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NATURAL MENTORING AS A FORM OF SUPPORTING INDEPENDENT LIVING FOR YOUTH AGING OUT OF FOSTER CARE

Abstract: Youth in foster care are at high risk of adverse outcomes across all areas of health and development, and they often face unfavorable results after leaving the care system. This is especially true given their limited internal and external resources. Research shows that those aging out of care encounter numerous difficulties in daily life. This review aims to identify existing knowledge on natural mentoring as one form of support for youth transitioning out of foster care. The research question concerns the effectiveness of this form of support in working with young people entering adulthood. A literature review method was applied. Scholarly literature was searched in Polish and English using databases including MEDLINE, PsycINFO, PubMed, and Scopus, supplemented by a Google Scholar query. Searches were conducted using key terms. The effectiveness of natural mentoring is moderate, but it can be influenced by mentor characteristics and the mentoring relationship itself. Research on natural mentoring is focused on outcomes such as health and well-being, social skills, behavioral and emotional functioning, educational attainment, employment, perceived and received social support, conditions for utilizing different types of support, and the optimal qualities of non-parental adults who assist in the transition to independence. Social workers strive to maintain family contacts while youth are in care and intensify these efforts during emancipation. Regardless of these efforts, youth aging out of care seldom receive optimal support from their parents. Mentors can partially compensate for this deficit. Despite promising findings, the topic of mentoring in foster care is rarely addressed in European studies.

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INTRODUCTION

Success in the transition to adulthood depends on basic resources (e.g. socio-economic status, financial and housing situation) and adaptive resources (in particular, support from adults, coping skills, future planning and motivation, and the quality of attachment to parents; Masten et al., 2004). Young people who transition to independence outside the family home may have limited access to such resources, which leads to difficulties in the journey to adulthood. Despite lacking parental support, they must make important decisions about employment, housing, and starting a family (social maturity), take responsibility for those choices (psychological maturity), and situate their plans within a life trajectory (Oleś, 2011). Adulthood, understood in this way, depends on successfully completing tasks in prior developmental stages and formulating one's own future plans (Brzezińska et al., 2012).

Most 18-year-olds are not ready for independent living and require support in early adulthood (van Breda et al., 2020). This is partly due to the prolonged period of adolescence (Brzezińska et al., 2011), which results from pursuing higher education and economic challenges at the start of a career. The average age at which young people leave their family home in European Union countries is 26.2 years, underscoring that foster youth become independent much earlier than their peers (Dworsky, 2005; Wade & Dixon, 2006). Emancipation at the age of 18 limits the opportunity to experiment with independent roles (Kerivel, 2015) and to make adjustments to established future plans. It ultimately leads to difficulty achieving self-sufficiency (Stein, 2019). The felt pressure to make binding decisions at 18 (Kerivel, 2015), under conditions of insufficient support, can leave youth feeling unprepared for independent life and result in a pessimistic outlook on their future.

Youth aging out of foster care are particularly prone to developmental and health disorders, especially mental health issues. The number of violent events (including neglect) experienced in childhood is a strong predictor of developing mental disorders (McMillen et al., 2005). This group has been found to have more than double the rate of mental disorders compared to control groups (Keefe et al., 2022). It is estimated that one in five children in care struggles with problems related to dysfunctional and developmentally inappropriate ways of forming social bonds, such as reactive attachment disorder (Lehmann et al., 2013).

Review analyses have shown that symptoms of PTSD and complex PTSD among children and adolescents in foster care are significantly higher than in the general population (Czerwińska & Kucharska, 2024). The accumulation of multiple traumatic experiences increases the risk of developing severe post-traumatic stress symptoms (Breslau et al., 1999; Suliman et al., 2009), especially when these experiences are accompanied by an intensified negative appraisal of the traumatic event and its consequences (Kube et al., 2023). Problems with mental and physical health, emotional functioning, weak relationships, substance abuse, delinquency, low education levels, unemployment, housing instability, and even homelessness all hinder the transition to independence and lead to a reduced quality of life for most youth who age out of care. The consequences of these problems can be long-lasting (Font et al., 2021; Gypen et al., 2017), affecting their functioning in the future.

BASIC PART

Method: This review is aimed at identifying the existing knowledge in the area of mentoring as one form of support for youth in foster care who are entering adulthood. Research in this area has been conducted primarily in the United States and is rarely present in European journals. The research question concerns the effectiveness of using natural mentoring as a support tool in work with youth leaving care. The article is a literature review. Scholarly literature searches were carried out in both Polish and English using databases such as MEDLINE, PsycINFO, PubMed, and Scopus, supplemented by Google Scholar. The searches employed keywords including “natural mentor,” “mentoring,” “independent living,” and “foster care.”

Due to the lack of parental involvement, foster youth find themselves in a situation characterized by feelings of rejection, abandonment, and loneliness. Responsibilities related to care, upbringing, education, and preparation for adulthood are taken over by state institutions in place of parents; however, these institutions are unable to optimally meet all needs, particularly the need for enduring emotional bonds and stability. In contrast to their peers, emancipated foster youth typically experience an abrupt entrance into adulthood and a sudden loss of prior support. As a result, they feel anxiety about having to assume full responsibility for their lives (Cunningham & Diversi, 2013). Despite the implementation of programs offering support, youth aging out of care report feeling alone in facing the challenges of independent life. It has been shown that the support provided to them drops off significantly after they leave care (Wade & Dixon, 2006). Youth from institutional care or those who have experienced multiple placement changes are especially at risk of lacking complementary support (Scannapieco et al., 2007). The absence of a single, consistent caregiver from the beginning of a child’s life makes it significantly more difficult for that child to form secure and satisfying relationships with others (Bowlby, 2007).

Research on youth preparing to age out of foster care (Butarewicz-Głowacka et al., 2021) and those who have already left care indicates that supportive adults, including mentors, have a significant positive impact on various domains of independent living. At least one supportive, caring, and trustworthy person serves a protective role for young people in high-risk conditions and increases their chances of success in education, obtaining and maintaining employment, and even perceived emotional stability (Ahrens et al., 2008; Shpiegel et al., 2022; Courtney & Lyons, 2009; Armstrong-Heimsoth et al., 2021). The opportunity to draw on a support network is a tangible asset that helps youth cope with the challenges of the transition to adulthood (Hedenstrom, 2021). Even while in care, long-term relationships can help counteract negative experiences by promoting continuity in one’s life story, making sense of the past, and filling gaps in personal narrative—all of which are important for identity formation. This is especially crucial when children cannot return home and an independent living plan is to be carried out outside the family. Moreover, youth from institutional care in particular express the need for an individual relationship with an available and caring adult (Butarewicz-Głowacka et al., 2021). Such a person can be a current foster caregiver, an independent living coordinator, a teacher, extended family members, a social services worker, or a family friend. Supportive non-parental adults can play a significant role in adolescent development—a life stage characterized by rapid social, psychological, and cognitive changes (Erikson, 2004). Simply perceiving

that one is receiving support is associated with improved well-being (Malecki & Demaray, 2003), which in turn helps reduce educational, socio-emotional, and behavioral problems in foster youth (Steinberg, 2007). Additionally, adolescents note that important non-parental adults differ from their peers because they can offer support that friends are unable to provide due to a lack of experience and sense of responsibility. These adults also differ from the youths' parents (and foster caregivers) because youth feel able to tell mentors about situations they would not dare discuss with their parents or caregivers for fear of disapproval, shame, or punishment (Beam et al., 2002). Some foster youth maintain contact with their biological parents and feel attached to them, but these relationships are often marked by unresolved conflicts; in some cases, rather than receiving support from their families, young people find themselves in the position of providing support to their family members (Samuels & Pryce, 2008). Therefore, in searching for effective solutions for preparing foster youth for independence, research has increasingly focused on the importance of building a secure relationship with a responsible adult whom the adolescent can identify as a source of support within their social network. Such an adult can be a mentor.

Mentoring as a Form of Support for Foster Youth

In recent times, greater importance has been attached to mentoring as a significant form of support for children and adolescents in foster care, especially during the transition to adulthood. Mentoring is defined as a partnership relationship aimed at discovering and developing the mentee's potential (Karwala, 2007, p. 67), or as providing an individual with guidance to transform their knowledge, work, or thinking (Megginson et al., 2008, p. 17). Employed as a tool in social work, education, and psychology, mentoring allows for relationship-building, enhances the sense of security, and facilitates the development of social skills. The literature points to a variety of mentoring forms, ranging from formal programs to natural, spontaneous relationships with adults who support youth in the maturation process. Formal (program-based) mentoring requires structured programs and trained mentors. Such programs are run by non-governmental or government organizations, with clearly defined goals, structure, and participant selection criteria (DuBois & Silverthorn, 2005). Informal (natural) mentoring relationships develop spontaneously and may involve relationships with a teacher, member of a foster family, neighbor, instructor, clergy member, sports coach, social worker, probation officer, or other adults. These relationships are based on emotional bonds and voluntary interaction (Thompson, Greeson, & Brunsink, 2016). Other types of mentoring that can operate within the care system have also been distinguished: promising *peer mentoring*, which involves support provided to younger foster youth by slightly older peers with similar life experiences (Keller, 2007); *community mentoring*, based on supervised relationships between adult volunteers and children (Rhodes et al., 1999); *specialist mentoring*, carried out by professionals (psychologists, educators, social workers) and focused on developing specific skills and competencies (Butarewicz, 2022); and *therapeutic mentoring*, delivered by therapists, particularly when working with youth who have mental health disorders (Johnson et al., 2011). These forms differ in their degree of oversight, level of professionalization, objectives, and intensity of support provided. The choice of mentoring type and mentor should be tailored to the specific needs and expectations of

the young person. Mentoring plays an important role in the process of preparing for adult life by facilitating planning and follow-through on commitments. Meta-analyses have shown that mentoring programs have a positive, though moderate and variable, impact on the well-being and achievements of youth in foster care, especially those who have experienced abuse (Rhodes et al., 2021; Van Dam et al., 2018). This impact depends on the quality of the relationship and on the mentor's skills, competencies, and commitment—such as relevant experience, life wisdom, and willingness to share it—as well as on how well both the program and the mentor are matched to the mentee's needs (Fingas & Szala, 2018). The duration of the relationship is also a key factor (Grossman & Rhodes, 2002).

Natural (informal) mentoring appears to be a better solution for foster youth than formal mentoring. Informal mentoring relationships develop naturally over time, which can foster trust and the formation of bonds (Ahrens et al., 2008). Developing a high-quality relationship requires commitment and a gradual process of getting to know each other. The more frequent and satisfying the interactions, the greater the likelihood that the mentor will provide the youth with supportive experiences, which in turn can positively influence the stability of the relationship. Long-term mentoring is associated with lower stress levels (Munson & McMillen, 2009) and a greater sense of security within the relationship. Mentor characteristics have also proven to be significant for effective mentoring (Spencer, 2006; 2007). It can therefore be assumed that informal mentoring indeed makes it easier to provide adequate support. The most commonly distinguished forms of support in mentoring relationships are emotional support, cognitive (informational) support, appraisal (affirmational) support, and instrumental support. Social support is considered a universal human need, and one of its functions is emotion regulation, including during crises. Social support can be understood as using one's relationships in order to obtain help (Cieślak & Eljasz, 2004). Support contributes to mental and physical health, good well-being, effective coping in difficult situations, and optimal daily functioning. The presence of significant people in a child's life positively influences the development of coping mechanisms in challenging situations and the acquisition of key life skills. Conversely, a lack of emotional support—or lowered support—is associated with poorer health outcomes, including lower well-being and higher likelihood of depression (Karski, 2007). People who are socially isolated typically receive less support, even in extremely difficult circumstances (Maciarz, 2005).

FINDINGS

Several empirical studies have examined the effects of natural mentoring relationships on youth aging out of foster care. Below in table 1 there is an overview of key findings from selected studies, including sample characteristics and main outcomes:

Table 1: Effects of Unrelated Natural Mentoring in Foster Care During the Transition to Adulthood

Participants Studied	Main Findings	Reference
N = 160 foster youth with mentors, age 14–18	Improved overall health; less frequent reports of suicidal thoughts and criminal behavior; a slight increase in participation in higher education	Ahrens et al., 2008

N = 339, mean age 18.0 years	Longer duration of the mentoring relationship (measured in years) is associated with better <i>psychological</i> outcomes (fewer depressive symptoms, lower stress, greater life satisfaction) and <i>behavioral</i> outcomes (lower levels of delinquent behavior and substance use)	Munson & McMillen, 2009
N = 7 adolescent girls in foster care	Identified the most important mentor qualities as trust, love, care, and having quasi-parental traits, as well as the need for a variety of types of social support	Greeson & Bowen, 2008
N = 590 emancipated foster youth, age ~21	Closer mentor-youth relationships are associated with a higher likelihood of employment within one year after the mentoring period and a significant reduction in the likelihood of a return to homelessness. No link was found between having a natural mentor and later criminal behavior	Courtney & Lyons, 2009
N = 15,197 emancipated foster youth, age 18–26	Mentor characteristics described as “like a parent,” “role model,” and providing “guidance/advice” are significantly associated with some indicators of the youth’s external assets	Greeson, Usher, & Grinstein-Weiss, 2010
N = 20 youth, age 15–21 (mean 18.1), mean time in foster care = 7.2 years	Revealed the need for lasting relationships with adults and desired mentor characteristics (mentor viewed as a family-like figure; being supportive, trustworthy, a role model, and reliable)	Greeson et al., 2015
N = 23 emancipated foster youth, age 18–25	This qualitative study found: (1) positive outcomes of support from natural mentors in <i>socio-emotional development</i> (e.g. learning relationship skills) and <i>cognitive development</i> (e.g. planning, problem-solving); (2) emotional and informational support from mentors are crucial; (3) youth initially face relationship barriers (fear of being hurt, fear of losing autonomy, feeling obliged to reciprocate, distrust, feeling misunderstood) but also initial facilitators (mentor patience, authenticity, showing respect, expressing interest, similarities to the youth in experiences or hobbies). Ongoing relationship barriers include placement changes (relocation) and fear of not meeting the mentor’s expectations, while ongoing facilitators include certain mentor personal qualities and the frequency and nature of contacts	Ahrens et al., 2011
Systematic review of 38 studies (2006–2015)	Natural mentoring is a promising intervention method, associated primarily with improved well-being of children in foster care. The authors recommend involving natural mentors as early as possible when planning care for children	Thompson et al., 2016

The presented findings indicate that many youth aging out of foster care are able to recognize support from non-family adults, and that these supportive relationships are associated with several positive effects. Notable benefits have been observed in *behavioral* domains (such as building certain personal assets, completing education, securing employment, reducing instances of homelessness, and partially reducing risky and delinquent behaviors), *psychological* domains (such as fewer reports of depression and suicidal ideation, lower stress levels, greater life satisfaction, and higher self-esteem), and *social-emotional* domains (such as maintaining relationships with peers and adults, learning relationship skills including conflict resolution and setting boundaries with peers, and improving coping with failures and managing emotions). The effects of mentoring during the transition to independent living are significant, although generally small to moderate in magnitude. However, research suggests that a natural mentor's professional experience in a helping field (e.g. as a social worker, teacher, or career counselor) can strengthen these effects (van Dam et al., 2018). Outcomes also depend on the length of the mentoring relationship (Munson & McMillen, 2009) and on the regularity and type of mentor-mentee contact (Ahrens et al., 2011). Early termination of the mentoring relationship has been shown to negatively impact outcomes (Grossman & Rhodes, 2002). The quality of the mentor-mentee relationship likewise affects results, particularly with respect to positive socio-emotional development (van Dam et al., 2018).

Studies have accounted for the difficulties that foster youth may have in forming and maintaining relationships (Greeson, Usher, & Grinstein-Weiss, 2010; Ahrens et al., 2011). A lack of trust in adults, suspicion regarding the intentions of adult mentors, and fears about having their autonomy restricted by mentors stem from earlier experiences in relationships with parents (Bowlby, 2007), caregivers, or peers, as well as from trauma (e.g. instability, broken attachments, abuse) that undermines their mental health and well-being. Outcomes also depend on how the youth perceives the mentor and the mentor's personal attributes (Greeson & Bowen, 2008; Greeson et al., 2010; Courtney & Lyons, 2009; Ahrens et al., 2011; Greeson et al., 2015). Beyond the mentor's experience and availability, young people value qualities such as honesty, authenticity, reliability, commitment, and consistency—traits that help in establishing closeness and maintaining the relationship. Researchers have repeatedly found that foster youths' expectations of the adult mentor's role align with viewing the mentor as a substitute for a parent they lost or who failed them: someone close and supportive, to whom they can always turn for advice and spend time with, without fear of rejection (Greeson et al., 2015; Greeson & Bowen, 2008; Greeson, 2010). A factor that facilitates youths' engagement in a mentoring relationship is the presence of shared experiences or interests (Ahrens et al., 2011). A mentor's own experience with the foster care system makes the mentor seem more credible and understanding of the problems that care leavers face. Meanwhile, common interests make it easier to initiate and sustain contact through activities during free time. Such leisure activities involve fun, relaxation, and a sense of freedom, and associating these positive experiences with the mentor leads youth to attribute favorable qualities to the mentor (for instance, perceiving the mentor as caring, likable, and genuinely enjoying their meetings). In sum, mentoring relationships are associated with positive adaptation during the transition to adulthood

for youth in foster care (Ahrens et al., 2008), but they require appropriate preparation and support to achieve optimal outcomes.

CONCLUSIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Extending natural mentoring into the period of emerging adulthood can be crucial for the life success of foster youth. It is therefore worthwhile to implement and monitor natural mentoring strategies for this population (Munson & McMillen, 2009), while ensuring that the goals of such programs (e.g. improving self-determination and prosocial skills, developing the ability to build support networks and form relationships with significant others) and the capacities of mentors are aligned with the specific needs of the participants. Given the importance of mentoring for youth socialized outside the family, it is important to professionalize mentoring services, at least through training (Taussig & Weiler, 2017; Ahrens et al., 2011), in areas such as relationship-building and maintenance, providing support, and understanding the problems of transitioning foster youth. Taussig and Weiler (2017) observe that practitioners should keep in mind the difficulties care leavers face in forming relationships with adults as a result of their adverse experiences. This creates a need to train and support mentors by providing them with specialized knowledge, emphasizing the importance of consistency and patience, and teaching strategies for building and maintaining trust when working with this group of young people. When planning interventions for youth who cannot maintain contact with their parents, it is advisable to incorporate natural mentoring as early as possible into the existing array of services.

There are many reasons to utilize mentoring relationships to improve outcomes for youth in foster care and those aging out. Research on natural mentoring has focused on measuring indicators of broadly understood health and well-being. The transition to adulthood involves taking on not only professional roles but also family roles, both of which determine quality of life. Those who were raised outside a family and who have experienced harmful relationships may develop a distorted view of marriage and parenthood, as well as unfavorable attachment patterns (Bowlby, 2007). Further research should concentrate on the outcomes of mentoring for the functioning of former foster youth in marital and parenting roles. Additionally, in the studies analyzed, the length of the mentoring relationship was typically no longer than 18 months (Johnson et al., 2011). It appears that for at least some youth aging out of care, this duration may be too short—especially in the context of preparing for future family roles. It would be worthwhile to examine whether extending the duration of mentoring, and in which areas and for whom, would be most optimal for healthy adult functioning.

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ПРИРОДНИЙ МЕНТОРИНГ ЯК ФОРМА ПІДТРИМКИ ЖИТТЄВОЇ НЕЗАЛЕЖНОСТІ МОЛОДІ, ЯКА САМОСТІЙНО ЖИВЕ В СЕРЕДОВИЩІ ЗАМІННОГО ОПІКУНСТВА

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Анотація: Молодь, яка перебуває під опікою, піддається високому ризику невдач у всіх сферах здоров'я та розвитку, а також несприятливих результатів після виходу з системи опіки, особливо в контексті наявних внутрішніх та зовнішніх ресурсів. Дослідження показують, що ті, хто залишає опіку, стикаються з низкою труднощів у повсякденному житті. Метою огляду є ідентифікація наявних знань у сфері природного наставництва як однієї з форм підтримки вихованців замісної опіки, які стають самостійними. Дослідницьке питання стосується ефективності використання цієї форми підтримки в роботі з молоддю, яка вступає в доросле життя. Було застосовано метод огляду літератури. Наукова література була пошукована польською та англійською мовами з використанням баз: MEDLINE, PsycINFO, PubMed та Scopus. Пошук був частково доповнений оглядом в Google Scholar. Пошук здійснювався за допомогою ключових термінів. Результати: ефективність природного наставництва є помірною, однак вона може бути модифікована характеристиками наставника та самої відносини. Дослідження природного наставництва спрямовані на оцінку здоров'я, самопочуття, соціальних навичок, показників поведінкового та емоційного функціонування, успіхів у навчанні, професійної діяльності, якості сприйманої та отриманої соціальної підтримки, умов використання різних видів підтримки, оптимальних рис дорослих, які не є батьками, що підтримують у становленні незалежності. Працівники соціальної допомоги працюють над підтриманням контактів з родиною вже на етапі опіки, а ці дії інтенсифікуються на етапі становлення самостійності. Незалежно від ефективності цих дій, молодь, яка перебуває під опікою, рідко може розраховувати на оптимальну підтримку з боку своїх батьків. Ментори можуть певною мірою компенсувати цей дефіцит. Незважаючи на багатообіцяючі результати, тема менторства в опіці рідко піднімається в європейських дослідженнях.

Ключові слова: менторство, ментор, підопічний, програми менторства, самостійність, замінна опіка

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