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Youth Mentoring and the Parent-Young Person Relationship:

Considerations for Research and Practice

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Youth Mentoring and the Parent-Young Person Relationship: Considerations for Research and Practice

Over recent years, youth mentoring has become increasingly popular as an intervention for young people deemed to be in need of support. There is a need, however, to pay attention to the potential impact of mentoring on the parent – youth relationship. Drawing on findings from two Irish studies of young people and parents attending youth projects, this article highlights considerations for research and practice in relation to mentoring and the parent – youth relationship.

Key Words: Youth mentoring, parents, social support, intervention.

Introduction

Whereas youth mentoring has been recently promoted as an important form of intervention in helping young people to cope it is not a new concept (Baker and Maguire 2005). For example, now operating worldwide, the Big Brothers Big Sisters Programme (BBBS) a major mentoring initiative has been in existence since 1904 (Grossman and Rhodes, 2004). In terms of benefit, it has been found to be a proven model of 'friendship' and has been subjected to a well-cited high quality randomised control trial research (Tierney et al 1995; Rhodes, 2002). Mentoring has been seen to be associated with positive outcomes for young people including better school attendance and reduced propensity towards risk taking behaviour. However, whereas the mentoring has been viewed as positive for young people and in respect of contexts such as labour market potential (Colley, 2003) the effects of mentoring on social relationships generally (both positive and negative) and in particular between parents and their offspring, has been less scrutinised. Using the recent introduction of Big Brothers Big Sisters (BBBS) mentoring programme in Ireland as a case study, this paper explores this issue by brief reference to findings from three related studies.

Youth Mentoring in Context and In Ireland

Although there is some emerging evidence that mentoring troubled youth has a positive effect on parent-child relationships the contexts in which does or does not actually occur needs more specific consideration (Philip, 2003). Thus far, there is a growing body of research on mentoring which focuses on very particular outcomes, for example, mentoring in schools as an activity which enhances academic performance (Slicker and Palmer, 1993) or in the USA, faith based mentoring and possible improvements in a young person's perceived wellbeing and religiosity (Keller, 2005; Dubois et al, 2005). However, like all social interventions for young people, mentoring programmes can only have limited effect, and overall, it is fair to state that little is known about the downside of mentoring for example, when matches fail or end early (Rhodes 2002; Philip, 2003; Colley 2003). While we know the benefits overall to the parent-child relationship when mentoring is 'high quality', conversely, where relationships are poor or fail, little is known about how mentoring either positively or negatively changes the key social support relationship between the young person and his or her parent(s).

Thus, given the well established centrality of the parent-child relationship there is need to advance the debate on the effects of mentoring programmes such as Big Brothers Big Sisters on parents and young people. With some very brief reference to studies on social support involving adolescents and parents attending Neighbourhood Youth Projects (NYP) and findings from an implementation study on the introduction of BBBS in Ireland in these youth work sites, this paper tentatively explores this issue. This exploration is made all the more relevant given that Ireland is experiencing major economic growth referred to as a "Celtic Tiger" whereby there is now and will be in the future major spending on mentoring services to support young people at risk. This also occurs in the context of social change whereby the constellation of families in Ireland is going through a major change, for example, a marked increase in one parent families and major changes in the living arrangements for young people, parents and extended family (Task Force on Active Citizenship, 2007). While the increased emphasis on child and

family policy initiatives has been broadly welcomed, others have critiqued the tendency of such policy to see children as 'investments' (Featherstone, 2006, p.5) and to underestimate the multiple meanings which can be attached to family and family practices. It has been argued that, by bringing the private world of the family into the public sphere, children's services increase the state's reach into family life and represent another strand of governance and 'responsibilization' (Muncie, 2006, p.773) of children, young people and families. In a period of such rapid social and policy change, therefore, it is imperative to consider how a policy intervention such as youth mentoring can impact on relationships at the core of family life.

Although informal friendships whereby adults usually relatives support young people is 'age old' and traditional in Ireland and dates back to the Brehon Laws (Gilligan, 1991) and was particularly prevalent in rural contexts, it is only very recently that any formal or major youth mentoring programme has been established. Big Brothers Big Sister (BBBS) was introduced to Ireland as a youth mentoring programme by Foroige a national youth work organisation in 2002. Thus far, the programme has focussed on providing youth mentoring as an "add on" programme to a standard youth work intervention model (Foroige Neighbourhood Youth Projects, NYPs) and has been piloted in three counties in the west of Ireland. Initial formative research on the introduction and implementation of the programme (Brady et al, 2004; Brady and Dolan 2007) has found that overall the service has been received very positively. Young people in receipt of the service (n= 61) have reported high satisfaction with their 'Bigs' and have outlined personal benefits. Similarly, volunteers have reported benefits to their sense of wellbeing and have clearly enjoyed the care giving aspects of offering support and friendship to young people. It is notable that where matches have gone well, parents of young people have indicated improvements in their overall relationships with their children and this is in line with findings from other international studies (Rhodes, 2004; Daring, 2005). Such improvements include parents reporting less daily hassles with the young person. However, it should be noted although these successful indicators are consistent with results from other major studies on BBBS (See Tierney et al 1995) in the Irish context this finding is as yet very 'tentative'. For instance, the study did not track cases where

matches failed completely or ended very prematurely with support waning from the 'Big to the Little'. Having said this, the BBBS Ireland programme which is expanding as a result of philanthropic support is due to go through a more rigorous evaluation.

Adolescents, their social networks and the role of mentoring

There is strong evidence that as with all other life stages young people have an ongoing need for social support during their adolescence (Cotterall, 1996; Darling 2005). Since the 1970s pioneers of social support network theory such as Weiss (1974) have evidenced the essential value of having ample social support as a buffer to stress and as central to coping. The types and qualities of social support are also well established (Tracy et al, 1994; Cutrona 2000) and typically come in four forms:

- Emotional support
- Advice Support
- Esteem Support
- Concrete support

Apart from the need to have all forms of support present during adolescence (Cotterral, 1996) the sources of support and their relationship with the central network member is also known to be of equal if not more importance. In sum, support for a young person is best provided within relationships which include at least one reliable alliance who provides all forms of support and is close dependable and where there is reciprocity (Cutrona 2000). The benefits of such social support not alone assists development during the teenage years, but also has protective functions (Thompson, 1995) as well providing compensation for young people who suffer distress and or loss (Gilligan, 2000; Cutrona and Cole, 2000; Pinkerton and Dolan, 2007).

There is little doubt that parents are the central source of support in a young person's life (Ghate and Hazel, 2002; Dolan and McGrath, 2006). Despite the over assumption that adolescence is seen as a troublesome time of storm and stress (Feldman and Elliot, 1993) in fact only 10 to 15 percent of young people actually experience adversity to the extent of requiring intervention by professionals. Despite our lack of research on normative

adolescence (Coleman and Hendry, 1999), this in itself demonstrates that the vast majority of young people cope well and do so because their natural networks of support including parents (and often as unsung heroes) offer the requisite help they need. In practical terms, young people receive ongoing financial and emotional support from parents and often advice support from other adults such as grandparents aunts or uncles in order to cope. Whereas many young people shop around for support among their network memberships particularly with friends (Cotterell, 1996) the existence of support from parents remains key to their coping capacity (Cutrona and Cole, 2000).

For young people who experience adversity and have troublesome relationships with parent(s), not alone should it not be assumed that they are not supportive of their parents and close to them. In turn, parents are generally still key sources of help to their adolescent offspring despite any ongoing difficulties in their relationships. It could be argued that such a false assumption may underpin the rationale for referring a young person onto a mentoring programme like Big Brothers Big Sisters. The following two Irish studies involving young people and parents attending Neighbourhood Youth Projects (also the sites for the BBBS programme) act as brief illustrations. Both studies explored the perceived social support networks of respondents at different times, in the first example, among young people and in the second, in relation to parents.

Neighbourhood Youth Project Study No.1 - Young People

Findings from a tracking study of the social support needs of young people experiencing adversity (with caseness) attending a day care support programme called Neighbourhood youth projects in the west of Ireland (n=172) found that despite the presence of mental health problems among almost one third of respondents and a range of school or behaviour related problems among participants, parents were still seen as strongest sources of social support and were consistently selected in networks. Although many young people reported strains in their relationships with parents, mothers and fathers were rated as consistent key providers of social support. Whereas mothers were slightly nominated more than fathers and in some cases dads were essentially 'absent', young

people remained consistent in their positive perception towards parents. In terms of types of support on offer parents were seen to provide strong support in relation to all types of support, however esteem support from parents was seen as slightly weaker compared to all other three forms of help, including emotional concrete and advice support (Dolan, 2006; Pinkerton and Dolan, 2007). Finally, it is noteworthy that the study also found a statistically significant association between the presence of support from parents and mental health and wellbeing among respondents.

Neighbourhood Youth Project Study No.2 – Parents

Whereas much is known regarding the social support needs of young people the role and functions they play in respect of providing social support to others such as their parents is less well known. With this in mind, in a point in time study of the social networks of parents of adolescents (n=26) attending a Neighbourhood Youth project in Galway city (Canavan and Dolan, 2000), their young people were identified by parents as an important source of social support. Using the Social Network Map assessment tool (Tracy et al, 1994) parents were asked to identify who offered support, how much support they could access and the quality of the help on offer to them. It should be noted that the study focused on the primary caregiver known to project staff in the NYP, which was primarily mothers (24 mothers and 2 fathers).

As one would expect, parents reflected on the amount of stress which parenting a young person brings, for example, parents who were generally on a low income referred to the financial support they had to give to their children. However, all parents said that their adolescent offspring provided them with practical help and emotional support, despite difficulties in their relationship at the time. Importantly parents also rated themselves as remaining "very close" to their teenager, again despite their ongoing tumultuous relationship. Parents noted that while help from their adolescent offspring was sometimes inconsistent and could wax or wane depending in part on the current functioning of the parent-adolescent relationship, their feelings of closeness toward the young person remained high and was consistent.

Costs and benefits to Young people's Social Networks and relationships with Parents

Thus far as has been briefly illustrated from three related pieces of research, overall, parents of young people perceive the Big Brother Big Sisters mentoring programme in Ireland as positive and a benefit to them and their offspring. Furthermore, young people attending NYPs the service from which the BBBS programme is delivered, value very highly the emotional and tangible support they receive from their parents and do so despite the ongoing existence of strains in their relationship. Similarly, parents identify their adolescent offspring as an important source of support and select them as central social network members. Although their young people are seen as a source of worry and in some cases the cause of ongoing adversity, parents still retain a perception of closeness to their children. With this in mind, it would seem obvious that in the context of providing a mentoring service, the desire should be to enhance the parent-child relationship through mentoring and to ensure that the introduction of an adult friend in the young person's life does nothing to take from the capacity of the parent as a caregiver.

Despite the known benefits to parents when mentoring works well, more intuitively, it can be seen as involving a range of potential negative effects. For example, the creation of a mentoring match can be seen as introducing an artificial component into a child's social ecology and as a direct consequence, undermining natural helping systems. More specifically, it is easy to imagine how adult-child mentoring approaches could negatively affect child-parent relationships, at their most basic, by reducing time spent in positive activities between a young person and their parents. Indeed, if the focus is on outcomes from mentoring programmes for parents, one could also hypothesise negative consequences in relation to parents' confidence in their parenting ability. However, in truth the extent to which such scenarios apply are unknown.

At a more profound level, it could also be argued that mentoring illuminates the tension between the rights of children and parents. Mentoring assumes the achievement of children's rights by virtue of its protective impacts on children, in the context of immediate risks or risk to their development. Within the context of statutory intervention, this can be seen as appropriate. What is less clear is to what extent mentoring programmes lead de facto to a diminution of parents rights by distorting their roles. In the Irish context with a forthcoming referendum on the rights of children (at the time of writing this paper), this point has particular resonance.

In this paper, we have only considered parents overall and not focused on mothers and fathers separately and perhaps this issue of rights is played out most clearly in relation to non-resident fathers of children and adolescents who participate in mentoring programmes. We know now that, as Featherstone (2004) puts it 'fathers matter', and a body of research, much of it arising in the US context, has developed to support this position. For example, Pleck and Masciadrelli (2004) identify a range of studies that demonstrate positive outcomes for children from father involvement. Interestingly, findings in recent Irish research demonstrate positive associations between father involvement and outcomes from children (McKeown et al 2003).

What are the implications for the increasing minority of fathers who do not reside with their children, or for the far smaller minority of fathers, some non-resident, whose children are involved with Irish State child protection services? There is the realisation that social service interventions generally have not been effective at engaging fathers and that this is a significant policy and practice failure (Taylor and Daniel, 2000). In this context, the question is to what extent do services generally and BBBS Ireland could more specifically, support these minority fathers in relation to engagement, accessibility and responsibility, the three empirical dimensions around which father involvement has been approached by researchers (Lamb and Tamis-Lemonda, 2004). Similarly to what extent does generativity, the idea of contributing to the ongoing cycle of generations (Palkovitz, 1997), feature as an anchor concept for services such as BBBS in their engagement with such fathers.

A fictional situation involving a non-resident father who has a poor relationship with the child's mother gives meaning to the negative possibilities. In the context of limited resources, not a huge amount of time is devoted to engaging the father in relation to the issue of the child's difficult behaviour. A family support or social worker suggest a mentoring programme, an opportunity which is seized upon by the mother who is at her wits end. The child is amenable to the 'match' but, in spite of the best efforts of services to engage him, the father is not consulted about the proposed intervention. A male mentor is matched with the child and begins the relationship-forming, for example, going to see the local football team. In the context of this specific set of circumstances, the possibilities for negative interactions among the child, mother and father, in relation to the father's role is easily imagined.

In this sense, mentoring is akin to the full range of interventions undertaken by social service professionals, insofar as it involves introduction of an external component or force into the lives of those seeking or deemed to be in need of services. The general argument for intervention is that it is in the child or young person's best interests – something more easily argued in the context of reactive interventions geared towards risk, and less easily so in the context of lower risk, community-based preventive interventions. In either case, the issue is that those intervening need to be confident that the situation for a child / young person will be better in the short and long term, as a consequence of the intervention.

When considered in this way linked conceptual and practical concerns emerge relating to mentoring. Conceptually, mentoring models need to encompass fully active roles for parents and intended outcomes for them, both mothers and fathers, and how these relate to the mentors and their activities. This is even made all the more necessary given as has been highlighted here the reciprocal support which parents and young people exchange and even so where relationships are strained or estranged. More specifically, in relation to the issue of non-resident fathers, they need to show to what extent they support or run the

risk of undermining non-resident fathers in relation to their involvement with their children.

If mentoring brings benefits to parents where matches go well, and we are less certain of either the outcomes when there are problems or, hidden 'side effects' for fathers in particular as suggested above, the concept of adding to mentoring extra and compensatory interventions could be considered. In the case of Ireland, BBBS is thus far an 'add on' intervention for youth coupled with the NYP programme. This format has the potential of bringing additional benefits for the mentee. Similarly, it could be suggested that given the requisite resources, a programme to support the parent-child relationship and particularly father-child bond could be utilised. So for example, concurrent to the child receiving the support of a mentor, his/her father could receive a programme which works on parenting skills and methods for ensuring better attachment with his child. Even at an initial pilot phase such a move would help establish the true effects if any of adult-child mentoring on parent-child relationships, but also hold the hope of providing additional benefits for all parties.

Conclusion

Despite a growing body of evidence on the value of friendship mentoring to young people and particularly so in relation to those experiencing difficulties, the effects positively and negatively of such relationships on the parent-child bond, are still uncharted waters. Whereas the benefits to parents are known in relation to successful matches, less is know when things go wrong or in relation to longer term outcomes. This may be further compounded in that policymakers and professionals may overlook the supportive role of parents to their young people that often remains crucial despite the presence of a strained relationship. Similarly, the support which young people offer to parents and the closeness of their relationship as perceived by parents may also be underrated in the context of the presence of other problems, for example, in terms of overriding child protection concerns. Thus, apart from the need for more research not just in Ireland as in the case considered here, but also internationally, as mentoring

develops as a model to help troubled and troublesome youth, cognisance needs to be retained regarding the importance of parent child relationships generally and father child relationships more specifically. This will ensure not just better outcomes for young people in need but equally important, better sources and resources to enable them to cope.

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