

One-to-one mentoring programmes and problem behaviour in adolescence

WHAT WORKS FOR CHILDREN?

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- There are several models of mentoring. This Evidence Nugget reports on one-to-one mentoring, delivered by a volunteer and organised by a dedicated mentoring project or scheme.
- One-to-one mentoring programmes can have different aims ranging from being a preventative measure to helping young people change their disruptive behaviour. This nugget focuses on the latter.
- A review of 55 individual mentoring evaluations found that overall the programmes had a small but beneficial effect on problem and high-risk behaviour, when measured by the young people's own report.
- Many evaluations have reported positive experiences by young people who sustain their relationship with their mentor. Little research has looked at why so many mentoring relationships break down, and the effect this has on the young people.
- Increasingly mentors are used as part of a multi-component project where mentoring is one part of a range of tailor-made packages for young people. Research indicates that these programmes are more successful than those delivering mentoring on its own.
- Some research has found that mentoring can cause harm, particularly when relationships break down and when delivered to young people who exhibit personal vulnerabilities.

The searches for this Evidence Nugget were first done in 2002 with some updates in spring 2003 in response to reviewers' comments. A further update of the literature was conducted May 2006. As new research becomes available, this version of the Evidence Nugget will become dated.

What are mentoring programmes?

Attachment theory has identified a child's relation to adults as important for his or her cognitive and emotional development.¹ Resilience research has found that children who do well in spite of adversity have often had a close and nurturing relationship with an adult from outside their family.² Planned mentoring aims to facilitate the creation of such relationships.

There are many forms of mentoring. This Evidence Nugget describes the type of mentoring where an adult volunteer provides support or guidance to someone younger or less experienced. The relationship is established within the framework of a formal mentoring project, which normally provides support and guidance to the mentors and coordinate the matching of mentors to young people. The mentoring consists of regular one-to-one meetings between a mentor and a young person over an extended period of time. Some mentoring is delivered as part of a larger package of services.

Mentoring relationships may be encouraged to develop in different directions. Some programmes aim to reintegrate the young person into a mainstream school or workplace. Others provide a mentor as an additional support to the family. Some programmes have a preventative brief, working with children and young people perceived to be at risk of developing challenging behaviour.

Mentoring also exists in other contexts such as workplaces, or as peer-mentoring, but these models are not considered here.

What are problem behaviours?

Adolescence is often associated with problem behaviours, but the definition of what this incorporates varies. This Evidence Nugget focuses on young people who are seen as being at risk of developing a persistent pattern of problem behaviour, indicated by their involvement in offending, substance abuse and truanting. The nugget does not cover diagnosable disorders such as conduct disorder, although some of the young people in the included studies may have been diagnosed with a mental health problem.

Young people's behaviour results from individual, biological, genetic and environmental factors.^{3,4} A number of factors such as learning disability, low income, parental alcohol abuse, having a teenage mother, hostility in the parent-child relationship or parental divorce increase chances of a young person developing problem behaviours. A Canadian study reported that 50% of children exposed to four or more of the risks above were found to have behaviour problems, compared to ten per cent of children exposed to none of the risks.⁵

Parenting and family interaction account for as much as 30-40% of the variation in child antisocial behaviour.⁶⁻⁸ Parenting practices found to have a

negative impact on children's emotional and behavioural adjustment include harsh and inconsistent discipline, high levels of criticism, poor supervision, low involvement, and a lack of warmth in the parent-child relationship.^{6,9-12}

Conversely, children who have other warm relationships (e.g. with siblings, relations, teachers and peers) but live in stressful home environments, have been found to have comparable levels of problem behaviour to children living in low risk environments.^{1,3}

Impact

Size of the problem

Over 9,000 children, mostly boys, were permanently excluded from school in the 2002/2003 school year.¹³ Sixty percent of young people excluded from school have offended, compared with only a quarter of those in mainstream education.¹⁴

Children and young people are both victims and perpetrators of crime. In a survey by the Home Office, more than a third of children aged 10-15 had experienced at least one personal crime in the last twelve months¹⁵. Young people excluded from school, or whose siblings were in trouble with the police, were more likely to be victimised¹⁶.

Short and long term effects

A minority of young people who are involved in truancy and offending go on to become persistent offenders.¹⁷ Behaviour problems are nevertheless associated with poor academic achievement, low self-esteem, poor social skills and depressive symptoms.¹⁸ Lack of formal educational qualification is associated with greater unemployment and substance misuse in adulthood.¹⁹ These outcomes are more likely when the behaviour problems start in early childhood.^{20,21}

Who will benefit the most?

Behaviour likely to bring about a caution or conviction is a particular problem in young men. In the year 2000, there were around 2 cautions or convictions for every 100 young men aged 10-15 years, compared with less than 1 per 100 females in the same age group.²²

Schools in more deprived areas are likely to have higher rates of unauthorised absence and poorer results at primary and secondary level.²³ An intervention that targets school absence and criminal behaviour may help reduce these inequalities.

Research evidence

Systematic Reviews:

A systematic review is a method of comprehensively identifying, critically appraising, summarising and attempting to reconcile the research evidence on a specific question.^{24,25}

A **meta-analysis** is a statistical technique combining results from several studies into one overall estimate of the effect of an intervention.

The most comprehensive review of the mentoring literature is a meta-analysis of 55 studies of mentoring programmes.²⁶ The review found a small positive effect from mentoring on young people's problem behaviour, measured by self-report. The authors did not find an overall effect on behaviour when looking at administrative records (e.g. police and school records).

This indicates that mentoring programmes are unlikely to have an overall effect on the behaviour of young people. Importantly, some studies have found that mentoring may have a negative effect for young people who are particularly vulnerable.²⁷⁻²⁹

One study found that when a mentoring relationship breaks down, it can have negative effects on the young person in terms of increased alcohol use and self-esteem. Mentoring relationships were more likely to break down when the young people had been "referred for psychological or educational programmes or had sustained emotional, sexual or physical abuse".²⁹

Four UK studies have looked at the effect on mentoring.³⁰⁻³³ The studies report mixed results and no overall conclusion can be drawn from the findings. Individual accounts of mentoring are often positive,^{30,34} but young people who drop out, or do not get on with their mentor, are seldom asked about their opinion.

Four UK studies of mentoring

Project CHANCE³²

Volunteer mentoring.

Young people: With behaviour problems, referred from primary schools which met government criteria for social and economic deprivation. **Evaluation:** Behaviour of 25 mentored children compared with 25 non-mentored children, at the start of the mentoring and one year after. **Results:** No statistically significant differences between mentored and non-mentored children in terms of behaviour³⁵, exclusions from school, number of school absences, appearance on special needs register, reading age or test results in English, maths or science. Parents were positive about mentoring and felt that their children benefited from being part of the scheme.

Dalston Youth Project³⁰

Volunteer mentoring alongside after-school tutoring. Parents are offered parenting classes.

Young people: Aged between 11 and 14, underachieving at school, with behavioural problems, mostly from materially poor home backgrounds, living in dysfunctional families. **Evaluation:** Information collected from teachers (about academic achievement) and the police (offending behaviour). Outcomes for those who remained in the programme were compared with the outcomes of those who dropped out. **Results:** No statistically significant changes were observed in school performance or rates of offending in response to the project. Offending behaviour fell (by 40%) in the group as a whole, but those committing crimes were equally likely to have been mentored as not.

The Persistent Young Offender Project (PYOP)³¹

Volunteer mentoring. Siblings are welcomed to participate in activities. Parents are offered counselling.

Young people: Aged between 7 and 16, assessed as being in need of intervention to prevent offending. **Evaluation:** 41 young people who stayed with the programme for more than 6 months were compared with 19 young people who dropped out from the project within the first 2 weeks. The groups were assessed at entry and 6 months later, using LSI-R. LSI-R measures children's risk of offending (e.g. criminal history, attitudes to offending, personal distress). **Results:** The mentored young people improved in terms of how they spent their spare time, attitudes and engagement with education, financial problems and attitudes to crime. The same improvement was not seen in the young people who dropped out. The findings were statistically significant.

Mentoring Plus³³

Volunteer mentoring alongside a structured education and careers programme.

Young people: Aged between 15 and 19, referred mainly through statutory agencies (youth offending teams, social services, educational welfare), seen as being in need of an adult role model, and who expressed an interest in the programme.

Evaluation: 389 mentored young people were compared with 172 who opted not to take part. At the start of the project, and after 12 months, young people filled in a survey about their education, training, work, offending, substance use, and lifestyle.

Results: Offending levels dropped irrespective of whether or not the young people had been mentored, alcohol use increased in both groups, and illicit drug use remained the same. Mentoring did not appear to impact on young people's self esteem or locus of control (belief about the amount of control a person has over situations in their life). The mentored young people improved marginally more in their education and work, and well-implemented programmes achieved better results. The young people said that the education component had been more helpful than the mentoring.

The choice of evaluation methods can make it difficult to interpret some of the UK findings. Three of the studies compared mentored young people with those who dropped out. But we don't know whether those who remained in a mentoring relationship had personal characteristics that meant they would have utilised any kind of help or service. Those who dropped out may have stayed, and improved their situation, if the service on offer was something other than mentoring. Or those who dropped out may have been in less or more need of help than those who stayed.

To get a more reliable picture of the effects of mentoring, it is best to compare two similar groups of young people. Ideally, mentoring should be randomly assigned so that there are no systematic differences between the groups. This is also a fair solution when there is a waiting list. If randomisation is not possible, the groups ought to be matched on key characteristics. For a useful comparison, the comparison group should not be offered mentoring in the first place. The evaluation of Project CHANCE is a good example of how this can be done.³²

What are the policy and practice implications?

Mentoring programmes have been targeted at groups of children experiencing difficulty in their lives as a result of their challenging behaviour; for example those referred by schools, police, court, social welfare agencies³⁶⁻³⁸, identified as having multiple and serious difficulties (e.g. contact with police, history of exclusion)³⁰, pregnancy while still at school³⁹ or with diagnosable behaviour problems.³² Young people in these difficult situations are often brought into contact with welfare agencies in the hope that early support may offset later disadvantages.

The main costs of mentoring programmes are in managing the scheme and providing training and support for mentors who are usually volunteers from the local community. The recruitment, training and matching of mentors and young people demand significant resources. In most schemes care has been taken to match the mentor and mentee for gender, ethnicity or experience. The aim of this matching is to increase the likelihood of successful relationships forming, although research has not supported this theory.²⁶

The Dalston youth project provided educational support and a residential weekend as well as mentoring. Total running costs were £110,000 per year. On average 19 young people were recruited to the project per year, making the average cost per young person £5,800. Had the maximum of 30 young people completed the programme the cost would have been £3,700.³⁰ Project CHANCE cost approximately £10,000 per child per year during the 1997-2000 evaluation period, although again the projected cost was lower (£3,000 per child) based on an estimate of larger numbers of children completing.³²

A study of the cost of 52 mentoring programmes in the USA found that the average budget was \$324,000 per programme, and \$1,114 per mentee. The range between the programmes was wide, from an average of \$12 to \$1,900 per young person per year. When including in-kind donations and the voluntary work (mainly provided by the mentors) these figures increased and no mentoring scheme was able to provide services for less than \$189 per young person, with some costs as high as \$9,000 per mentee. The larger programmes had higher costs.⁴⁰ We do not know whether this is because larger programmes require more paid administrative work or whether they provide more intensive mentoring.

If changes in behaviour, employment prospects, or service uptake were observed then some of the project costs could be offset against savings in these areas.

Practice Recommendations

On evidence to date, mentoring programmes do not appear to be a promising intervention for young people who are at risk of permanent school exclusion, those with poor school attendance, involved in criminal activities, with histories of aggressive or disruptive behaviour, or those already involved with welfare agencies.

Few studies reported the frequency of contact between mentors and young people or the length of the relationship.²⁶ Although most studies acknowledge the negative impact of “failed” mentoring relationships⁴¹, none has looked at this systematically.

Some mentoring schemes have managed to sustain a large proportion of their matches. For example, in Project CHANCE 79% of young people maintained a relationship with a responsible adult outside their family for the period of the study.³² For young people who are failing to engage at school or within their community this relationship might in itself be viewed as a positive outcome. In the UK mentoring programmes have proven to be more expensive than anticipated in pilot projects due to drop out or failure to recruit.

Promising approaches

In view of the research evidence, it may be prudent to consider alternative interventions where larger behavioural changes have been demonstrated such as some forms of parent training and cognitive behavioural therapies (CBT).
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One study, looking at the impact of volunteers working with young offenders has found promising effects when using more directive approaches. The volunteers were trained for eight weeks before meeting the young person and they were closely supervised during the programme (2 hours per week).

Each volunteer met with the young person 6-8 hours a week and the most successful group in reducing offending used advocacy and behavioural contracting in their work with the young person. So for example, the young people were given rewards for appropriate behaviour. The young person's carers were also trained in these techniques so that they could continue to use them after the scheme had finished.⁴²

How will you audit a mentoring programme?

Audit provides a method for systematically reflecting on and reviewing practice. It aims to establish how close practice is to the agreed level of best practice. This is achieved by setting standards and targets and comparing practice against these.

Consider whether a mentoring programme is the most appropriate response to the needs of children and families in your area. What issues do parents and children want to be helped with and how? Then consider whether the appropriate conditions are in place for your agency to implement mentoring programmes. Are the necessary people and sufficient training resources and funds available?

Further down the line, the question is; is it happening? How many young people are attending the programme? Are young people in the target population accessing the scheme? Are you able to meet the demand for mentoring programmes?⁴³

The auditing of mentoring programmes should pay attention to the aspects of the programme that users do and don't like. Staff should be given appropriate training and support, and staff, young people and mentors asked for feedback about the pros and cons of particular aspects of the programme.

How will you evaluate a mentoring programme?

Service evaluation may be defined as a set of procedures to judge a service's merit by providing a systematic assessment of its aims, objectives, activities, outcomes and costs. Audit may be one activity which takes place during a service evaluation, alongside other activities such as routine data gathering, incident reporting and interviews with staff and service users.

Not enough is known about the impact of mentoring in combination with other interventions. If you decide to set up a mentoring scheme in your area it will be particularly important to put in place evaluation to look at whether it is working as you hoped it might. Research²⁶ indicates that good outcomes increase as more theory and empirically defined best practice is used. Sustained mentoring relationships appear most likely to have a preventive potential, and this should be considered in the design of any programme.

We currently do not know whether mentoring is an overall positive intervention. Mentoring therefore needs to be evaluated in a randomised controlled trial. When comparing a mentored group with a non-mentored group, we can see whether mentoring has benefits. It is not possible to get this overview when looking at individual cases. In addition to a trial it will be important to look at the process of implementation, and to speak with a wide variety of children and young people who are eligible for the scheme. It is important to gain the views of those who choose to participate and those who choose not to.

Search Strategy:

A search strategy documents how studies were found; which databases/libraries/other contacts were used to find studies and when, what key words were used to locate them and what limitations were put on the search.
Age limits: Birth to 18 years, or school age as appropriate.
Search terms: mentor or mentor* in title or abstract, meta-analysis; review; randomised controlled trial/control groups/experimental design/control in title or abstract; program evaluation, mentoring evaluation, mentor* school, mentor* school research.
Databases searched: Medline; PsycINFO; ERIC; British Education Index (BEI); ChildData; Google (for resource information only)
Experts in the field were contacted for guidance on other sources of information.
Bibliographies of sources were examined for additional references. The conclusions made should be viewed in the light of this restricted search strategy.

The Research Team

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