

JUST SIX  
QUESTIONS

RESEARCH  
SUMMARY



# The Role of Therapeutic Mentoring in Enhancing Outcomes for Youth in Foster Care

## Key Details

### KEY WORDS

Youth, foster care, mentoring, mental health, treatment, therapy

### POPULATION GROUP

Youth in and leaving care

### STEPPING UP THEMES

Health & Wellness; Strong, Supportive Friends & Families

### RESEARCH ORIGIN

USA

### SOURCE

Academic Article (peer-reviewed)

**“These youth are in need of ongoing, specialized, and preventive care, and mentoring is one way by which some of their needs might be addressed.”**

### 1. What is the research about?

Research demonstrates that youth living in foster care are more likely than peers not in care, to experience a number of behavioural and mental health challenges. These challenges include low academic achievement, poorer peer relationships, decreased community involvement, and expulsion or suspension from schools. Such experiences indicate the need to develop a feasible and effective form of intervention to support the wellbeing of youth in foster care.

Since youth in the foster care often lack close, stable relationships with trusted adults, it may be especially valuable for them to receive support from a mentoring relationship. This study examined the psychosocial effects of youth in foster care who experienced therapeutic mentoring as compared to youth who did not. **Therapeutic mentoring (TM)** refers to mentors who are clinically trained to respond to youth with traumatic experiences.

The study had two objectives:

1. To determine whether outcomes are different for foster youth who received TM compared to those who did not receive TM
2. To determine whether duration of mentoring relationships makes a difference in outcomes

### 2. Where did the research take place?

The intervention took place within a social service agency in a large metropolitan area in the Midwestern United States.

### 3. Who is this research about?

The research examined the experiences of children and youth between the ages of 6 and 15 living in foster care, who were assessed as being at-risk of placement disruption by their caseworker. The demographic breakdown was: African American (76%), Hispanic (9.9%), Caucasian (5.3%), multiracial (4.2%), other (3.1%) and unknown (1.4%).

### 4. How was the research done?

TM was provided to families identified as potentially benefitting from the mentoring service. The mentors were screened and received training both before and throughout their tenure at the agency. The mentor and mentee then met on a consistent basis for an average of 3 to 5 hours per session.

A total of 262 youth participated in the research and their psychosocial functioning was measured by the Child and Adolescent Needs and Strengths (CANS) tool. The study also utilized case records, interviews with family members, and clinical assessments. The youth were assessed at intake, and then again at six-month intervals. They were then compared to assess change in psychosocial outcomes. A TM factor was employed to see the extent to which receiving TM had an impact on the youth's psychosocial wellbeing.

## 5. What are the key findings?

The researchers found that:

- Foster youth who received TM improved significantly on measures of **family and social functioning, school behaviour, and school achievement** relative to foster youth who received a limited amount of TM;
- Foster youth who received **limited TM showed lack of improvement overall** compared to those receiving substantial TM and no TM; and
- For those who received substantial TM between 12 and 18 months, **a significant decrease in the expression of trauma symptoms** was demonstrated relative to those with no TM

## 6. Why does this research matter for youth work?

This study shows that in order for mentoring to be effective and beneficial to youth in foster care, it must be ongoing and frequent. What's interesting to note is that youth in the study fared worse when receiving limited TM, even when compared to those receiving no mentoring at all. This may suggest that

receiving limited support could perhaps be more damaging than receiving no help at all when it comes to mentoring, signifying the importance of establishing a stable relationship with foster youth. The researchers also note that mentoring shows promise as a protective factor for youth exposed to traumatic events, seeing that both those who have received substantial and limited TM showed improvements in this area. In light of these findings, it is pertinent to explore further how bonds develop between mentors and foster youth to truly understand the benefits that mentoring may bring.



Johnson, S. B., Pryce, J. M., & Martinovich, Z. (2011). The role of therapeutic mentoring in enhancing outcomes for youth in foster care. *Child Welfare, 90*(5), 51.