

Mentoring for young people leaving care

Mentoring for care leavers is a relatively recent development in the United Kingdom. This research builds on earlier mentoring research by the team from York University and was carried out in 14 mentoring projects supported by the Prince's Trust. The researchers looked at the impact of mentoring from the viewpoints of young people and their mentors, as well as outcomes for these young people.

- The projects in the study were offering a mentoring service to vulnerable young people who were at varying stages in process of leaving care. This service was provided as an addition to other services the young people were using.
- The main type of mentoring provided by the projects in the study was one-to-one volunteer mentoring. Mentoring was either 'traditional', provided by an adult, or peer mentoring, provided by other young people who had already left care.
- Young people saw mentoring as offering them a different type of relationship from both professional help and support provided by their families.
- Mentoring relationships included both 'instrumental' task-focused work and 'expressive' befriending roles.
- The mentoring process was dynamic: setting goals was a flexible and negotiated process.
- According to project files, three-quarters of the young people in the study achieved at least one of their original goals, and 93 per cent had some 'positive' outcomes from their mentoring relationship.
- Young people who had been mentored for over a year were more likely to have achieved goals and have made some plans for the future. A total of two-fifths of the young people had made some future plans.
- Whilst young people felt that the long-term impact of mentoring was difficult to measure because they often had other support in their lives at the time, looking back, they recognised that mentoring had had a positive impact.
- The mentors felt that the impact of the mentoring relationship on them was to increase their skills and confidence in working with young people.
- For young people, better matching, greater flexibility, and fewer time restrictions would improve their experience of mentoring. For mentors, more consistent and accessible support was most important.



Background

A consistent finding from studies of care leavers is that a majority move to independent living at just 16 or 17 and have to cope with major changes in their lives at that time, often with variable support. During 1998, in response to the vulnerability of care leavers, the Prince's Trust and Camelot Foundation set up the first network of locally based mentoring projects, in partnership with the National Children's Bureau.

Mentoring is used to describe many different types of relationships. But this study looked particularly at two dimensions:

- the *purpose* of mentoring schemes, on a continuum beginning with 'instrumental' mentoring linked to 'hard' outcomes, such as employment, education or training, and continuing to more 'expressive' mentoring linked to 'soft' outcomes, such as self-esteem and personal development;
- the *process* of mentoring, located on a 'service led' to 'participatory' continuum, identifying the extent to which goals are defined by the mentoring service (or project) or are initiated by, negotiated with, and agreed by the mentored young person.

The study was also carried out during the early implementation of the Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000, from October 2001, strengthening the legal framework in respect of young people leaving care in England and Wales.

The study was carried out over a two-year period (2002-04) and involved young people who started being mentored between 2000 and 2002. The study set out to explore the longer-term mentoring experiences and outcomes of young people leaving care. Information was collected through a file search at mentoring projects (maintained by project staff and therefore some caution is needed in interpretation), as well as interviews with young people and their mentors. The research focused on ongoing mentoring relationships that lasted between six months and three years, as well as mentoring relationships that had ended between two and four years earlier. In addition, policy interviews were carried out with project leaders.

The mentoring projects

Most of the projects were either based in specialist leaving care teams or had developed links with them, and had well-developed systems for mentor selection, training, support, matching and feedback based on the Prince's Trust Minimum Standards.

The projects were funded by the Prince's Trust for the recruitment, training and supervision of mentors and by different partnership arrangements between local authorities and voluntary organisations. The funding was short-term and seen by most project leaders as inadequate.

Mentoring relationships were likely to include both 'instrumental' task-focused and 'expressive' befriending roles, although there were differences in emphasis between projects and there was no uniform development from one of these dimensions to the other. Problematic areas included: the impact of defined time limits upon young people; boundaries within mentoring relationships – these varied across the projects; and confusion between mentors and personal advisers appointed under the Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000.

Young people and their mentors

The projects were working with similar numbers of young men and young women, aged between 15 and 23. Just over three-quarters were white and a fifth black or mixed heritage young people. Three-quarters of the mentors were female, aged between 18 and 62 and three-quarters were white British. Just under three-quarters were in employment.

Two-thirds of the young people were matched with a mentor within two months. They were referred, or referred themselves, for a wide variety of reasons including wanting a 'listener' or 'role model', help with 'independent living skills', exploring their 'options and plans' and 'general support'.

Just over three-quarters of young people (where information was available) 'achieved their goals' and over half had achieved other goals that emerged during the mentoring relationship. Most of the young people (93 per cent) had some 'positive outcome' recorded by the end of the mentoring relationship. This included either an 'instrumental' goal achievement or a more 'expressive' dimension.

Half of the relationships had some negative outcomes including lack of engagement, missing appointments and unplanned endings – often linked to chaotic lives. In a fifth of these cases, the mentor withdrew and no longer met with and supported the young person. Where young people had unplanned endings, some had achieved positive outcomes prior to that time.

Young people who were mentored for over a year were more likely to have achieved their original goals and have future plans. Also, the longer the mentoring relationship lasted the greater the likelihood of a positive outcome.

The mentoring relationship: the views of young people and their mentors

“The most important help for me was having somebody to talk to about my problems. About being alone, and missing my parents. And just not being sure if I’m good enough to do something. That’s what I question always.” (Nat, young person)

In the context of their transition to independence and the many changes taking place in their lives, young people’s initial action plans and goals were subject to many changes. Mentors generally worked with young people to agree their goals and carry out their action plans. It was a negotiated process rather than an imposed one.

The mentor’s gender and ethnicity, as well as their experience of care and parenthood, could contribute to successful matching. Young people valued the accessibility, attention and informality of the mentoring relationship, contrasting this with professional help.

“It was more friendly contact than professional. She never used to dress up in a suit. She just used to be very friendly. It was helpful because you could talk to her about anything and she wouldn’t have any problems about it.” (Danielle, young person)

“It’s not because they take you out or anything like that. It’s because they explain things in a better way than professionals would. They help you to cope with certain situations.” (Danielle)

There were differences between traditional adult one-to-one mentoring and peer mentoring. The former discouraged drawing upon the mentor’s own background whereas this was central to the rationale of peer mentoring.

“So having her there and knowing she’s been through everything I’m going through now, you know... it’s different like that, I have more respect for her.” (Clarice, young person with peer mentor)

Being a mentor: the views of mentors

Mentors were well-equipped for the role by some combination of personal experience, having been in care themselves, or being a parent, or their previous or current work experience with young people.

Training was seen as very helpful especially during the course of a longer-term relationship. Mentors also received and valued both group supervision and one-to-one supervision with the project co-ordinator. The mentor’s initial perception of their role was often very goal-oriented but that was likely to change over time as they recognised the complexity and subtlety of the process.

Making a difference? The views of young people and their mentors

The young people interviewed thought that mentoring helped them with important practical advice, particularly in relation to maintaining their accommodation, discussing education, employment and training and finding work. Mentoring was also highly valued by young people for helping them with relationship problems, building their confidence and improving their emotional well-being.

“She taught me how to communicate and if I don’t understand something, to ask, and explained a lot about how to build your self-esteem up.” (Danielle, young person)

Young people’s views on the longer-term impact of mentoring are difficult to measure, given the many influences on their lives. However, some of the young people felt on reflection that mentoring had been helpful to them even though they may not have recognised its value at the time. The mentor’s views of the impact of mentoring generally reflected the young people’s views.

“Reality is, it is often just being there, just listening and being someone who says ‘How are you today? Have a good day’. Just by being there you can actually make a huge difference to somebody’s life. Maybe you’ll never know that.” (Mentor)

The mentoring experience had a significant impact upon the mentors. All of them thought they had improved their skills and confidence in helping young people and, as a consequence, most wanted to work with young people.

“... I learnt from there that you might just do a little bit and it might help a lot. Not to expect big jumps and things might move very slowly.” (Mentor)

For young people, mentoring could be improved by better matching, greater flexibility and fewer time restrictions on meeting and the length of mentoring relationships. For mentors, more consistent and accessible support, and involving young people in their training, would improve mentoring.

“I think that when they interview mentors they should find out a little bit more about who you are and what you do and match the right mentor to the right person ... Me and (mentor) didn’t really have that much in common.” (Kate, young person)

Mentoring – a different kind of relationship?

The role of the personal adviser is central to the implementation of the Children (Leaving Care) Act’s main provisions, including needs assessment and pathway planning. Why then is there a role for volunteer mentors, as this study suggests?

The answer is, in part, that volunteer adult and peer mentoring is seen by these young people to offer a different type of relationship from professional help and, also, for some, from their troubled family relationships.

The study suggests that successful mentoring for young people leaving care usually combines 'instrumental' and 'expressive' dimensions during the course of the relationship. One dimension may lead to the other, but in any direction. Young people were allowed to take steps both backwards and forwards; this is how many young people experience the transition to adulthood, but, ironically, care leavers are expected to follow a clear and direct pathway to independence.

Also, young people and their mentors saw the process itself as shaping the development of the relationship. The balance between instrumental and expressive dimensions depended mainly upon the responsiveness of the mentor to the changing needs and circumstances of the young person. Goal-setting was part of this dynamic process – set goals were often changed and new ones agreed, linked to the young person's changing life course. It was at best a flexible and negotiated process, working with, not on, young people.

For young people leaving care, who are coping with challenges of significant transitions, mentoring may provide a different kind of additional support – and that may in part explain why mentoring has been identified as promoting the resilience of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds.

“ ‘Cos when you leave care, you're in a flat, you're by yourself, you know. You need someone there to support you. Not everyone has family, not everyone has friends, but I think a mentor is essential.” (Clarice, mentored for over three years)

In conclusion, in the context of an increasingly formalised, professional and target-driven culture in education, child welfare and youth policy, mentoring is able to offer a complementary but different experience of a relationship to young people at the critical period of their transition to adulthood, young people who also often lack consistent support by their families. Or, as one young person put it, it's about “having someone for me”.

About the project

This project was carried out in England, by Jasmine Clayden and Mike Stein of the University of York, building on earlier work by the authors. The study used a mix of methods including qualitative interviews with young people, mentors and project co-ordinators, and a file search of records kept by projects of mentoring relationships.

The file search was carried out in thirteen of the projects and comprised 181 mentoring relationships. Seventeen young people were interviewed providing a detailed view of their experience of their mentoring relationships, as well as other aspects of their post-care experience. Interviews were carried out with mentors of twelve of these young people, providing data on mentors' motivations for mentoring and previous experience, as well as their perceptions of the impact of mentoring. Detailed interviews were carried out with ten project co-ordinators or managers who provided information about the projects and their management as well as a policy context in which to situate the study.

For further information

The full report, **Mentoring young people leaving care: 'Someone for me'** by Jasmine Clayden and Mike Stein, is published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (ISBN 1 85935 401 7, price £9.95).

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