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The Influence of Mentoring on the Peer Relationships of Foster Youth in Relative and Nonrelative Care

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The influence of a mentoring program (Big Brothers–Big Sisters) on the peer relationships of foster youth in relative and nonrelative care was examined. Youth were randomly assigned to either the treatment or control condition, and changes in their peer relationships were assessed after 18 months. Foster parents were more likely than nonfoster parents to report that their child showed improved social skills, as well as greater comfort and trust interacting with others, as a result of the intervention. In addition, whereas the peer relationships of all nonfoster youth ($N = 90$) remained stable, treatment foster youth ($N = 90$) reported improvements in prosocial and self-esteem enhancing support, and control foster youth showed decrements over time. When the foster youth were differentiated further on the basis of their placement, a pattern of findings emerged in which treatment youth in relative foster care reported slight improvements in prosocial support, whereas treatment youth in nonrelative foster care reported slight declines. All foster youth in the control group reported decrements in peer support over time, with nonrelative foster youth reporting the sharpest declines. Implications for research and intervention are discussed.

Thousands of programs linking vulnerable youth with volunteer mentors have emerged in recent years. These efforts have included a wide range of youth—for example, pregnant teenagers, African American boys—and volunteers—for example, community members, executives, and elderly

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people (McLearn, Colasanto, & Schoen, 1998). In addition, mentoring programs have been advocated by child welfare programs to address the needs and circumstances of foster youth (Mech, Pryde, & Ryecraft, 1995). Although available research with nonfoster youth suggests that mentoring can be an effective intervention, virtually no research has examined the efficacy of mentoring programs with foster youth. Attachment theory and research would suggest, however, that relationship-focused interventions may differentially affect foster and nonfoster youth. In this study, we examine mentoring relationships involving foster and nonfoster youth, with particular attention to the influence of such relationships on youth's peer relationships.

Existing research with nonfoster youth suggests that relationships with caring adults can make an important difference in the lives of vulnerable children and adolescents (Cowen & Work, 1988; Garmezy, 1985; Rutter, 1990; Werner & Smith, 1982). Indeed, adolescents who grow up under extremely difficult circumstances and yet somehow succeed often credit their success to the influence of an informal role model or mentor (Anderson, 1991; Freedman, 1995; Lefkowitz, 1986; Levine & Nidiffer, 1996; Williams & Kornblum, 1985). More recently, researchers have linked natural mentor support to improvements in at-risk adolescents' psychological, social, academic, and career functioning (McLearn et al., 1998; Munch & Blyth, 1993; Rhodes & Davis, 1996).

In addition to these informal alliances, there is also some evidence to suggest that mentors who are assigned to youth through more formal volunteer programs can positively affect youth outcomes (Davidson & Redner, 1988; DuBois & Neville, 1997; LoSciuto, Rajala, Townsend, & Taylor, 1996; McPartland & Nettles, 1991; Quint, 1991; Slicker & Palmer, 1993). The most comprehensive evaluation of formal mentoring to date has been an impact study of Big Brothers–Big Sisters (Tierney, Grossman, & Resch, 1995). The study included nearly 1,000 participants from a geographically diverse set of Big Brothers–Big Sisters programs. Control participants were put on a waiting list for 18 months, and treatment youth were matched with a mentor. In addition to increased levels of prosocial behavior, mentor support was associated with improvements in the youth's interpersonal relationships. Treatment youth reported more trust in parental relationships, lied less frequently to their parents, and felt more emotionally supported by their peers.

It remains to be seen, however, whether foster and nonfoster youth derive comparable benefits from mentors. In light of their past experiences, foster youth may find it relatively difficult to establish close, supportive relationships with mentors. Attachment theory and research suggest that expectations of self and others derived from early, intimate relationship with

parents can affect the development of subsequent close relationships (Bowlby, 1988). As a group, foster youth may enter mentoring programs with different relationship histories than nonfoster youth (Eagle, 1994). Indeed, most children are placed in foster care today as a result of problems in parental functioning, including child abuse and neglect (Downs, Costin, & McFadden, 1996). Consistent with attachment theory, maltreated children frequently manifest highly problematic attachment relationships with their parents and other adults (e.g., Carlson, Cicchetti, Barnett, & Braunwald, 1989; Main & Hesse, 1990; Schneider-Rosen, Braunwald, Carlson, & Cicchetti, 1985; Zeanah, Mammen, & Lieberman, 1993). Thus, foster youth may find it relatively difficult to establish close, supportive relationships with mentors.

Clearly, if foster youth do not first establish supportive relationships with mentors, then the positive effects of mentoring on peer relationships (Grossman & Tierney, 1998) will not be realized. Some evidence suggests that foster youth may be at heightened risk for problematic peer relationships. Existing research has documented continuity between poor-quality parental relationships and difficulties in later peer relationships (Cooper & Cooper, 1992; Elicker, Englund, & Sroufe, 1992). Such difficulties may intensify throughout early adolescence, as youth begin to place relatively greater emphasis on peer and romantic relationships (Blain, Thompson, & Whiffen, 1993). Exploring and developing more intimate peer relationships may ignite foster youth's existing anxieties and lead to strain and detachment from peers (Batgos & Leadbeater, 1994; Salahu & Bullman, 1994). If foster youth experience difficulties with intimacy and trust in their mentor relationships, improvements in peer relationships may be attenuated.

It is also possible, however, that foster youth may be uniquely responsive to supportive relationships with caring adults. As they negotiate the transition from middle childhood to adulthood, foster youth may seek out support and guidance from extrafamilial adults. Attachment theory and research indicate that, to the extent that such relationships develop along different lines than parent–child relationships, earlier patterns might change gradually (Ainsworth, 1989; Ainsworth & Marvin, 1995; Main, Kaplan, & Cassidy, 1985). Nonparent adults can offer a model to adolescents of care and support, and they may challenge views that adolescents may hold of adults as untrustworthy and of themselves as undeserving of attention and care. As is the case with supportive parents, nonparent adults may scaffold foster youth's understanding of social processes and provide a safe context in which relational skills relevant to peers can be developed (Cooper & Cooper, 1992; Rhodes, Contreras, & Mangelsdorf, 1995). A relationship with a mentor can thus become a "corrective experience" for those adolescents who have experienced unsatisfactory relation-

ships with their parents and can facilitate more positive peer relationships (Olds, Kitzman, Cole, & Robinson, 1997).

Of course, the impact of mentoring may vary in relation to the characteristics of the foster care placement. In particular, increasing numbers of children are being placed with relatives, in part to maintain stability in children's attachment relationships. Placement with grandparents, aunts, and uncles who already have a relationship with the child may be less traumatic than placement with strangers (Chipunga, 1991). In addition, there is some evidence that placements with relatives are more stable and more conducive to continuing contact with parents (Berrick & Barth, 1994). Thus, although they may experience more relationship difficulties than do nonfoster youth, children in relative foster care may fare better than youth in nonrelative foster care. In this study, we examined the extent to which a formal mentoring program facilitated improvements in foster youth's peer relationships. In addition to overall comparisons between foster and nonfoster youth, the effects of the program on foster youth in relative versus nonrelative placements were assessed.

METHODS

Participants

This study makes use of a subset of data collected as part of a national study of mentoring relationships formed through Big Brothers–Big Sisters of America (Tierney et al., 1995). The national study included 959 adolescents, ages 10 through 16, all of whom applied to selected Big Brothers–Big Sisters programs in 1992 and 1993. Agency participation was sought through presentations at national conferences, agency surveys, and interviews with agency staff. The key selection criteria for an agency's inclusion in the impact study were a large, active caseload; a waiting list; and geographic diversity. With only a few exceptions, all age-eligible youth who came to the study agencies during the intake period were encouraged to participate in the research. Half of the youth were randomly assigned to a treatment group in which Big Brothers–Big Sisters matches were made or attempted; the other half were assigned to waiting lists for a period of 18 months.

Two subgroups of participants were selected from the larger sample of adolescents who were participating in the national evaluation of Big Brothers–Big Sisters. The "foster" subgroup of participants (n = 90) included all participants in the national study who indicated that a foster parent, a guardian, or an extended family member (aunt, uncle, or grandparent) was their custodial parent. This conforms with accepted defini-

tions of foster youth, which include formal, relative, and other nonparent residential arrangements (Everett, 1995). Within this group, further distinctions were drawn between youth whose custodial parents were members of their extended family "relative foster" (n = 78), and youth whose custodial parents were not members of their extended family "nonrelative foster" (n = 12). The "nonfoster" group (n = 90) included a subset of matched participants who indicated that their mother or father was their custodial parent. Members of the nonfoster group were matched with the foster group on several demographic variables, including their gender, race, age, state of residence, and disability status. Youth in the three parenting groups did not differ on these demographic variables.

More than half of the foster and nonfoster group participants (56.1%) were in the treatment group; the remaining 43.9% of foster and nonfoster group participants were in the control group. Youth in the three parenting groups (nonfoster, relative foster, nonrelative foster) were equally likely to be included in the treatment and control groups, $\chi^2(2, N = 177) = 1.01, p < .60$. Fifty-four percent of participants were boys, 61.7% were African American, and 23.9% were White. The remaining participants were Hispanic (6.1%), American Indian (2.8%), biracial (2.8%), or other (0.6%). The racial identity of 2 participants was missing. The participants ranged in age from 10 to 15 years (M = 11.8, SD = 1.26).

Procedure

Big Brothers–Big Sisters is an intensive relationship-based intervention. The overall goal of the program is to promote the positive development of at-risk youth through relationships with well-functioning adults. The average length of the matches in this study was 12 months, and more than 70% of the youth met with their Big Brother or Big Sister one or more times per week. Depending on the youths' and mentors' preferences, the dyads engaged in a wide variety of leisure- and goal-oriented discussions and activities, including those focused on peers. The treatment and control groups were compared on a variety of cognitive and social measures at baseline and 18 months later. In this study, we focus on participants' relationships with mentors and peers.

Instruments

History of abuse–trauma. Case managers collected information about the youth and his or her family, including whether, based on intake interviews, the case manager believed the young person had sustained sexual, physical, or emotional abuse, had been arrested, or had any physical or

learning disabilities. The case managers also indicated whether the youth had a history of substance abuse or domestic violence, and how the case manager anticipated that the youth would benefit from participation in the program. The two groups did not differ in terms of their abuse history, illness or injury, or arrests, but the nonfoster group members were more likely to have sustained a parental divorce or separation, $\chi^2(1, N = 177) = 3.06, p < .05$, and the foster group were more likely to have sustained an unspecified trauma, $\chi^2(1, N = 177) = -2.47, p < .05$. Three-way group comparisons revealed that the nonrelative foster youth were significantly more likely than youth in the other two groups to have sustained a trauma, $F(2, 177) = 6.83, p < .01$, and the nonfoster youth were significantly more likely than youth in the other two groups to have sustained a parental divorce, $F(2, 93) = 4.87, p < .01$.

Mentor relationships. Case managers monitored the progress of the mentor–youth relationships, including the number and length of meetings, the participants' satisfaction with and problems in the relationships, and early terminations.

Parent reports. At baseline, all foster and nonfoster parents were asked to indicate, from a 12-item checklist, the reason or reasons that they felt that their child–ward would benefit from the program. The internal reliability alpha coefficient of this subscale was .95. At follow-up, the nonfoster and foster parents whose child–ward participated in Big Brothers–Big Sisters were asked to rate their satisfaction with the program and whether they felt that it had made a difference in their child's life. The parents also were asked to respond to a series of 21 questions about their impressions of their child's Big Brother or Big Sister (e.g., "The volunteer seems to accept my child's–ward's strengths and weaknesses"). The questions were answered on a 4-point scale, ranging from 1 (*very true*) to 4 (*not at all true*). The internal reliability alpha coefficient of this subscale was .67.

Features of Children's Friendship Scale. The 20-item Features of Children's Friendship Scale (Berndt & Perry, 1986) consists of five subscales, each representing a different support or problem domain. The five subscales, with example questions, were, (a) intimacy (e.g., "Do you talk to your friends about something that bothers you?"); (b) self-esteem enhancement (e.g., "Do your friends give you the confidence to do something you thought you couldn't do?"); (c) prosocial support (e.g., "Would your friends agree to do a favor for you if you asked?"); (d) conflict (e.g., "Do you get into arguments with your friends?"); and (e) inequality (e.g.,

"Do your friends try to boss you around?"). Responses were coded on a 4-point scale, ranging from 1 (*hardly ever*) to 4 (*pretty often*). At baseline, correlations among the subscales ranged from .10 to .62 (see Table 1), and the internal reliability alpha coefficients of the subscales ranged from .62 to .73.

RESULTS

Mentor Relationships: Case Manager and Parent Impressions

Group comparisons of case manager reports revealed no differences between the foster versus nonfoster or among the three groups (nonfoster, relative foster, nonrelative foster) on any indexes of mentor relationship quality or intensity. Nonetheless, at baseline, foster parents were significantly more likely to indicate that they sought out the program because their child was insecure and did not trust adults, $t(175) = -2.88$, $p < .01$, and because their child had poor relationships with others, $t(177) = -3.46$, $p < .001$. In three-way comparisons, at baseline, nonfoster parents were significantly less likely than parents of youth in either of the two foster groups to report that the reason that they sought out the program was because their child was insecure and did not trust adults, $F(2, 174) = 4.72$, $p < .05$, or because their child had poor relationships with others, $F(2, 176) = 6.67$, $p < .01$. At follow-up, foster parents in the experimental group were significantly more likely than nonfoster parents in the experimental group to describe their child as having demonstrated improved social skills, $t(72) = 2.17$, $p < .05$, and as becoming more comfortable with and trusting of adults over time, $t(70) = -2.85$, $p < .01$. The experimental foster parents also were more likely than the experimental nonfoster parents to report that the mentor

TABLE 1
Intercorrelation Matrix of Berndt Subscales (Baseline)

	1	2	3	4
1. Intimacy				
2. Inequality	.10			
3. Conflict	.11	.62***		
4. Self-Esteem enhancing	.52***	.16*	.16*	
5. Prosocial	.48***	.21**	.19**	.56***

Note. Subscales are from "Children's Perceptions of Friendships as Supportive Relationships," by T. Berndt and B. Perry, 1986, *Developmental Psychology*, 22, p. 640.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

had learned a lot about their child's life, $t(65) = 2.18$, $p < .05$, and that the mentors provided affirmation to their child, $t(56) = 2.00$, $p < .05$. In three-way comparisons, nonfoster parents were less likely than parents of youth in the two foster groups to describe their child as becoming more comfortable with and trusting of adults over time, $F(2, 69) = 4.25$, $p < .05$.

Group Comparisons on Peer Relationships

A primary goal of this study was to determine how the mentoring program influenced foster youth's relationships with their peers and whether these effects varied from those of nonfoster groups. As such, a series of repeated measures multivariate analyses of variance (MANOVA) with time as the within-subjects factor (baseline or 18-month follow-up), and treatment group (control vs. treatment) and parent group (nonfoster vs. foster) as the between-subject factors was conducted. These analyses were then repeated with the parenting factor further differentiated to include nonfoster, relative foster, and nonrelative foster. The dependent variables in these analyses were the composite and subscales of the peer support scale (Berndt & Perry, 1986).

Comparisons of the foster versus nonfoster youth on the composite peer support scale (summing all five subscales) revealed no significant group differences at baseline, but, at follow-up, the nonfoster group ($M = 60.60$; $SD = 8.24$) scored marginally higher than the foster group ($M = 58.43$; $SD = 9.30$), $t(172) = 1.70$, $p < .10$. Comparisons among the three groups (nonfoster, relative foster, nonrelative foster) revealed no significant group differences in peer support at baseline, but significant differences at follow-up, $F(2, 173) = 6.6$, $p < .01$. A Bonferroni post hoc test indicated that youth in the nonfoster ($M = 60.60$; $SD = 8.24$) and the relative foster ($M = 59.44$; $SD = 8.23$) groups scored higher than did youth in the nonrelative foster group ($M = 50.64$; $SD = 9.26$).

Next, comparisons of the foster versus nonfoster youth on the various peer subscales were conducted. Comparisons of the peer prosocial support revealed a significant two-way interaction effect of Parenting Group × Time, $F(1, 171) = 8.71$ $p < .01$, and a three-way interaction of Parenting Group × Treatment Group × Time, $F(1, 171) = 6.23$, $p < .05$. There were no significant group differences in prosocial support at baseline, and, as indicated in Figure 1, participants in the nonfoster group (experimental and control) demonstrated slight increases in prosocial support over time. In the foster group, however, the experimental participants demonstrated increases in prosocial support over time, whereas the control participants demonstrated decreases in prosocial support over time.

The analyses were then repeated, this time with the parent group factor further differentiated to include the nonfoster, relative foster, and nonrelative foster groups. Consistent with the previous findings, both the two-way interaction effects of Parenting Group × Time, $F(2, 169) = 6.86$, $p < .001$, and the three-way interaction effects of Parenting Group × Treatment Group × Time, $F(2, 169) = 3.28$, $p < .05$, were significant. There were no significant group differences in prosocial support at baseline, and, within the treatment group, the nonfoster and relative foster youth showed slight increases in prosocial support, whereas the nonrelative foster youth showed slight decreases. Within the control group, nonfoster youth showed gains, whereas those in the relative and nonrelative foster groups showed decrements in peer relationships over time, $F(2, 75) = 7.09$, $p < .01$ (see Figure 2). A Bonferroni post hoc test revealed that the nonfoster control group's posttest score was significantly different from the two foster groups' scores and that the relative foster group's posttest score was significantly different from the nonrelative foster group's score, $F(2, 75) = 7.09$, $p < .01$.

In the next set of analyses, we focused on the self-esteem enhancement subscale. Again, we first compared the nonfoster versus foster group differences with time as the within-subjects factor and treatment group and parenting group status as the between-subject factors. Both the two-way interaction effects of Parenting Group × Time, $F(1, 174) = 7.10$, $p < .01$, and the three-way interactions of Parenting Group × Treatment Group × Time,

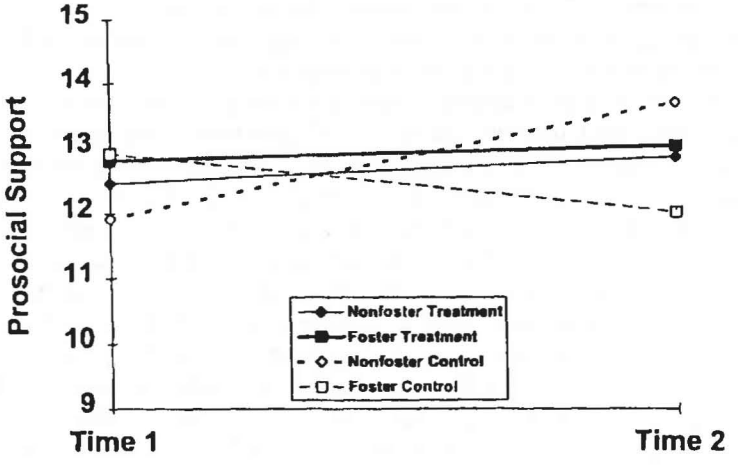

FIGURE 1 Parenting Group (nonfoster, foster) × Treatment Group × Time interaction effect for prosocial support.

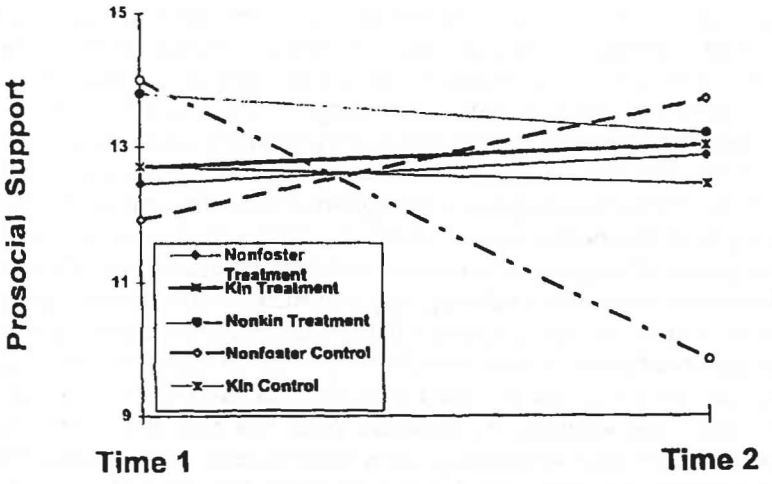

FIGURE 2 Parenting Group (nonfoster, relative foster, nonrelative foster) × Treatment Group × Time interaction effect for prosocial support.

$F(1, 174) = 3.94$, $p < .05$, were significant. There were no significant group differences at baseline, and, as indicated in Figure 3, participants in the nonfoster group (experimental and control) demonstrated only slight increases in self-esteem enhancement over time. In the foster group, however, the experimental participants demonstrated increases in self-esteem enhancement support over time, whereas the control participants demonstrated decreases in this support domain over time.

The analyses were then repeated, this time with the parent group factor further differentiated into the nonfoster, relative foster, and nonrelative foster groups. The results of the repeated measures MANOVA indicated that a two-way interaction effect for Parenting Group × Time was significant, $F(2, 172) = 4.30$, $p < .05$, with the nonrelative foster group showing a decrement in self-esteem enhancement over time, irrespective of group assignment. Although the three-way interaction effect was not significant, follow-up statistics revealed a similar pattern in which the nonfoster and relative foster experimental groups demonstrated slight increases in self-esteem enhancement over time, whereas the nonrelative foster experimental group demonstrated slight decreases in self-esteem enhancement over time. Additionally, nonfoster controls showed slight improvements, and both relative and nonrelative controls showed decrements in self-esteem enhancement over time (with the youth in nonrelative foster care showing the largest decrements; see Table 2). Analyses of the inequal-

TABLE 2
Means and Standard Deviations of Measures by Parent Group

	Experimental						*Control*					
	Nonfoster		*Relative*		*Nonrelative*		*Nonfoster*		*Relative*		*Nonrelative*	
Variable	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Baseline												
Conflict	11.35	3.22	11.06	3.36	9.50	4.18	10.60	3.19	10.80	3.20	10.00	3.60
Intimacy	10.13	3.32	11.36	3.25	12.67	1.75	10.62	3.07	11.16	3.74	12.33	3.88
Inequality	11.73	3.60	11.21	3.69	11.33	1.97	11.50	3.15	11.13	3.16	11.83	3.66
Prosocial	12.46	2.85	12.70	2.75	13.80	.83	11.92	2.56	12.70	3.39	14.00	1.41
Self-Esteem	12.54	2.91	12.53	2.66	13.83	1.94	12.29	3.18	13.59	3.02	13.67	2.07
Follow-up												
Conflict	10.97	2.64	11.25	2.67	7.5	2.43	11.83	2.53	11.00	3.31	9.50	3.56
Intimacy	10.96	3.49	10.72	3.28	12.00	3.10	10.95	2.68	11.12	3.40	9.50	4.18
Inequality	12.09	2.95	12.09	2.40	8.33	1.63	12.05	2.90	11.77	3.60	9.33	2.66
Prosocial	12.87	2.50	13.20	2.59	13.20	2.25	13.71	2.02	12.45	3.37	9.83	3.37
Self-Esteem	13.21	2.57	13.02	2.41	12.50	2.81	13.05	2.37	12.09	3.27	11.67	3.67

Note. Self-Esteem = Self-Esteem Enhancing Support.

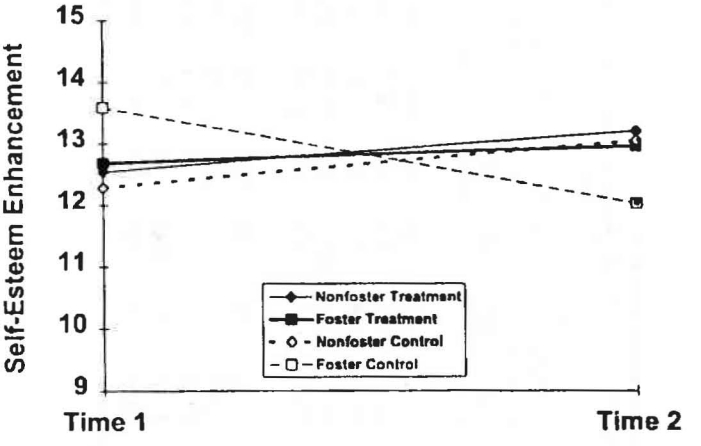

FIGURE 3 Parenting Group (nonfoster, foster) × Treatment Group × Time interaction effect for self-esteem enhancement.

ity, intimacy, and conflict subscales yielded no main or interaction effects, irrespective of whether placement status was considered.

DISCUSSION

Our findings, based on data from a national evaluation of Big Brothers–Big Sisters of America, extend existing research to demonstrate the potential significance of formal mentoring programs for certain foster youth. As indicated by parent–guardian baseline reports, foster adolescents appeared to have more difficulty with close relationships and trust than did adolescents who were residing with their parents. Despite the potential challenges posed by their circumstances, the foster youth in the experimental group were able to form, and in some cases benefit from, relationships with mentors. Both relative and nonrelative foster parents were more likely than nonfoster parents to report that their child showed improved social skills, as well as greater comfort and trust with others as a result of Big Brothers–Big Sisters. Improvements in peer relationships varied as a function of whether the foster youth was in relative versus nonrelative care. Overall, foster youth in the treatment condition showed improvements in their peer prosocial support and in their self-esteem enhancement over time. When the foster youth were further differentiated on the basis of their placement, however, relative foster youth in the treatment group showed

slight increases in prosocial support, whereas the nonrelative foster youth showed slight declines.

By comparison, all foster youth in the control group showed decrements in peer support over time and, within this group, the nonrelative foster youth showed the sharpest declines. This suggests that, in the absence of intervention, foster youth may be at heightened risk for alienation from their peers. Such problems may be exacerbated by the growing emphasis on peer relationships throughout adolescence and the resulting opportunities for disturbances. These findings highlight the particular vulnerabilities of foster youth and underscore the important role that mentors can play in attenuating and, in the case of relative foster youth, reversing the interpersonal problems that may be associated with foster placement and the transition into adolescence.

As expected, the relative foster youth tended to have similarities with each of the other two groups. They were more responsive to the intervention than the nonrelative foster group and showed fewer decrements in peer relationships when left untreated. This makes sense, given that the relative foster youth were exposed to less childhood trauma and less extreme severance of familial ties than the nonrelative foster youth. In light of their relationship histories, relative foster youth may have been more receptive to mentors and less vulnerable to problems in peer relationships.

The patterns described previously may not be entirely generalizable to other foster youth. Only a small proportion ($n = 12$, 13%) of the foster youth included in the national evaluation listed a nonrelative adult as their custodial parent. Relative foster youth were not systematically oversampled (Tierney et al., 1995), suggesting that their parents may be seeking out the program at higher rates. Whatever the reasons, the resulting smaller sample may have decreased the power of the analyses to detect effects within the nonrelative foster group. Nonetheless, because the patterns of subgroup findings essentially replicated the pattern that emerged when the foster groups were combined, we can be reasonably confident in the findings.

The ability to generalize from this sample may have been further compromised by possible self-selection biases. The fact that the foster parents sought out the program may suggest that these youth were in particular need of additional support resources. Indeed, foster parents were significantly more likely than their nonfoster counterparts to indicate that they sought out the program because their child–ward was insecure, did not trust adults, and had poor relationships with others. It is thus possible that the foster youth were particularly vulnerable to the negative social trajectory that was evidenced in this study. This also may be the case, however, for other foster youth who seek out mentoring programs.

Although our findings are suggestive of the effectiveness of mentoring programs for enhancing some aspects of the peer relationships of foster youth in relative care, additional issues should be considered in future research. First, such research should explore the mechanisms through which relationships with mentors promote such improvements. For example, mentors may provide adolescents with alternative models of relationships involving trust, support, and care, or they may provide an opportunity for the development of basic social skills. Second, future research should investigate the role of adolescent development in the effectiveness of mentoring. For example, mentoring may be particularly effective during major transitions, such as the transition from elementary school to the more impersonal middle school, or the transition from foster care into independent adult living (Courtney & Barth, 1996). Similarly, future research should continue to investigate the challenges posed by problematic early and ongoing relationships with caregivers to the formation of mentoring relationships. Additional information about relative foster youth (and the ways in which they may differ from their nonrelative counterparts) would be particularly timely in light of the dramatic increase in relative foster care placements (up to 50% of all placements in some states; Berrick & Barth, 1994). Finally, future research with foster youth should investigate the effects of mentoring relationships on additional outcome variables, such as parental relationships, psychological functioning, and academic achievement.

Taken together, our results suggest that mentoring is a viable intervention for attenuating problems and, in the case of adolescents in relative care, promoting improvements in peer relationships. Because mentoring programs address a fundamental need for many foster youth and do not depend on extensive resources, they may represent a practical approach to prevention and intervention with this group. At the same time, our results indicate that mentoring programs are not a panacea. Although decrements in nonrelative foster care youth's peer relationships are attenuated by volunteer mentors, there may be no substitute for high-quality professional intervention for promoting optimal development in such youth.

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