



Family involvement in the youth mentoring process: A focus group study with program staff



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 10 September 2013
Received in revised form 7 January 2014
Accepted 17 March 2014
Available online 22 March 2014

Keywords:

Youth mentoring
Family involvement
Qualitative methods
Strength-based practice

ABSTRACT

Although youth mentoring is most commonly understood to be a relationship between an at-risk youth and a non-related adult, programs are increasingly developing practices intended to involve youth's families in the mentoring process. However, due to the tendency to focus largely on the mentoring dyad, these practices are rarely examined leaving us with little sense of what family involvement entails and how it may influence the mentoring process. Six focus groups were conducted with staff members ($n = 39$) from 24 agency affiliates of Big Brothers Big Sisters of America in order to identify and describe the ways that agencies are involving families in the mentoring process. Three distinct approaches emerged: (a) involving, (b) engaging and serving, and (c) collaborating. These approaches were characterized by both the philosophical approach to families articulated in these groups and the day-to-day practices that appeared to grow out of these values and beliefs.

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1. Introduction

Youth mentoring is most commonly understood to be a relationship between an at-risk youth and a non-related adult and many mentoring programs focus the bulk of their efforts on the adult volunteer and youth dyad. Evidence suggests that at least some programs are involving families in the mentoring process (DuBois, Holloway, Valentine, & Cooper, 2002; DuBois, Portillo, Rhodes, Silverthorn, & Valentine, 2011; Taylor & Porcellini, 2013), but how and to what effect is not yet well known. Keller's (2005) systemic and social network (Keller & Blakeslee, 2013) models of mentoring draw attention to the larger context within which the mentor–youth dyad is situated and some research indicates that programs that engage and support parents tend to demonstrate more positive youth outcomes (DuBois et al., 2002), but this evidence is not consistent (DuBois et al., 2011). Research explicitly focused on family involvement is sparse and our knowledge about the specific nature and quality of family involvement practices in mentoring programs is quite limited (see Taylor & Porcellini, 2013, for a review). The present study examines program staff accounts of family involvement practices among a group of agency affiliates of a national network of youth mentoring programs, providing a window into some of the family involvement practices currently being implemented and program staff members' perceptions of how these may influence the mentoring process.

Mere mentions of family involvement in the research literature on youth mentoring are rare and substantive treatments of the topic rarer still (Keller, 2005; Spencer, Basualdo-Delmonico, & Lewis, 2011; Taylor & Porcellini, 2013). Keller (2005), and Keller and Blakeslee (2013) have put forth a more systemic model of mentoring and conceptualize the mentor–youth dyad as embedded within a larger web of relationships that includes both the child's parents or guardians and the mentoring program staff. Using social network theory, Keller and Blakeslee (2013) argue that due to the interdependent nature of social environments, people in the larger social networks of both the mentor and mentee can influence the nature and effectiveness of the mentoring relationship. They suggest that goal agreement and cooperation among mentors, youth, parents, and program staff may be needed for program success. Others have recommended that programs seek minimal involvement from families, enlisting only their support of the process but not full engagement in it, so as not to interfere with the mentor–youth relationship (Miller, 2007; Styles & Morrow, 1992). Two qualitative studies have noted how parents may negatively influence the mentoring process through miscommunications with mentors, drawing mentors into family conflicts, and attempting to control or sabotage the relationship (Philip, Shucksmith, & King, 2004; Styles & Morrow, 1992). Also noted in these studies were mentors' self-reported efforts to maintain distance from the family to prioritize the relationship with the young person, an approach often supported by the program. Taylor and Porcellini (2013) have argued that some of the concern about parental sabotage is rooted in a widely held perception that compensation for inadequate parenting is one of main reasons why a child might need a formal mentor.

A more intense focus on the mentor–youth dyad and less investment in engaging parents, which is fairly typical in the mentoring field today,

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stands in contrast to the view of families among developers of evidence-based intervention and prevention programs for high-risk children and youth more generally (see Kumpfer & Alvarado, 2003, for a review). Many such programs now strive to address the needs of both children and their families, as these approaches have tended to achieve better results than ones targeted at either children or their families alone (e.g., Brody, Kogan, Chen, & Murry, 2008; Kumpfer & Alvarado, 1998). Family involvement is also being promoted in education, after-school programs and in positive youth development efforts more generally (e.g., Caspe & Lopez, 2006; Family Strengthening Policy Center, 2005; Harris & Wimer, 2004; James & Partee, 2003; Kreider, Little, Buck, & Coffey, 2006).

The idea of including families more centrally in youth serving programs is beginning to be taken up in the practice literature on mentoring. There are now fact sheets and briefs summarizing research relevant to mentoring that strongly endorse family involvement (Mentoring Resource Center, 2005; The Center for the Advancement of Mentoring, n.d.). One even begins with the statement, “Involving parents in mentoring services is one of the best things a program can do to ensure its success” (Mentoring Resource Center, 2005, p. 1). Research linking parental involvement and academic and social and emotional outcomes for youth more generally is cited to bolster these recommendations as is research indicating that some of the benefits of mentoring are mediated by improvements in the parent–child relationships (Rhodes, Grossman, & Resch, 2000). Recommendations for how to involve families range from orienting parents fully to the program (i.e., goals, roles, policies, etc.) and regularly soliciting information from them regarding the progress of the mentoring relationship to hosting events for families and providing “wrap-around” services to the family, whether directly or through linking them with other resources in the community (Family Strengthening Policy Center, 2004; Mentoring Resource Center, 2005; The Center for the Advancement of Mentoring, n.d.).

Three different program models of family involvement in youth mentoring were identified in a recent review (Taylor & Porcellini, 2013). One model, referred to as the family mentoring model, targets the entire family system by explicitly seeking to address the needs of the family as a whole through mentoring, family support, and connections to community resources. Of the other two models, dubbed “youth only” models, one combines dedicated mentoring for the youth with additional skill building for parents that is intended to strengthen the parents’ capacities for effectively supporting their children. The other adds opportunities for family participation in program-sponsored activities to the traditional one-to-one mentoring program model. Beyond this high level review, however, we know little about how these and other potential approaches to family involvement are being carried out by mentoring programs, for what purposes and to what potential effect.

The goal of the present study was to identify and describe some of the specific ways that agencies employing what Taylor and Porcellini (2013) have termed a youth-only program model were working to involve parents in the mentoring process. These descriptions centered around four major areas of interest: (a) similarities and differences in the approaches taken to family involvement across the different agencies, (b) how the families served are viewed by program staff, (c) hoped for benefits of family involvement, and (d) perceived actual benefits of family involvement efforts. As interest in family involvement in youth mentoring programs is growing and recommendations are being more strongly made that programs engage in such efforts, knowledge about the specific practices being implemented and the role these are believed to play in the mentoring process is needed. For this exploratory study, we focused on how program staff engaging directly with participants (i.e., mentors, youth and families) were conceptualizing family involvement practices and operationalizing these in their day-to-day interactions with program participants. We expect that the findings from this study can then be used to guide further efforts to deepen our understanding of these practices, their codification at the

program level, how participants in these programs experience such practices, and what contribution they may make to the effectiveness of youth mentoring programs.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Representatives ($n = 39$) from a total of 24 Big Brothers Big Sisters of America (BBBSA) affiliate agencies were recruited to participate in one-time focus group interviews. Because the intention was to examine family involvement practices currently being enacted, the participating agencies were selected from among those with a stated commitment to family involvement and family strengthening. As the traditional BBBSA program model has typically focused on the mentor–youth dyad, each of the participating agencies was considered to be one that might go “above and beyond” the traditional model when working with the families of program participants. Participating agencies were grouped into one of six focus groups based on shared programmatic emphasis, such as mentoring programs focused on specific ethnic groups (Native American, Hispanic youth) or populations (children of incarcerated parents). Others were grouped by their particular attention to family within their program models (Casey Family Strengthening Award recipients) and programs that were implementing a new enhanced model for school-based mentoring that included parental involvement. The youth served by these programs ranged in age from 6 to 18 years, although youth over 16 years of age were not typically newly matched with a mentor. The six focus groups were conducted with 5–11 staff representing a total of 3–5 agencies in each group. Among the program staff participating in the focus groups ($n = 39$; 38 female) most identified as White (69.2%), 12.8% as Black, 10.3% Latino, 2.6% Asian and 5.1% identified as bi- or multi-racial. The average participant age was 40 years old ($SD = 11.63$) with 5 years of experience ($SD = 3.85$).

2.2. Data collection

All focus groups were conducted by telephone conference call, audio recorded, and professionally transcribed. The groups were facilitated by a BBBSA staff member in the organization’s national office. This staff member had considerable prior experience leading and training others to lead focus groups conducted for both research and program development purposes. A semi-structured interview guide was used to insure that participants in all six groups were asked questions related to the major areas of interest while also allowing the facilitator to ask follow-up questions and to tailor some of the questions to be most relevant to the agencies being interviewed. All participants were asked the following kinds of questions: “How is it that you engage families/parents in the mentoring experience?”; “What roles have you observed parents playing in the mentoring process?”; and “Is there anything you do as staff to help encourage parents to be (more) active participants in their child’s mentoring relationship?” Each focus group interview was about 1 h in length.

2.3. Data analysis

In the absence of much discussion of parental involvement in the youth mentoring literature and of any sort of programmatically driven overarching national approach directing these efforts among the agencies selected to participate in this study, we approached the data inductively implementing a data driven thematic analysis. Analysis began with an initial reading of all of the focus group interview transcripts in their entirety by a primary coder (second author). Then each transcript was coded thematically (Braun & Clarke, 2006), using the qualitative data analysis software Atlas.ti. The initial themes identified in this first round of coding were discussed with a second researcher (first author) and

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