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Understanding the Role of Parent Engagement to
Enhance Mentoring Outcomes:
Final Evaluation Report

June 2014

by Lara Kaye and Carolyn Smith

with thoughtful feedback from Brad Watts and Rose Greene

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Understanding the Role of Parent Engagement to Enhance Mentoring Outcomes:

Final Evaluation Report

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report provides an evaluation of the impact of a parent mentoring intervention on mentoring relationships and youth outcomes in a youth services agency. The program and research design and the evaluation resulted from a partnership between the Center for Human Services Research (CHSR) and Big Brothers' Big Sisters' Capital Region (BBBSCR).

Background

While mentoring is a widespread and successful intervention for youth-at-risk the impact of mentoring on youth outcomes appears to be modest (Dubois, Portillo, Rhodes, Silverthorn & Valentine, 2011). Ways to refine and strengthen mentoring are of great interest. One potential approach is parent engagement which has been shown to play a meaningful role in improving youth outcomes (Epstein, Joyce & Sanders, 2000; Higginbotham, MacArther, & Dart, 2010; St. Pierre & Kaltreider, 1997). Parents of youth involved in mentoring programs tend to be minorities and living in low-income. These parents face a unique set of structural and psychological obstacles to being engaged (Chang, Park, Singh & Sung, 2009; Diamond & Gomez, 2004; Patel & Stevens, 2010; Payne, 2006; Van Velsor & Orozco, 2007).

Methods

The Parent Engagement Model (PEM) was designed to engage parents in mentoring as well as to increase mentors' cultural understanding of families served by the program. The model consisted of six components: 1) parent orientation, 2) a parent handbook, 3) Energizing the Connection (ETC) mentor training, 4) match support on enhanced topics, 5) monthly post cards for each topic, and 6) biannual family events. It was evaluated using a quasi-experimental design with a waitlist control group. Recruitment took place from over a year resulting in 125 study matches made up of youth and mentors; parents were also include as study participants. Qualitative and quantitative data were collected including BBBS intake data and surveys, a standardized youth outcome instrument (the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL)), and project-developed instruments.

Findings

No significant improvements in youth outcomes were detected in quantitative analysis. This was attributed to a combination of factors including the incomplete implementation of the intervention, missing data on a few of the youth outcomes measures, as well as the smaller than expected sample. Yet, the parent orientation was well received, parents felt it was helpful and their knowledge increased overall. There were a number of findings related to the study process. Many challenges were faced in the study process related to sample size, program implementation, and staffing. Both the voluntary mentor ETC and the biannual family events were not viable as implemented for this study. Other qualitative findings related to the role of socioeconomic cultural divide and the potential need for more attention to this divide.

Recommendations

General recommendations include ongoing communication with parents and mentors, considering new ways to reach out to and communication information to parents and mentors, taking steps to decrease staff turnover, avoiding implementation pitfalls such as scheduling burden on participants, and broadening the intervention to include efforts to increase socioeconomic cultural understanding among parents, program staff, and researchers.

Conclusions

During this implementation of the PEM, we are unable to identify any differences in youth outcomes. Some components of the intervention, such as the parent orientation, were successful while other components, like the ETC, were not. Considering feedback from participants could help in designing approaches to better engage parents and future research on the role of socioeconomic cultural differences could help determine the value and nature of incorporating this content into the program for parents as well as mentors and staff.

INTRODUCTION

The prevalence of single parent households, children living in poverty and low graduation rates portends a challenging future for youth in America. These risk factors increase the chance of involvement in juvenile justice system and other negative outcomes for youth. One such example is the Capital Region of New York State with 35% of children under the age of 18 living in single parent households (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012 American Community Survey), one in every seven children living in poverty (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012 American Community Survey) and a 52.3% graduation rate in one of the region's largest school districts, Albany City Schools (NYSED Information and Reporting Services, 2012). Identifying meaningful ways to minimize these risks and ameliorate some of their impacts on youth is crucial.

Mentoring, an established intervention for at-risk youth, has been linked to positive youth outcomes (Dubois, Holloway, Valetine & Cooper, 2002; Jekielek, Moore & Hair, 2002; Keating, Tomishima, Foster & Allesandri, 2002; Herrera et al, 2007; Rhodes, 2008). Mentoring approaches vary in structure and design. Some programs focus on mentoring in the community while others are school-based. Many programs are structured around adults mentoring children while others consist of peer-to-peer mentors. The effects of mentoring are increased by the duration of the relationship and have been shown to have a positive impact if matches are together for at least 12 months (Grossman & Rhodes, 2002). The quality of the mentoring relationship and the frequency of contact can also play a role in improving benefits for youth (Dubois, Neville, Parra & Pugh-Lilly, 2002; Para, Dubois, Neville, Pugh-Lilly & Povinelli, 2002). Yet, the findings of the effects of mentoring are mixed -- a meta-analysis of 55 evaluations found that the benefits are modest or small for the average youth (Dubois, Holloway et al., 2002). A subsequent meta-analysis of 73 evaluations showed that while mentoring programs do improve outcomes across behavioral, social, emotional and academic domains, these gains continue to be modest (Dubois, Portillo, et al., 2011). Recommendations from the 2011 meta-analysis include the need for ongoing refinement and strengthening of mentoring programs.

Parent engagement is seen as a critical element in many intervention programs to improve outcomes for at-risk youth (Epstein et al., 2000; Higginbotham et al., 2010; St. Pierre & Kaltreider, 1997). Many studies of parent engagement have been in the field of education and the outcomes tend to be related to academics (Fan & Chen, 2001; Jeynes, 2005; Jeynes, 2007). Some studies extend beyond education, for example parent engagement with child welfare services (Gerring, Kemp & Marcenko, 2008) and mentoring (Higginbotham, MacArthur & Dart, 2010; Spencer, Basualdo-Delmonico, & Lewis, 2011).

Literature discusses the role of race, ethnicity and socio-economic status on parent engagement (Chang et al., 2009; Diamond & Gomez, 2004; Patel & Stevens, 2010; Payne, 2006; Van Velsor & Orozco, 2007) indicating that minority low-income parents face a unique set of structural and psychological obstacles to being engaged.

Big Brothers Big Sisters Capital Region (BBBSCR) is a local mentoring organization serving families residing in four counties in the capital region of upstate New York. The program has been in existence for over 20 years and is affiliated with the nation's oldest, largest and most well-known youth mentoring organization, Big Brothers Big Sisters of America. Surveys conducted in 2010 by BBBSCR of parents and mentors provided feedback from parents indicating a need to be better informed about the program, procedures, and policies of the organization. Feedback from mentors also indicated a need to improve communication with parents. In addition, the program staff/administration perceived that many match closures were related to parents' unrealistic expectation of both the program and the mentor.

The parent engagement model (PEM) that is the focus of this evaluation was based on the need to refine and strengthen programs to better understand mechanisms that contribute to meaningful positive outcomes for youth. Development of the model was based on feedback from the local program, parents, and mentors, as well as literature that suggests parent engagement plays a key role in youth outcomes.

The model itself was developed in conjunction with the BBBSCR program staff and resulted in six components: 1) parent orientation, 2) a parent handbook, 3) Energizing the Connection (ETC) mentor training, 4) match support on enhanced topics, 5) monthly post cards for each topic, and 6) biannual family events. The first two components, the group parent orientation and the handbook, dealt specifically with orienting the parents to the program and communicating expectations. ETC was a workshop for mentors that addressed potential challenges in the match, the role of poverty and resources, as well as hidden perspectives on poverty. Enhanced match support calls addressed a time relevant topic about the match such as reasons to call match support or ideas for outings during the regularly monthly call with parents. In addition to the verbal communication of these topics, BBBS sent to parents postcards with information related to each topic. Lastly, the biannual family event was a special event where parents, mentors and matches were invited to spend some time getting to know each other better, share a meal and do fun activities together.

While we were unable to show any differences in youth outcome based on the PEM in this study, we found that parent orientation, a key mandatory component of the intervention, was well received and increased knowledge. We also found that voluntary attendance at the ETC and the biannual family events were not viable as implemented. Mentors' time constraints and availability were a significant challenge in the program, outside of the added ETC training. Lastly, future research on the role and impact of training on socioeconomic cultural perspective differences could be extremely useful to mentoring programs in determining the best ways to incorporate this content as well as to determine its impact on mentoring relationships and hence youth outcomes.

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