



Online Youth Mentoring: Creating a Safe and Comfortable Space can Result in Meaningful Digital Connections

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Ensuring consistent connection between mentors and mentees is vital, regardless of circumstances like the global pandemic of COVID-19. We explored the experiences of youth mentors during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic in the U.S. We studied (1) the role of the pandemic on mentor–mentee interactions and relationships and (2) the ways in which mentors could be supported during the health crisis to better meet youth needs.

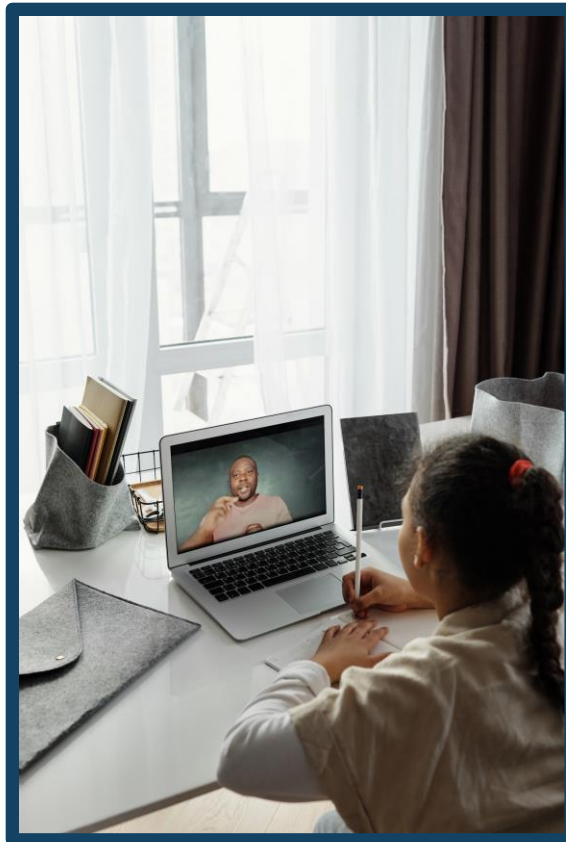


Figure 1 Photograph by August de Richelieu from Pexels. CCO

Highlights

The individual effort of youth mentors during the COVID-19 pandemic showed commitment and intentionality.

Mentoring programs can develop emergency plans (like moving to digital operations) to prepare for unexpected events with the intention of ensuring continuous support for mentees.

“During the early weeks of the pandemic, mentors continued to engage with mentees, offering valuable support during a confusing and scary time. Mentoring programs can broaden their approach, intentionally integrating online connecting in an effort to provide safe, appropriate, and continued support to both mentors and mentees.”

Methods

Six online focus groups were conducted with a total of 39 mentors in April 2020 using the Facebook private groups platform. Each focus group lasted approximately 60 minutes and provided opportunities for participants to comment on direct questions posted by the facilitators as well as to interact with other posts. Written comments were anonymized, copied into a document, and uploaded for coding and analysis.

Results

- Mentors in this study continued to connect with their mentees despite the difficulties created by the pandemic.
- As mentors transitioned to a primarily online format during the pandemic, text and video chat became the most common communication methods.
- Mentees' access to technology and privacy were the biggest challenges that mentors faced.
- Mentor concerns for their mentees varied, including mental health, school, family finances, and access to instrumental support and food.
- Mentors valued their relationships with mentees and were determined to adjust their own mentoring practices to suit the needs of the pandemic and each mentee as an individual.

HOW DID A COMMUNITY PSYCHOLOGY PERSPECTIVE INFORM YOUR WORK?

Youth mentoring is an example of how a community can be vital to the health and well-being of young people. Mentors stepped up for young people all over the country to ensure they were physically safe, caring for their emotional needs, and continuing academic progress the best they could.

What Does This Mean For...

Practice: Informed, comprehensive digital mentoring platforms can provide support during potential future shutdowns while also offering a new way of mentoring on a regular basis.

Research and Evaluation: Future research may explore what elements of a digital relationship make for strong e-mentoring. For instance, researchers could assess textual chats between mentors and mentees or code video calls to determine the qualities of a meaningful digital relationship (or identify what is counterproductive). Investigations should also assess whether e-mentoring differs in its effectiveness compared to in-person mentoring (or no mentoring at all) for youth more broadly. Finally, it would be useful to know if there are differences in the effectiveness of e-mentoring across youth age groups. Younger youth may be more difficult to engage via digital means, whereas teenagers may be more comfortable engaging in this way as compared to in person because they are used to communicating via digital technology with their peers.

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