



## Predictors of early versus late match relationship beginnings in Big Brothers Big Sisters community programs



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### ABSTRACT

This study examined patterns and predictors of early versus late match relationship beginnings involving youth and adult volunteer mentors participating in Canadian Big Brothers Big Sisters (BBBS) community mentoring programs. Survival and multinomial logistic regression models were estimated on a sample of 845 youth approved for service from 20 mentoring agencies. Results showed that just over half of the youth (53%) had been paired with a mentor 6 months from the completion of their baseline assessment. At 12 months, 70% had been paired. Compared to never-mentored youth, predictors associated with a reduced chance of an early match beginning (<6 months) included youth gender (boys) and a rural or small town place of residence. Youth perceptions of emotional support from parents/caregivers and parents' expressed need for another adult in their child's life were associated with an increased chance of both early (<6 months) and late match beginnings (6 or more months). Implications for agency services are discussed.

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### 1. Background

Evidence suggests that mentored youth enrolled in community-based mentoring programs experience greater health and social benefits compared to non-mentored youth (DuBois, Portillo, Rhodes, Silverhorn, & Valentine, 2011; Meyerson, 2013). However, not all youth who qualify for formal mentoring services are mentored by an adult mentor and among those that are several months may pass before a suitable match is found (Lymburner, 2006; Tierney, Grossman, & Resch, 1995). In 2009, Big Brothers Big Sisters of Canada (BBBSC) estimated that 10,000 young people across the nation were on a waiting list to be paired to an adult mentor with some waiting as long as two years (Big Brothers Big Sisters of Canada, 2009). Large wait lists and excessive waiting times averaging 18 months have also been reported for BBBS programs in the United States (Smink & Schargel, 2013).

Long wait times for youth enrolled in formal mentoring programs may have a number of negative consequences. First, mentoring practitioners have expressed concern that non-mentored youth may

experience declines in their mental health the longer they wait for a mentor (Furano, Roaf, Styles, & Branch, 1993). Indeed, at least one study of mentoring program effectiveness found that youth who waited months to be paired to an adult mentor became more depressed leaving them worse off than when they first applied (Royse, 1998). Second, because most mentoring organizations rely on corporate, government, and private donations to survive, there is an expectation on the part of funders and other key stakeholders that qualified youth who apply for services are matched to an adult mentor as quickly as possible. Program funding may be jeopardized when these expectations are not met. Long wait times also constitute a significant drain on mentoring program resources (e.g., wait list activities for non-mentored youth) that might have otherwise been allocated to serving new clients or strengthening program infrastructure. Last, when long wait times occur, there is an increased risk that parents and youth will become discouraged causing some to end their relationship with the mentoring organization (Buckley & Zimmermann, 2003; Tannis, 2006). In addition, older youth waiting for a mentor may be forced to leave a program if they reach the age of 18 and are no longer eligible to receive services.

Despite the possible negative implications of long wait times for youth well-being and the potentially harmful impact on the efficient

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and timely delivery of mentoring programs to youth in need of an adult mentor, a systematic study of the factors that impede or hasten the formation of new mentoring relationships has not been conducted.

### 1.1. Factors associated with the formation of program-supported mentoring relationships

Demographics appear to play a key role in explaining why some youth wait longer for a mentoring relationship than others. Research using client databases from mentoring agencies together with studies of mentoring program effectiveness have shown that boys and ethnic minority youth are more likely than other youth to appear on waiting list programs following approval for service and to remain there for longer periods of time (Furano et al., 1993; Moodie & Fisher, 2009; Thompson & Kelly-Vance, 2001; Tierney et al., 1995). The longer wait times for these groups have been attributed to a shortage of male and ethnic minority adult mentors, and for ethnic minorities specifically, a tendency on the part of youth, parents, and program practitioners to prefer same-race matches (Jucovy & Public-Private Ventures, 2002; Tannis, 2006). Rhodes (2002) reported that 15–20% of adult mentors from mentoring programs across the United States in 2002 were members of racial minority groups in contrast to 50% of participating youth. Estimates from BBBS agencies suggest that for every 10 people making inquiries about becoming an adult mentor, only three are men (PR Newswire, 2006).

Youth age may be another factor influencing the formation of mentoring relationships. Adolescents may be more difficult to pair with a mentor than younger youth because they have already developed firmly entrenched attitudes and behaviors and are increasingly influenced by peer networks that compete for their time and attention (Cavell & Smith, 2005). Mentors may be less willing to consider them as potential mentees to the extent that they perceive such influences to interfere with their ability to provide guidance and support. Alternatively, adolescents may be more receptive to being mentored, a view based on evidence at or around the time of puberty of a gradual developmental shift away from dependence on adult authority figures for support (especially parents) toward an increased desire for forming secure and meaningful attachments with peers and non-parental adults (Gatha, 2009).

Program-supported mentoring relationships may be difficult to establish in rural settings that lie on the fringe of agency catchment areas (National Center for Mental Health Promotion and Youth Violence Prevention, 2012). Recruiting mentors for rural youth entails several challenges including convincing prospective mentors, most of whom live in urban areas, to travel long distances to meet with their mentee on a regular basis, a lack of public transportation, and fewer community youth-related programs and activities to assist mentors in providing structured activities for their mentees. Some rural communities may also be influenced by cultural traditions that discourage outside interference in the lives of its residents.

Others have suggested that mentoring relationships have a greater chance of getting started for youth already embedded in a network of healthy social relationships (e.g., relationships with parents, teachers) arguing that the relationships provide the social skills and confidence to engage and welcome the guidance and support of an adult mentor (Gatha, 2009). Conversely, youth with a previous history of involvement in unsatisfying social relationships, in particular, negative parent relationships, may be more distrustful of other adults and therefore reject the overtures of caring adult mentors (Schwartz, Rhodes, Chan, & Herrera, 2011). Blechman and colleagues speculate that youth who are angry or hostile toward adults or those with impulsive or unpredictable behavioral tendencies may display an adverse or negative reaction to what they perceive as the contrived or artificial nature of arranged mentoring relationships (Blechman, Maurice, Buecker, & Helberg, 2000).

Adult mentors themselves may be reluctant to enter formal mentoring relationships with youth having a history of delinquent or violent behavior or physically or mentally challenged youth. Mentors may feel a sense of inadequacy or lack of preparedness in dealing effectively with the unique needs and circumstances of these groups (Britner, Balcazar, Blechman, Blinn-Pike, & Larose, 2006; Furano et al., 1993). Indeed, mentors who have not experienced the same marginal status as their mentees may feel particularly ineffective in reaching vulnerable youth because they are less likely to have an understanding of their problems (Freedman, 1988; Rogers & Taylor, 1997).

Finally, motivational factors may play a role in determining how quickly youth enter a mentoring relationship with an adult volunteer. In formal mentoring programs such as Big Brothers Big Sisters, parents or guardians apply for an adult mentor on behalf of their child and in the final stage of the mentoring agency's match determination process (typically a face-to-face meeting with caseworkers, parents, youth, and mentors), all parties must agree to the agency's choice of a mentor before a match relationship can begin. However, not all youth who participate in mentoring programs join because of a desire to be mentored but do so in response to extrinsic motivational factors such as pressure by parents or referrals by mental health or social service professionals. In addition, parents may express different reasons for wanting a mentor for their child that could impact how quickly youth are matched. In BBBS programs, this information may be collected as part of the screening application and match determination interviews and used to assess a youth's level of need for a mentor.

### 1.2. Current study

The current study will undertake a detailed examination of patterns and predictors of early versus late match relationship beginnings among adult mentors and mentees participating in BBBS one-to-one community-based mentoring programs. Prior evidence to support the importance of certain predictors has been based entirely on theoretical supposition, anecdotal reports, or demographic information gleaned from mentoring program data bases. The current paper will add to the existing knowledge base by examining the joint influence of multiple predictors of early versus late match relationship beginnings by utilizing a large longitudinal cohort of youth and their parents enrolled in 20 Canadian BBBS mentoring programs.

### 1.3. Program description

BBBS community mentoring programs (Big Brothers Big Sisters of Canada, 2014a) are designed to give youth a one-to-one mentoring relationship with a caring and responsible adult mentor. For a minimum of 12 months mentors are expected to commit an average of 2–4 h each week with their mentee engaging in recreational, skill-based, or career-oriented activities.

The programs consist of three phases: 1) qualifying assessment; 2) match determination; and 3) caseworker monitoring and support. While the implementation of these phases is governed by a set of national standards established by Big Brothers Big Sisters of Canada (BBBS of Canada, 2014b), the content may vary slightly from agency to agency.

Adult volunteers who apply to become a BBBS mentor must pass a qualifying phase that involves the completion of a screening application. The application typically collects information on demographic background characteristics (e.g., current address, residential stability, marital and employment status), the names of individuals living in the mentor's household, access to a motor vehicle, previous motor vehicle infractions, previous arrests, charges, or convictions for criminal offenses, experience or education that would assist them in their mentoring role, membership in clubs and organizations, why they would like to become a mentor, and interests and hobbies. They must provide up to three references, agree to a vulnerable sector police

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