

Gaining new insights into mentoring programs for adolescent girls

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A study of a Big Brothers Big Sisters of America formal mentoring program, which matched adolescent girls with women mentors, revealed that strong emotional support and improvement in girls psychosocial functioning from these relationships was a dominant theme coupled with the development of new skills and confidence through collaborations.

Unlike previous mentoring studies, this one explicitly examined the relational processes in adolescent girls' relationship with female adult mentors from the perspective of the participants themselves. Each adolescent and mentor pair was extensively interviewed separately and then together. Their recorded comments were analyzed and revealed that [girls](#) benefit from both skill development and gain vital emotional support.

Those findings appear in the *Journal of Primary Prevention* in a study led by Renee Spencer, an assistant professor at Boston University School of Social Work and Belle Liang, an associate professor at Boston College that was published last month.

"In the absence of much research on gender in mentoring, many have assumed that boys are mostly interested in doing activities with male mentors, which, by nature, may be more focused on skill building and problem solving whereas girls are more interested in developing emotionally-focused relationships with mentors," said Spencer.

"However, in our study, we found that these girls' relationships with their mentors offered both emotional support and opportunities to develop

skills and confidence through collaborations with their mentors in shared activities, such as doing homework together or learning to sing."

A key ingredient needed for the healthy psychological development in [adolescents](#) is a strong relationship with adults. For these young people living in single-parent homes or coming from disadvantaged backgrounds, community-based mentoring programs try to create such connections by matching them with unrelated adult volunteers in the hope that a caring and supportive relationship will develop.

The study, "She Gives Me a Break from the World": Formal Youth Mentoring Relationships Between [Adolescent Girls](#) and Adult Women," involved in-depth interviews of 12 pairs of girls, referred to as protégées, and women who had been in a mentoring relationships for between 2.5 to 11 years. They were in a formal mentoring program established through the Big Sister Association of Greater Boston.

The girls, racially and ethnically diverse, ranged in age from 13 to 17 years, and were referred to the agency by friends and family members or child protective services case workers. The mentors, mostly single women, were White and 28 to 55-years of age. They met their protégées with parental consent, regularly three to four times per month for at least a year and routinely corresponded through emails and phone conversations.

While mentoring is often viewed as the adult offering support to the child, the study found that the collaboration of these 12 pairs was more of a two-way arrangement, in which "the adult partners or joins in the process of working with the child to meet her goals, offers scaffolding to expand the reach of the child and actively contributes to the learning, thereby enhancing the likelihood of success."

A thematic analysis of the three-part interviews (adolescent alone, adult

alone and pair together), some initial themes were identified and grouped into five larger categories: shared activities, emotional support, companionship, collaboration and improvement in the girls' psychosexual functioning.

Emotional support was a dominant theme with some girls saying, "I can tell her all my secrets," and "we talk about everything," while the mentors commented about "she knows she can talk to me about anything," and "She knows that I'm always gonna be there... But I think she tells me some things....that she doesn't tell her mom." Still others cited an adolescent girl's anger issues and the need to be a calming influence.

In developing new skills and confidence the girls would praise how they learned new things and gained help with their studies.

The study acknowledges that the mentors ability to listen, respond with genuine thoughts and opinions while not passing judgment was in part because they were freed from the responsibilities of parenting.

"For many of these girls, their mentors had the luxury of being able to spend lengthy amounts of time alone with them, something their stretched parents were often less able to offer," the study noted.

For everyone involved, companionship - the spending time together -- meant "fun," a word repeated by both protégées and mentors. Although for some mentors, "fun" meant spending a lot of money on particular things, the authors noted that "our findings, however, seem to suggest that girls enjoy trying new things in the context of close and supportive relationships."

The findings from this study suggest that programs serving girls should be cautious about prioritizing emotional support over skill-building, or

assuming that skill-building may undermine more collaborative or bi-directional relationships between female youth and adult program participants. Instead, attention should be given to integrating various types of support in interventions for girls, as emotional support and collaborative skill-building may play a synergistic role in supporting the positive development of female youth.

Source: Boston University

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