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Youth Mentoring as a form of support for children and young people at risk: Insights from research and practice

Caroline McGregor, Mary Lynch, Bernadine Brady

1. Introduction

Formal mentoring programmes, which facilitate the development of a friendship or ‘match’ between an older volunteer and a young person, have been shown to be an effective way of supporting troubled youth, helping them sustain positive mental health, cope with stress, and lead successful lives through adolescence and into adulthood (Rhodes, 2002; Dubois et al, 2011). Because youth mentoring is generally framed as a preventative intervention, it is often not considered as a viable option by social workers working with young people with higher levels of need. On the one hand, it can be argued that young people with challenging personal lives would benefit from the development of a positive relationship with a non-parental adult but on the other hand, the needs of the young person may be too complex for a volunteer to take on. Drawing on insights from research and practice, this paper explores the issues relating to the suitability or appropriateness of youth mentoring as an intervention for young people with higher levels of need with a view to informing practitioners who work with children with high levels of need or risk in their lives on how best to utilise mentoring as a form of social support.

The chapter is in two parts. Part 1 provides a brief overview of the rationale for youth mentoring programmes and provide a case study of the Big Brother Big Sister (BBBS) programme in Ireland, describing their youth mentoring model and drawing on research and practice insights regarding the benefits of mentoring for young people. In the second part of the chapter, we move on to consider how mentoring can work effectively for children deemed to be at higher levels of risk. The following questions are considered: is mentoring more suited to being a preventative intervention or a protective intervention? Are young people with higher levels of need suited to matching with a volunteer? What types of young people is mentoring not suitable for? Finally, we consider the question of how social workers and other practitioners working with young people and their families where there is a high level of need can avail of mentoring more effectively as part of their support and protection interventions.

2. Young people, social support and youth mentoring

Supportive relationships with family and friends during adolescence are critical to well-being and coping (Bal et al, 2003). Recent research has emphasised that having at least one caring adult in a young person's life can help in dealing with stress and improve mental well-being (Dooley and Fitzgerald, 2012). Research has shown that many young people draw on natural mentors – i.e. non-parental adults for guidance, encouragement and emotional support (Munson *et al*, 2010; Zimmerman *et al* 2002). Werner and Smith's (1982) ground-breaking study of young people in Hawaii identified the presence of a consistent care-giver or natural mentor as a key factor in enabling young people to make successful transitions to adulthood, in spite of experiencing significant adversity throughout childhood and adolescence. Further important work by Garmezy (1985) and Rutter and Giller (1983) also drew attention to the presence of at least one non-parental adult who provides consistent support as contributing to the resilience of young people.

However, these supportive relationships are often lacking for some of the most vulnerable children, including those in the care of the state; research has shown that many such children feel that they lack personal, emotional and practical support from a trusted adult (NEF, 2014). Formal mentoring programmes aim to foster the development of supportive mentoring relationships for young people who may not have access to natural mentors in their lives. The youth mentoring model recognises that children and young people derive support from informal social ties they perceive to be authentic, confidential and meaningful and aims to provide such relationships in the context of a formal programme (Dolan and Brady, 2011). Research has shown that young people can be reluctant to share their problems with formal helpers because they fear their problems will not be kept confidential (Halett et al 2003). There have been calls for new forms of service provision for children and young people that enable self-expression and are not governed by 'top-down' objectives regarding what children need (Moss and Petrie 2006; Parton 2006). It can be argued that particular types of mentoring programmes can provide this space for children and young people (Brady, Dolan and Canavan, 2015). This emphasis on genuine child and youth led participation reflects the intent of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Article 12 – UNCRC). Furthermore, in line with Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological framework, mentoring can be considered a flexible intervention that is capable of working with the 'whole child' in his or her own environment, culture, context and gender and building on their unique strengths. As a social

policy intervention, mentoring also has the advantage of being available outside of ‘9 to 5, Monday to Friday’ and thus has the capacity to provide support to young people when needed (Brady and Dolan 2007).

Studies of youth mentoring interventions have shown evidence of outcomes in a variety of areas of such as emotional well-being, education and risk behaviour and relationships with parents and peers (DuBois et al., 2011; Blinn-Pike, 2007; Tierney et al, 1995). Philip and Spratt’s (2007) review of published UK research on mentoring and befriending found that young people who developed meaningful relationships with their mentors reported increased confidence, social support and involvement with their communities. For many young people, this relationship was a positive alternative to other relationships with family and professionals and was used as a means of re-negotiating difficult relationships with family and friends. Young people with positive mentoring relationships were more likely to return to education and do well than those whose relationships failed. However, they found that building and sustaining mentoring interventions takes time, persistence and skill. It should also be noted, that not all youth mentoring programmes will be effective; a structured and formal approach to programme practices (Furano *et al*, 1993; Tierney *et al* 1995) is associated with positive outcomes for youth participating in mentoring programmes (Dubois *et al*, 2002).

Case study: Foróige’s Big Brother Big Sister Programme

Foróige is a large Irish youth organisation which aims to involve young people consciously and actively in their own development and in the development of society (see www.Foróige.ie). The organisation works with over 56,000 young people aged 10-18 annually through volunteer-led clubs and staff-led youth projects. Foróige also works with vulnerable young people who require additional support through a full range of targeted services. In its work with disadvantaged young people and their families in the 1990’s, Foróige identified a need for a new youth work approach and a gap in service provision– that of one-to-one voluntary mentoring support for individual young people experiencing a range of difficulties.

The internationally recognised Big Brother Big Sister programme was chosen to meet the identified need. The programme matches an adult volunteer to a young person (aged between 10 and 18) of the same gender. Its core assumption is that a caring and supportive friendship will develop and reinforce the positive development of the young person. In Big Brother Big Sister, the relationship is known as ‘the match’, the mentor is referred to as the Big Brother or

Sister and the mentee is known as Little Brother or Sister. The match meets once a week, for one to two hours, and the initial commitment is for one year. This match between the volunteer and young person is the most important ingredient of the intervention. The underlying assumption is that the adult volunteer will become a role model, a mentor, but perhaps most of all, a friend (Rhodes, 2002).

Once this relationship has been established, the BBBS programme can address the needs of the young person that have been identified through the intake process. For example, goals might be related to learning a new skill or hobby, school attendance, academic performance or relationships with others. However, the foremost goal is to develop the match friendship itself. As part of their ‘match’, mentors and mentees often take part in activities such as sport, music, cooking, board games, computers, fishing or going to a football match. Participation in the programme is voluntary for both the young person and mentor.

A major study of the Foróige BBBS youth mentoring programme, which involved a randomised control trial (n=164), qualitative case studies and an implementation study found that the programme was effective in enhancing young people’s perceived social support and emotional well-being (Dolan et al, 2011a and 2011b). The research also found the Irish BBBS programme to be a model of good practice in youth mentoring. We draw further on this research regarding the BBBS programme throughout this chapter, combined with further practice experience from BBBS staff.

How young people can benefit from mentoring

From Foróige’s experience, the critical factors that differentiate the BBBS programme from other interventions is fact that the Big Brother or Sister is present in a voluntary capacity and that a personal connection develops between the two individuals. A close relationship is seen as the foundation from which many outcomes can emerge for the young person. This practice perspective reflects Rhodes (2005) theory of the youth mentoring process, whereby, a ‘strong inter-personal connection, characterized by mutuality, trust and empathy’ (2005, p.31) is a foundation from which the relationship can influence the social, emotional, identity and cognitive development of the young person. We move on to highlight a number of key ways in which young people can benefit from the mentoring relationship, drawing on qualitative case studies undertaken as part of the BBBS research study (Dolan et al, 2011b; Brady, Dolan and Canavan, 2015)ⁱ.

Building positive and solid relationships

BBBS provides the young person with a mentor that is present in their lives in a voluntary capacity and that has similar interests and a complementary personality to them. The aim is that the young person can spend quality time with their mentor engaging in shared leisure activities that they both enjoy. BBBS staff encourage the young person and volunteer to get to know each other during the first six months of the friendship. The underlying assumption is that building this solid relationship, around shared leisure activities, will become the foundation for the young person to learn from their big brother or sister and accept support, advice and direction from the mentor in the months to follow. In the Dolan et al (2011b) study, young people frequently spoke of valuing their friendship with the mentor and of being happier as a result of their match, as the following quotes illustrate.

I: *How do you feel when you are with her?*

P: Really happy.

(Amy, young person)

I: *And how is it going overall?*

P: It's going brilliant.

I: *What's brilliant about it?*

P: It's going out, having a laugh, just being able to ...have a good time.

(Eoin, young person)

When children and young people are experiencing particular problems within their family or due to their circumstances, this companionship with their mentor may be a welcome distraction and may help with coping.

Emotional support

Mentors can play an important role in providing a listening ear for young people. In the Irish BBBS research, all of the mentors referred to the conversations they had with their 'little' as an important part of the relationship, as the following quotes illustrate.

I suppose we go for chats, helps him maybe relieve thoughts that he'd had on his mind or in his head and he gets them out there and we discuss them (Ronan, mentor)

She seemed to find it easy to talk and spoke about things like that were quite personal and that might have been, I felt that she wouldn't have spoken maybe to anybody else. It was kind of fairly intimate stuff you know. (Niamh, mentor)

Some young people were open with their mentor from the start, while others became more comfortable with divulging personal difficulties as the relationship became closer. Some young people did not confide in their mentors about personal issues at any stage of the relationship but appeared to derive support and encouragement with normative pressures such as school and exams. There was also evidence in the study that some mentors supported their mentee in dealing with emotions and behavioural issues which enabled them to interact more effectively with others and to deal with negative situations. For example, this parent described how her daughter Chloe's mentor helped her to deal with bullying.

Chloe was being bullied in school and no matter what I did it was making it worse in her eyes. So her mentor was a great help....She actually sat her and spoke to her and said 'well look, you don't need to put up with this bullying'. Chloe herself actually told me that her Big Sister explained this to her and she's at the end of the phone and she meets her and all that but she is going to have to try and stick up for herself as well, gave her a little bit of confidence. (Mary, parent)

Building self-esteem and positive behaviour

Rhodes (2005) argues that mentoring relationships can help to build young people's self-esteem; if young people are viewed positively by their mentor, they can start to see themselves more positively. Our research showed many examples of encouragement and praise from the mentor to the young person that many young people appeared to derive esteem support from their mentoring relationship.

Big Brother would be very encouraging towards Sean and telling him you know? He's done really well and this is great for him. (Gary, caseworker)

Furthermore, it was clear from the research that many matches are characterised by reciprocity, whereby the mentor perceived that he or she was gaining from the relationship and not just offering support. This reciprocity has the capacity to build the self-esteem of a young person as they are likely to feel that they can make a worthwhile contribution to the relationship. For example, the parent of the one young person described how her daughter helped her mentor to

overcome a fear of swimming. It is possible that these experiences, as well as being enjoyable, helped the young person to develop their identities as being someone with something valuable to contribute to others.

Fiona's Big Sister (Martha) has a fear of water ..but Fiona made her go in to the pool and she loves it now..... Fiona goes, 'oh my god I helped my Big Sister', do you know, because Fiona is a great swimmer and Martha has a fear of swimming so, do you know, it worked out well. (Margaret, parent)

Help in making choices

In addition to the caring and supportive aspect of the friendship, there is evidence that Big Brother/Sisters have also supported young people with very practical choices and skills in their lives, such as making healthy choices, encouragement to stay in school, choosing a course in college or career path to follow or looking for accommodation when transferring into independent living. For example, in the Irish BBBS study, a mentor, Liam, described how his mentee asked his advice regarding school and education.

With regard to school I suppose he has been, he's not been asking me advice but we have kind of ended up talking about school and what he was going to do after the junior cert, was he going to do transition year, was he going to go straight into fifth year and things like that so yes, I suppose he would have asked me advice on that or I'd have given my advice I'm not sure which, so yes, we talked a good bit about that actually. (Liam, mentor)

Access to different life perspectives

Involvement in the programme also provides the young person with a different perspective in life, to which they would normally not have access to. The skills, life experiences and network of the Big Brother or Sister, is an additional resource from which the young person can experience and learn, providing them with a different perspective outside of their own world.

In our research, there were many examples of non-formal learning or education occurring through mentoring relationships, whereby young people gained important skills or knowledge that are likely to be of value in the 'real world'.

He's not from the country and I'm from the country so he'd have no understanding of what it's like to grow up in the countryside or to go for a cycle on a bike and to

understand what's happening around him in the fields and farms and roads and to cycle on the left side of the road and not the right, you know, some basic stuff. I suppose it's just broadening his horizons, hopefully. (Cormac, mentor)

In another example, Annie, who wanted to be a lawyer was matched with a post-graduate law student who could tell her about what college was like. This girl was doing well at school and was likely to have benefited from seeing a version of her 'possible self' (Marcus and Nurius, 1986).

I want to be a lawyer because I like the idea of bringing justice, I'd like to make a difference.She is studying to be a lawyer, because she is doing courses for it, it takes a long time to be a lawyer. My friend is going to go to college too, it would be cool to go to Dublin. (Annie, young person)

A constant person in the young person's life

A number of young people involved in the BBBS programme have said that their Big Brother/Sister has been the only constant adult in their life through many foster/ care placements, changes of schools and difficulties in their lives. The Big Brother/Sister has become a lifetime supportive friendship to them (long after the professionals are gone) that they would otherwise not have had access to. This point also emerged in the BBBS research, where the mentor was often seen as a constant in what could otherwise be quite turbulent and difficult lives for the young people involved. For example, one young person, Brendan, did not mention his parents break-up with his mentor, Alan, until a few months after it had happened but his mother believes that he took emotional comfort from the consistency of the presence of Alan in his life, as this quote suggests.

I mean he's come through a marriage break up as well you know? Myself and his father broke up in the last year, so there has been an awful lot of changes for Brendan. But I just think that Alan (mentor) gives him that stability whereas I didn't, and his father didn't, you know? He still has a continuum with Alan; Alan was still here on the dot every week, once a week, sometimes twice a week. So it's certainly helped with being you know? He's had consistency as far as Alan goes. (Evelyn, parent)

Similarly, a BBBS caseworker spoke of his belief that another young person, Mark, saw his match as a space in which he could escape from the stresses in his life.

I think it was an outlet for Mark.... mum said to me when he comes up to the estate, he's being bullied at school and also the estate, very little friends and it was something, by meeting Ronan (mentor), it was something that he took ownership of himself and that he didn't share with anybody else ... (Gary, caseworker)

Enhancing Other Support Networks

In many cases, the volunteer mentor played a vital role in support and informing other formal supports and interventions in the young person's life. This is illustrated by an example from our research study (Dolan et al, 2011b). Brendan, a 14 year old boy who had played football in the past and, according to his mentor, Alan, had been quite good at, but had 'drifted away' from the sport. As the mentor describes, he re-introduced him to the football club and believed that his contacts in the club will be 'good to him'. This is an example of how mentors can support young people to make use of resources in their communities and draw on their own social networks and connections for the benefit of the young person (Dubas & Snider, 1993).

He's back playing sport and I'm very involved in sport here. Which means I know everybody that's in charge of things and .. they know the situation and they will be good to him too, so and he's actually playing good sport. (Alan, mentor)

It is clear from the themes presented that mentoring can be an important form of support for young people. However, because relationships are at the heart of the programme, there is a risk that they will not work out or will end early. This is one of the main risks of the programme, particularly where young people who are vulnerable or have been damaged by relationships may potentially be hurt by the ending of another relationship (Rhodes, 2002). While the BBBS programme has procedures to ensure the match ending is handled as sensitively as possible to minimise any disappointment for the young person, the potential for hurt or disappointment should not be overlooked.

3. Mentoring for children and young people with higher risk

We now move on to explore the issues relating to providing mentoring for higher risk young people. We start by providing some context in relation to classification of need or risk within Irish child and family services before moving on to provide insights from research and practice regarding the suitability or appropriateness of youth mentoring as an intervention for young people with higher levels of need (Brady, Dolan and Canavan, 2015).

Context: Classification and response to need within Irish Child & Family Services

Since Jan 2014, child and family services in Ireland are delivered via an Independent Child and Family Agency called Tusla. Prior to this, child protection and welfare services were delivered as part of a wider Health and Social Care Provision under what is called the Health Service Executive (See www.hse.ie). The development of an independent agency is the result of a number of drivers within the child welfare and protection system over a number of years including: enhanced awareness of inadequate protective and support services for children in the past from the statutory authorities (e.g. McGuinness, 1993; Kennan, 1995; Gibbons, 2010; Buckley & Nolan, 2013), institutional care services (O' Sullivan, 2009), the promotion of a stronger children's rights ethos (Kilkelly, 2008) and heightened awareness of the need to address child and family services as a distinct priority rather than as part of a massive health system. In addition to the establishment of Tusla, major relevant developments since 2000 include the establishment of a separate Minister and Department for Children and Youth Affairs and the appointment of a Children's Ombudsman. The intention of this reform is to improve outcomes for children and families overall and to work towards a stronger prevention and early intervention model of practice (e.g. Meitheal, Tusla 2014). Wider developments in the child protection welfare system globally are important drivers for change also, especially the renewed recognition of the central importance of Relationship working in child protection and welfare (Munro, 2011) and the recognition of the dynamic interaction of services between welfare, protection and children's rights practice (Gilbert et al, 2011; Parton, 2014).

With regard to the delivery of child and family services, Ireland has historically relied heavily on voluntary/third sector organisations to deliver key services (See Skehill, 2004) and the essential role of such partnerships in the present underpins the organisation and delivery of services. The well know Hardiker model of need (Hardiker et al, 1991), which delineates four levels of need that children and families may present with, provides the basis for the service delivery model set out in the TUSLA Thresholds document. For each level of need, the appropriate response is also detailed. Usually, it is needs assessed as Level 3 and Level 4 that are retained by the statutory services for direct child welfare and protection intervention that includes *both* family support *and* child protection in most instances. Children and families assessed as Level 2 are deemed to be in need of family support which can be delivered from direct state services or services commissioned from the voluntary sector. With regard to the types of services available to children and families, they can be wide ranging and diverse. Normally, services provided for Level 1 and Level 2 are more likely to avail of informal as

well as formal processes and it is where, arguably, the use of youth mentoring is most well developed. We now move on to review literature and practice experience in relation to the benefits and challenges of youth mentoring for higher risk groups.

Level	Definition ..
1	‘No additional needs/child achieving expected outcomes’ (Thresholds Document, 2014; 2)
2	‘Children with additional needs’ (ibid)
3	Children with multiple (complex) needs (ibid)
4	Children with highly complex, acute (need) and/or immediate risk of harm (ibid)

Source: Thresholds Guidance, TUSLA, (2014)

Research evidence in relation to youth mentoring for higher risk groups

Because it involves voluntary mentor rather than a paid professional, youth mentoring has traditionally been seen as best suited to children and young people at lower levels of risk, who are suited to being matched with a volunteer mentor. A number of challenges have been identified as associated with mentoring for higher risk groups. Where children have experienced poor parenting and childhood adversity, they may have difficulties forming attachments with other adults, which may in turn prevent them from benefiting from mentoring relationships (Rhodes, 2005). Families may have many professional workers involved in their lives and may be distrustful of an intervention of this nature. On the other hand, it is well-established in the literature that often young people will relate better in a less formal befriending context than through formal relationships (e.g Caplan, J. B.). Rhodes (2005) points out that vulnerable young people may be more likely to seek out positive sources of support. Rhodes argument is supported by studies with young people engaged with child protective services, particularly foster care, which have shown that many young people draw on the support of natural mentors and that this support is linked to improved outcomes (Greeson et al, 2015; Munsona et al, 2010).

Over the past decade, some studies have focused specifically on the effectiveness of mentoring for higher risk groups. In their meta-analysis of the effects of youth mentoring programs, DuBois et al (2002, 2011) found that higher-risk youth have benefited from program involvement at least as much as lower-risk youth. The study distinguished between risks at the “individual” level (that is, challenges in the youth’s behaviour, social or academic functioning or health) and at the “environmental” level (that is, challenges in the youth’s surrounding

environment, such as living in poverty or a single-parent home). Herrera, Dubois and Grossman (2013) built on this work to explore the experiences and benefits of mentoring programmes for higher risk young people. The study assessed the effects of mentoring for 1310 young people aged 8 to 15 years who were deemed to be ‘high risk’. They found that youth mentoring programmes reached young people with varying ‘risk profiles’ and that these young people had relationships of similar strength and duration and derived similar benefits from programme participation. The key benefits found were reduced depressive symptoms, gains in social acceptance, academic attitude and results.

Foróige’s experience with regard to mentoring for high risk young people

While the ‘risk’ threshold for referral to the BBBS programme is generally considered to be low to medium, BBBS also works with children identified as being at high risk. In 2015, 28% of young people engaged in Foróige’s BBBS programme, presented with high levels of need in the intake process. This included; young people living in care or at risk of going into care, young people cautioned by a juvenile liaison officer (JLO) for involvement in criminal activity, young people living in temporary accommodation, due to homelessness, young people not attending formal education or training. From experience, these young people present with a broad range of issues including: bullying, social isolation, alcohol /substance use within the family, bereavement, impact of parental imprisonment, lack of confidence, abuse and neglect and difficulties living in care.

In general, the programme does not have strict criteria regarding what types of risk are suitable or unsuitable – it is guided by a consideration of whether or not the young person would benefit from the programme and if they are suitable for matching with a volunteer. BBBS staff work closely with professionals from other agencies involved in the young person’s life to offer mentoring as part of a comprehensive care plan for this young person. The young person may therefore be availing of a number of support services at the same time as having a Big Brother / Sister; for example, they may be also attending counselling, educational support services, family mediation programmes or youth justice programmes. Six months into the match, the BBBS staff consult with the parent/guardian, young person and volunteer to devise a case-plan that is individually tailored to meet the needs of this young person. This case-plan takes into account the needs of the young person at the intake process and the needs that have arisen during their six months of involvement in the programme.

The case-plan offers the young person the opportunity to identify areas in their life that they feel their Big Brother or Sister can support them with. If staff decide that it is something that can be facilitated by the Big Brother / Sister, they will incorporate it into the case-plan. However, if it cannot be facilitated by the programme, the staff liaise with other agencies to support the young person with this particular issue. This case plan is reviewed and tailored every three months. The experience of the organisation in working with young people with higher levels of need is that, when certain criteria are in place, youth mentoring can be an effective preventative and protective tool for this target group of young people. ⁱⁱ.

From Foróige's experience, the factors that help to maximise the chances of having a successful match are as follows;

- The young person understands the mentoring programme, wants to be involved and has needs that are suitable to volunteer intervention.
- The volunteer is committed to the programme and demonstrates to staff, in the intake process and in the training, their openness and ability to be friends with a young person with a higher level of need.
- The young person and volunteer are well matched. The match is made based on common interests and complementary personalities. The need of the young person is matched with the capability of the volunteer.
- The volunteer does not have detailed knowledge of the young person's background or reason for referral to the service prior to the introduction meeting. During the assessment process, staff receive information from the young person, their family and the agencies involved but this information is only shared with the volunteer on a 'need to know' basis. This ensures that the volunteer does not have pre-conceived notions of the young person prior to being introduced to him or her and the majority of the information s/he receives is from the young person themselves, from their own perspective. If issues arise during the course of the match, volunteers are trained to consult with their assigned staff person to discuss and decide on a course of action.
- Volunteers are protected by the programme from communication with other agencies. Programme staff are involved in liaising with other agencies on behalf of the young person's involvement in the programme. Volunteers are identified as being a friend to the young person and not another agency involved in the young person's life. This is vital in encouraging the development of the mentoring relationship, particularly with a young person with a higher level of need, as often their lives are dominated by negative

relationships with others; including parents, siblings, teachers, guards and peers. The mentoring relationship should be protected from setbacks in other areas of the young person's life, unless the young person chooses to involve the mentor.

- The staff member is supportive and proactive in case-managing the match. This involves ensuring the supervision with the participants is to standard, is effective and that the case plan is tailored to meet the emerging needs of the young person. It may involve identifying additional training for the volunteer to ensure that they have the support and skills necessary to be effective in their role as a mentor. The staff member may also need to liaise with other agencies and family members in relation to the young person's needs.

Barriers and challenges to mentoring young people with a high level of need must also be recognised. Herrera, Dubois and Grossman (2013) reported that staff found it more difficult secure the interest and involvement of families in the enrolment process, reported some distrust from families and difficulties in accessing some young people due to frequent moves, homelessness and care placements. From Foróige's experience, additional challenges include:

- The recruitment of volunteers (especially male volunteers) that have the capacity and capability to form a friendship with a young person with a high level of need.
- The young person's needs become too acute for the volunteer to cope with. The volunteer becomes overwhelmed by the situation and withdraws early from the programme causing stress to the young person.
- The young person and volunteer do not connect with each other leading to an early match closure. In this case, the young person is offered a rematch and is prioritised on the waiting list.
- Staff that are under-resourced to manage match caseloads and support volunteers who are matched with young people with a higher level of need

4. Conclusion

Based on the research and practice evidence presented in this chapter, we argue that mentoring can be suited to both preventative and protective interventions, though greater care is needed in the use of mentoring where there are high levels of need or situations where children are involved with protective services. While mentoring will clearly not always be suitable for higher levels of need or children at risk, its potential seems to be under-used at present with

services relying perhaps too much on formal services only. It is evident that young people often prefer less formal mechanisms for support and thrive on them. This has been the experience of Foróige and is also borne out in the literature (NEF, 2014). However, while there are referrals of young people from the child protection system (for example), it seems that the resource offered by BBBS to supplement, reinforce and indeed help a young person to engage with formal services, has further potential for utilisation by social work. From the experience of the organisation and learning from research to date, the following are some guidance points we would offer to practitioners working with child protection services and/or specialist formal services for children, such as child and adolescent mental health, youth justice and education welfare.

- Find out about the youth mentoring programmes available in your local area and engage directly with them
- Become familiar with research that shows the value of informal supports in engaging young people and use this in your practice
- Discuss the potential value of mentoring directly with young people and parents to help informal decision making regarding its relevance for a particular situation
- Include the mentoring agency as one of the key supports in the young person's life alongside professionals and involve them appropriately in consultations
- Take time to follow up and discuss progress with the mentoring programme staff and be available to offer advice and appropriate information to them.
- Ensure professional training courses (e.g. social work, family support, childhood education, police training) include youth mentoring as an important form of social support for young people and help students develop skills of working effectively with organisations who provide both formal and informal/voluntary supports.

In this chapter, we have sought to emphasise the potential value of youth mentoring for young people identified with high levels of need or at risk of harm. We acknowledge the greater challenge often involved in providing informal mentoring alongside necessary formal services, especially where there are protective as well as support needs involved but also are aware of the great potential benefit of mentoring for children in these situations. We have used our research and practice experience to provide some guidance for practitioners in the hope of encouraging wider use of youth mentoring in situations where children have high levels of need or at risk, not as an alternative to necessary specialist formal services but as a crucially beneficial supplementary service. And in so doing, we advise readers to be aware of the

importance of avoiding seeing mentoring as a 'panacea' or of overlooking the need for rigorous programme practices to ensure quality is provided. Like the New Economics Foundation (2014), we argue that mentoring is not a simple solution for children facing significant risks in their lives but it can be used by social workers to forge a more effective, child-centred care system.

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ⁱ Names have been changed to protect anonymity

ⁱⁱ It is important to note that these conclusions relate to the BBBS programme, which is considered an example of best practice in relation to youth mentoring. They should not be seen to apply to all youth mentoring programmes since the quality of programme practices are of great importance in interventions of this nature. (DuBois et al, 2002)