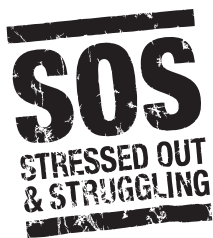


**SOS**  
STRESSED OUT  
& STRUGGLING

## Making Mentoring More Effective



The following publication is produced by the YoungMinds Stressed Out and Struggling (SOS) Project, which is funded by the Big Lottery Fund. The project aims to highlight the mental health needs of 16-25 year-olds, and campaigns to improve access to and acceptability of mental health services for this age group. YoungMinds believes that this group requires particular consideration because of the stresses and strains they face in making the transition from adolescence to adulthood, which can compound problems already faced by young people who are vulnerable to mental ill health.

YoungMinds is the leading children's mental health charity, which is working within the Every Child Matters five outcomes framework to improve the mental health of all children and young people. If you would like to find out more about YoungMinds, please visit [www.youngminds.org.uk](http://www.youngminds.org.uk)

Other publications produced by the SOS Project include:

- *Perspectives on the Causes of Mental Health Problems in Children and Adolescents*, in which leading figures from the fields of psychiatry, nutrition, foetal development, psychotherapy, attachment theory and evolutionary psychology give their views about the causes of mental health problems.
- *Higher Education Institutions and International Students' Mental Health*, which suggests ways in which higher education institutions can help support the mental health of international students.
- *Information for Higher Education Institutions on Helping Students with Personality Disorder or Personality Difficulties*.
- *A Work in Progress: the Adolescent and Young Adult Brain* which summarises recent findings from the field of neuroscience into adolescent and young adult brain development.
- *A Call to Action: Commissioning Mental Health Services for 16-25 year-olds* challenges planners to step back from commissioning in the usual age-banded format, and to give greater consideration to the particular needs of 16-25 year-olds, not just when considering the development of new services, but also existing services.
- The findings from the YoungMinds *Stressed Out and Struggling Service-mapping Exercise* is an invaluable resource for all those interested in how services are meeting the needs of this age group.
- The *Stressed Out and Struggling Focus Group Report* – the SOS team met with a range of ordinary young people in England and Northern Ireland to discuss what the transition from adolescence to adulthood felt like, and what was difficult and what was easy. The report draws conclusions for policy makers about the stresses and strains young people face today.

For further information about the project or to download these publications, please visit: [www.youngminds.org.uk/sos](http://www.youngminds.org.uk/sos)

**This publication is for managers of mentoring schemes, policy makers in the youth sector, commissioners of voluntary sector services and other interested parties. It is one of several reports from the Stressed Out and Struggling (SOS) Project, funded by the Big Lottery Fund. The project aims to raise awareness of mental health issues for young people aged 16-25 among the general public, service users and service providers and to encourage better, more targeted provision of services for young adults.**

**The purpose of this publication is to highlight what factors contribute to a positive outcome in mentoring schemes that match adults with young people, and the importance of planning, structure and adequate resources.**

## **Introduction**

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The internet is a modern day barometer of interest in new ideas and schemes. A search for 'mentor' or 'mentoring' will generate over a hundred million links. The appeal of a more experienced party – the mentor – who shares their expertise with, and takes an interest in, the less experienced protégée or mentee, is immense in all walks of life. Business and industry regularly use both formal and informal mentoring to encourage the development of new talent. There is a wide range of mentoring schemes in the public sector, from peer mentoring programmes<sup>1</sup> and learning mentors in schools, to voluntary programmes, where concerned adults support young people in difficulty. This interest is matched by considerable financial investment from the government. It would be fair to say that, for most people, mentoring is seen as a positive activity that helps the recipient.

But do the evaluations of schemes confirm such a positive view? Evidence is emerging about the potential for harm in the type of mentoring scheme that places an adult volunteer with a young

person who is deemed to be at risk. A Joseph Rowntree Foundation evaluation of the 'Mentoring Plus' scheme (a scheme which combines a mentoring approach with an element of training and employment support) found that the expected benefits of such mentoring schemes are not materialising.<sup>2</sup> A meta-analysis of a number of American mentoring programmes found that the benefits of such schemes to date did not match the unqualified support that mentoring schemes have attracted over recent years.<sup>3</sup> There is a potential danger in seeing mentoring as a cheap intervention (and consequently not expecting too much from it).

However, evaluations also show that mentoring can be successful and is most successful when it is delivered in a planned and structured way, with the more successful mentoring schemes spending time selecting, supporting and training mentors, planning activities and involving parents. There are some programme features which, when present, are associated with significantly more positive effects on outcomes.\*

This paper highlights the following issues and looks at evidence of their importance in contributing to a positive outcome when commissioning or providing a mentoring service that matches adults with young people:

- Who makes a good mentor and what types of mentoring schemes are more successful?
- Who is most likely to respond and find mentoring approaches helpful?
- Matching mentors and mentees.
- Issues concerning the length of the relationship and how it ends.

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\* 'Outcome' in the DuBois *et al.* study, for example, was divided into five categories: emotional/psychological well-being, problem or high-risk behaviour, social competence, academic/educational, and career/employment.<sup>3</sup>

- Training and supervision.
- Is the relationship more important than a concrete result?
- Structured activities – how they can help the relationship to develop.
- The importance of involving parents.

## Who makes a good mentor?

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The evidence suggests that schemes which recruit people who have already had experience of, and success in, helping roles are more likely to build positive relationships with mentees.<sup>3</sup>

According to research led by David DuBois, a substantial proportion of the people who fell into this category were teachers or other school staff, or undergraduate students reading subjects related to helping, such as psychology, education, or social work.<sup>3</sup> This is probably due to such people being more accustomed than the general population to thinking about, and reflecting upon, the experience of others; they may have a greater degree of insight about their own attitudes than the general public as a whole. They may in addition be better able to listen to the anxieties of the people they are dealing with, and be able to tolerate the difficult feelings aroused in them by their mentees.

Recruitment of mentors solely from the pool of adults who have prior experience and success in helping roles would dramatically change the profile of potential mentors; however, such a step would begin to take seriously the impact which mentoring can have on young people.

Mentors volunteer for a variety of reasons, only some of which will be helpful to the young people to whom they are assigned. For example, some will volunteer with the (perhaps unconscious) hope of being able to rescue (from crime, unemployment,

hopelessness) the young person to whom they are assigned. They may have this ambition because they wanted once (or still want) to be rescued from something themselves. A mentor who holds such a belief is likely to become disillusioned if they fail in their attempts to 'rescue' the mentee. The training for mentors needs to equip them to bear very painful feelings of failure and disappointment in the event that all their good efforts seem to come to naught. Mentors need to be committed to stay with the mentee sufficiently long (in the face of aggression perhaps, non-attendance by the mentee, open mockery, even) to help the mentee feel understood and secure about his or her idea of the mentor.

Whichever sections of society mentoring schemes target as potential sources of volunteers, it is important that marketing material presents a realistic picture of the difficulties and benefits of being involved in a mentoring relationship. There needs to be more emphasis on the screening of potential mentors, in terms of the capacities those volunteers already possess and which they can bring to the fledgling relationship between themselves and the mentee to whom they are assigned.

The mentoring relationship is not always smooth or without conflict. Mentoring organisations may downplay this, presumably for fear of putting off potential volunteers. 'Even the most dedicated mentors', Jean Rhodes points out, 'are likely to feel exasperation, ambivalence, anger and regret at various points'. She continues: 'If mentors were told that the road to establishing this connection [between mentor and mentee] could be a tough one – that the adolescents might very well spend the first six months testing them before offering even a shred of appreciation or authentic disclosure – many people would probably examine their motivations and commitment more carefully before volunteering'.<sup>4</sup>

## Who responds best to being mentored?

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Some evidence suggests that young people whose emotional development lies more or less midway between well-functioning and poorly-functioning may be most likely to benefit from mentoring.<sup>3</sup> This means that young people deemed to be 'at-risk' may be more likely to benefit than young people who are already demonstrating significant personal problems.<sup>3</sup> These latter young people are more likely to require assistance from a range of professionals rather than a non-professional volunteer.<sup>3</sup> Grossman and Rhodes found that young people who had experienced shorter mentoring relationships also tended to have been referred for professional programmes from mental health or education teams, or had experienced significant levels of abuse.<sup>5</sup>

However, for people with less serious problems, who are at risk of more dysfunctional behaviour, high quality mentoring may help. A recent publication by the Social Exclusion Unit, *Young adults with troubled lives: summary of questionnaire responses*, found that it was as important to build self esteem and 'soft skills' as to gain qualifications.<sup>6</sup> Such basic, interactive 'skills' – the ability to get to work on time, to be able to take directives from people in charge, for example – are arguably difficulties in maintaining relationships. Since it is extremely difficult to progress in life without them, they may be the area of functioning which mentoring is best suited to help with.

Research also points to mentoring being a less effective intervention for the 13-16 age group, with 65% of relationships more likely to terminate than in the 0-12 age group.<sup>5</sup> This may reflect the fact that adolescents are often striving to establish their own identity separately from adults and may, in consequence, be less willing to engage with yet another adult.

## Matching mentor and mentee

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Does it matter whether young people are mentored by people from the same gender or background as themselves? The evidence is not conclusive.

Philip *et al.* noted that mentees preferred mentors from similar backgrounds and experiences.<sup>7</sup> However, Newburn and Shiner warn of the dangers of matching policies which focus on ethnicity and gender and which ignore other influences, such as social class and geographic location.<sup>8</sup> The DuBois *et al.* study did not establish a link between matching gender or race/ethnicity and improved outcomes.<sup>3</sup> Likewise, Morrow and Styles found that effective relationships were just as likely to form in cross-race pairs as in same-ethnicity pairs.<sup>9</sup>

Jean Rhodes agreed that the evidence for ethnic matching as a predictor of success was inconsistent, and suggested that a positive relationship resulted from a variety of factors which included race, gender, personal style and the attitude of parents.<sup>4</sup> Rhodes also concluded that the duration of the relationship was not affected by a gap in age between the mentor and mentee, although caseworkers, parents and young people sometimes preferred certain age configurations.<sup>4</sup>

There seems limited evidence for many of the assumptions which mentoring schemes employ when making matches based on gender and/or ethnicity criteria, although some research does suggest that matching based on socio-economic status and shared interests may contribute more to successful mentoring.<sup>4</sup> Given the lack of clarity surrounding this issue, what may be of greatest importance is that those mentees who express an opinion about the kind of person they are looking for are heard, rather than mentoring organisations adopting blanket policies on the basis of assumptions.



## Length of mentoring relationships, time-limited mentoring

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Grossman and Rhodes found that mentoring relationships which lasted a year or more reported the largest number of improvements. During their evaluation of the American Big Brothers Big Sisters programme (in which relationships are intended to last at least one year) it was found that, where the relationship lasted three months or less, the young people concerned showed significant declines in their global self-worth, and did less well at school.<sup>5</sup> This has serious implications for mentoring schemes only intended to last less than a year. Crucially, however, it demonstrates the importance of the quality of the relationship between mentor and mentee, since it is this factor that will profoundly affect the willingness of both parties to sustain their relationship over time. Many mentoring schemes last for a year. In reality, since mentors are predominantly volunteers, it would be unreasonable (and could be counterproductive in terms of recruitment) to expect an extended, or even open-ended, commitment from them.

Some mentees, already highly sensitive to rejection or perceived rejection, could interpret the fixed-term nature of the scheme as implicitly rejecting. Was it something they did, they might wonder, that caused the scheme to end? Although, consciously, they will be aware that the scheme was only intended to be for a year, at another level they may feel let down, or pushed out, by its ending.

Mentoring schemes should address what effect the knowledge of its time-limitedness can have on the depth of content brought or explored within the relationship between mentor and mentee. Why, a mentee might feel, should he or she discuss painful issues about family relationships or difficult areas of self-doubt with someone who won't be there after a year? On the other hand, of course, some mentees may feel very anxious about the

prospect of a year's engagement with a mentor – it may appear like an enormously long period. What on earth will they have to discuss? What will the mentor be expecting them to do?

Schemes need to put as much effort and thought into planning the ending of the relationship as they do into the beginning, when matching mentors and mentees. The relationship may end prematurely – at the instigation of either the mentor or mentee, or may run its planned course. Planning activities that address feelings of loss, such as creating a timeline which includes the termination date, or a planned fun activity prior to the final meeting, can help prevent the end of the relationship from contributing to the young person's feeling of being abandoned. Mentors should also be supported through this process by their case workers.<sup>4</sup>

## **Ongoing training and supervision for mentors**

How big a part does training and ongoing supervision play in mentoring outcomes?

DuBois *et al.* found that ongoing training for mentors was associated with improved outcomes, as opposed to preliminary training, which was not. This training comprised education about specific, practical issues – helping young people with school work, for example.

The authors of the study felt, however, that although supervision and support were generally thought to be essential, outcomes for schemes with ongoing support were not better than those with no supervision of mentors.<sup>3</sup>

This is contradicted by Rhodes, who argued that supervised volunteers were more likely to stay with the scheme, and that

mentoring schemes in which caseworkers supported mentors to discuss the emotional costs of mentoring may help mentors to sustain the relationship with the young person. She suggested that mentors should be encouraged to discuss their feelings towards the young person with caseworkers, including focusing on the mentors' own experiences and reasons for volunteering.<sup>4</sup>

Whilst it is important that a mentor knows about practical ways in which young people can be helped, supervision can help mentors stay in touch with certain key aspects of the relationship (without which it is hard to envisage a successful mentoring relationship progressing). The ability to stay in touch with certain feelings and to reflect on the many emotional responses a mentor can have may come 'naturally' to some people (perhaps those mentors with prior experience in a helping capacity would fall into this category). However, even for these mentors, any supervision or training which helps them to think about the largely unconscious processes at work in these kinds of interactions is likely to help the relationship between the two parties.

## **Focusing on the relationship between mentor and mentee, rather than focusing on 'results'**

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Achievements at school or work are directly linked to secure emotional and social development. Young people who find it difficult to form and maintain relationships with other people very often struggle to achieve their full potential. Although it has been found that positive outcomes are linked to a good quality, trusting relationship between the mentor and mentee, many mentoring schemes make 'results' (such as employment, training, reduction in offending) their primary goal.

It might be that so much emphasis is placed upon 'results' because funders require programme efficacy to be measurable.

However, it could be that the nature of the difficulties which young people face, or rather the difficulties which their mentors face when trying to really listen to their problems, has led to a gradual turning away from the core emotional issues the young people struggle with. The evidence suggests that it is the quality of the relationship that has developed between the two parties that is of paramount importance, especially in the initial stages of the process. That said, although the establishment of a trusting, stable relationship between an adult and a young person is a major achievement in itself, and one which has the potential to help that young person in many aspects of their future life, the quality of the relationship should not necessarily be regarded as an end in itself, but can be used as a spring-board for pursuing more goal-oriented approaches in mentoring.

However – as with many aspects of the mentoring process – the quality of the relationship is largely dependent on the capacity of the mentor and his or her ability to ‘take their cues from their protégés to strike a comfortable balance between having fun, working toward practical goals, and exploring emotions’.<sup>4</sup>

## **Structured activities for mentors and mentees**

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Although the DuBois *et al.* study found that the presence of structured activities for mentors and mentees correlated to improved outcomes, it did not record specific data on what kinds of structured activities these were.<sup>3</sup> However, Jean Rhodes found that four key factors contributed to positive relationships:<sup>4</sup>

- Working together on academic activities.
- Spending more than ten hours per month together.
- Joint decision-making.
- Spending time on social activities – for example – meeting for lunch or just ‘hanging out’ together.

It may be that, over and above the specific nature of the activities engaged in, it is the repeated, structured nature of these positive experiences/activities which contributes to better outcomes. For a relationship to proceed, develop and deepen, a mutual sense of trust must exist. This sense of trust, borne of a feeling of security, is fostered by the experience of regularity within defined and accepted limits. Positive experiences lead to expectations of further secure and safe activities, thus creating a benign cycle. It is only through such regularity of experience that negative events (such as lateness, absence or preoccupation on behalf of the mentor, for example) can be seen to be merely human lapses, rather than be assumed to be evidence of a general carelessness or rejecting attitude. It is of the utmost importance that mentors are aware of the importance of creating a reliable and safe mentoring relationship structure – which in practice means, for example, turning up on time to meetings, making sure that they have done what they agreed with the mentee to do in the previous meeting, not seeking to impose their views or goals on mentees, and not springing surprises on the mentees.

## Mechanisms for support and involvement of parents

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What is the effect of mentoring schemes on the relationships of mentees with parents, and how important is it to involve them in the process?

The DuBois *et al.* study found that schemes which supported and involved parents had improved outcomes.<sup>3</sup> There may be a number of reasons for this, including the importance of avoiding a rivalrous situation arising between mentor and parent(s) and the importance of not marginalising the parent (who may be feeling ashamed, or that they have failed somehow, because their child is involved in a mentoring programme). It may be that

parents who are supported by, and become involved in, the mentoring programme come to view the programme as a help, rather than a hindrance, and can also feel in some way 'mentored' themselves. This in turn may help to make difficult family relationships less fraught, which would be undoubtedly beneficial for the mentee concerned.

Jean Rhodes suggested that schemes should not only acknowledge the feelings of parents but also arrange to directly discuss with parents their perception of what their child needs or is achieving.<sup>4</sup>

## Conclusion

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We should celebrate those who, in a selfish world, are prepared to give up their time to support a young person to overcome difficulty. However, wanting to help is not enough to guarantee benefit to the person in need; without the presence of certain other qualities and aptitudes, it can be positively harmful.

The evidence points to the importance of previous success in a helping role, and schemes need to be aware via their screening process of the capacities and experience of potential mentors.

Mentoring schemes need to be realistic in how they market themselves and in what they expect from mentors. The cost to the young person of a mentoring relationship which breaks down prematurely is considerable, and schemes should guard against this happening by adding the elements of supervision and training to careful selection of mentors.

There is always great interest in schemes that match mentors and mentees of the same ethnicity and gender – but the evidence suggests that this is not necessary for a successful mentoring relationship unless this is what the mentee has specifically requested.

Providing a structure for the relationship or carrying out defined activities can be helpful to both mentor and mentee, but what is most important is that there is regular contact taking place in an atmosphere of trust. This builds a positive experience for the mentee of a relationship which delivers within a framework. Defining a scheme by a predetermined result may mitigate against achieving that result and may make a scheme seem unsuccessful when, from the perspective of the mentee, it may have achieved a good outcome.

To enter into a mentoring relationship, both the mentor and mentee are giving up their time in the hope and expectation of positive benefit. Commissioners fund mentoring schemes because they expect the overall outcome for young people to be beneficial. Bearing in mind the investment by all parties in terms of time, emotional energy and financial cost, it is vital that mentoring schemes are given the best chance to succeed. Commissioners share the responsibility with providers of mentoring schemes to create a framework that considers and develops best practice, and that systematically monitors qualitative as well as quantitative outcomes.



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