

## **Mentoring for Young People Leaving Foster Care: Promise and Potential Pitfalls**

In this article, Spencer, Collins, Ward, and Smashnaya reflect on the research around the effectiveness of mentoring in positively impacting outcomes for youth transitioning from foster care to independent living (“transitioning youth”), and the potential advantages and pitfalls of utilizing this relationship-based intervention. Since there is little research specifically on the effects of mentoring on foster care youth, Spencer et. al. look at the research on the life outcomes of transitioning youth and research on youth mentoring. Their initial analysis indicates that researchers agree that the psychosocial and vocational outcomes of transitioning youth are quite poor, especially when compared to other young adult populations (Cook, 1994; Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Courtney et. al., 2001; Reilly, 2003), and that “youths who have at least one positive and significant naturally occurring mentoring relationship tend to fare better in the transition to adulthood (Ahrens, DuBois, Richardson, Fan, & Lorenzo, 2008; Drapeau, Saint-Jacques, Lépine, Bégin, & Bernard, 2007; Hines et. al., 2005).”

Though Spencer et. al do not discuss whether volunteer mentors are as effective as “natural mentors” for transitioning youth, research suggests that a close, enduring relationship with an adult will generally elicit better outcomes for youth. Since duration, consistency and emotional connection are the key set of factors that distinguish the more effective mentoring relationship (Rhodes and DuBois, 2006), mentoring programs for transitioning youth will probably need to provide a higher level of support for their mentors and mentees than those serving the general youth population. Potential pitfalls for these programs fall into three areas: 1) the interpersonal relationship between the youth and mentor, 2) the administration of mentoring programs, and 3) the policy environment supporting mentoring initiatives for transition-age youths in child welfare systems.

In terms of the potential pitfalls, Spencer et. al stress that programs should not underestimate the importance of preparing mentors for the challenges of connecting with youth in foster care and having good match closure procedures; mentors should understand that a premature or sudden ending to a mentor relationship for a child or youth with a history of neglect or abuse can have detrimental effects. Administrators should ensure that program goals, guidelines, and expectations for mentors and mentees are clear from the very beginning, establish good relationships with the other people in the youth’s life, and take into account the heterogeneity of this population (Keller, Cusick and Courtney, 2007). Finally, mentoring programs for foster care youth will need to advocate for policy support that focuses funding on sustaining current relationships, best practice model adherence, and equity in youth access to mentoring, rather than to simply increasing the number of foster youth served.

The question the mentoring field needs to answer is “whether and under what conditions is a volunteer mentor likely to reliably and effectively serve in th[e] role [of a competent, caring adult for a young person in the child welfare system]” (p.232). As well as advocating for a stronger focus on evaluating mentoring interventions, Spencer et. al suggest that successful mentoring for transitioning youth must include concrete assistance, e.g. safe housing, employment, education, etc. To capitalize on the promise of mentoring, programs and mentors must commit to fully considering the risks of a relationship-based approach and helping young people find the resources they need to become independent adults.

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