



Support for Evidence-Based Mentoring for Youth in Foster Care

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Mentoring-based interventions for children in foster care are fairly common. Yet, we don't have much empirical evidence to demonstrate the effectiveness of these interventions. Children in the foster care system often have particularly complex interpersonal histories. Past trauma may simultaneously offer opportunity and challenge in mentoring relationships. In this study, we pay careful attention to the factors that affect the impact of relational interventions to avoid harm and increase the likelihood of positive impact.

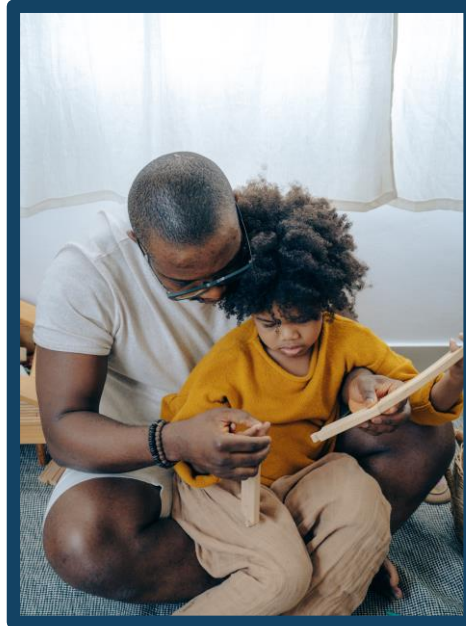


Figure 1 Photograph by Ketut Subiyanto from Pexels. CCO

“The results of this study are encouraging; the FHF program seems to be positively impacting mental health-related outcomes for children with varied relational histories.”

This study included 426 children between the ages of 9 and 11 who were placed in out-of-home care due to maltreatment. The goal of the study was to determine whether the children's relational histories (i.e., birth parent relationship quality, foster parent relationship quality, caregiver instability, and previous mentoring experience) would impact the degree to which they

Highlights

FHF is one of very few evidence-based youth mentoring interventions for youth in foster care.

Overall, FHF has positive effects on youth in foster care.

FHF improves the mental health of children with varied relational histories.

benefited from Fostering Healthy Futures (FHF), a 9-month mentoring and skills-based preventive intervention designed specifically for children in foster care.

Methods

Children were randomized to the FHF program or the control condition. Children's mental health, trauma symptoms, and quality of life were assessed prior to the participation and six months after the mentoring concluded. We then examined whether children's relational histories affected degree of impact of FHF on children's mental health, trauma symptoms, and quality of life.

Results

- While children's early relational histories may affect the impact of mentoring programs, Fostering Healthy Futures (FHF) improves mental health of children with varied relational histories.
- FHF's impact on trauma symptoms and quality of life were stronger for children with fewer caregiver changes pre-program.
- FHF's impact on quality of life was stronger for children with poorer quality birth parent relationships.

HOW DID A COMMUNITY PSYCHOLOGY PERSPECTIVE INFORM YOUR WORK?

This work is connected to Community Psychology by emphasizing individual and community strengths, considering the impact of context, and using a collaborative and systemic approach.

What Does This Mean For?

Research and Evaluation: This study found that youth with fewer pre-program caregiver transitions benefited more from the intervention than other children on some outcomes. Future research should examine the impact of caregiver transition during mentoring interventions on the process and outcomes.

Practice: Program models like FHF can feel encouraged by the study outcomes. Although we were unable to examine the specific intervention components that contributed to positive outcomes despite varied relational histories, the combination with skills groups and the use of graduate students as mentors are two aspects to consider. Graduate student mentors in FHF receive ongoing supervision within an educational context, which implies they have more opportunity to develop advanced skills. As a result, FHF mentors may be skilled to work effectively with children with varied relational histories resulting in relatively consistent impacts. For stand-alone mentoring interventions serving youth in foster care, it may be helpful to examine the background, training, and support of mentors and consider the use of groups (e.g., skills-related, support). Additionally, the time-limited nature of the FHF program likely aids in promoting healthy good-byes and ensuring that premature terminations are very rare.

Social Action: Well-designed interventions can support youth in foster care, but not all organizations have the capacity - financial or otherwise - to support such programs properly and sustainably. Advocating for funding, drawing on capacity-building entities, and collaborating with similar programs are needed to elevate program impact.

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