



Natural mentoring among older youth in and aging out of foster care: A systematic review



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ABSTRACT

Due to their histories of caregiver maltreatment, living instability, and potential attachment challenges associated with out-of-home care, older foster youth represent a particularly vulnerable group of adolescents at increased risk for a number of poor well-being outcomes. However, research supports the notion that a relationship with a competent, caring adult, such as a mentor, may serve protectively for vulnerable youth, and a nascent yet growing body of literature suggests that naturally occurring mentoring relationships from within youth's social networks are associated with improved outcomes among young people in foster care during adolescence and the transition to adulthood. This systematic review is the first to comprehensively identify, synthesize, and summarize what we currently know from nearly a decade of theories, concepts, and research findings pertaining to natural mentoring among adolescent youth in foster care. A bibliographic search of seven databases and personal outreach to mentoring researchers and practitioners through a national listserv yielded 38 English-language documents from academic sources and the gray literature pertaining to natural mentoring among older foster youth. We identified quantitative studies that have been conducted to test the theories and hypotheses that have emerged from the qualitative studies of natural mentoring among youth in foster care. Together, this literature suggests that natural mentoring is a promising practice for youth in foster care. Based on our findings from the systematic review, we make practice recommendations to encourage the facilitation of natural mentoring within child welfare contexts and outline an agenda for future research that more rigorously investigates natural mentoring among older youth in foster care.

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1. Introduction

Mentoring continues to gain national attention, momentum, and support as a practice for improving the well being of adolescent youth (DuBois, Portillo, Rhodes, Silverthorn, & Valentine, 2011). Positive relationships with supportive, caring nonparental adults are both normative for youth in the general population as well as protective for marginalized youth who are at-risk for experiencing poor well-being outcomes (Zimmerman et al., 2013). Indeed, meta-analyses indicate a positive association between youth mentoring and improved psychosocial, behavioral, and academic outcomes (DuBois et al., 2011; Tolan, Henry, Schoeny, Lovegrove, & Nichols, 2014; Wood & Mayo-Wilson, 2012). However, across meta-analyses, the overall effect size (i.e., the impact of the average mentoring program in improving youth outcomes) is small. Both theory and empirical research suggest that more effective mentoring may be associated with the youth's previous attachments as well as the quality and longevity of the mentoring relationship (Rhodes, Spencer, Keller, Liang, & Noam, 2006). Thus, further

investigation is warranted into the types of mentoring relationships that best address these factors for specific sub-groups of marginalized youth.

Older youth aging out of foster care represent a unique marginalized group, and the formation of typical mentoring relationships with programmatically supported unfamiliar adults may be particularly challenging for these youth due to their experiences of past caregiver maltreatment, out-of-home placement, and living instability (*Greeson, 2013). Representing one in ten exits from foster care each year (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2014), emancipating youth are at risk for increased rates of unemployment, low educational attainment, reliance on public assistance, behavioral health symptomatology, poor physical health, homelessness, unplanned pregnancy, and criminal justice involvement (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Dworsky & Courtney, 2010; Dworsky, Napolitano, & Courtney, 2013; Hook & Courtney, 2011; McMillen & Raghavan, 2009; Pecora et al., 2006). A growing body of theoretical, qualitative, and quantitative literature suggests that natural mentoring (i.e., the presence of a caring, supportive nonparental adult from within the youth's social network) may serve as a protective factor and may be a better fit for youth in foster care as compared to formally matched mentoring relationships with unfamiliar adults (*Britner, Randall, & Ahrens, 2013). This systematic

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review is the first to provide a comprehensive look at the present state of the literature pertaining to natural mentoring among older youth in foster care.

1.1. Background and significance

1.1.1. Youth mentoring

The popularity and proliferation of youth mentoring are evident by the number of mentoring programs, dollars spent, and national attention given to this topic area in the United States over the past decade. For example, the *Corporation for National & Community Service* (n.d.) estimates that approximately three million adults serve as volunteer mentors in formal programs across the nation. With more than 5000 mentoring programs, government agencies such as the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention and the Departments of Health and Human Services, Education, and Labor collectively allocate hundreds of millions of dollars each year toward mentoring programs (DuBois et al., 2011). President Obama has also demonstrated support for mentoring interventions, and in February 2014, he launched *My Brother's Keeper*, an initiative that uses mentoring to ameliorate the opportunity gap experienced by many young men of color (Duncan & Johnson, 2015). Through Proclamation No. 9224, 3 CFR (2014), President Obama declared January 2015 National Mentoring Month stating, "Every day, mentors play a vital role in this national mission by helping to broaden the horizons for our daughters and sons." Indeed, numerous qualitative studies identify the role of mentoring as protective among at-risk youth (*Hass, Allen, & Amoah, 2014; Dallos & Comley-Ross, 2005; Graham, Schellinger, & Vaughn, 2015; Munson, Brown, Spencer, Edguer, & Tracy, 2014), and countless personal testimonies of successful adults pay tribute to their mentors (Harvard School of Public Health/MENTOR, n.d.; Chronicle of Evidence-Based Mentoring, n.d.).

Quantitative research supports a positive, though modest, association between nonparental adult mentoring and improved well-being outcomes among adolescent youth. For example, DuBois et al. (2011) conducted a meta-analysis of 73 independent evaluations of mentoring programs published from 1999 to 2010. Findings indicate a positive effect of mentoring programs across the domains of achievement motivation/prosocial attitudes, social/relational skills, psychological/emotional outcomes, behavior, and academic/school functioning. However, the average effect size across all studies was 0.21, which is considered to be a relatively small effect (Cohen, 1992). In terms of clinical significance, or the amount of change experienced in one's daily life due to mentoring, DuBois et al. (2011) conclude that such an effect size corresponds to the average mentored youth scoring roughly nine percentile points higher than the average non-mentored youth. In other words, although this meta-analysis found a statistically significant relationship between mentoring and positive outcomes (e.g., social, relational, emotional, behavioral and academic), the size of the average mentoring program's impact on youth outcomes was somewhat small.

Other meta-analyses have investigated the effects of general mentoring among sub-groups of youth and have also found small to moderate, positive effects. A meta-analysis of 46 studies investigating the impact of mentoring among juvenile delinquent youth found a positive effect in relation to improved delinquency outcomes, including aggression, drug use, and academic achievement (Tolan et al., 2014). Although the average effect sizes were statistically significant, they were small to moderate in size, ranging from 0.11 to 0.29. A smaller meta-analysis of school-based mentoring for adolescents included six studies and examined the impact of school-based mentoring on academic performance, attendance, attitudes, behavior, and self-esteem (Wood & Mayo-Wilson, 2012). Across studies, the post-treatment impact of school-based mentoring was only statistically significant for the measure of self-esteem, though the effect size was 0.09, which the authors conclude is trivial.

Although there is strong anecdotal and public support for mentoring among adolescent youth, quantitative meta-analyses continue to find

relatively small effect sizes in terms of positive outcomes associated with mentoring. Such analyses may be limited in their ability to detect substantial effects when such effects are diffused across many youth with varying personal characteristics, experiences, environmental contexts, and types of mentoring relationships. This quandary has spurred researchers to explore personal, environmental, and relational factors that may be associated with more effective mentoring strategies. Indeed, we need to better understand for whom various kinds of mentoring relationships are more effective and under what circumstances.

Both theory and empirical research provide some elucidation for understanding factors associated with effective youth mentoring. Rhodes' conceptual model of developmental youth mentoring (2006) posits that positive youth outcomes are contingent upon the presence of a close and meaningful relationship between the mentee and mentor. Through this caring relationship, mentors are well positioned to influence the youth's social-emotional, cognitive, and identity development, leading to improved well-being youth outcomes. Rhodes, Spencer, Keller, Liang, and Noam (2006) states,

Mentoring relationships are not all alike, and some are likely to have greater influence than others. Furthermore, mentoring is likely to work differently with different youth. We contend that the contribution of mentoring to the developmental processes outlined varies on the basis of a number of interrelated factors, including what the youth's preceding relationship history is, whether the relationship becomes close and meaningful to the youth, and how long the mentoring relationship lasts (p. 696).

Empirical studies support the notion that the youth's attachment style and relational history as well as the quality and longevity of the mentoring relationship are positively associated with mentoring effectiveness. For example, one study used an adapted version of the Attachment Style Questionnaire (ASQ), an instrument designed to measure attachment style in important relationships after and beyond childhood, to survey 569 high school students. Results indicated that youth with a more secure attachment style reported a stronger mentoring bond (Georgiou, Demetriou, & Stavrinides, 2008). Another study collected monthly data over a one-year period for 50 mentoring relationships and concluded that youth with relationships characterized by feelings of closeness experienced greater perceived benefits (Para, DuBois, Neville, Pugh-Lilly, & Povinelli, 2002). Likewise, Spencer, Basualdo-Delmonico, and Lewis (2011) conducted qualitative interviews with 13 parents of youth involved with a community-based mentoring program. Findings revealed that parents played a distinct role in the preservation and promotion of the mentoring relationship by acting as collaborators, coaches, or mediators for their child and mentor. Grossman and Rhodes (2002) investigated the impact of the duration of a mentoring relationship on youth outcomes among 1138 adolescents. Findings revealed that youth mentees in a relationship for at least a year reported the most favorable outcomes whereas youth who experienced relationships that terminated quickly reported a decline in functioning.

1.1.2. Natural mentoring among youth in foster care

Due to their histories of caregiver maltreatment, living instability, and ensuing attachment challenges associated with out-of-home care, older foster youth represent a particularly vulnerable group of adolescents (Muller-Ravett & Jacobs, 2012). For these youth, the achievement of factors associated with effective mentoring (e.g., enduring, close, meaningful, nonparental adult relationships) may be difficult to attain within the context of formal mentoring programs. Such programs (e.g., Big Brothers Big Sisters), typically match unfamiliar, volunteer adult mentors with youth mentees, but for youth in foster care, past relational trauma, placement moves, and disrupted relationships may make it difficult to form a social bond with an unfamiliar adult mentor (*Britner et al., 2013). For example, Rhodes, Haight, and Briggs (1999)

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