Predictors of Natural Mentoring Relationships Among Former Foster Youth


The study examined the benefits that natural mentoring relationships may provide for youth emancipating from foster care. Natural mentors were defined broadly to include close, supportive relationships with non-parent adults that develop outside formal mentoring programs. Unlike non-foster youth, foster youths’ ties to their families, peers, and communities have been weakened by the experiences of maltreatment, removal from home, and disrupted foster care placements. Given the challenging circumstances facing many foster youth and the hypothesized benefits of natural mentoring relationships, child welfare services should endeavor to fortify the ability and willingness of foster youth to develop and maintain social connections after emancipating from care. In this way, efforts to help foster youth build natural mentoring relationships can be seen as a potentially important tool in facilitating successful transitions to adulthood.

The basic premise of the investigation was that the existence and quality of natural mentoring relationships will be a function of (1) a youth’s ability to develop and maintain interpersonal relationships and (2) the mentoring opportunities that are available within a youth’s social ecologies. Data for this study came from the Midwest Evaluation of Former Foster Youth. Data were collected during five waves of computer-assisted interviews; the results for the last three interview waves were used in the current study. Multiple measures were completed by the youth during the interviews. The average age of youth in the current study ($N = 683$) was 23.97 years.

A selection of key findings includes:

- Approximately 60 percent of youth reported having had a natural mentor. Among youth with natural mentors, about 40 percent reported that their mentor was a family member or non-professional and 35 percent a non-family member.

- Approximately 16 percent reported that their mentors were affiliated with a social institution like a school, religious organization, or employer and 9 percent were a staff member in a social service agency or mentoring program.

- The mean and median values on the frequency of contact item were 5.42 and 6.0, respectively, which corresponded to responses between every few weeks [5] and about once a week [6]. The mean and median values on the emotional closeness item were 3.22 and 4.0, which corresponded to responses between quite close [3] and very close [4]. Indeed, approximately half (51.7%) of the youth who had a natural mentor reported that they were quite or very close with their mentor and had contact with their mentor at least once per week.

- The mean level of emotional closeness was higher among youth whose mentors were family members (3.52) than it was for youth whose mentors were non-family acquaintances (3.26).

- Youth who identified as Black were 33 percent less likely to have a natural mentor than youth identifying as white. Hispanic ethnicity was not statistically significantly associated with the natural mentorship status.

- Female youth reported greater frequency of contact and emotional closeness with mentors than did male youth.

- Youths’ participation in several types of social institutions was found to be positively associated with the likelihood of having a natural mentor. Specifically, youth who attended religious services at least once during the past year were twice as likely to have a natural mentor. Similarly, youth who had performed volunteer or community service work over the previous year were two-and-a-half times as likely to have a mentor.

- Attendance in school was not found to be associated with natural mentorship status, but working 10 or more hours per week was associated with a 38 percent increase in the likelihood of having a natural mentor.

- Attachment insecurity was found to be negatively associated with the likelihood of having a mentor and the level of emotional closeness with mentors.
Findings

- Prior maltreatment and substitute care experiences, placement with kin, closeness with caregivers and parents, and neighborhood connectedness were not found to be associated with the likelihood or nature of natural mentoring relationships.

Implications

The author concludes that the findings of the current study have several potentially important implications for foster youth and natural mentoring policy, practice, and research. Collectively, the findings suggest that connections to family, caregivers, and communities may not be important determinants of natural mentoring relationships among former foster youth. Rather, the existence of high quality natural mentoring relationships for foster youth is a product of a complex interplay between youths’ characteristics and their social ecologies. For example, although providing youth with opportunities to engage potential mentors in social institutions is clearly important, most of the predictors exhibiting statistically significant relationships with frequency of contact or emotional closeness were youth-level characteristics, like attachment insecurity. Hence, supporting youth through ongoing behavioral and emotional supports, and efforts to help youth build social and emotional competencies, may be more important for ensuring that these mentor relationships are positive and impactful. The findings also underscore the salience of family and natural supports for former foster youth. Finally, the findings raise the possibility that previous findings suggesting that natural mentors have a positive influence on foster youth outcomes may have been, in part, artifacts of sample selection. For example, if youth with better social-emotional skills are more likely than other youth to have natural mentors, then the positive outcomes that have been associated with natural mentoring might be, in part, a reflection of the effects of better social-emotional skills among youth who have natural mentors. Thus, if we are to understand the impact of natural mentors for foster youth, researchers and program developers will need to make creative use of rigorous experimental or quasi-experimental designs.

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