

## ***Mentors for Adolescents in Foster Care***

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**ABSTRACT:** Significant numbers of adolescents in foster placement plan to live independently following discharge. Mentoring is increasingly being used as a support service to assist older foster youths to make the transition to adult living. A survey of 29 child welfare programs indicate that a variety of mentoring models are in use. The main models are transitional Life Skills Mentors, Cultural-Empowerment Mentors, and Corporate-Business Mentors. Mentoring connects foster wards with a cross-section of community citizens who provide a bridge to higher education and employment, and serve as a resource for transitional problem-solving. Information is needed on the impacts of mentor-mentee matches and efforts to sustain mentor-mentee relationships.

Mentoring is increasingly being used as an intervention for youth considered to be at-risk, vulnerable, or likely to be unprepared for effective adult living. Youths identified as headed for problematic and/or unfavorable life outcomes include delinquents, homeless and jobless youth, pregnant and parenting teens, and school dropouts. The adolescent risk groups cited are not mutually exclusive. Much overlapping exists across subgroups. Within the past few years the child welfare field has recognized that adolescents in placement rep-

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Based on a paper presented at the Second National Child Welfare Conference, Division of Child Welfare Research, Arlington, Virginia, 1994. The research is supported by Research Grant #90CW1026 entitled "Mentors as Resources for Preparing Foster Youths for Independent Living," from the Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Washington, D.C.

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resent a significant risk-group. A high percentage of children in out-of-home placement are between the ages of 13 and 18 years. The Child Welfare League of America points out that, "Adolescents constitute a major segment of the population served by the child welfare system. In 1989, over one-third in out-of-home care were teens" (DeWoody, Ceja, & Sylvester, 1993, p. 1).

For most adolescents in care, the accepted permanency options of adoption or family reunification are not realistic. Rather than return to their families, increasing numbers of older foster wards plan to live independently following discharge. The movement toward independent living requires support systems that will help youths to attain self-sufficiency. The task of helping large numbers of emancipated foster wards to make a successful transition to adult living is a difficult undertaking. Most foster youths lack ongoing support from their own families.

In accordance with CWLA's standards for Independent Living Services, the child welfare field is in the process of developing aftercare services for youths who are attempting to move from a dependency oriented placement system to independent living. Aftercare services may include financial assistance, transitional subsidies, employment counseling, housing assistance, emergency shelter, information and referral with regard to community resources, and advocacy to involve community institutions in assisting youths in moving toward self-sufficiency (Irvine, 1988). Mentoring is one of the services that is now emerging to assist foster adolescents in making a transition to early adulthood.

### Mentoring: A Role Perspective

*Webster's II New Riverside University Dictionary* (1984) defines a mentor as a "wise and trusted teacher or counselor." A mentor makes a conscious effort to guide and influence, and serves as a teacher, advisor, and sponsor. Mentors attempt to help their mentees to develop a sense of competence, to increase skill levels, and to improve performance. The mentoring formula typically includes the following elements: a) a one-to-one relationship between a pair of unrelated individuals, b) an age difference in which the mentor is the older more experienced person, and c) a relationship that is developmental in nature, with focus on enhancing the character and competence of the mentee (Freedman, 1993).

The traditional mentoring model emphasizes achievement, nurturance, and generativity. Generativity refers to intergenerational responsibility and the desire to pass on knowledge, values, and culture to the younger generation (Freedman, 1993). Embodied in the element of achievement is a focus on competence in a chosen vocation. The element of nurturance emphasizes transmitting lessons in character development.

Mentoring has evolved from its traditional focus on males, and is rapidly becoming associated with females. Mentoring has been accepted as a positive factor in the corporate and business world, within professions such as law, in higher education, and with gifted students. Although mentoring has typically focused on well motivated, educated, and goal-directed individuals, modern mentoring practice tends to focus on achievement and performance, and places less emphasis on nurturance. The effects of mentoring on talented, motivated, and gifted individuals is well established. There is, however, little information on mentor programs for youths considered to be difficult to reach, such as, school dropouts, youths at risk of dropping-out, delinquents, pregnant and parenting adolescents, and youths in foster care.

### Focus

The focus of this article is on trends in mentor programs for adolescents in foster care. In theory, mentoring matches adults who are in the economic, educational, and social mainstream of society with young persons who are growing up in difficult circumstances. The main focus of the matches with foster youth is to prepare for adult living. Young people who enter the placement system usually do so for reasons of neglect, abuse, exploitation, abandonment, and inability and/or unwillingness on the part of their families to provide proper care. Foster placement poses special risks that children who are raised in their own homes are not likely to encounter. The child welfare system tends to be fragmented, with some responsibility for the needs of the youth assumed by the agency, some by caretaker(s), and some may be assumed by the biological parent(s). Of concern is that out-of-home placement carries with it the likelihood of multiple placements and feelings of impermanence. Foster care tends to isolate youths from their community, and prevents them from gaining practical knowledge about community resources. Moreover, many foster

youths lack social supports and/or consistent family ties, and face formidable obstacles in maintaining satisfactory educational progress. For the reasons cited, it is understandable why many child welfare agencies are implementing mentor programs for adolescents in placement. At this juncture, little systematic information is available on the characteristics of mentor programs in the child welfare field.

Accordingly, our survey posed a series of questions as a guide to collecting information about mentoring programs within the child welfare system. The main questions posed were as follows: 1) What are the main program models in use to mentor foster adolescents?, 2) How are mentors recruited and matched with foster adolescents?, 3) What are the expectations and guidelines that are established for mentors, and what are the main program supports available to mentors?, 4) What are the characteristics of mentors in terms of age, race/ethnicity, sex, education, occupation, income, and reason(s) for mentoring?, and 5) What are the characteristics of mentees in terms of age, race/ethnicity, sex, school status, and placement background?

### Data Collection

Information was collected from 29 mentor programs located in 15 states. States represented in the study were: California, Connecticut, Indiana, Maryland, Michigan, Missouri, Montana, Nebraska, Nevada, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Ohio, Oklahoma, and Virginia. No formal directory or list of mentor programs for adolescents in placement was available at the time the survey was initiated. Our procedure was to contact, on a state-by-state basis, child welfare administrators who were recipients of federal Title IV-E foster youth independent living funds. The process of identifying, contacting, and interviewing key personnel in various mentor programs covered a time span of approximately two years. Mentor sites were selected for inclusion if three criteria were met: a) the program was designed to serve adolescents in foster care, b) the program was operational for at least twelve months prior to the site visits, and c) the program provided access to information on mentor-mentee characteristics.

During site visits, interviews were conducted with administrators, program coordinators, and support staff, as well as with sub-groups of mentors and mentees. Focus in this article is on the programmatic aspects of mentor services for adolescents in placement as provided by program coordinators. Questions posed in the field interview

schedule included the following: "How are mentors recruited?", "How long is the mentoring commitment?", "What incentives are provided to recruit and retain mentors?", "Are mentors required to have a car, driver's license and insurance?", "Is a background check required before mentors are approved?", "How are matches supervised?", "How many hours per month are mentors expected to spend with their mentees in face-to-face contact?", "Does your program require mentors to participate in program orientation, pre-program training, on-going training, or mentor support group meetings?", "What percentage of your matches stay together for the expected time commitment?", "What are some of the reasons as to why the mentor/mentee matches disrupt?", "How much support does the mentor program get from your agency staff?", and "In relation to other aspects of your job, how much time do you spend on activities devoted exclusively to mentoring?"

### Program Trends

#### Mentor Models

Five categories of mentor models emerged, as follows: a) Transitional Life-Skills Mentors, b) Cultural Empowerment Mentors, c) Corporate/Business Mentors, d) Mentors for Young Parents, and e) Mentor Homes. Each model is considered in turn.

*Transitional Life-Skills Mentors (TLS).* The Transitional Model of mentoring utilizes adults as mentors to assist older adolescents make the transition from foster care settings to independent living. Mentors attempt to provide mentees with social support, friendship, and to serve as role models. Transitional mentors are expected to facilitate the acquisition of independent living skills, and to assist mentees to develop tangible and intangible life skills.

Transitional mentors are recruited directly from the community. Programs advertise for mentors through newspapers, public service announcements, church bulletins, and corporate newsletters, and through direct appeals to social, service and fraternal organizations. Typically, mentors are required to be over 21 years old, economically self-sufficient, and have an interest and ability to work with youth. Emphasis is placed on forming a relationship that cultivates a community connection for youths that is sustained during their transition to independence. The goal is to recruit as many mentors as possible,

irrespective of factors such as age, sex, religion, race, or socio-economic status, and to match mentors with youths in placement who are receptive to a mentoring relationship. Of the program sites surveyed, nearly 80%, use a Transitional Life-Skills model.

*Cultural-Empowerment Mentors (CE).* The Cultural-Empowerment Model matches youths from a minority cultural, or ethnic group with adult members from the same group. The rationale for Cultural Empowerment Mentoring is that minority status groups are recipients of negative societal messages, and that a positive role model from their minority group can have a beneficial influence on mentee identity, aspiration levels and future orientation. Two sites in our survey use the Cultural Empowerment Model: *Rites of Passage* at Don Bosco Hall in Detroit, Michigan and the *Big Siblings* program at Gay and Lesbian Adolescent Social Services (GLASS) in West Hollywood, California. The Detroit program recruits African-American males over age 30, who are expected to emphasize the importance of education and to convey a sense of responsibility to self, community, and society. The *Big Sibling* program at GLASS matches mature, responsible gay and lesbian adults with gay and lesbian adolescents who reside in GLASS group homes.

Recruitment of culturally-specific mentors is quite focused, as it is not feasible to advertise to the general public when looking for a specific type of mentor. Recruitment efforts are aimed directly at the target population. In order to recruit gay and lesbian mentors, advertisements may be placed in gay/lesbian newspapers or newsletters. Speakers may address the congregation of a gay and lesbian-supportive church or synagogue, or gay and lesbian professional organizations. Similarly, African American, Hispanic, Asian American or persons from other ethnic/cultural groups are recruited by using targeted advertisements and speakers.

*Corporate/Business Mentors (CB).* The Corporate Mentor Model matches older foster adolescents with mentors from the private sector/business community. In the corporate model, job placement is of central importance. Corporate mentoring recruits businesses that are ready, willing, and able to hire foster teens. Social agencies serve as brokers and attempt to bring together motivated adolescents and mentors. Participating businesses agree to provide jobs, to monitor work experience, and to offer career development employment opportunities for mentees who successfully complete a prescribed program.

An example of the Corporate/Business Mentor Model is the Missouri Mentoring Partnership located in St. Louis.

*Mentors for Young Parents (MYP).* In the Mentors for Young Parents Model, experienced mothers are matched with young pregnant or parenting teens. Mentors share their child rearing experiences and try to help young mothers to develop responsibility, confidence, and a positive orientation toward raising children. Emphasis is placed on guiding young parents toward self-sufficiency, so that they can make responsible choices about subsequent pregnancies, education, and averting child maltreatment. Mentors for Young Parents is an example of a preventative program. The goal is to prevent young mothers from becoming involved in neglect, abuse, or child maltreatment situations that can result in their children being placed into the foster care system. One program that matches mentors with young parents is *Mentoring Mothers*, part of the Summit County Children Services in Akron, Ohio. *Mentoring Mothers*<sup>1</sup> was founded in 1987 and currently has 25 active members.

Recruitment of mentors for young mothers is difficult because they are such a diverse group. *Mentoring Mothers* addressed the recruitment problem by using the following procedure. The mentor program worked with a local newspaper to develop a human interest story on the *Mentoring Mother* program. This article, complete with pictures of some of the young teens and their children, also included a direct appeal for volunteers to assist these young mothers. Using an innovative marketing strategy, the article ran in the newspaper on Mother's Day. As a result of the no-cost recruitment strategy, the agency was inundated with phone calls from willing volunteers.

*Mentor Homes (MH).* In the Mentor Homes model the plan is to place four to six foster adolescents in a home with an adult mentor. The mentor is in residence and is responsible for guiding the activities of youths in terms of education, employment, community involvement, etc. Wolverine Human Services program in Michigan is an example of a program that utilizes the Mentor Homes approach to prepare foster wards for independent living. Mentor Homes is the only model studied that employs mentors to work with at-risk youth

<sup>1</sup> Although the *Mentoring Mothers* Program is not specifically designed for youth in foster care, it was included in this study because it is designed to prevent foster care placements. The young women who participated from this site were similar in age, education level, and race as those from other sites.

In addition to a small salary, mentors receive free room and board. Mentors are hired to live in the homes and to supervise the youth. They are also expected to serve as role models for the youth. Mentors are typically college or university students who attend classes during the day. Mentors teach and model independent living skills such as grocery shopping, laundry, cooking and housekeeping. They also model positive behaviors such as getting to school and work on time, and studying. Mentors are recruited and hired in the same manner as other youth workers.

#### *Recruitment Techniques*

The main approaches to mentor recruitment include: word-of-mouth referrals from other mentors, newspaper advertisements, articles, television/radio public service announcements, presentations to social, service, and fraternal organizations, announcements through United Way organizations, community-circulars, church bulletins, voluntarism bureaus, and college/university organizations.

#### *Expectations, Guidelines, Supports*

The typical program expects mentors to devote an average of 10 hours per month to their mentees. Most programs offer mentors few, if any, incentives. Generally mentors do not receive a stipend, mileage reimbursement for program related travel, or liability insurance coverage.

With respect to requirements, the list is extensive. Most programs require that mentors have a valid driver's license, access to a car, and auto insurance. The majority of programs also require mentors to submit to a police background check. Most programs require participation in some form of training. Nearly 80% require on-going training, and a high percentage expect attendance at monthly mentor support group sessions. With respect to mentor training, most programs used a modified version of the curriculum developed by Walters, Furnas, and Renstrom (1989)—from the Nebraska Department of Social Services. The Nebraska curriculum includes topics that are relevant to the foster placement system and independent living. Topics covered are: Elements of foster care, physical and emotional development, attachment and bonding, separation and grief, problem-solving, decision-making skills, the role of volunteer-mentors in communicating, listening, relationship building, serving as a link to the community, and the matching process.

Supervision and monitoring varies widely across sites. Three tech-

niques are typically used to monitor the progress of mentor-mentee matches. The approaches are (a) phone calls from program coordinators to mentors, or phone contact with coordinators that is initiated by mentors, (b) activity logs that are maintained by mentors, and (c) in person meetings with mentors and mentees.

#### *Mentor/Mentee Characteristics*

Socio-demographic information was obtained for 260 mentors and 269 mentees. The typical mentor was nearly 37 years old. Nearly 3 in 4 were female. Sixty-three percent were white. The mean education level was 15.0 years with 55% completing a college degree. Nearly 7 in 10 were employed full time. Sixty-six percent were unmarried, and mentor incomes ranged from less than \$20,000 a year to more than \$80,000 a year.

The typical mentee was 18 years old, female (69%), non-white, with a mean educational level of 10th grade. Nearly 60% of the mentees were enrolled in a general high school curriculum with only 15% enrolled in a college preparatory track. The majority were in out-of-home placement for reasons of physical maltreatment, sexual abuse, or neglect. More than 50% first came into foster care between the ages of 13 and 17. Only 1 in 10 plans to return to the biological home or to live with relatives. The majority (70%) indicated that independent living was the permanency goal.

With respect to race/sex distributions for mentors and mentees, only 11% of the mentors were non-white males compared with 24% of mentees who were non-white males. Nearly 40% of the female mentees were non-white, whereas only 26% of the mentors were non-white females. The major responsibility for mentoring is carried by white mentors, primarily white middle-class females. In contrast, nearly 2 out of 3 mentees is non-white.

#### *Discussion*

The movement toward extending mentoring services to youths classified as disadvantaged is receiving considerable support in the child welfare field. Even though mentor programs for youths in foster care are relatively new, tend to be small in scope, and have low visibility, the movement represents an important transitional support. While mentoring should not be construed as a panacea for transitioning foster adolescents to independent living, the process of connecting foster

wards with a cross-section of community citizens can do much to offset a tendency to become overly dependent on experts and professionals for answers to societal problems.

Non-parental adults who assume a mentoring responsibility can have influence with young people, particularly adolescents who are alienated from their families or those motivated to differentiate themselves from their own parents. Typically, adolescents in placement have experienced a series of negative forces in their lives including maltreatment, separation from families, and weak or non-existent parental ties.

Irrespective of type of facility, emphasis in placement is on conformity and adhering to rules and regulations. Placements for adolescent wards value structure and control—characteristics that are reflected in group, residential, and congregate/institutional facilities. In placements that are heavily oriented to conformity and control, many young people may not have sufficient opportunity to interact with adults who live outside youth serving systems. Mentoring represents an effort by child welfare agencies to provide adolescent wards with opportunities to interact with adults in community settings. At the present time, little information is available about the impacts of mentor services on adolescents in placement. Literature on adolescent development suggests that the characteristics of a "significant adult" include "... availability, trustworthiness, helpfulness, understanding, and honesty" (Galbo, 1986, p. 45). However, the affective elements valued by mentees may not be priorities for mentors who may strive for tangible progress and achievement in an adult-youth relationship.

At this juncture, it is important to expand efforts to improve mentor programs in child welfare. The formula for program improvement includes establishing realistic outcome expectations for mentor/mentee matches, developing stronger infrastructures for coordinators that permit upgrading with respect to the recruitment, training, and support of mentors, as well as supervision of mentor-mentee matches. In our 29 site survey, the majority of mentors were white females. In contrast, the majority of mentees were non-white youths. Information is needed on the potential impacts of cross-racial and cross-sex mentor/mentee matches.

For most adolescents who leave placement at the age of majority, the 18-21 age period represents a critical developmental phase. Having a mentor prior to leaving placement is important, but sustaining a mentor relationship after leaving placement may be vital to the well-being of many foster wards. The future direction of mentor ser-

vices in child welfare can benefit from an expanded information base. Little is known about the nature of adolescent perceptions of a mentor, or the extent to which meaningful adult/youth relationships can be obtained through formal mentoring programs. The issue of formal assignment of mentors continues to be a controversial topic. Pessimists suggest that mentoring cannot be engineered but must evolve as a "... spontaneous and mutual involvement of two individuals ..." (Kram, 1987, p. 185). As a basis for making informed decisions Carden (1990) recommends that prospective mentors and mentees should be made aware of the positive as well as negative aspects of advisory/support relationships.

Viewpoints toward mentoring range from the skepticism and ambivalence expressed by Coles (1991), to the optimism of Blechman (1992) who perceives mentoring for disadvantaged youths as a politically viable prevention strategy. The *Wingspread Conference on the Future of Mentoring* directed attention to the need to recruit mentors who can bridge the "... social distance between middle and upper class mentors and poor youth" (Watson, 1993, p. 22). Too often youths lack trust in adults who attempt to make connections with them, and they lack the patience needed for relationships to evolve. Overall, the potential benefits of mentoring as a transitional support for at-risk youth appear to outweigh the disadvantages. As Freedman (1992) reminds us, "the movement offers a glimpse not only of our better selves, but of a potentially better society ..." (p. 71).

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