

# ATTACHMENT D

# WORKING TO MAKE IT WORK: THE ROLE OF PARENTS IN THE YOUTH MENTORING PROCESS

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*Theoretical and empirical work on youth mentoring relationships has been largely focused on the mentor-youth dyad, with little attention to the larger context within which such relationships form and develop. The perspectives of parents have been absent for the most part from the mentoring literature to date. In-depth, semistructured, qualitative interviews were conducted with parents (n = 13) of youth who were participating in a community-based mentoring program. Four major themes were identified: parents' (a) hopes and expectations for the mentoring relationship, (b) trust in the mentor and satisfaction with the relationship, (c) roles in the mentoring relationship, and (d) reflections on and experiences with cultural differences between their child and the mentor. © 2010 Wiley Periodicals, Inc.*

The theoretical and empirical work on youth mentoring relationships has focused largely on the mentor-youth dyad (Rhodes, 2002), with little attention to the larger context within which these ties form and develop. A notable exception is Keller's (2005) systemic model, which situates mentoring relationships within family and agency contexts; however, this model has yet to be explored empirically. In particular, the perspectives of parents—key figures in children's lives—have been absent for the most part from the mentoring literature to date. Even the rare discussions of parents'

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roles and influences are based on information gathered from other sources (e.g., Styles & Morrow, 1992), rather than directly from parents themselves. When parents are included in the research, it is typically to serve as an additional reporter of youth characteristics and outcomes (e.g., DuBois, Neville, Parra, & Pugh-Lilly, 2002). In the present study, the role of parents in the youth mentoring process is examined from the perspectives of parents themselves.

Mentions of parents in the youth mentoring literature tend to appear in either speculations that youth seek mentors to compensate for unsatisfactory parental relationships or discussions of parents' potential negative influence on the mentoring process. Thus, it has been suggested that programs should minimally involve parents. For example, Miller (2007), detailing best practice principles for formal youth mentoring relationships, urges programs to "seek the support of parents/carers" but "not their active engagement in the mentoring process," as "nonsupportive parents can sabotage the mentor-protégé relationship" (p. 318). Styles and Morrow (1992), in a qualitative study of formal youth mentoring relationships, describe some of the problems associated with parents, such as miscommunications between mentors and parents, parents drawing mentors into family disputes, and parents' attempts to influence the mentoring relationships, all from the perspectives of mentors as no parents were included in this study. In another qualitative study (Philip, Shucksmith, & King, 2004), many of both the professional and the volunteer mentors noted their efforts to maintain "distance" in their relationships with the families to prioritize the relationship with their protégés. At the same time, some evidence points to the potential importance of parents. In a meta-analysis of program evaluations, (DuBois, Holloway, Valentine, & Cooper, 2002) found parental involvement to be among a group of program practices associated with more positive youth outcomes. In a review of studies of 10 mentoring programs, Jekielek and colleagues (2002) conclude that "youth are more likely to benefit if mentors ... know their families" (p. 5).

Virtually none of this work has included the perspectives of parents (see Philip et al., 2004, for an exception). Evidence linking parental involvement in mentoring programs with greater program effectiveness (DuBois, Holloway et al., 2002) coupled with more systemic conceptualizations of youth mentoring (Keller, 2005) call for more concerted study of parental roles in and influences on youth mentoring relationships. The purpose of the present study was to explore parents' own understanding of the mentoring process, including their hopes and expectations, their assessment of the relationship quality, and their understanding of the role they played in the development and maintenance of their child's mentoring relationship.

## **METHOD**

### ***Participants***

Thirteen parents (12 female) serving as primary caregivers for children whom they had enrolled in a community-based youth mentoring program were interviewed. These parents ranged in age from 30 to 52 years (mean [ $M$ ] = 40, standard deviation [ $SD$ ] = 7.05) and were a racially and ethnically diverse group, with five identifying as White, two as African American, five as Latina, one as Puerto Rican, and one as biracial. All reported having a household income of less than \$40,000 per year. The children of these participants were 9 to 14 years of age ( $M$  = 11.58,  $SD$  = 1.51) and had been matched with their mentors for less than 1 year.

### **Procedure**

Participants were recruited through two agencies affiliated with Big Brothers Big Sisters of America (BBBSA) in an urban area in the Northeast. The stated goal of these programs is to facilitate supportive, nurturing, and enduring one-to-one relationships between adult volunteer mentors and youth. Agency case managers asked parents of children who participated in their programs whether they would be willing to be interviewed by a researcher about their experiences with the programs. Parents who agreed were contacted and asked to participate. Consent was obtained at the time of interview and participants received \$20 upon completion of the interview.

Each parent participated in an in-depth (Johnson, 2002), semistructured (Seidman, 1991), in-person interview. The interviews lasted approximately 1 hour and took place in either the home or the workplace of the participant. The interviewers utilized a semistructured interview protocol and the topics that were addressed included parents' hopes and expectations for the mentoring relationship, perceptions of the nature and quality of the mentoring relationship, and their own relationship with their child's mentor. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis.

### **Analysis**

The verified interview transcripts were analyzed using a three-step process. Each transcript was read in its entirety multiple times and a narrative summary was constructed (Way, 1998). Three coders conducted a thematic analysis using a holistic-content approach (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998). Initial themes were identified and discussed by the coders, who agreed on four major themes (detailed below) for further examination. The coders recoded all of the interviews for the four major themes and entered the associated quotations into conceptually clustered matrices (Miles & Huberman, 1994) that were constructed for each theme to detect patterns and identify subthemes across the interviews.

## **RESULTS**

### ***Parents' Hopes and Expectations for the Mentoring Relationship***

The parents spoke about two distinct sets of hopes and expectations: (a) what they had hoped a mentor could offer their child when they made the decision to enroll the child in the program and (b) what they had expected their own relationship with the child's mentor would be like. There was a good deal of consistency among these parents with regard to their hopes and expectations for the mentor-youth relationship. They stated their desire that the mentor serve as an additional positive adult role model and confidant for their child. Further, many hoped that the mentor would offer their child experiences and opportunities different from those they and the other supportive adults in their child's life could provide and that such experiences would contribute to a broadening of their child's sense of self and future possibilities.

There was greater variation in parents' expectations for their own relationship with their child's mentor. Most expressed a desire to have a personal connection; however, some simply hoped for open and consistent communication, while others expected the mentor would become an active participant in family activities and special events. As a parent in the later group said, "If she's building this relationship with my

daughter, then she's gonna be part of this family, too." For some of these parents, a lack of closeness with the mentor was not a primary concern as long as the mentor had a good relationship with their child. For others, the distance in their own relationship with the mentor became a source of concern and seemed to contribute to parents' diminished satisfaction with the mentoring relationship.

### ***Trust and Satisfaction***

Parents spoke about experiencing feelings of trust when the mentor demonstrated (a) clear commitment, (b) genuine positive regard for their child, and (c) respect for parental guidelines. Parents viewed mentors as committed when the mentor demonstrated attentiveness to the child's interests, spent a significant amount of time and consistently communicated with their child, and kept promises. As one mother stated, the mentor's "conscientiousness really shows me that she respects my daughter ... She's taking the time out of her busy schedule to make time to see my daughter, when she's supposed to see her. Not just haphazardly, here or there." Another parent described the impact of a lack of consistency on the part of the mentor: "Where I get upset is if you're disappointing my child, and you're not in communication with her and she's asking me about you and I don't know what to tell her ... that upsets me because it upsets her." This parent talked directly with the mentor about this concern and noted that although the mentor still did not see her daughter every week, the mentor had at least begun calling consistently.

The theme of positive regard arose from parents' assessment of the mentor's fundamental respect, interest, and enjoyment of time with their child. Parents spoke about their observations of how the mentor interacted with their child and the mentor's levels of attentiveness and attunement to their child's hobbies and interests. Mentors who showed genuine interest and investment in developing a nurturing relationship with their child earned these parents' trust and respect.

Respect for parents' own judgment and rules for their children also seemed to engender deeper levels of parental trust and satisfaction. One parent described how she instructed the mentor to provide structure and consequences for her daughter, who had exhibited some behaviour problems in previous relationships with adults: "I told her at any point in time she feels ... that [the child] is gettin' out of control, or gettin' ready to escalate, just bring her home ... So, she did." This parent appreciated the mentor's respect for her wishes and continued to say she was "really liking" this mentor who was "becoming part of the family." In contrast, one parent described feeling that the child's mentor disregarded her guidelines for her child. She recounted a time when she had explicitly given the mentor permission to take her daughter to a movie she knew the girl wanted to see, despite its PG rating, saying to the parent that she did not think it was "an appropriate movie." About her response, the parent said, "I just looked at her ... I didn't say nothin'." The mentor took the child to see a Disney movie instead, which the parent thought the child had not enjoyed. This parent went on to express her sense that the mentoring relationship was not going well overall and that neither she nor her daughter felt connected to the mentor.

### ***Parents' Roles in the Relationship***

Three main types of parental roles emerged from these parents' narratives: (a) collaborator, (b) coach, and (c) mediator. In 8 of the 13 cases, parents played at least

two roles, which, in some cases, changed over the course of the mentoring relationship. Parents who served as a *collaborator* took an active role engaging in the mentoring relationship, working together with the mentor to help facilitate the development and promote the efficacy of the relationship. In some cases, these collaborations were focused on helping to structure the relationship, such as providing suggestions for activities that would engage the child or actively coordinate schedules in a complimentary fashion. Other parents and mentors teamed up in deeper ways. As one parent noted, she and the mentor “look at ... things in a different way” and they capitalized on this by “work(ing) as a team.” She would let the mentor know when her child had a particular “problem” so that the mentor would “talk to her and stuff and then try to get things going” and then relate back what she learned. These collaborations seemed to grow out of friendly and more personal relationships established between parents and mentors.

In other cases, especially those in which the mentor was considerably younger than the parent and relatively close in age to the child, the parent served as a *coach* to the mentor. Some noted what they perceived to be a lack of maturity in the mentor, which they attributed to both age and lack of parenting experience. A couple of participants expressed parent-like concern for the mentor’s well-being and even coached the mentors on their own lives. Some seemed to embrace this gap and enjoy serving as coach. Others seemed to long for a more collaborative relationship but settled for the coach role to try to ensure a productive relationship with their child.

Parents who acted as *mediators* did so out of a sense that they needed to take action to protect their child’s best interests by trying either to preserve the mentoring relationship or end it when it became untenable. One parent served as a mediator by actively working to quell her child’s anxiety about the mentor dropping out of contact at times. Because the parent saw value in the relationship, in spite of the mentor’s inconsistency, she focused on helping her child tolerate the times when the mentor fell out of touch: “I just always told [child]... (the mentor’s) a student and ... there are gonna be many times when he’s just gonna be completely out, and you just gotta ... wait and he’ll be back.” In another case, the parent deemed the lack of communication too disruptive for her child. Stating that she was “very upset” by the mentor having “basically dumped” her daughter “like a hot potato” during her busy season at work, she decided to end the match. Parents contacted mentors directly or turned to the agency for help when they observed a lack of communication or infrequent meetings. It was a meaningful gesture to a parent when the mentor responded positively to this intervention.

### ***Differences in Racial and Social Class Backgrounds***

Just over half (eight) of the youth were paired with mentors who did not share their racial and ethnic background, and all but one were matched with mentors with higher incomes. Among parents who explicitly expressed preferences about the mentor’s racial background, some indicated they had desired a mentor with a racial background similar to that of their child (“I really had hoped it would be a woman of color ... I should have said that”), others had no preference, and one parent of color requested a Caucasian mentor. Some spoke to how they thought sharing a racial background could facilitate the development of the relationship, through shared cultural traditions and experiences of feeling different from the mainstream, as well as enhancing the role

modelling aspects of the relationship, by allowing their children to more fully imagine themselves being like their mentors and able to achieve what they had achieved. As one parent said, "It's a little different to see somebody like yourself ... to serve as that role model? ... 'That could be me.' You know what I mean? 'That could be me.'" This parent also noted that most of the other adults in leadership roles in her daughter's life were Caucasian.

A couple of parents expressed reluctance to state their preference for a mentor of color, as they were aware of the limited pool and concerned that their child would have had to wait even longer for a mentor. Some parents also spoke to the opportunities presented by cross-race matches, such as the learning that can result from engaging with someone from a different cultural background. One parent speculated about whether differences in racial backgrounds might be contributing to the distance she observed in her child's, and experienced in her own, relationship with the mentor. Despite having been matched "for almost a year," the parent noted the mentor continued to identify herself by her first and last name each time she called and seemed "uncomfortable" when she came to the house, refusing the parent's offers to come inside and sit down while waiting for the child to be ready to leave. Not sure what to make of these behaviors, this parent said, "I don't know if she feels uncomfortable... because of the race? ... Or, if she's just a person that's uncomfortable around certain people until she doesn't know them?" The parent had not spoken to the program about this. Having waited several years for her daughter to be matched, a less than ideal mentor seemed better than no mentor at all.

Whereas many of these parents tended to view same-race matches as more desirable if less attainable, they were inclined to see greater opportunity in having their children matched with mentors from more advantaged class backgrounds. They observed how much their children enjoyed going on outings to restaurants, museums, and professional sporting events, experiences they otherwise may not have had, and spoke about how having personal connections with professionals who had college educations could serve to raise their child's aspirations and motivation for educational and occupational achievement. One parent poignantly described her desire for this kind of modeling by relaying that when her daughter expressed a desire to be like her when she grows up, she felt like saying "No... no! You want to be better than me!" She liked that the mentor offered her daughter the opportunity "to be around people" that she can "look up to and ... see what they have achieved in their lifetime" and know that she can "achieve more."

However, at times these positive feelings were accompanied by feelings of discomfort. One parent felt conflicted about the mentor taking her child shopping and spending what, to the parent, was a great deal of money on her child. She was glad for her daughter to have the nice things the mentor purchased and enjoyed seeing her child's pleasure. However, she also felt "guilt" and indebtedness to the mentor: "I can't afford paying her back anything ... So, I feel so bad." To not interfere with her daughter's pleasure, this parent put her own personal values aside ("if I borrow something from you or my neighbor ... I buy her and give it back to her") and dealt with her discomfort in silence. She focused on how the amount of money spent did not have the same meaning for the mentor, "For her, it's like nothing," and the many other benefits to her daughter that had "nothing to do with the money—"I can't be more grateful for everything she's doing" and "it's a huge blessing."

## DISCUSSION

This study suggests that parents may play a significant but, to date, largely unnoted role in youth mentoring relationships. All of these parents were active participants in their child's relationship, whether by teaming up with the mentor in an effort to address specific concerns or running interference behind the scenes when the mentor fell out of touch or behaved in ways the child had difficulty understanding. Some parents enjoyed a relatively easy relationship with the mentor, whereas others experienced distance or discomfort. Rather than filling some void in the child's life with regard to positive adult role models, these parents' hoped a mentor could expand their child's horizons, offering a range of positive experiences that would enhance their child's well-being and expand his or her sense of self and future possibilities. This stands in contrast to the expectation on the part of some mentors that they will be serving as the central positive adult presence in the child's life; an expectation that can contribute to the mentor feeling disappointment or a diminished sense of self-perceived value to the child (Spencer, 2007). Such mismatches in expectations between parents and mentors may interfere with the development of the more collaborative parent-mentor relationships, for which some of the parents had hoped. Understanding parents' motivations for their child to have a mentor could provide mentoring program staff with important information to guide their efforts to make effective matches and provide meaningful ongoing support.

These findings lend support to Keller's (2005) systemic model of youth mentoring relationships, which calls attention to the "network of relationships" within which the mentoring dyad is situated (p. 170), especially relationships with parents and guardians and mentoring program staff. Keller suggests that exchanges within these other important relationships likely "help or hinder the mentor-youth relationship" and contribute to its efficacy (p. 170). For most of these parents, developing some type of relationship with the mentor was important and the nature and quality of the relationship established with the mentor seemed to influence the role that a parent would play in the mentoring process. When parents had formed friendly or close relationships with the mentor, they tended to be serving in more collaborative and supportive roles in the mentoring relationship. When the relationship was more distant, parents relied on their child's experiences and sense of satisfaction. In these cases, parents who had the sense that the relationship might deteriorate or potentially even become harmful stepped in to take action in some way.

These parents' desires for a relationship with the child's mentor suggests a potential mismatch between some parents' need for personal connection with the mentor and many programs' tendency to encourage mentors to maintain more distance (cf Garringer & Jucovy, 2007). The parents in the present study seemed to feel better about their child's mentoring relationship if they had been able to establish some kind of working relationships with the mentor. The lack of a personal connection appeared to heighten some parents' concerns and diminish their satisfaction with the relationship. Apprehension about parental over-involvement and sabotage of the mentor—youth relationship may be over-shadowing the potential importance, and perhaps even benefits, of fostering strong working relationships between parents and mentors. In the absence of careful empirical study of the many different ways parent are and are not involved in the youth mentoring process, powerful anecdotes about negative situations may hold sway. At the same time, it should be noted that it is possible that these parents who agreed to participate in this study may be more interested in active relationships

with their child's mentor than parents of youth participants in mentoring programs more generally. Programs may need to tailor their support efforts in ways that allow for more nuanced assessments of how best to work with individual mentors and families to maximize the benefits of mentoring for each child and family.

These parents' observations about the ways that racial, ethnic, and economic differences between their children and their mentors were being negotiated lend insight into the complexity of the dynamics within these relationships that has not been captured in previous research that relied on the perspectives of mentors and youth alone. Parents may not express their actual preferences regarding the mentor's racial and ethnic background, potentially contributing to a false sense that it does not matter much to parents. On the program level, special consideration may need to be given to how to elicit and respond to parents' concerns and hopes for the relationship.

For the most part, these parents were pleased that mentoring had afforded their children access to new opportunities and experiences. Indeed, this was precisely what many of these parents had hoped mentoring could offer. Some also spoke about the potential for the mentors' social class status to provide tangible motivation for their children to perform well in school, so that they may reach beyond the income and education levels of their family, as well as directly and personally link their children with adults engaged in professional employment. At the same time, their narratives shine light on some of the difficult, and even painful, feelings some parents may bear when mentors with more privileged backgrounds enter into the life of their child and therefore their family. Greater attention to whether and how programs are supporting parents in this process is needed so that such tensions do not place parents in unduly difficult situations that could potentially undermine the mentoring relationship.

There are limitations to what can be concluded from a study of this size and scope. The small and select group of parents who participated may be different in many ways from parents of youth in mentoring programs more generally. Most notably, parents who agreed to be interviewed may have a greater interest in being involved in the mentoring process. Still, the findings focus attention on the larger contexts within which mentoring occurs and shed light on some of the different roles that parents may play. As other research on youth has indicated, parents have a distinct perspective on their children's lives and note aspects of their children's circumstances that youth themselves do not report (Davies, Davis, Cook, & Waters, 2008). Having parents reflect on their own experiences of the mentoring process, rather than simply serving as reporters on the mentoring dyad, yielded important insights and indicated that gleaned parents' experiences could greatly contribute to our understanding of how mentoring works. Finally, understanding what types of parental involvement under which conditions may be the most productive could help improve the quality and efficacy of youth mentoring relationships.

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