

# Mentoring for Young People Leaving Foster Care: Promise and Potential Pitfalls

*Renée Spencer, Mary Elizabeth Collins, Rolanda Ward, and Svetlana Smashnaya*

Mentoring for youths transitioning out of the foster care system has been growing in popularity as mentoring programs have enjoyed unprecedented growth in recent years. However, the existing empirical literature on the conditions associated with more effective youth mentoring relationships and the potential for harm in their absence should give us pause, as meeting these conditions may be especially challenging when working with transitioning youths. Using the social work professional lens to examine the potential and challenges of mentoring approaches for foster care youths, the authors review the literature on the effectiveness of youth mentoring programs and on the psychosocial outcomes and needs of youths leaving foster care. They offer a set of considerations for maximizing the potential benefits of mentoring for transitioning youths. The authors suggest that although mentoring may serve as an important component of a larger complement of services for transitioning youths, an individual-level intervention such as this does not eliminate the need for more systemic action to meet the many needs of these vulnerable youths.

KEY WORDS: *foster care; mentoring; transition to adulthood*

It would seem that mentoring—matching youths with a caring and committed adult—would fit hand in glove with the needs of young people who are transitioning out of the foster care system. A stable, consistent, and caring adult presence is precisely what many such youths lack as they reach the age of legal adult maturity (18 in most states, 21 in others) and may no longer have access to foster care services. It is not surprising that mentoring programs targeting foster care youths have been cropping up across the United States and abroad (Clayden & Stein, 2005; Mech, Pryde, & Rycraft, 1995), as mentoring programs have enjoyed unprecedented growth in recent years (DuBois & Karcher, 2005). However, the existing empirical literature on the conditions associated with effective formal youth mentoring relationships and the potential for harm in their absence should give us pause, as meeting these conditions may be especially challenging when working with transitioning youths.

The needs of transitioning youths and the efficacy of mentoring programs are of central concern to social work. Child welfare has been a major field of practice since the beginning of the profession. In addition, relationship-based approaches to intervention are a core technology of the profession, both through clinical intervention and community-based programming. In this article, consistent with the

social work profession's attention to the empirical evidence base for interventions, we identify and critique the research literature on the effectiveness of mentoring programs for youths more generally and the implications of this evidence for programs serving youths leaving foster care and for policies guiding and governing these programs. We use the ecological approach (for example, Germain & Gitterman, 1996) in our analysis, partially out of concern that mentoring has tended to focus intently on the interpersonal relationship to the neglect of both mezzo and macro issues (see Keller, 2005, for an exception).

## **PSYCHOSOCIAL OUTCOMES AND NEEDS OF TRANSITIONING YOUTHS**

Prior to addressing the potential for mentoring with transition-age foster youths, we briefly review what is known about the outcomes of youths aging out of foster care. Virtually all of the existing evidence suggests that the psychosocial and vocational outcomes of these youths are, on the whole, quite poor (for example, Collins, 2001; Cook, 1994; Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Courtney & Heuring, 2005; Courtney, Piliavin, Grogan-Kaylor, & Nesmith, 2001; Lindsey & Ahmed, 1999; McMillen & Tucker, 1999; Reilly, 2003). Studies have found, for example, high rates of homelessness and incarceration, poor

physical and mental health, limited educational attainment, higher unemployment and use of public assistance, and higher rates of parenting and substance abuse among this group than other young adult populations (for example, Cook, 1994; Courtney & Dworsky, 2006; Courtney et al., 2001; Reilly, 2003). Although some youths do make the transition to healthy and productive adulthood (Hines, Merdinger, & Wyatt, 2005), for substantial proportions of youths who have been in substitute care, the basic goals of a high school education, employment, and stable housing remain elusive.

It is typically presumed that the challenges facing young people aging out of care are at least partially related to the lack of strong, healthy, and stable relationships, which are key ingredients for any adolescent's successful transition to adulthood. It is expected that these relationships are lacking; otherwise, the child need not have spent long periods of time in care. However, the extent to which young people are completely on their own is unclear. Often they reconnect and sometimes live with their biological parents, siblings, and extended family members (Collins, Paris, & Ward, 2008). In addition, efforts are made while youths are in care to provide alternate nonparental relationships through foster parents and professional staff, and many youths are helped by these relationships (Lemon, Hines, & Merdinger, 2005). Others, however, for a variety of reasons, do not form sustained helpful relationships while in care. Frequent moves among homes of biological relatives, foster homes, and group care settings may be part of the problem, as this instability disrupts attachments needed for healthy development (D'Andrade, 2005). Some youths connect with natural mentors, or supportive nonparental adults in their existing social networks (Gilligan, 1999), and recent studies indicate that youths who have at least one positive and significant naturally occurring mentoring relationship tend to fare better in the transition to adulthood (Ahrens, DuBois, Richardson, Fan, & Lozano, 2008; Drapeau, Saint-Jacques, Lépine, Bégin, & Bernard, 2007; Hines et al., 2005).

Increasingly, due to greater flexibility allowed to states to assist youths after age 18, some youths appear to get their basic needs for connection and social support met by voluntarily electing to remain in the foster care system. Evidence indicates that these youths tend to fare better than those who leave the foster care system as soon as they are legally able to do so. They are more likely to have health insur-

ance and to be enrolled in high school, college, or vocational training and are less likely to be a parent or to be exposed to violence than youths who do not continue in care (Collins, Clay, & Ward, 2008; Courtney & Dworsky, 2006).

Whereas there is agreement that foster youths need permanent, supportive, emotional connections with adults to navigate the challenging transition to adulthood (Charles & Nelson, 2000; Pew Charitable Trusts—Kids Are Waiting Campaign and the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, 2007), it is less clear how such support is best obtained. Of particular concern are those youths who lack some type of stable family connection, whether through kinship network, an adoptive family, or the voluntary continued support of a foster family. Increasingly, mentoring has been identified as a potential way to meet these youth's critical needs for supportive connections (Clayden & Stein, 2005; Daining & DePanfilis, 2007; Massinga & Pecora, 2004). The Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 (P.L. 106-169), the primary federal legislation providing supports to foster youths who age out of care, includes mentoring among the services that may be provided by states with federal funding. In addition, bills have been introduced in multiple sessions of Congress in recent years that would provide grants to states to encourage more mentoring programs to serve foster care youths (for example, the Foster Care Mentoring Act of 2009). Yet there is little discussion of how to develop and implement mentoring interventions for this population.

### **MENTORING FOSTER CARE YOUTHS**

Mentoring for foster care youths is taking a variety of forms (Britner & Kraimer-Rickaby, 2005). Some programs are using the more traditional model of matching youths with adult mentors who then meet regularly in person. Examples include the Adoption and Foster Care Mentoring program in Boston and the Foster Care Mentoring program run by Mentoring USA in New York. Other programs are using alternative formats such as online mentoring, wherein mentors and youths communicate through regular e-mail messages (for example, the vMentor program), or what are called peer mentoring programs, in which youths who have transitioned out of foster care and into independent living mentor youths in care (for example, FosterClub). Mentoring programs serving youths more generally, such as Big Brothers and Big Sisters of America, are also

encouraging greater participation of foster care youths in their existing programs.

However, research specifically addressing the nature and efficacy of formal mentoring programs for foster care youths more generally, and transitioning youths in particular, is quite sparse to date. Consequently, there is little empirical evidence regarding whether and how mentoring may enhance the well-being of transitioning youths. Research on formal mentoring with foster care youths is largely limited to descriptions of programs (for example, Mech et al., 1995; Payne, Cathcart, & Pecora, 1995; Utsey, Howard, & Williams, 2003) or individual program evaluations (for example, Osterling & Hines, 2006).

Clayden and Stein (2005) offered a more comprehensive examination of 181 mentoring relationships across 11 programs in the United Kingdom and focused specifically on transitioning youths, with participants ranging from 15 to 23 years of age. They culled case files to yield descriptive information on the youths, the mentors, and the mentoring relationships and interviewed 17 of the youths. This study offers a snapshot of the characteristics of the mentor and youth participants and some information about the nature of their relationships, including whether they set and reported achieving mutually agreed-upon goals, evidence in the case files for positive or negative outcomes associated with mentoring, and whether the relationship endings were planned. However, this approach did not allow the researchers to use standard measures of youth behavioral or psychosocial outcomes, and comparisons were not made across programs.

One study (Rhodes, Haight, & Briggs, 1999) examined the effects of mentoring for foster care youths ages 10 to 16 years. These researchers examined data from foster youths and parents gathered as a part of a national study of mentoring relationships formed through Big Brothers and Big Sisters of America (Tierny, Grossman, & Resch, 1995), which randomly assigned youths to treatment (received a mentor immediately) and control (placed on a waiting list for a mentor) groups. Foster parents were more likely at follow-up to report improvements in their child's social skills and comfort and trust with others than were non-foster parents. The foster care youths who were in the control group and did not receive mentors reported decrements in peer support over time, suggesting that mentors may mitigate the interpersonal problems experienced by

youths in foster placements. In addition, the reasons foster parents sought out mentors for their children differed from those of non-foster parents. Foster parents were more likely to seek a mentor for their child because the child was "insecure and did not trust adults" and had poor relationships with others (Rhodes et al., 1999, p. 191).

Some recent research has examined the role of natural mentors in the lives of foster care youths. One study (Ahrens et al., 2008) found associations between having a natural mentor in adolescence and faring well in adulthood among youths who had been in foster care. Examining data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, the researchers found that mentored youths (those who reported having a mentor before the age of 18 years and for at least two years) did better on self-reports of overall health, educational attainment, physical aggression, suicide risk, and risk of sexually transmitted infection than did nonmentored foster care youths. Another study (Munson & McMullen, 2008) of older youths in foster care found that youths who had been in a natural mentoring relationship for more than one year reported lower levels of stress and were less likely to have been arrested by the age of 19 than where nonmentored youths.

### **CURRENT RESEARCH ON THE EFFECTIVENESS OF YOUTH MENTORING PROGRAMS**

In the absence of empirical evidence on the effectiveness of mentoring programs for transitioning youths specifically, we examined the research on youth mentoring more generally. It should be noted that the preponderance of this research has been conducted on more traditional community and school-based formal mentoring programs (one-to-one, face-to-face relationships with unrelated adults that are intended to continue over many months minimally) and with younger adolescents (typically ages 10 to 16 years) than those transitioning out of the foster care system. This research suggests that such relationships, even under optimal conditions, can prove difficult to engineer. On average, mentoring tends to have only modest benefits for the youth participants (DuBois, Holloway, Valentine, & Cooper, 2002), and in some cases these small effects appear to fade over time (Aseltine, Dupre, & Lamlein, 2000; Herrera et al., 2007). However, research has begun to point to a set of factors that distinguish more effective mentoring relationships, with duration, consistency,

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and a close emotional connections emerging as key characteristics (Rhodes & DuBois, 2006).

### **Duration**

The benefits of mentoring appear to accrue over time. Grossman and Rhodes (2002) found that mentoring relationship length significantly contributed to youth outcomes, such as improvements in emotional and behavioral functioning and academic achievement, with the positive effects of mentoring growing progressively stronger the longer the relationship continued. Youths (ages 10 to 16 years) whose relationships lasted at least one year experienced the greatest benefits, with significant improvements in feelings of self-worth, perceived social acceptance, perceived scholastic competence, the value placed on school, and the quality of relationships with parents as well as decreases in drug and alcohol use as compared with nonmentored youths. Also important is their finding that youths in relationships that persisted for fewer than three months reported decreases in self-worth and in perceptions of scholastic competence (Grossman & Rhodes, 2002). This and other research (Spencer, 2007) suggested that relationships that end prematurely have the potential to make matters worse for already vulnerable youths. Unfortunately, although relationship failure rates can vary greatly across programs, general estimates are that only about half of the mentoring relationships established through formal programs last beyond a few months (Rhodes, 2002). The failure rate is even higher among youths who have more complex problems, such as a history of abuse, or who were referred to a mentoring program in response to psychological or educational difficulties (Grossman & Rhodes, 2002). Rhodes and DuBois (2006) have noted that although the optimal amount of time a formal mentoring relationship needs to last for youths to reap the greatest benefits is not yet clear, research on natural mentoring relationships suggests that relationships that last for several years—and thus help shepherd youths

through significant developmental transitions—may be especially beneficial (for example, Klaw, Fitzgerald, & Rhodes, 2003).

### **Consistency**

Consistent contact is another feature of more effective mentoring relationships (DuBois & Neville, 1997; Herrera, Sipe, & McClanahan, 2000). Regular contact is linked to youth outcomes indirectly through the ways that such contact creates opportunities for the mentor to become more directly involved in the young person's life and to offer various forms of meaningful assistance, including instruction and guidance in areas of interest and emotional and instrumental support (Herrera et al., 2000; Parra, DuBois, Neville, Pugh-Lilly, & Povinelli, 2002; Spencer, 2006). It has also been suggested that the stable presence of a caring adult may facilitate attachment-related processes, such as helping youths more effectively cope with stress and promoting positive changes in their working models of relationships (Keller, 2007; Rhodes, 2002).

### **Emotional Connection**

The bond that forms between the mentor and the youth is considered by many to be at the heart of the mentoring process (Herrera et al., 2000; Rhodes, 2002; Spencer, 2006). The presence of a strong emotional connection is associated with better outcomes, such as improvements in youths' self-reports on standardized measures of scholastic competence and feelings of self-worth (Grossman & Rhodes, 2002) and levels of emotional and behavioral problems, as reported by youths, parents, and teachers (DuBois & Neville, 1997). One study (Parra et al., 2002) found the perceived benefits of mentoring relationships to be mediated by relationship closeness for mentors and youths, rather than being directly linked with variables such as amount of contact and types of activities. Relationships that are less close tend to have little effect (Grossman & Rhodes, 2002; Parra et al., 2002).

### **Program Support for Mentoring Relationships**

Evidence is beginning to indicate that there is much that programs can do to facilitate the development of close, enduring, and consistent mentoring relationships. Based on a meta-analysis of more than 50 evaluations of mentoring programs (DuBois et al., 2002), Rhodes and DuBois (2006) noted that the

magnitude of the positive effects of a program on youth outcomes increased as the number of both theoretically (based on practice standards) and empirically based program practices implemented rose. These “best practices” include screening prospective mentors, using mentors with some experience in a helping role, training mentors prior to matching with their protégés, providing ongoing training and support and supervision to mentors, having expectations for the frequency of contact between mentor and youth and for the overall duration of the relationship, and providing mentor–youth matches with structured activities. The effect size among programs using the greatest number of these best practices was more than double that associated with programs using the fewest.

### **POTENTIAL PITFALLS FOR MENTORING PROGRAMS SERVING TRANSITIONING YOUTHS**

The conditions associated with more effective mentoring relationships may be difficult to meet with many transitioning youths, especially without considerable program support and, perhaps, greater support than is offered by mentoring programs serving youths more generally. In the absence of research specifically examining the effectiveness of mentoring programs for foster care youths, we highlight the implications of some of the lessons learned from the research on formal youth mentoring programs. We organize this discussion using an ecological model, focusing the pitfalls in three areas: (1) the interpersonal relationship between youth and mentor, (2) the administration of mentoring programs, and (3) the policy environment supporting mentoring initiatives for transition-age youths in child welfare systems.

#### **Interpersonal Relationships**

Like the research on mentoring programs more generally, Clayden and Stein (2005), in their study of mentoring programs for youths leaving care in the United Kingdom, found that the youths whose mentoring relationships lasted for more than one year tended to report more favorable outcomes than those in shorter term relationships, including greater likelihood of having achieved their original goals and having made some plans for their future. However, the complex circumstances faced by transitioning youths may make achieving a close and enduring relationship with a previously unknown adult men-

tor especially difficult. Given the transitory nature of the lives of youths as they move out of the foster care system, consistent contact between a young person in these circumstances and a formal mentor may be quite difficult to maintain for the amount of time necessary for the mentor to become the kind of “significant adult” in the young person’s life that has been associated with effective mentoring (Parra et al., 2002).

Support and guidance may need to be provided to matches to help them be creative and flexible in their approach to spending time together (for example, phone calls when face-to-face meetings are not possible), establishing plans for how to reach each other when the young person has to move unexpectedly or experiences an interruption in telephone service. Findings from a recent impact study of school-based mentoring programs (Herrera et al., 2007) suggest that some form of contact between mentor and youth may serve to bridge the relationship during times when face-to-face contact is not possible. Consideration may also be given to the establishment of mentoring relationships earlier in the young person’s life so that a close and consistent connection is already in place when the young person makes the transition to independent living and is likely to experience increased instability in many arenas. However, programs should not be bound to foster placements, so that when a young person changes placements or moves to independent living he or she does not lose the mentor.

Building meaningful connections with foster youths may be difficult in some cases. Recently, there has been greater explication of some the attachment-related difficulties of many foster care youths (Mennen & O’Keefe, 2005). A large proportion of foster youths have substantial maltreatment histories, which have been related to insecure attachment. Specifically, maltreated children tend to demonstrate a devalued sense of self, mistrust of others, and wariness in relationships (Price & Glad, 2003). Problems in mentoring relationships, more generally, have only recently begun to receive attention (Spencer, 2007), despite their frequent occurrence. Mentor abandonment is one considerable contributor to early match endings (Spencer, 2007), and Clayden and Stein’s study (2005) suggested that this is likely to be the case for programs serving foster care youths as well. Other research on youths in state custody has noted that mentors’ not feeling connected to the youths contributed to premature endings and

that youths who experienced disruptions in their matches reported higher rates of externalizing behaviors, as compared with nonmentored youths or youths whose matches remained intact (Britner & Kraimer-Rickaby, 2005).

On the one hand, the past vulnerable experiences of foster youths may present barriers to their establishing close relationships with mentors. On the other hand, this same history may mean that youths in foster care could be especially responsive to supportive relationships with caring adults when such relationships take hold and grow. Rhodes and colleagues (1999) argued that mentoring relationships may mitigate the negative effects of problems in these youths' primary caregiving relationships by offering a "corrective experience" in the form of a more stable and consistent adult presence. Facilitating such corrective experiences with foster care youths, however, may pose particular challenges.

Introducing a failed or disappointing relationship into the life of any young person has the potential to be detrimental to his or her well-being, and this is likely to be especially true for foster youths who have already suffered significant disruptions in relationships with adults. Having clear guidelines and options for appropriately and sensitively ending the mentoring relationship may help reduce the likelihood that mentors may simply abandon the relationship when they become uncertain about how to handle a difficult situation or have decided they no longer want to continue the relationship. This could prove useful to the youth as well, offering an opportunity to terminate a mentoring relationship that is not meeting his or her needs in a manner that builds skills in ending relationships in a healthy way.

### **Program Administration**

To facilitate successful implementation of programs that address the interpersonal factors identified earlier, thoughtful and professional program administration is needed. The first step is achieving clarity about the program goals and even the definition of mentoring. Youth mentoring programs are quite diverse in their form (one-to-one, group, peer), setting (school, community, e-mail), tasks (engaging in social activities, eating lunch at the youth's school, reading together, tutoring), and goals (psychosocial development, academic achievement). As noted previously, mentoring programs for foster youths appear to be following suit and are taking a variety

of forms. It is critical that programs clearly define the role of the mentor and provide appropriate supports to minimize risks and maximize potential benefits of the mentoring relationships.

Given that the current evidence points to the effectiveness of certain features of mentoring relationships (duration, frequency of contact, and connectedness), rather than offering clear evidence for which specific program models are most effective, it is reasonable for programs to use different approaches. It is important, however, that the program philosophy be clearly articulated and then supported by core program elements, implementation practices, and program administration. This conceptual clarity is needed for each individual mentoring program offered by a public or private agency. From this clarity flows decisions regarding the structure of the program, its administration, and, ideally, evaluation of its effectiveness. A rigorous process for carefully screening mentors that includes clear descriptions of program focus and goals and of the youths being served, along with forthright discussion of the challenges posed by forging a relationship with youths in such circumstances, could help eliminate adults who may be ill-suited to mentoring this population. Intensive training that includes information about the foster care system, the kinds of difficulties these youths tend to face, and their consequences, along with ongoing supervision or support for the mentors, may help reduce the likelihood of mentors entering into their relationships with unrealistic expectations and quickly becoming disillusioned or overwhelmed by the reality of mentoring a transitioning youth.

In the absence of empirical guidance, some effort has been made on the part of programs to adopt best practices for mentoring more generally to their work with foster care youths. The NYC Administration for Children's Services (n.d.) has developed a set of guidelines for best practices, and a report by Senior Corps (LEARNS, 2004) offers recommendations to their program directors on special considerations for programs serving foster care youths. These recommendations include specialized training for mentors and the importance of partnering with other agencies providing services to these youths. Few other sources on this topic exist.

Also relevant is how a mentoring strategy intersects with a young person's relationship with his or her own family and the child welfare system's responsibility to support the family relationship.

Handling the intricate dynamics of vulnerable youths and their families is a profound challenge requiring a high degree of clinical skill. Introduction of a mentor into a youth's life might cause a parent to feel threatened, a youth to feel conflicted, or a sibling to feel jealous, for example. No program would intend to create these feelings, and a good program would be conscious of these possibilities and take actions to address them. They remain risks, nonetheless.

Finally, it is important to keep in mind that there is substantial heterogeneity within the population of former foster youths—some do quite well with the transition, others do not. Keller, Cusick, and Courtney (2007) identified four distinctive profiles of this population and advocated matching appropriate services to the needs of specific youths. This type of empirical analysis may contribute to more sophisticated thinking about program design and matching. Such a typology, based on factors such as kind of out-of-home care or level of vocational functioning, might suggest different mentoring strategies for different youths. These kinds of program practices would require significant resources, such as well-trained staff with adequate support and time to complete these tasks and appropriate levels of responsibility.

### **Policy Considerations**

As noted, federal policy in this area allows the use of federal funds for mentoring programs. These are state choices, raising the question of whether, with always limited funding, states will choose mentoring over other less politically popular uses (for example, substance abuse treatment). Assuming that there is careful consideration of the issues that we have raised and that cautious, protective, and evidence-based mentoring programs have been developed that offer a reasonable chance of producing some positive change for some young people as they transition from care, additional considerations also need attention. The criterion of efficiency is central to policy discussion, and thus begs this question: Is this the best use of our already limited funding for child welfare? Assuming some agreement that this is a good use of funding, we must also address how funds should be spent to support mentoring. Presumably, good mentoring programs will be expensive. Recruitment, assessment, training, supervision, and monitoring will be required activities, as will the provision of resources to allow

for innovative and exciting activities for the mentor and the youth.

Government funding for social services, particularly in child welfare, is vulnerable to cuts in tight budget environments. Mentoring programs, by definition, involve relationships, and early evidence suggests that although mentoring relationships with youths of at least one year's duration can yield modest benefits for youths, there is some evidence that greater benefits may be realized through relationships that extend over several years (Rhodes & DuBois, 2006). This raises concerns about the level of commitment to ongoing funding that would support the relationships established as they progress over time. Currently, youth mentoring programs are under pressure for growth, with greater emphasis often placed on establishing new relationships, despite the growing evidence base emphasizing the importance of quality of the matches made for positive youth outcomes (Rhodes & DuBois, 2006). In this climate, limited resources may go disproportionately toward increasing the number of foster youths served rather than ensuring that the youths who are being served are served well.

A related concern is attention to effectiveness as determined by program evaluation. If successful models for mentoring programs for transitioning youths are identified, it will then be critical to ensure that models with the best evidence are implemented. We can predict that chronically underfunded agencies will be under great pressure to replace core elements of successful mentoring models with cheaper alternatives. There is a long history in human services of "model drift"—that is, the tendency for empirically supported models of interventions to be adopted in various settings and with different populations, without extensive attention to fidelity to the original program model. The experience with intensive family preservation programs, for example, demonstrated these tendencies, often combined with cost-cutting measures (for example, expansion of caseload), and offers a lesson in adherence to program fidelity (Hayward & Cameron, 2002).

Equity considerations are important in discussions of policy responses and raise particular challenges for mentoring foster youths. As it is unlikely that all youths transitioning from foster care will have access to this type of intervention, the potential for biases in the methods of selection is great, especially in light of the limited pool of

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volunteer mentors currently faced by youth mentoring programs (MENTOR/National Mentoring Partnership, 2006b). Highly vulnerable youths, such as those with long stays in residential care and histories of drug use or violent behavior, may have the greatest needs for emotional supports but be less attractive to volunteer mentors. In addition, the well-known disproportionate representation of youths of color within the child welfare system (Hines, Lemon, & Wyatt, 2004), coupled with the fact that most adult volunteer mentors in formal programs are white and reside in middle- to upper-income households (MENTOR/National Mentoring Partnership, 2006a), suggests that attention to the role of race and culture in the mentoring process should be a priority.

## **CONCLUSION**

Mentoring, if done well, may hold the potential to meet some of the critical needs of youths transitioning from foster care to independent living and early adulthood. However, given the heightened vulnerabilities and complex needs of these youths, social workers should proceed with caution. Protecting foster youths from further rejection or disappointment must take precedence; this priority dictates, at minimum, diligent adherence to the best practices gleaned from the research on youth mentoring more generally. There is no doubt that, as a report from the Casey Family Programs (2001) asserted, "every young person who leaves the child welfare system" needs to be "connected with a competent, caring adult" (p. 3). The question, rather, is whether and under what conditions is a volunteer mentor likely to reliably and effectively serve in this role.

Several steps in filling the gaps in empirical knowledge are warranted. Obviously, a serious commitment of evaluation of these interventions is needed, with the use of progressively rigorous designs for constructing the knowledge base. Evaluations should be a requirement of receiving funding for mentoring interventions. Evaluations should provide explicit

attention to the characteristics of the youths, the mentors, and the program so that comparisons across programs can be made. Each intervention should articulate a clear program philosophy and theory of change so that evaluations can be based on program theory and not the simple collection of outcome data. The practice field must encourage the replication of existing models rather than the design of new models that may fit agency resources but do not necessarily build the knowledge base. Finally, ongoing efforts to synthesize the research base are needed.

Still, the mentoring approach, particularly one-to-one mentoring, remains an individual-level solution to what are inherently systemic problems. Families involved with the child welfare system struggle with poverty, mental illness, domestic violence, homelessness, and other social problems primarily rooted in systemic challenges related to social class, racism, and sexism. A sound mentoring program may prove to be a key ingredient to helping some youths to achieve a successful, healthy, productive adulthood, relatively free of these types of social problems. Yet disproportionate attention to mentoring as a solution might continue to prohibit the enactment of more comprehensive solutions to the problems plaguing vulnerable families. As is often the case in social work, both micro and macro efforts will need to occur simultaneously. The profession must not lose sight of the need to tackle the far more difficult structural challenges while working to assist individual youths in the immediate term.

Both social networks and concrete assistance are typically needed to effectively serve vulnerable youths, such as those transitioning from foster care. Without social networks, concrete assistance (for example, safe housing, employment, education) and access to health care may be insufficient for sustained success. Ostensibly, mentoring provides the individual attention and support to supplement concrete supports. However, it cannot serve as a substitute for these supports. To the extent that it is relied on without first securing the basic building blocks of a successful adult life—housing, employment, education, and health care—it will almost surely fail to support young people in their transitions to adulthood.

If our cautions outweigh our enthusiasm, it is only to bring contemplation and care to what appears at times to be a bandwagon phenomenon, driven by the broad appeal of mentoring and the connection

most people make with a personal story of a caring adult who made a difference in their lives. The widespread and rapid growth in interest in mentoring for foster youths is occurring in the absence of clear empirical support for the effectiveness of these programs. Capitalizing on the promise of mentoring and other relationship-based approaches (including professional social work, foster parenting, apprenticeships) certainly calls for not only creativity and innovation, but also an unwavering commitment to full consideration of the risks and the construction of a sound evidence base on which to build these programs to protect transitioning foster care youths from further harm. **SW**

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**Renée Spencer, EdD, LICSW**, is associate professor, School of Social Work, Boston University, 264 Bay State Road, Boston, MA 02215; e-mail: [rspenc@bu.edu](mailto:rspenc@bu.edu). **Mary Elizabeth Collins, PhD**, is associate professor, School of Social Work, Boston University. **Rolanda Ward, PhD**, is assistant professor, State University of New York at Fredonia. **Svetlana Smashnaya, MSW, MA**, is a doctoral candidate, School of Social Work, Boston University.

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