disabilities through Career Mentoring**

**This online training equips mentors with the knowledge and skills to develop inclusive and effective career mentoring relationships with youth experiencing disabilities.**

**Explore Mentor Canada's training catalog for additional learning opportunities.**

# Benefits of Mentoring for Youth with Disabilities

## KEY FINDINGS

- 71% of youth with disabilities stated that their mentors had a big impact on their lives.
- Access to mentorship is associated with a higher likelihood of reporting stronger social capital and well-being.
- Nearly 4 in 5 youth reported their mentors helped them develop critical Skills for Success related to their employment preparedness.
- Mentors may also help youth navigate access to accommodations that can best support their inclusion.

Results indicate that for young adults with a disability, having a mentorship experience in early adulthood, whether through natural mentorship or a formal program, has statistically significant positive effects on several subjective measures of success and well-being.<sup>1</sup>

Compared to their peers without mentorship experience, youth with mentors in early adulthood are more likely to report stronger:

- Employment satisfaction,
- Social capital,
- General support,
- Flourishing (self-perceived success), and
- Well-being.

*See Appendix 3 for the list of survey measures and their definitions.*

Respondents with an invisible disability who had a mentoring experience in early adulthood are also more likely to report positive mental health.

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<sup>1</sup> Our analysis determined that there was a statistically significant association (correlation) between having mentorship experience and improved outcomes. However, this analysis does not allow us to conclude that mentoring caused or led to these outcomes (causation). See Appendix 1: Research Methods for details.

Among respondents who reported a mentoring experience since turning 18, 71% of youth with disabilities reported that their mentor had a significant impact on their lives. However, young adults with visible disabilities reported relatively lower rates of impactful mentorship, with 58% stating that a mentor had a big influence on their lives.

Survey results from youth who reported impactful mentorship experiences shed light on how mentors can have a significant impact on the well-being of young adults with disabilities. They do so by offering emotional support and by helping youth with disabilities achieve their goals and become better prepared for employment.

### **Well-being, self-determination, and socioemotional support**

Mentors provide a listening ear but also play a significant role in positive identity development. They help youth with disabilities strengthen their self-esteem and self-confidence. Importantly, mentors support young persons with disabilities in strengthening their agency and self-advocacy. Among youth with disabilities who had an impactful mentorship experience in early adulthood:

- 94% reported their mentors supported them by listening and being there for them,
- 91% reported that their mentors helped them be proud of who they are,
- 90% reported that their mentors helped them gain confidence in their abilities.

Our findings show that mentorship helps youth with disabilities set goals and support their growth.

- 92% reported their mentors provided them with advice and guidance,
- 89% reported their mentors helped them with setting and reaching goals,
- 89% reported that their mentors helped them stand up for themselves,
- 88% reported that their mentors helped them ask for help when they needed it.

### **Social capital and employment preparedness**

Over 4 out of 5 youth with disabilities who have had an impactful mentorship experience reported that their mentors helped them develop and strengthen critical Skills for Success,<sup>2</sup> such as problem-solving, collaboration, innovation, and adaptability skills.

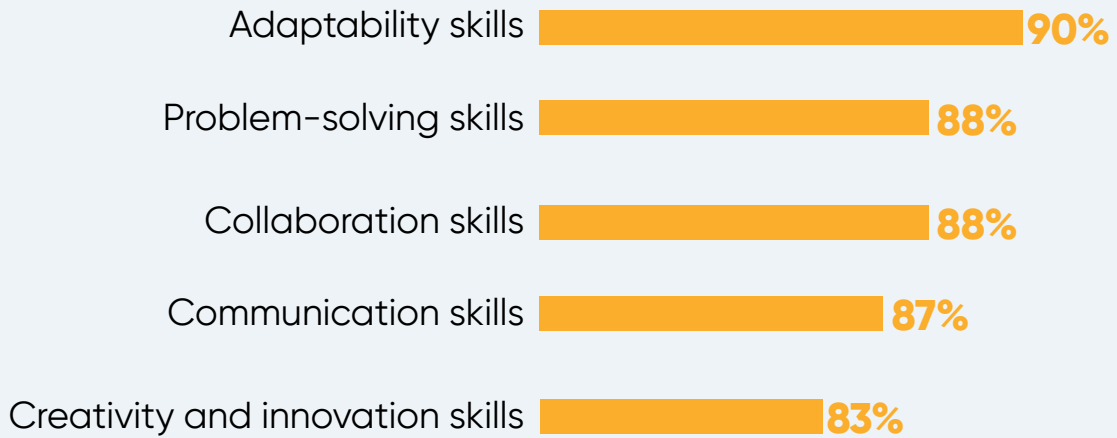
#### **CATEGORY OF ANALYSIS: IMPACTFUL MENTORSHIP**

Survey respondents who agreed that their mentors had a big impact on their lives as young adults were included in the “impactful mentorship” category of analysis. These respondents answered additional questions about how their mentors supported them.

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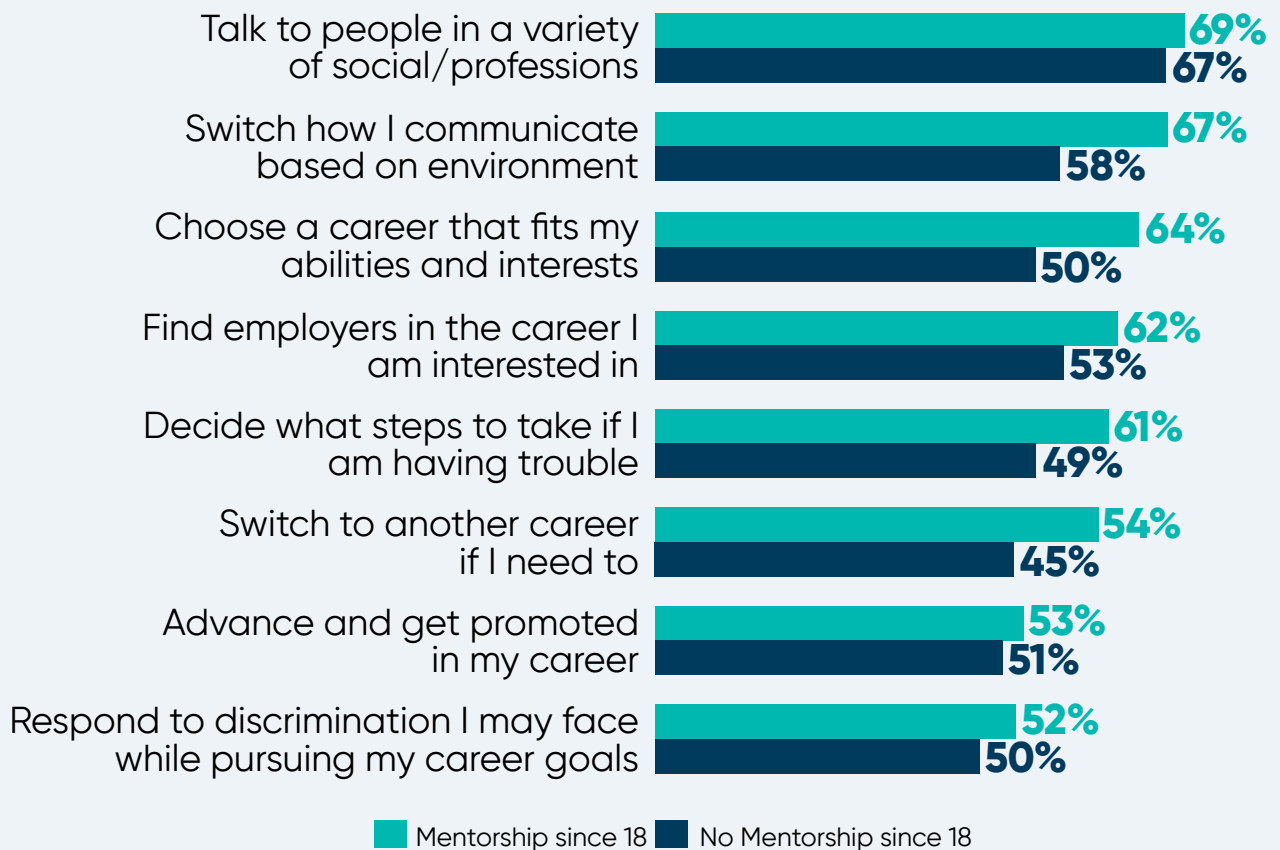
<sup>2</sup> Skills for Success is a framework created by the Government of Canada that outlines nine foundational and transferable skills needed to get and keep good jobs in today's economy.

## Skills for Success Youth with Disabilities Develop with Their Mentors



Youth with mentorship experience also reported higher confidence in their ability to navigate career decisions than their peers without mentorship. Mentors' support may be particularly significant in helping youth choose career paths and make adjustments when encountering challenges.

## Career Decision-Making Self-Efficacy Based on Access to Mentorship



Mentors expand young people’s networks and access to opportunities. Among respondents with impactful mentoring experiences:

- 83% report that their mentors connected them to people and services to support them.
- 92% report that their mentors broadened their horizons and introduced them to new experiences and opportunities.

Youth with disabilities who have had mentorship experiences in early adulthood generally have more relational resources to draw on for support (social capital and general support).

### **Disclosure and accommodation**

Importantly, mentors can help youth navigate the disclosure and accommodation process. The survey asked respondents who disclosed experiencing a disability whether they were receiving the support and accommodation needed for their disability at work and in school. Just over half of youth report having the support they need at work, and just under half report having the support they need at school.

Although survey participants were not asked directly whether their mentors helped them navigate the accommodation process, results show that respondents with mentorship experience report receiving the support needed at higher rates than their peers without mentors.

#### **Access to Disability Support Based on Mentorship Experience**



Other studies have shown that mentors can play a key role in facilitating the disclosure and accommodation processes for youth with disabilities (Lindsay et al., 2019). In addition, our findings on mentors’ influence on young adults’ self-advocacy and help-seeking illustrate how mentorship can build foundational attitudes and skills that help youth with disabilities request accommodations.

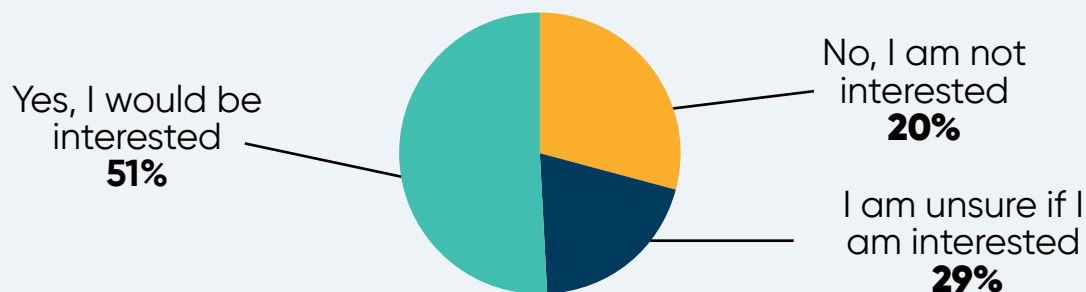
# What do youth with disabilities seek in mentorship?

## KEY FINDINGS

- Among youth with disabilities who reported no mentorship experiences in early adulthood, 80% shared that they are open to having a mentor
- Youth are seeking mentors who share similar lived experiences or disability experiences with them.
- Youth are seeking mentors to provide socio-emotional support, advice, and connection to opportunities.
- Half of young adults with disabilities are most interested in connecting with a mentor through their community, and about one-third are interested in connecting with a mentor through school or work.

Nearly one-third (29%) of respondents with disabilities reported that they did not have mentoring experience in early adulthood. In the survey, respondents without mentorship experience but potentially interested in a mentor were asked a series of questions to determine what would constitute valuable, relevant mentorship opportunities from their perspective.

## Interest in Mentorship Among Unmentored Youth



Among youth with disabilities who reported no mentorship experiences in early adulthood, 80% indicated that they are open to having a mentor. However, among those open to mentorship, a large proportion (29%) are unsure rather than decidedly interested. To overcome this widespread hesitancy and persuade youth with disabilities that mentoring is for them, it is critical to better communicate the benefits of mentoring and provide mentorship experiences that are both accessible and relevant to their priorities and goals.

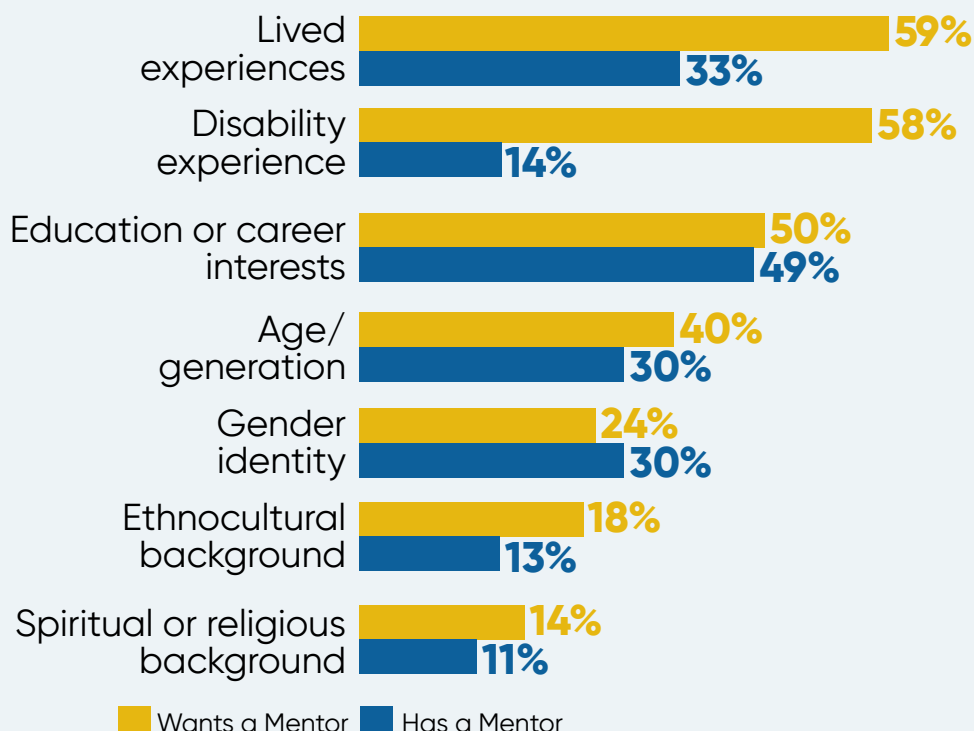
Youth with disabilities who are open to mentorship see value in mentors who share similar lived experiences and disability experiences. Although only 14% of mentored young adults with disabilities had at least one mentor who shared their disability experience, 58% of young adults with disabilities who are open to mentorship indicate that shared disability experience with potential mentors would be important to them. This finding points to an important gap: youth with disabilities may face unique barriers in finding mentors who share this experience with them in early adulthood.

**CATEGORY OF ANALYSIS:  
OPEN TO MENTORSHIP**

This category includes survey respondents who did not report having a mentor since they turned 18 and who indicated that they were interested (51%) in having a mentor if they could or were unsure (29%) about whether they would be interested in mentorship.

Youth with disabilities who are open to mentorship are also seeking mentors with similar educational or career interests, underscoring the importance of support and guidance in navigating the many transitions of early adulthood.

**Similarities Youth Seek in a Mentor vs. Similarities Youth Have in a Mentor**

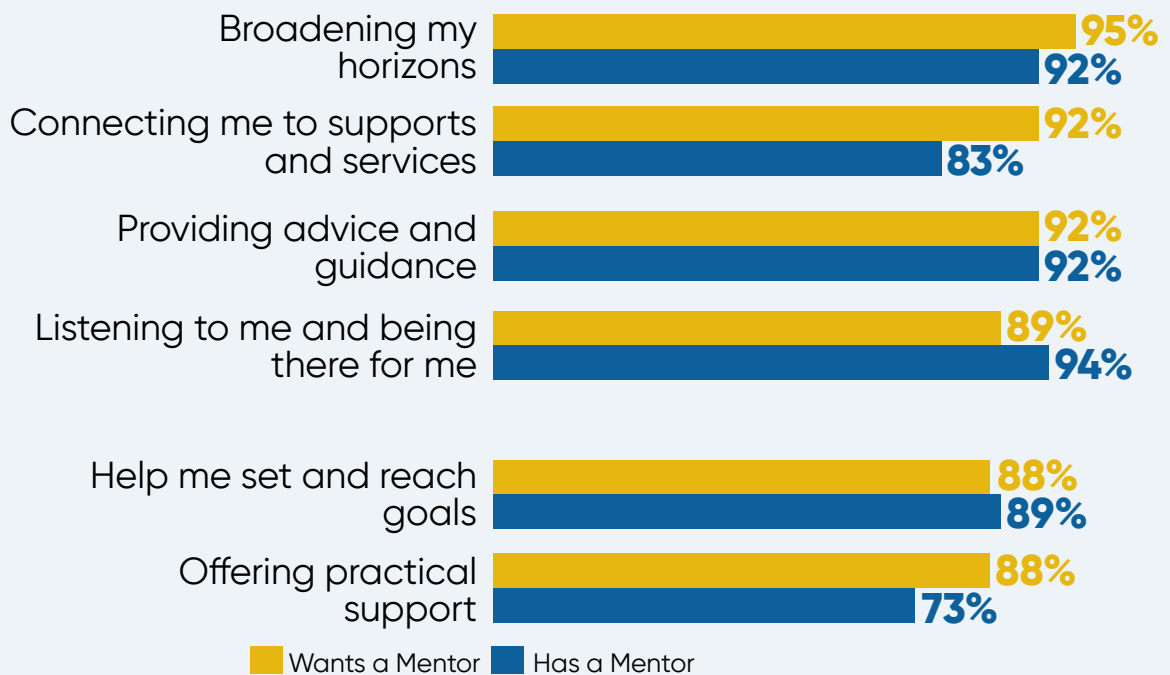


Young adults with disabilities are most interested in connecting with a mentor through their community (54%), followed by connecting through work (35%) and school (34%). This finding highlights the need for creating mentor-rich environments where youth can develop natural mentoring relationships with supportive individuals.

## How can mentors support youth with disabilities?

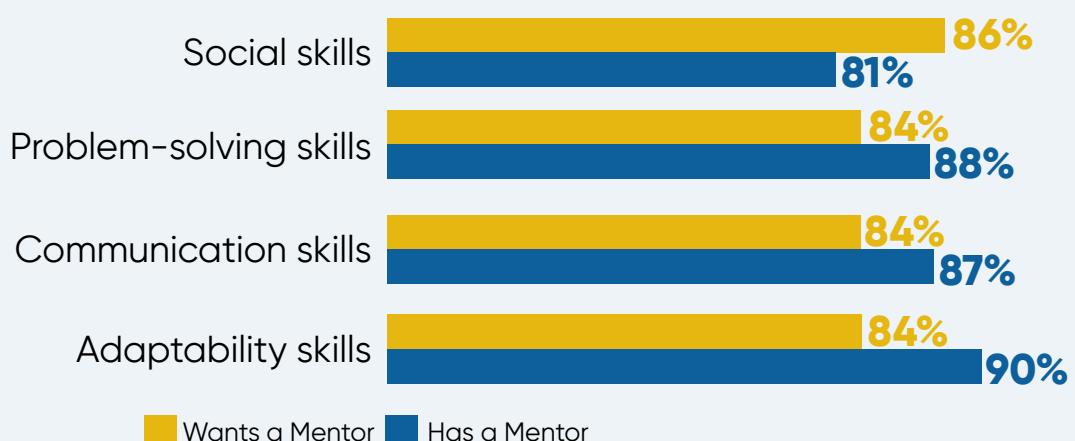
Youth open to mentorship were asked how a mentor could best provide meaningful support. Their responses show that they seek mentors who can provide emotional support as well as advice and guidance. They are also interested in mentors who can open doors for them, including broadening their horizons and connecting them to supports and services.

### Support Received for Youth with Mentorship and Support Desired for Youth Seeking Mentorship



Youth with disabilities interested in mentorship also report that they would want mentors who can help them strengthen their skills. They seek mentors to help them develop their social skills and Skills for Success, such as problem-solving, adaptability, and communication.

### Skills Developed Through Mentorship and Desired Skill Development for Youth Seeking Mentorship



Response patterns between young adults' actual and desired mentorship experiences regarding skill development and the support offered are closely aligned. This near consensus on the role of mentorship validates that mentors generally provide youth with meaningful and relevant support.

## **Conclusion**

Mentorship is a relatively common experience for young persons with disabilities. Less than a quarter of survey respondents (23%) indicated never having had a person they consider a mentor in their lives.

Youth who have had mentorship experiences report reaping several benefits, including having someone to listen and support them, providing guidance, opening doors, and developing critical skills. Moreover, nearly three-quarters of youth with disabilities who had mentorship experiences after the age of 18 stated that their mentors had a big influence on their lives, highlighting mentoring's transformative potential.

While our study focused on the experiences of mentees or protégés, research has demonstrated that mentoring relationships yield reciprocal benefits for both mentors and mentees. For mentors, documented benefits include generativity, a sense of purpose and fulfillment, greater job or life satisfaction, and greater empathy and understanding across differences (Goerisch et al., 2019; Lindsay et al., 2016). Additionally, it is important to emphasize that mentees are not passive recipients of a mentor's help. The mentoring relationship is a collaborative space where mentors and mentees co-create and achieve goals relevant to the mentee. For example, mentors' influence in bolstering mentees' self-confidence and self-advocacy demonstrates that the mentoring relationship offers a space where young people can exercise and develop their agency and self-determination.

This study also uncovered an important mentoring gap and areas for improvement. Among respondents with a disability, 74% reported experiencing at least one barrier to mentorship in early adulthood. Even more concerning is the fact that two out of five respondents with a disability who have had a mentor after the age of 18 reported at least one negative mentoring experience. Addressing these barriers and negative experiences is essential so that young people with disabilities can access the high-quality mentoring opportunities that they deserve.

## **Implications for Practice**

The implications for practice of the research findings provide a useful guide for mentors, communities, programs, and organizations seeking to improve the access of youth with disabilities to quality mentoring experiences. A few key areas for action could significantly impact how youth access and benefit from mentorship.

## **Navigating transitions**

Mentorship is well-suited to provide support for youth with disabilities as they navigate the several transitions of early adulthood. Mentors can fill important support gaps in between systems, such as the transition from school to work. Mentors can accomplish this by providing socioemotional support and guidance, helping youth strengthen critical skills, and introducing them to people and opportunities, all of which contribute to their well-being and employment readiness.

## **Strengthening self-determination**

Mentoring provides a propitious context for youth with disabilities to practice and develop their self-advocacy skills and their agency, thereby bolstering their self-determination. Understanding youth's views of success can also help mentors and programs support them in ways that align with what they value and consider relevant. Mentors can also help youth navigate the disclosure and accommodation processes.

Organizations offering mentoring programs for young persons with disabilities should provide opportunities for them to be involved in the program design and improvement processes. This approach supports young people's self-determination and helps ensure the program will be pertinent to their lives.

However, it is essential to respect young people's views about whether they want to be mentored. Indeed, 20% of youth with disabilities without mentoring experience in early adulthood (equivalent to about 5% of all respondents with disabilities) are not interested in being mentored, and several respondents reported that their participation in mentoring was not their choice. Although some young people may become interested in mentoring with a greater understanding of its reciprocal benefits for mentors and mentees, it is important to honour the wishes of those who remain uninterested.

### **RESOURCE ALERT**



#### **Career Conversations and Building Webs of Support**

**This guide for youth helps them explore career paths and build a strong support network through mentoring.**

### **RESOURCE ALERT**



#### **Inclusive Mentoring for Persons with Disabilities**

**This three-part online training for mentoring programs introduces foundational concepts for utilizing an inclusive approach to designing mentoring opportunities for persons with disabilities.**

## Demystifying mentorship and promoting accessibility

Several young people reported that they did not think that mentorship would be helpful for them. This finding, combined with the fact that nearly a third of youth without mentoring experience in early adulthood are unsure about whether they are interested in having a mentor, highlights important gaps in how young people learn about mentoring, what it is, and how it can benefit them. Organizations, including schools and employers, and communities must be proactive in explaining the role mentors can play in supporting young people's development.

Programs also need to foster an inclusive environment for staff members, mentors and mentees, including proactively promoting the available accommodations and reducing barriers to access.

## Training and supporting mentors

A small, albeit not negligible, number of study participants with disabilities reported negative experiences with mentors, including mentors not possessing the skills or knowledge needed to support mentees, mentors not valuing mentees' goals, or mentors not understanding mentees' culture, identities, or backgrounds. Fortunately, training can address these negative experiences and better prepare mentors to be youth-centred and effective. Providing ongoing support to mentors and mentees can also ensure that programs proactively address issues that may arise in mentoring relationships. Programs may also consider a more holistic approach to mentorship by offering mentees the option of multiple mentors to address their intersecting identities and needs.

## Fostering mentor-rich environments

Few young adults with disabilities have had a mentor who shared their disability experience. However, among young adults without mentorship experience but open to it, over half indicate that a potential mentor's shared disability experience would be important to them. Youth with disabilities face unique barriers in finding mentors who share this experience.

Programs and communities can encourage persons with disabilities to see themselves as mentors by articulating all that they have to offer and how youth can benefit from

### RESOURCE ALERT



#### **Pathways to Inclusion: Empowering Youth with Disabilities through Career Mentoring**

**This online training equips mentors with the knowledge and skills to develop inclusive and effective career mentoring relationships with youth experiencing disabilities.**

**Explore Mentor Canada's [training catalog](#) for additional learning opportunities.**

### RESOURCE ALERT



#### **Adopting a Mentoring Mindset**

**This tipsheet offers supportive individuals with four actionable strategies on how to adopt a mentor mindset in everyday interactions with youth.**

their support. Programs can encourage potential mentors to get involved by underscoring the reciprocal benefits for mentees and for mentors, helping them understand what is in it for them. Young persons with disabilities are most open to developing mentoring relationships with individuals in their communities, followed by their workplaces and schools. As such, these settings play an important role in increasing the pool of mentors and supportive individuals with whom youth can develop natural mentoring relationships.

Organizations and communities can encourage supportive individuals who interact with young people with disabilities to adopt a mentor mindset. This mindset recognizes that everyday interactions with youth are important opportunities to connect with them, to understand them more deeply, and to support their goals, values, and needs. A mentoring mindset helps supportive individuals approach every interaction with young people as an opportunity to deepen their relationship, listen with intention, teach them a new skill, or support growth.

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## ***Appendix 1: Research Methods***

Research data were collected through a national quantitative youth survey, qualitative youth interviews, and stakeholder mentoring interviews. All research methods and protocols were reviewed and approved by the Community Research Ethics Office in July 2024.

The youth survey was collaboratively developed by SRDC, Mentor Canada, and peer researchers, drawing on validated measures (e.g., Warwick Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale, Flourishing Scale, SCALE Measures, and career adaptability tools) as well as new items reflecting themes of community cultural wealth and resistance capital (ability to challenge inequity). The 20-minute survey, available in English and French, covered six areas: demographics, school and work, skills, social networks, wellbeing, and mentoring. Survey recruitment was managed by Maru Matchbox, who invited 18–30-year-olds from their national panel to participate between July and August 2024. After data quality checks and weighting to Statistics Canada benchmarks, SRDC and a peer researcher analyzed the data using STATA. The combination of survey weights and rounding can sometimes result in counts that are slightly different from unweighted survey data or proportions that total more than 100 per cent. Linear regressions were used to estimate the effect of mentorship on a youth's success and well-being (see Appendix 3 for measures), controlling for age, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic history, immigration background, family background, province of residence, and community type.

## Appendix 2: Respondents' Demographic Information

	Mentor Since 18		No mentor since 18		All Respondents	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
<b>Age Groups</b>						
18-21	59	22%	31	25%	103	23%
22-26	111	42%	56	44%	187	42%
27-30	96	36%	39	31%	156	35%
<b>Province</b>						
British Columbia	38	14%	15	12%	55	12%
Alberta	33	12%	20	16%	61	14%
Manitoba / Saskatchewan	21	8%	12	9%	37	9%
Ontario	103	39%	51	40%	181	41%
Quebec	48	18%	19	15%	79	18%
Atlantic Provinces	23	9%	10	9%	35	7%
<b>Community Type</b>						
In a city	214	80%	94	74%	346	78%
In a small town /in the country	52	20%	32	26%	100	22%
<b>Gender Identity</b>						
Woman	141	53%	63	50%	236	53%
Man	110	41%	51	40%	179	40%
Non-Binary	23	9%	16	12%	38	9%
Cultural Gender Minority (i.e., Two-Spirit)	-	-	-	-	6	1%
<b>Sexual Orientation</b>						
Heterosexual	103	41%	58	47%	177	42%
Sexual minority (2SLGBTQIA+)	141	55%	57	46%	221	52%
Unsure	10	4%	8	6%	26	6%
<b>Type of Disability</b>						
Visible disability only	53	20%	10	8%	74	17%
Invisible disability only	182	68%	103	81%	317	71%
Both visible and invisible	18	7%	7	6%	26	6%
Unsure	-	-	-	-	15	3%

<b>Ethnicity</b>						
African origins	26	10%	6	5%	37	8%
Caribbean origins	17	7%	7	6%	27	6%
Central and South American origins	-	-	-	-	18	4%
East Asian origins	-	-	-	-	28	6%
European origins	125	47%	61	48%	206	46%
Indigenous to North America origins	39	15%	19	15%	63	14%
Middle Eastern origins	30	11%	15	12%	49	11%
Oceania and Pacific Islander origins	-	-	-	-	11	3%
South Asian origins	19	7%	11	9%	32	7%
Southeast Asian origins	22	8%	9	7%	34	8%
Other	20	7%	13	10%	37	8%
<b>Racial Identity</b>						
Asian	46	17%	17	13%	68	15%
Black	30	11%	9	7%	45	10%
Brown	23	9%	12	9%	36	8%
White	162	61%	78	62%	277	62%
Latinx	-	-	-	-	24	5%
Mixed Race/Multiracial	29	11%	14	11%	46	10%
Pacific Islander	-	-	-	-	12	3%
Other	-	-	-	-	12	3%
<b>Highest Level of Education Completed</b>						
Some high school or less	33	13%	13	11%	58	13%
High school graduate	54	20%	34	27%	102	23%
Some college/technical school	30	11%	18	14%	55	12%
Completed college/technical school	35	13%	18	14%	54	12%
Some university	34	13%	12	10%	55	12%
University undergrad degree or more	79	30%	32	25%	121	27%
<b>School and Work Experiences</b>						
<b>Attended School/Education/Training since turning 18</b>						
Yes	230	86%	97	76%	363	81%
No	36	14%	30	24%	83	19%
<b>Day to Day Activity</b>						
Studying or in education/ training full time or part-time	74	28%	26	22%	107	25%
Working full-time	89	34%	41	33%	139	32%
Working part-time	34	13%	18	14%	60	14%
Caregiving	-	-	-	-	13	3%
Pursuing a hobby or interest	23	9%	10	8%	37	9%
Looking for work	23	9%	14	12%	48	11%

The combination of survey weights and rounding can sometimes result in counts that are slightly different from unweighted survey data or proportions that total more than 100 per cent.

## Appendix 3: Survey Measures

Linear regressions were used to estimate the effect of mentorship on several subjective measures of youth's success and well-being. Regression models were evaluated for statistical significance at  $p < 0.05$ , and controlled for age, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic history, immigration background, family background, province of residence, and community type.

Name of Measure	Definition	Reference
<b>Career decision-making</b>	A person's self-confidence in their ability to navigate career-related circumstances, such as unemployment or job transitions, to achieve one's career goals	Koen et al., 2010.
<b>Employment satisfaction</b>	How content a person feels about their job and their experiences in the workplace.	Career adaptability measures (Koen et al., 2010).
<b>Flourishing</b>	A person's self-perception with their success in relationships, self-esteem, purpose, and optimism.	Flourishing Scale (Diener et al., 2010).
<b>Social capital</b>	Resources accessed through interpersonal relationships to improve a person's livelihood and help achieve their goals.	The Social Capital Assessment + Learning for Equity (SCALE) Measures (Search Institute, 2021).
<b>Well-being</b>	Captures the thoughts and feelings of a person's mental well-being using function-based statements	Short Warwick Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale (Clarke et al., 2010).