



A parent's place: Parents', mentors' and program staff members' expectations for and experiences of parental involvement in community-based youth mentoring relationships



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ABSTRACT

Youth mentoring has been conceptualized largely as a dyadic relationship between a mentor and mentee, with less attention paid to the role of parents. This study contributes to an emerging body of research on parent involvement by examining expectations for parents' roles in the mentoring process held by program staff, mentors, and parents themselves. In-depth interviews with mentoring program staff ($n = 12$), mentors ($n = 30$), and a parent or guardian of the youth being mentored ($n = 30$) were analyzed to identify these participants' views on the role of parents. Findings indicate that mentors and program staff were more aligned in their views and tended to be more focused on the ways that parents could potentially interfere with or otherwise disrupt the mentor–youth relationship. Parents' views were more varied and rooted in differences in both their individual values and beliefs about the role of a mentor in their child's life, their parenting styles and ways they expected adults outside of the family who were interacting with their child to engage with them. Implications for future research on parent involvement and for mentoring program practices are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Youth mentoring has been conceptualized largely as a dyadic relationship between a mentor and mentee, with less attention paid to the larger social context within which mentoring relationships develop and are sustained over time (Rhodes, 2002). Keller (2005) proposed a systemic model of mentoring that widens this dyadic view by highlighting the influence that interactions between youth, mentors, program staff and parents have on the mentoring process and the ways these interactions are also influenced by the program's approach to mentoring (i.e., program structure and practices). However, as yet there has been little empirical study of the nature of these interactions, particularly those involving parents, and the specific ways they shape the mentoring process. Only more recently has research begun to focus on the role of parents (Spencer & Basualdo-Delmonico, 2014; Spencer, Basualdo-Delmonico, & Lewis, 2011). Like Spencer et al. (2011), this study integrates the perspectives of parents themselves regarding issues pertaining to their child's mentoring relationship. The current study offers a closer examination of the guiding beliefs and opinions of not only parents', but also mentors and program staff toward what parental involvement in a youth mentoring relationship should be. While Spencer et al. (2011) identified distinct roles that parents described

playing in their child's mentoring relationship, this study reveals distinct philosophical approaches that parents, along with mentors and program staff describe regarding what they perceive parental involvement means in the youth mentoring relationship.

The philosophical approach toward parental involvement has been examined by Spencer and Basualdo-Delmonico (2014) in a focus group study of 24 mentoring programs. This 2014 study identified variability in program practices and strategies and in the beliefs and values that programs held regarding their relationships with parents. The latter were largely driven by the amount and type of power they believed parents had or should have within their program. This current study also examines the underlying beliefs and values that program staff have in regards to parental involvement, but also maps this perspective alongside those of mentors being trained by the same agency and the parents served by them. The present study extends this emerging work by examining the philosophical approaches that guide the expectations for parental involvement in the mentoring process as held by program staff, mentors, and parents themselves and presenting these multiple perspectives simultaneously.

As Taylor and Porcellini (2013) aptly noted, “parents are a primary gatekeeper to the child” and thus family support for the mentoring relationship is likely to be critical for its success (p. 457). Indeed, some evidence suggests that programs that make efforts to involve parents produce better youth outcomes (DuBois, Holloway, Valentine, & Cooper, 2002; Higginbotham, MaCarthur, & Dart, 2010; Rhodes, 2005; Weinberger, 2005). Rooted in the idea that parents who feel engaged

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are more likely to support the mentor's positive influence (DuBois et al., 2002), interest in finding ways to seek parents' support of the mentoring relationship is growing among mentoring programs (DuBois et al., 2002; Jucovy, 2001; Miller, 2007). Yet some evidence indicates that there is considerable variability in the approaches to family involvement being put into practice (Spencer & Basualdo-Delmonico, 2014; Taylor & Porcellini, 2013).

Earlier treatments of parents in the mentoring literature tended to emphasize ways that parents can interfere with or otherwise obstruct the mentoring process (Philip, Shucksmith, & King, 2004; Styles & Morrow, 1992), leading some programs to focus their efforts on trying to mitigate this potential negative influence. However, Rhodes (2005) model of mentoring brings forth the assumption that mentoring relationships can have a positive impact on the parent-child relationship. Therefore, greater consideration of how program staff and mentors are trained to interact and engage parents may help to strengthen this outcome. More recently, however, program practices have expanded to more fully consider ways that parental involvement can be incorporated into program practice. In so doing, different approaches to family involvement have emerged (Spencer & Basualdo-Delmonico, 2014; Taylor & Porcellini, 2013). Some programs have sought to strengthen their own relationship with families through fostering better communication and providing more information to parents so that they can be more active supporters of the youth mentoring relationship (Kaye & Smith, 2014; Spencer & Basualdo-Delmonico, 2014). Other programs have approached family involvement by viewing it as a means of strengthening family bonds; improving the child-parent relationship and thus improving outcomes for youth achieved through mentoring. Still others have sought to enlist parents as more equal partners in the mentoring process, viewing them as an asset and actively seeking to capitalize on their knowledge of the mentored youth (Spencer & Basualdo-Delmonico, 2014).

Although research on parental involvement in youth mentoring is still in its nascence, parental involvement in education has been much studied over the last several decades (Jeynes, 2011) and offers important lessons and points of consideration for the field of youth mentoring. A great deal of research indicates that parent involvement in education matters; however many efforts to engage low-income and culturally diverse families, who are much like the families being served by many mentoring programs, have not been as successful as hoped (Warren, Hong, Rubin, & Uy, 2009). Two central critiques have been proffered as possible explanations for why effectively engaging low-income parents remains a formidable challenge. First, many of the approaches taken have been described to be "schoolcentric" (Lawson, 2003, p. 79), that is educational goals and outcomes, which parental involvement is meant to support, are predominantly defined by schools and reflect the priorities and values of schools (Olivos, 2006). The school – teachers and administrators – define the behaviors, roles and activities deemed as legitimate ways in which parents can effectively engage in their child's education (Brien & Stelmach, 2009; Olivos, 2006).

The second critique is that many efforts to engage families are rooted in ideas about family involvement that are more typical of middle class families. Thus, the involved parent tends to be viewed as one who promptly responds to teacher notes and requests for support (e.g. fundraisers, class volunteers, chaperones) and is available for school events and teacher conferences. When poor and low-income families do not participate in their child's school in these "traditionally expected ways" (Brien & Stelmach, 2009, p. 7), they are often viewed as uninvolved or lacking in some way, a response that denies the social conditions which prevent this kind of parental involvement (Bloom, 2001). This kind of deficit approach (Valencia, 1997) can also be seen in claims that these parents lack proper knowledge and skills or proper values to be effective allies to schools for a common educational goal. Further, discourse about parental involvement has been shown to be critical of these families for both lack of involvement and over-involvement (Nakagawa, 2000), which is thought to impede the promotion of

genuine and effective parental involvement in education (Brien & Stelmach, 2009; Weiss, Kreider, Lopez, & Chatman-Nelson, 2010).

It is likely that many of these same issues are at play in youth mentoring as its central structure mirrors that of education in some important ways. Mentoring programs overwhelmingly serve youth growing up in single parent and low-income households (Furano, Roaf, Styles, & Branch, 1993; Tierney, Grossman, & Resch, 1995) who are then paired with predominantly White, middle- to upper-class mentors. In addition, the backgrounds of staff who serve in mentoring programs are more similar to those of the volunteers they recruit and support than the families they serve. Approximately 78% of the staff in Big Brothers Big Sisters programs identify as White (S. Valentino, personal communication, 2014) and a college education being a requirement for many positions in these organizations. Deutsch, Lawrence, and Henneberger (2013) have argued that many mentor-youth dyads likely need to navigate class-based prejudices and in particular work against the normalization of the middle-class worldview in order to build effective mentoring relationships. The same may hold true for parents in their relationships with their child's mentor and with the mentoring program staff. Although the culture of poverty has been countered and debunked (Burke Leacock, 1971; Webster, 2000), undercurrents of these deficit based views about low-income families that ignore structural inequities still prevail. Handler and Hasenfeld (1997) describe a pervasive sentiment about individuals who seek public assistance as being morally deficient: "the failure to support oneself and one's family has always been considered more than just being poor. Violating the work ethic is a moral fault; as such, it contaminates other areas of personal and family life" (p. 4).

The purpose of the present study was to better understand how parent involvement in the mentoring processes is viewed by mentoring program staff, mentors and also by parents themselves. Mentoring research to date has rarely incorporated the first-hand experiences of parents or staff members (see Spencer & Basualdo-Delmonico, 2014; Spencer, Basualdo-Delmonico, & Lewis, 2011 for exceptions). It was expected that examining mentor and program staff perspectives in relation to those of the parents would yield a more nuanced account of the participants' perspectives and experiences and of the larger programmatic context (Keller, 2005) within which the mentor-youth dyad is situated. It was also anticipated that examining these multiple perspectives would offer a deeper understanding of the landscape within which parental actions and intentions are not only supported or discouraged but also interpreted and valued.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants and procedures

Data for this study included both primary and secondary in-depth qualitative interview data. Individual in-depth qualitative interviews with mentoring program staff from two community-based agencies providing one-to-one mentoring programs were collected for the purposes of the present study. The two agencies were affiliates of Big Brothers Big Sisters of America in the Northeast. The goal of these programs is to help better the lives of young people by facilitating mentoring relationships between a positive and caring adult role model and a young person for a minimum of 1-year.

All 35 program staff (14 from Agency A and 21 from Agency B) serving either in participant enrollment (supporting youth and families through the enrollment process, gathering information about the child's history, personality and interests, and assessing their fit with the mentoring program model) or match support (providing ongoing guidance and support to the youth, their parent or guardian and the mentors once matched) functions were invited via email to participate in this study and asked to contact the researcher directly if interested. Since the email was sent directly from an agency administrator, no additional information is available regarding staff members who did not

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