Youth mentoring relationships: Understanding how to prevent breakdown
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Preface

Youth Mentoring Relationships: Understanding how to prevent breakdown was produced by a research team from four Perth universities: Dr Judith MacCallum, Murdoch University; Dr Susan Beltman, Curtin University; Dr Anne Coffey, The University of Notre Dame Australia; and Dr Trudi Cooper, Edith Cowan University (with Jayne Jarvis).

This research adds another dimension to the suite of Mentoring Worx resources found at www.dlgc.wa.gov.au/mentoring-worx-resources

All these resources and this research report have been produced as part of the Western Australian Youth Mentoring Reform Project with funds provided by the Australian Government under the former National Partnership on Youth Attainment and Transitions. The Youth Mentoring Relationships research project was developed through consultation and collaboration with community agency representatives on the WA Youth Mentoring Reform Group. The participation of program coordinators, mentors and young people, enabled the researchers to gain insights into why some mentoring relationships break down and what strategies can reduce the risk of breakdown and ensure the development of effective mentoring relationships for young people. Although the small sample size limits the generalisability of findings, this qualitative research builds on the few international studies that have investigated this important but difficult area to research.
Introduction

A mentoring program provides the structure that “brings young people together with caring individuals who offer guidance, support and encouragement” (AYMN, 2014).

The mentoring relationship is the core of mentoring but the relationship and how to support it, is perhaps the least understood aspect of mentoring. Research on mentoring has focused on the positive outcomes of mentoring and the characteristics of effective mentoring programs. Reviews of research on youth mentoring (Brooker, 2011) and meta-analyses and reviews of evaluations of youth mentoring programs (DuBois, Holloway, Valentine and Cooper, 2002; Grossman & Rhodes, 2002; MacCallum & Brooker, 2012) point to the importance of quality ongoing mentoring relationships for positive socio-emotional, educational and life skill outcomes of young people.

Not all mentoring relationships work as well as anticipated and some break down. This project investigated the questions “Why do some mentoring relationships break down?” and “What strategies may reduce the risk of mentoring relationships breaking down?”

Significance

It is important to reduce the risk of break down of mentoring relationships because

- When mentoring relationships break down, the effects on young people may be worse than if they had never been offered mentoring;

- Participation in a mentoring relationship that has broken down may reduce the confidence of a mentor to volunteer for further mentoring, thus potentially exacerbating the shortage of mentors and mentoring opportunities for young people;

- There is a shortage of volunteer mentors, which means that to maximize the contribution of mentors it is important to reduce the number of relationship break downs as much as possible.
Background

Despite acknowledgement of the detrimental effect of ineffective youth mentoring relationships (e.g., Freedman, 1995; Struchen & Porta, 1997), and findings that a high proportion of relationships do not last more than a few weeks or months (Karcher, 2005; Rhodes, 2002), there has been little research on mentoring relationships that break down. Spencer (2007) argues that “the untold story is what happens when mentoring relationships do not go well” (p. 331-332). In an exploratory study, Spencer (2007) interviewed 31 participants, from two Big Brothers Big Sisters (BBBS) of America community-based mentoring programs, whose relationship had not lasted the minimum of one year set by the program. The study focused on why the relationships terminated early and on participants’ understanding of the impact on them. Six themes were identified: mentor or protégé abandonment, perceived lack of protégé motivation, unfulfilled expectations, deficiencies in mentor relational skills including the inability to bridge cultural divides, family interference, and inadequate agency support.

Eby and colleagues (Eby, McManus, Simon & Russell, 2000; Eby, Durley, Evans & Ragins, 2008) examined both positive and negative experiences in workplace mentoring relationships, but were not concerned with whether or not the relationship had been effective. When considered from the perspective of the protégé, negative experiences could be categorised into five main meta-themes: match within the dyad, distancing behaviour, manipulative behaviour, lack of mentor expertise and general dysfunctionality. A common response described differences in attitudes and beliefs. While there are some commonalities with Spencer’s (2007) findings, particularly around relational skills and mentor expertise, Spencer’s research identified other themes more related to the program aims and setting.

A quantitative American study (Martin & Sifers, 2012) with mentors of BBBS programs found that mentor satisfaction was related to training, confidence about engaging in a mentoring relationship, and ongoing support by the agency. They also identified barriers to having a good relationship, including: conflicts around scheduling meeting times; and difficulties in communicating effectively with a young person.

A survey of young people, who had chosen their mentors from available social networks (Schwartz, Rhodes, Spencer & Grossman, 2013), found a high proportion of enduring relationships with positive outcomes. Of cases in an interview subsample, 20% reported relationships breaking down or ending prematurely. In these cases young people thought the mentors were too busy to meet or provide the support they wanted, or that changes in other relationships within the social networks had negatively impacted the mentoring relationship.

Examining successful and unsuccessful e-mentoring relationships for young people with disabilities, Shpigelman and Gill (2013) found that mentors’ previous experience and success in helping roles contributed to success as did their ability to use a warm conversational text-based communication style. Those mentors who used a more formal writing style were
less able to develop a successful mentoring relationship.

MacCallum and Brooker’s (2012) review of three Australian program evaluations found that lack of clarity around the rationale for the program and its outcomes, and differing expectations of participants appeared to reduce the success of some relationships and outcomes for young people.

While different research studies have focused on different types of mentoring programs, a number of key areas relating to the break down of mentoring relationships have been identified: mentor-mentee communication/connection, mentor expertise and skills, expectations of the program, practical scheduling issues, as well as program and family support.

Deutsch and Spencer (2009) point out that the mentoring relationship comprises the Mentor, the Protégé (Mentee), their interaction, and the interaction of each of these with the Mentoring Program. However, the program also exists in a wider community (including schools, families and activity settings), which also interacts with each of the other elements. These interrelationships are represented in Figure 1. While the characteristics of the mentor and young person and the nature of actual relationship itself may be paramount in the success of a mentoring relationship, the interaction with the Program and wider Community may be potentially as important in the breakdown of a relationship or in the development of strategies to prevent breakdown.

**Figure 1:** The mentoring relationship and interactions with the program and the wider community

Source: Modified from Deutsch & Spencer, 2009
Rationale for this research

Successful mentoring has the capacity to improve young people’s lives, and can provide a cost effective means to offer targeted individual support to young people who might benefit from individual support and encouragement (Brooker, 2011). Relationships that end prematurely have the capacity to damage both the mentee/protégé and the mentor. For this reason it is very important to understand in a detailed way how and why some relationships break down or are at risk of breaking down, and what strategies might be effective to avoid or minimize mentoring relationship breakdowns. Existing research indicates that the potential reasons for breakdown are likely to be both varied and complex, and the means to prevent or reduce relationship breakdown are likely to involve multiple strategies. This research investigates factors that contribute to mentoring relationship breakdown, and what strategies might reduce mentoring breakdown. This work could provide the groundwork for future research to examine efficacy of different types of strategies and mentoring processes.
Methodology

Mentoring programs are diverse, in focus and setting. Differences in the focus of programs influence judgements about what constitutes success. Differences in focus and setting influence methods used by mentors in their interactions with mentees, and conceptions of the ideal type of relationship between mentors and mentees. This project draws data from four programs that represent different types of youth mentoring utilising volunteer mentors.

Sample

The research used purposive sampling of programs and participants within those programs.

The programs

The research examined mentoring programs offered to young people aged 12-18 years by four very different organisations/agencies. All programs met the Australian Youth Mentoring Benchmarks (2012), which is an indicator of program quality. Of the programs in this sample, two were school-based (operated in school time), two were community-based, and one operated exclusively on-line. In each case, volunteer mentors were supported by program staff.

Differences in program goals, focus and setting can be represented schematically along three continua:

- Focus defined by young person vs. focus defined by the program
- Personal relationship vs. impersonal relationship
- Open setting vs. controlled setting

Each of these dimensions is now illustrated.

Young person chooses or program chooses mentoring focus and activities

The focus of the mentoring relationship could be pre-defined by the program, could be chosen by the young person, or could be negotiated between program staff and the young person, either formally or informally. The programs in this sample differed considerably in terms of the amount of input young people had into the central focus of the program and its activities. In one program the goals and activities were almost exclusively defined by the program and were tightly focused on supporting the young person to make informed career choices.
Supervisors in this program discouraged mentors from discussions that were not related to this goal. In others programs there was a degree of negotiation. For example, in one program a major focus was literacy development but if a young person had other concerns or worries they wished to share with their mentor, the program allowed the mentor to focus on the young person’s concern, and allowed the young person to explore personal situations of their own choosing. Similarly, another program had a broad goal of life skills development, and the area of focus was negotiated with the young person through their interactions with other professional staff. In the fourth program, the focus of the mentoring relationship began with the young person’s interests and concerns and developed as a relationship that offered support and role modelling. In Figure 2, A, B, C and D represent the position of the four different programs on the ‘who chooses mentoring focus and activities’ continuum.

**Figure 2:** Young person or program chooses mentoring focus and activities

![Diagram](image)

**Personal relationship or impersonal relationship**

Programs had different ideals about the ‘ideal’ (and actual) level of intimacy in the relationship between the mentor and the mentee. For one program, mentors were not encouraged to form close personal relationships with the mentee and were expected to maintain a formal relationship. In another program, mentees discussed their personal feelings with counsellors, and mentors maintained a less intimate supportive relationship with mentees. In a third program, mentors followed the young person’s lead, and in some instances would maintain an impersonal task-focused relationship and in other instances would form a more personal relationship of trust where young people would choose to discuss personal issues. In the fourth program, mentors were encouraged to form a trusting ‘friendship-like’ relationship with the young person, and this necessitated a personal relationship. Figure 3 demonstrates the positions of the four programs on the ‘personal or impersonal relationship’ continuum.
When both these continua are put together they form a two dimensional profile that illustrates the diversity of focus and methods included under the umbrella term of ‘mentoring’.

Figure 3: Personal or impersonal relationship

![Diagram showing personal and impersonal relationships]

When both these continua are put together they form a two dimensional profile that illustrates the diversity of focus and methods included under the umbrella term of ‘mentoring’.
In addition to this, the setting in which mentoring programs operated added a further dimension of difference. Although participants in all programs had choice about whether they participated in the mentoring program, not all choices were made under similar conditions. The setting in which the mentoring program takes place can influence choices about participation, and the types of activities that the mentor and the young person share. A school is an example of a controlled setting, and school-based mentoring programs are also confined to the school premises and the types of activities appropriate to school. Community based mentoring programs provide examples of more open environment programs, because the activities may take place in a variety of community settings, for example, parks, shopping centres, coffee shops and leisure venues, and the shared activities can be more varied. The on-line environment provides yet another setting, which allows conversation without face-to-face meetings, and limits shared activities to conversation.

**Open setting or controlled setting**

Programs also differed in their policy about how long the relationship should last, and whether contact should continue after the mentoring relationship finished. In one program, the length of the relationship was fixed and the policy stated there was to be no contact after the mentoring relationship ended. In another program, the minimum length of the relationship was specified, but the maximum length was flexible and mentors and mentees were encouraged to maintain contact after the mentoring relationship had ended, if they both wanted to.

**The participants**

There were 16 participants in this exploratory study, six coordinators or program staff (five female, one male), six mentors (two female, four male) and four young people (one female, three male), across the four programs. Program staff have not been included in previous studies but their experiences of the interactions between mentor, mentees and the program and community are likely to provide new insights into understanding the wider issues around the breakdown of mentoring relationships. In terms of the mentors and mentees, the intention of the study was to identify mentors and mentees who had experienced a mentoring relationship that had broken down or one that had not worked as well as hoped.
Methods

After the four programs were identified, program staff were invited to participate and they subsequently invited mentors and mentees to volunteer to participate in the study. The number of volunteer mentors and mentees was less than planned, and has been identified as an ongoing difficulty in researching this sensitive area (Spencer, 2007).

Ethical approval was obtained from all four participating universities. All participants provided informed active consent to be interviewed in accordance with these ethical protocols.

Semi-structured interviews with participants were conducted in person at a time and place of their choosing or by telephone. The interview questions sought to provide the opportunity for participants to talk about characteristics of and their experiences of positive mentor-mentee relationships as well as relationships that did not work as well as hoped. In addition, coordinators were asked to describe the program in detail and their role throughout. Summaries of interviews were then developed with transcription of pertinent sections.

The summaries and transcriptions were examined for themes under the headings of “Why do some mentoring relationships break down?” and “What strategies may reduce the risk of mentoring relationships breaking down?” The researchers coded the transcripts with cross coding to check for reliability. The emergent themes provided the basis for the reporting of the findings.
Findings

The themes identified are presented below with the words of the participants used to exemplify the key points under the main headings of “Why do some mentoring relationships break down?” and “What strategies may reduce the risk of mentoring relationships breaking down?” Further, the themes are grouped to elaborate the aspects that relate to the mentoring relationship itself, those that relate to the program and those that relate to the interaction between the mentoring relationship and the program or the wider community.

Why do some mentoring relationships break down?

All mentoring programs have some relationships that don’t work as well as anticipated, don’t get past the initial matching or break down before the intended length of the relationship. Some themes were relevant across the four programs, while other themes were more relevant to programs with particular characteristics or participants.
Mentor and mentee relationship

The research examined aspects of the mentor-mentee relationship in more depth.

Mentee not comfortable with mentoring or mentor

A number of interviewees spoke about making a connection or not. Where the connection didn’t happen, the relationship struggled or didn’t progress as well as hoped. As one coordinator said “People bring a certain vibe to any relationship” and sometimes “the vibe is just wrong”. Another similarly said “you can tell in the first few weeks whether they are going to connect or not, some just don’t”.

Coordinator – You know yourself you can match people every which way there’s that X thing that happens that you just don’t take to people.

Coordinator – Really about a good rapport being established, establishing a good rapport – and it always works a bit better if that happens.

Several of the participants had experienced more than one mentoring relationship and different degrees of success. For example, one young person and a volunteer mentor had each had one very good relationship but another that had not worked as well. This highlights the importance of rapport or connection in a mentoring relationship.

Mentee not wanting to be mentored

While the mentors were volunteers who went through preparation for mentoring, this wasn’t always the case for young people. Many of the young people were referred to the program by teachers, counsellors, social workers or family members, and may have less understanding of the program and its aims.

Mentor – while they needed extra attention – they didn’t want to be seen as needing extra attention – you know didn’t want to be seen getting up having special help – they were embarrassed by it. And I think that’s another factor – I think it’s only happened about twice that I can recall – but it is a factor in the success of the program. If the kids don’t want to go, don’t embarrass them by making them go.

Mentor – Well I don’t think it works unless they’re willing. They’re just anti and they don’t cooperate in what you’re trying to get them to do. So I think it’s a waste of time if they’re not really wanting to.

Coordinator – some students just saw it as an excuse to get out of class.

All coordinators expressed the belief that the young person must genuinely want to participate and not be pressured.

Coordinator – I always tell them if they don’t want a mentor, they don’t have to.

Coordinator – kids that are really busy are not the best candidates for the program.
Coordinator – sometimes they say ‘yeh yeh I understand what it is but I don’t want it’ and you have the parent in the background going ‘yeh you do, it will be good, go on’ then we just don’t proceed as the young person doesn’t want it and what we are screening in the program is their capacity to participate in the program and build a friendship. It’s a waste of our resources cause there’s plenty on the list who do want it.

In career focused mentoring the young person needed to have an idea about a career or they couldn’t be matched. If they had a “very rigid idea about a career pathway” then it wasn’t likely to work for them either.

Mentoring relationships and interactions with the program or the community

There were several ways in which the longevity of the mentor-mentee relationship was influenced by factors external to the personal mentoring relationship.

Changed circumstances or commitments

Unexpected happenings in the life of the mentor or young person can result in the breakdown of the relationship or prevent it getting off the ground. Specific instances mentioned were personal or family illness or death, young people changing schools, mentors with new jobs, or young people or mentors changing their minds about participation early in the process due to changed circumstances.

Sometimes it is not the right time or relationship for the young person.

Coordinator – sometimes things happen in the lives of the mentors as well that lead to the relationship discontinuing, family illness etc.”

Coordinator – [early closure of the relationship] is mostly due to illness of student who then missed the first couple of weeks or students left the school.”

Coordinator – if [feeling uncomfortable] is ongoing, then they say this is just not the right match for us, if that’s the case, if it is other things in their life that have become too chaotic, then they are pretty honest about that as well, I’ve got school or I’m working at the moment and I just can’t fit it in.”
Coordinator – some students want to be in their class with their friends, they don’t want to come out to do work, sometimes it depends on the volunteer.

Program fit for mentors and mentees
Different programs have different outcomes and expectations about how these will be achieved. Participants may not fully appreciate this.

In some programs, the mentoring activities are specifically related to the outcomes, such as career development or academic skills, whereas in some community and school-based programs the main aim or an aim of mentoring is social engagement. Although these programs might expect improvement in school participation and performance, better relationships and less risky behaviour, these are not the focus of mentoring activities.

In one program where the main focus was academic, some mentors and young people were uncomfortable with the idea of talking about their personal issues whereas others thought it was important to do so.

Mentor – so you connect but I don’t see that as my role. My role is to try and instil the desire to learn by teaching them something and connecting it to some sort of job to do at the end.

Coordinator – some have a “traditional role” – I’m here to help you with your work and get out your book or workshop they want to help with work, others are a lot more flexible, and see greater needs and are happy to say leave the work, let’s talk.

One young person had two volunteers, but was much happier speaking with one about personal issues than the other, whom he thought was pushy. It appeared to negatively impact other aspects of the relationship.

Young person – he talks about my personal life which kind of pushes the line... kind of makes me upset... I’m trying to understand ... he get’s mad at me.

In another instance, differences in language usage was seen as a problem.

Coordinator – the mentor had unrealistic expectations about the program and the program focus. Sometimes it is the generation gap in terms of language.

Lack of support from parents or teachers
Coordinators in all programs pointed to the importance of adults connected with the young people supporting the program and the young person’s participation in it. If a young person’s parent or teacher does not understand the program or support the young person’s participation it could undermine the mentoring relationship.

In a community setting, the young person is collected from their home by the mentor. If the parent or caregiver is not supportive, then they may prevent the young person from going out with the mentor.
Coordinator – one of the other things that happens is that parents don’t get on board with the match, they won’t make sure that the young person is home at the right time, or they’ll try and interfere with the relationship when the volunteer comes to pick them up. They’ll say something like ‘oh they haven’t cleaned their room so they aren’t allowed out today’.

One of the issues raised is that families of young people matched in a mentoring relationship often don’t know how to support the young person in developing a relationship with another adult, one coordinator saying, “if they knew how to do it they wouldn’t need us”.

Parents have less impact in a school-based program, and it is the relevant teacher who may support the young person’s participation or not, as the student usually meets with a volunteer mentor is class time. While some teachers referred the young people to the program, mentors reported some teachers not being supportive, or not knowing how to make good use of the volunteer. In some cases volunteers thought the teacher saw the volunteer mentor as a threat.

Mentor – the teachers have to be supportive of the idea. But also to take advantage of the volunteer.

Mentor – if the school doesn’t want to do it or even does it half-heartedly or if the school decides they want to do it but then the teachers object to it or don’t cooperate, then the volunteers say ‘well what’s the use of going?’

Mentors having unrealistic expectations

In all mentoring programs there is an expectation that the mentor meets regularly with the young person. This may be weekly for an hour at a school site or online, or so many hours per fortnight or month. Many mentors think that they can manage this commitment “Mentors can’t always meet this expectation but think they can”, one coordinator said. Mentor over-commitment was an issue also: “sometimes we [empathising with mentor] take on too much and we’re not up for it”.

In addition, coordinators reported that not all mentors fully comprehended what being a mentor actually meant. One coordinator spoke about the difficulties of identifying these unrealistic expectations during screening processes.

Coordinator – Some of the volunteers go through all of this stuff and are really willing to evolve through it, ..., they really don’t get that being a mentor is going to change their lives. So I guess you can’t really tell who is going to handle that amazing process with grace and acceptance and who is just going to go ‘this is really uncomfortable, I quit’.

Mentors may think they are doing the right thing but may overstep the boundaries of the mentoring program. In the online program, the coordinator found that mentors often envisaged their role to extend beyond the bounds of careers, irrespective of the training.

Coordinators said they could work with mentors if they knew about instances of unrealistic expectations, but if they didn’t know then the relationship often suffered.
Coordinator – we train them, tell them how things are supposed to be set up, they run away with their idea of the program, so they take the young person out and spend money on them that they might not be able to afford or they end up feeling that they young person’s not grateful or they are doing things like spending the whole day with the young person so it becomes unmanageable quickly and then they become overwhelmed and they haven’t been telling the caseworker about all that because they know that they are out of program parameters.

Mentors not understanding the reality of young person’s life

Some coordinators reported instances where mentors were not familiar with the life experiences of the young people and their initial impulse was to rescue the young person.

Coordinator – [the mentors] are unprepared for the reality of someone who is from a really low socio-economic background is not part of their life, and the disadvantage and the feelings come about that, I think sometimes that’s a part of it too, they want to rescue them, then you’re done, it’s over, as soon as they can’t let go of wanting to rescue that young person the match will fall apart.

Mentor – All he wants to do is go to school and fiddle around. And most of the students are the same that I get. They’re only there to pass the time.

Young person – He doesn’t understand what my life is like. He doesn’t understand how hard it is… I have five things at once… I have other stuff to think about, it makes it hard for me to focus.

One coordinator suggested that this failure went back to selection, but acknowledged that “the best screening process in the world does not pick that up like real life will”.

Coordinator – We would love to be able to sit here and go we’ve worked out what it is, that if they answer this to that in the screening question, then they are going to say this six months down the track and be an early quitter, I can’t pick it and I wish we could.

Mentors not having skills or experience to deal with issues that arise

In both school and community settings the young people’s issues may be more complex than the volunteer mentor can deal with or should have to deal with. It might be a learning issue, difficulties at home, extreme disadvantage or a mental health issue. Sometimes it is outside the previous experience of the mentor, or they are not used to asking for assistance when things don’t go well.

Mentor – [one boy] had real learning difficulties and I was trying to do phonetic sounds and he was in primary school ... and I felt so inadequate trying to help him get basics but I felt really disappointed about that – I didn’t have a clue how to handle that. .... I felt I might be causing him more trauma than help.

Coordinator – There’s got to be other services that fill that gap because we can’t fill it, cause our people are volunteers and the way to work with volunteers is they need to be ok, they’re not getting paid lots of money to work with really difficult people in a professional way.
Coordinator – You often get high achievers who want to be mentors and they are actually not used to things falling apart and failing and sometimes they don’t want to face up to it. ... they won’t tell you because they are used to things going well and not really having to ask for a lot of support in anything they’ve done in their lives.

Communication breakdown

Communication breakdown was seen as a major factor in mentoring relationship breakdown and there were multiple connections where this might occur. As well as the connection between the mentor and the mentee, the connection between the mentor and the person supporting them in mentoring was noted as a particularly important one.

Coordinator – It’s when the communication breaks down between the volunteer and the caseworker and we don’t get to help them manage the relationship it can get really out of control, especially, most of the kids that are referred into the program, not all of them, but most of them have a really dysfunctional family life so their social norms are askew, so you are trying to manage stuff that’s unmanageable.

Formal preparation was provided in all programs but this was seen by coordinators as just the beginning and mentors needed to keep the communication channels open for ongoing support. When mentors were closed to this or thought they knew what they needed to know, mentoring relationships were likely to suffer.

Coordinator – Volunteers are nodding in training then running away with their own position description ...we bring this up all the time, in all sorts of scenarios, but it doesn’t sink in, partly because they’re these overachievers who go ‘yeh yeh yeh I know how to do everything’.

Mentor – No. I don’t need any ideas. I’ve dealt with people all my life. I know I’m a good teacher. I’ve been told that heaps of times during my career.
What strategies may reduce the risk of mentoring relationships breaking down?

The way the mentoring relationship was developed and guided through mentor-mentee interaction and interactions with program staff were key aspects of the strategies used to prevent the breakdown of a mentoring relationship, help repair one at risk or support participants in a broken relationship. Mentor and mentee selection, training and support processes were explained, but as reported in the previous section even the best selection, matching, training and support can fail in some instances. The participants were able to explain some of the complexities and limitations. Dealing with the unexpected was as important as planning for the anticipated and possible.

Mentor-mentee interaction to build the mentoring relationship

The importance of the approach of the mentor was evident in many interviews.

Mentor flexible in approach to relationship

From the perspective of the mentors they were able to work out ways that supported the participation of the young people in the relationship. Some of the mentees also believed that they had a role in this as well. Young person commented that:

Young person – We muck around, then he explains something, then joke around...He allows me to talk when I'm working, I think it is really great and cool.

Young person – She says baby steps, give it a go, don’t give up.... She says are you sure about that? ... She listens to me ... helps me be a better person ... she’s like a second grandma.

Young person – I am able to express myself to him ... I can show my intelligent side to him ... not able to show it in class.
Mentors reported the different methods they used to find out what interested the mentees. Some mentors spoke of going through the daily newspaper to see what sparked an interest. Others went through program-prepared lists of activities with the mentee to gain ideas of what might be of interest to the young person.

Also, mentors spoke of adapting for different young people or for the same young person on different occasions.

Mentor commented that:

Mentor – The mentor needs to be able to adapt to the style of the young person. One young person I mentored came up with ideas for activities. With [this young person] I offer some suggestions for activities. ....can’t be expected to know what different activities are about... I usually don’t settle on something too soon, ... always text three days before about what we talked about and the young person chooses.

Mentor – At one meeting we just had coffee. It felt like there was a barrier up and she was hard to engage in conversation ... I gave her a bit of a break, just silence for a while and I thought about things she might want to talk about...so we had a few quiet moments. I knew before that could happen, so I was prepared for the silences.

Mentor – Mentors have got to be prepared to – if a problem arises in the middle of their session – they’ve got to be prepared to look outside what they’re doing and realise that their student needs help in some other way. ... If they can’t handle it then to report to the coordinator.

Mentors needed to be able to be sensitive and use active listening skills, especially early in the relationships, before communication was well developed. They talked about the nature of activities and the importance of activities that didn’t require too much conversation or questioning early in the relationship.

Mentor – It’s hard to know if it is working. ...a few meetings ago I was really thrilled when [the young person] said ‘when are we meeting again?’

Mentor – We went to see the sculptures and that was fine, and then I said ‘let’s see what else is here’... It was an educational experience but I think the [young person] may have been a bit bored and wasn’t good at expressing that. It wasn’t a good idea.

Another way that community-based mentors were flexible was in scheduling of meetings. If something important came up for the young person and they were double booked, the mentor would simply ask ‘what about next week?’
Program strategies for prevention of relationship breakdown

Strategies used by programs to prevent relationship breakdown were common themes in the interviews.

Selection of mentees

The program coordinators clearly articulated which young people would benefit from the specific mentoring program and had policies identifying the young people targeted by the program. Some programs had ancillary staff who could provide additional supports for mentees, or had processes for referral, while others needed to select mentees who could be supported by the volunteer.

Coordinator – There might be some kids that we shouldn’t touch.

In programs with very specific career parameters required for selection of young people (and mentors) with particular characteristics was important.

Coordinator – The program will not work for students who have no idea what they want to do. The program is not going to be great for somebody who has a completely set up pathway to year 12 and knows exactly their path...the program is set up for those in-between students.

Coordinators also reiterated that the young people needed to want to be part of a mentoring relationship. In other words, participation of young people should be voluntary.

Young person – [The coordinator] said if I didn’t want to meet with my volunteer, I didn’t have to.

The concept of voluntary participation can be complex in some settings. In the school context, where the choice is between mentoring or participation in classroom activities, participation in mentoring might be the better (or worse) of two options at different times.

Selection of mentors

In all programs mentors went through a comprehensive screening process, to check their suitability for the program, and also for program staff to get to know them better.

Coordinator – Through the training also it is important that we get to know personally the mentors, so that when a young person applies we can go alright we think this mentor would be a good fit.

Coordinator – I want to meet them personally, and then I meet them and find out their interests, background, what times willing to give, and on that basis I already have a list of students who need additional support.
Program coordinators were also very aware that they were not primarily providing an avenue of service for volunteers, but a relationship that supported young people in particular ways. They also clearly articulated what the role of the mentor was in the particular program and what it was not.

One Coordinator believed “a strength of the program and the reason for very little attrition is that it is so tightly monitored, participants are stringently screened and the focus of discussion in very narrow”. They focused on mentors with “strong leadership qualities who hold or held leadership positions within their career or are starting to climb the corporate ladder”. Another characteristic identified was professionals who were “seeking a sense of reward in wanting to help others’.

Mentees understood that the interests and expertise of their mentor were important in helping them effectively.

**Matching of mentees and mentors**

Mentors and mentees were purposively matched using available information on interests, experience, cultural connections, approach and availability.

Coordinator – we have developed a screening and matching tool to use as well as personal knowledge of students.

Coordinator – I try and connect with something for the mentee and the volunteer ... I have lots of stories ...an older volunteer and a boy from [African country] and turned out that the volunteer had a particular interest in this country and asked the boy about it... they are both giving and receiving ... and that’s when it works.

Mentor – I’m very interested in the Arts and so is the [young person]. ...We have based some of our activities around that.

Young person – when we work on history, ...he tells me stories from his experience... tells me true stories, I really appreciate it.

In career-focused mentoring information from the interviews and computer profile was used for matching, looking for congruence in subjects studied, work or career, and interests or hobbies. Young people were matched with mentors who had significant experience in working in the field that they were interested in pursuing.

In schools, students’ favourite subjects and availability of volunteers was considered in matching, so that the hour for the young person to meet with the chosen volunteer was scheduled to avoid favourite classes.
Training and support of mentors

Intense support for mentors was a common theme across all programs. Each program had specific strategies utilising a mix of face-to-face meetings, emails, phone calls, newsletters, training sessions, informal chats and more formal reviews. Some had regular timings and would be weekly, fortnightly or monthly and mentors expected those forms of contact. In many ways, the coordinator or caseworker mentored the mentors, and the coordinators expected mentors to be open to learning.

Coordinator – The expectations are that they will be candid and open with their caseworker so that they can assist them when they reach those spots we know they are going to hit.

Mentor – I send an email to [program staff member] after every meeting with the young person. Just a few lines about what we did and how things are going. If there are any issues.

Coordinator – we do the supervision on the phone after each meeting in the early days of the match, then the frequency of the phone supervision drops back to fortnightly and then monthly later on in the match, so you’ve got a sliding scale but you’ve got to keep an eye on what people are saying, but you’ve got to keep an eye on it.

Coordinator – During the first 4 weeks the mentors receive a weekly newsletter – hints and tips and what they should be expecting at that stage of the program. Then it drops off to fortnightly. The newsletter gives mentors ideas about what to talk about ... We can recognise what is going to come up at various points in the program – mid program slump just before school holidays when conversation drops off as attention of students wanes.

In this career focused program the coordinator reported spending a lot of time on the phone to the mentors, and organised face-to-face meeting with mentors if required to manage their expectations. The coordinator added, “some [mentors] simply want to check with the coordinator that they are doing ok”. The contact ensured that the mentors clicked with the program outcomes.

In a school based program, the coordinator created an unobtrusive space for informal communication with the mentor.

Coordinator – Generally we have volunteers come the period before recess and then the volunteers stay until after recess. I can chat with the Volunteer at recess and they can let me know what’s happening with these students – how was so and so today. Get a chance for me to get to know them, and chat. Whatever it is. Sometimes they have frustrations that they need to share, and they need this debrief time, and feedback I get from them, it helps me work out what to suggest next to best support the student.

When there was open communication between program staff and mentors it was possible to work through issues as they arose.

Coordinator – I believe that the volunteer is the strategy and so they have to be, they can be disgruntled and they can be challenged and they can be finding it all very hard work, but if they ring up about that and talk to their caseworker and they are actively trying to engage and work through that stuff, that’s different to a volunteer who is like I’ve had enough and I’m quitting.
Program support for the mentee

In the school based programs, school staff provided support for the mentees and developed strategies to ensure that they knew how the students were feeling about the mentoring relationship and how it was working. In one program, a teacher or aid would walk with the student to or from the library where the student worked with the volunteer, and engage in informal conversation to see how things were working out.

In community based programs the coordinator or other program staff kept in regular contact with the young people and parents (as well as mentors) to see how things were going.

Coordinator – We have regular phone contact. After their outings we have phone contact with them, with the parent, the young person and the volunteer. The caseworker’s job is to make sure that all sides of the story match up.

Coordinator – I find that our young people are pretty honest, and they’ll say, for example, like I’m just not feeling comfortable. We will generally say that the first meeting, the first two or three meetings may feel a little bit uncomfortable, because they may not be used to a kind of relationship, such as a mentoring relationship. We obviously manage that at the time.

Another strategy was to propose the mentoring relationship as a trial, so that the young person could see if it was right for them.

Coordinator – I don’t want students to feel that they have to go. On the first session, I go to the class to collect them (after confirming with the teacher) and have time to talk with them on the way to the library. Tell them that teacher suggested you need a little help with this, teacher has asked for this and teacher already spoken to student – make sure the students understand what a volunteer is, and that we can try it out to see if it helps. ... A little bit of chit chat.

Coordinator – Might have a student who says they I don’t want to go... if there is some resistance from the student, I find out why. One student didn’t want to go out of class when his girlfriend was in the class, so we can work around that and go directly to the volunteer and let teacher know that. .... There are a range of reasons why, older students it is a little bit of shame. We try to give them strategies so that they don’t feel embarrassed to come out.

Young people were sometimes reluctant to say what was wrong, and the program heard about issues from the parent.

Coordinator – sometimes there are times when the young person gets stressed and doesn’t open up and we hear things second hand and sometimes it’s like the volunteer is trying to get the young person to do what they thought the young person wanted to do but the young person is not enjoying it and they didn’t want to say so, so they tell their parent and the parent tells us.
Formative evaluation and review of the mentoring relationship

Both community-based programs had a schedule of review of the mentoring relationship.

Coordinator – every three months we actually do a mentor-mentee review, we go out and meet with the young person and mentor – together – and we will also speak with the counsellor, and ask for their kind of feedback that they have had through the client about how they are feeling about the relationship.

Coordinator – we do a three month and a twelve month review, these are face to face meetings...

Coordinators and mentors reported regular volunteer meetings where they could chat informally with other mentors or those considering mentoring. In a school based program it was through special morning teas, in community programs it was mostly in the evenings.

Coordinator – we also do things like get our volunteers together four times a year to do either, well we call it training but really the essence of it is to get them together to talk to each other.

Coordinator – This year we have started to utilise our mentoring ambassador. He has offered for our mentors and mentees to attend a game together as a group so the other mentees and mentors can have a chance to chat to each other and engage with each other while at the same that young people who might be interested in engaging in a mentoring relationship but have anxieties about it can also attend and use those spare tickets, and see what the mentors are like and what their relationship are like with the young people.

Because mentors in the career-focused program came from a range of workplaces, some mentors had contact with each other at work.

Responses to early signs of relationship breakdown

Program coordinators explained how they and other program staff look out for red flags that the relationship may not be going as well as expected. Sometimes is it a disgruntled parent, young person or volunteer that alerts the staff, but it appeared often to be more subtle.

Coordinator – If the young person is not feeling comfortable in the relationship with the patterns of behaviours – such as not responding to the mentor’s text messages about a catch up, cancellation at the last minute. These are the things in general that we would look for.... We communicate with the youth counsellor and then with the mentee about how they are feeling, and if they are feeling that there's not that great match that we foresaw at the time or if things are bit too hectic in their lives then we would look at ending that relationship or seeing if we can recover it, depending on what the young people would like to do.
Coordinator – The first way that we support people is by early detection and trying to spot red flags, like missing appointments, getting into a rut, they've been going to the movies three weeks in a row or something.

Sometimes the alert was when accounts of meetings and what happened differed, or the coordinator had to read between the lines of what was said or not said.

Coordinator – if the volunteer rings and says I called for little Johnny and it was great we had a great time and you get the mum on the phone at the next phone call and she says Johnny came back in tears, he hated it, you have to figure out what is going on, but that rarely happens.

Coordinator – people are very nice and they don’t say, so if they are saying, it’s usually five times worse than what they are saying, so you’ve got to detect things as early as possible if they go ‘yeh I had to force myself to go this week, but I went and it was great’ and you have to say ‘tell me more about not wanting to go’ and they say ‘well every time I go, something’ and then you have to dig around a bit.

Program support for mentoring relationships at risk of breakdown

All programs explained how they went about repairing or supporting relationships when problems were detected. Repair and support options included premature closure in some instances. Several coordinators made the point that it is often how the relationships that aren’t working are managed that is most important. It might prevent them breaking down or it might help make the breakdown a less negative experience for all participants. Larger programs had other staff members available who could work with the coordinator to come up with a plan about how to intervene.

Individualised support for the mentor

Programs provided support for mentors for prevention, but when issues or red flags were detected, additional support and guidance was provided. In some cases these were in the form of constructive suggestions to the mentor, in a one-on-one situation.

Coordinator – it’s our job to feedback the information in a supportive way to the volunteer so it doesn’t come across like ‘oh you are doing it all wrong’ so we make suggestions to them as to what they can do.
Coordinator – We have had situations where we may have needed to – how ‘d you say it – have had to bring some mentors in and just provide with a little bit of one or one training or guidance. [The mentor has] not necessarily handled a situation in an incorrect way but where they may have been able to do it better – so we’re brought them in and had a discussion about possibly the incident and then we will talk to them about how they could handle it differently in future and how comfortable do they feel about going back into that relationship after they have been pulled up on something.

Coordinator – Feed suggestions to the volunteer, he’s really having problems with this, but I think he really needs time to chat about what’s happening at home. You can do this work but if he wants to talk, just let him talk. Don’t worry about the work.

One coordinator said that if a mentor approached the program coordinator they would talk them through the issues and explore all avenues before the relationship was brought to a close. The coordinator believed that it shouldn’t get to a point where out of the blue the mentor says ‘that’s it’.

Support for the mentee after an unsuccessful relationship

Programs had specific strategies for bringing a relationship to a close so that any damage could be limited and the positive achievements could be celebrated as much as possible.

Coordinator – we tell them that no matter why the relationship is ending we try to introduce some kind of element of reflection and celebration and gratitude.

Coordinator – recently we have heard from the mentor that they haven’t been catching up regularly, and the young person actually hasn’t really returned their calls and things like that. We have talked to the counsellor as well ... and will catch up with the mentor separately to have a chat see how we can rebuild the relationship. ...So our main goal is to try and rectify and rebuild this relationship, but if young person is feeling uncomfortable or unsafe to do so, then that is that. ...

Coordinator – If we feel for some reason that it is not working out – maybe an older volunteer, trouble hearing, connection not made – then say to volunteer or the student – it depends when this happens, that we want to finish at the end of term and work with someone else next term. We want to find a way out without embarrassing either. Volunteers have a lot to give, we don’t want them to feel bad, but sometimes they miss the mark.

Young person – [the coordinator] said there was a new volunteer available next term.
Coordinator – the first thing we do is early spotting and we try and move them towards, once the decision is made that the match is going to close, I sit with our caseworkers and we brainstorm what can be salvaged, whether it’s just a sense of, whether there is a beautiful closure meeting we can have, whether we can encourage them to meet at a café and have a nice hot drink and maybe, what they can do to say goodbye in a healthy, respectful way.

Coordinator – sometimes we may decide we have to end a relationship so we have to come up with a plan of how do we communicate that with the child and parents and what should be the alternative course of action, e.g. another mentor, another type of mentor, was how we matched them in the first place correct.

One coordinator talked about what happened if the mentor had done wrong by the young person because they believed it was important to acknowledge this, support young person, and acknowledge their pain.

Coordinator – If the relationship has broken down so much that it’s totally inappropriate, then it’s up to us to really try and get the message across to the young person that we think that the volunteer has done the wrong thing by them and that they deserve to be treated better and we don’t try and minimise it, we try to speak to them and let them know that we understand that they have lost someone who has probably been either really important to them or someone they hoped would be really important to them hasn’t been, we try to value and honour their disappointment.

In these cases it is often the program staff that have to pick up the pieces and do the best they can for the young person.

Coordinator – we work with the young person and the parent to do as much damage control that we can as it’s not the young persons fault and to kind of frame it that the volunteer kind of overcommitted or something else has happened in their life, whatever, trying to give it context for the young person, really at that point it’s damage control and young people get hurt and that really sucks, that’s the last thing we want to do, that’s one of our risks, it’s awful.
Support for the mentor after an unsuccessful relationship

It was clear that coordinators thought carefully about how to approach a mentor about an unsuccessful relationship and whether or not to match them with another young person.

Coordinator – the volunteer was feeling unhappy, feeling a bit uncomfortable. I said ‘We can get you another student for next term if you want, what do you think?’

Coordinator – I cringe at the thought of matching, sometimes it’s the family that drops out, or if the family has not been supportive or whatever, our resources are heavily poured into our mentors into training and the screening of them, so if they’ve made it all the way through, got matched and it didn’t work out, we try and keep our relationship with them as good as we can and give them a break and find out whether they’re interested in being matched again, and then if they are interested in finding someone else and this doesn’t work out either, and people are going to walk away.
Discussion

This research has contributed to a better understanding of some of the key strategies to reduce the breakdown of mentor-mentee relationships, and to mitigate the adverse effect of unavoidable relationship breakdown.

These will be summarised in this discussion. However, participants were very clear that breakdown of some relationships was unavoidable and could not be completely prevented by even the best mentor or mentee selection or matching processes, by training, mentor or mentee selection or by mentor or mentee supervision. For this reason it was important to have strategies to support mentors and mentees after the unavoidable breakdown of a mentoring relationship. Therefore, post-breakdown support strategies are also discussed.

The reasons for mentoring relationship breakdown identified in this study were similar to previous research in some respects, such as perceived lack of mentee motivation, unfilled and mismatched expectations, mentor and mentee communication skill difficulties, lack of family or teacher support. These factors were evident in both school-based and community-based programs. This study, however, identified some differences. Inadequate agency support and mentor inability to bridge the cultural divide, identified by Spencer (2007), were not identified as reasons for break down in this study. Program support emerged as an important factor in the nurturing of mentoring relationships and in providing appropriate guidance as required.

Several factors were important as breakdown prevention strategies, including:

- Mentor training, supervision and support
- Diligent selection and matching processes
- On-going mentor (and mentee) supervision and support by case workers and coordinators

The relationship between mentor and young person (mentor-mentee interaction) was an important factor in the program fulfilling its goals for the young people, and coordinators were able to identify the characteristics of a successful mentoring relationship, summarised by one coordinator as:

Frequency, regularity, even if it’s different times, regular contact, commitment, when someone says they are going to come they come, enjoyment, enjoyability, fun is the most critical factor because that’s what will keep them coming back, but that can take a while to build up. (Coordinator)
They were also aware that whilst the mentor mentee relationship was important other factors contributed to successful outcomes of mentoring programs, and in particular, the degree to which the mentee received support for the goals of the program from significant others in their lives (especially parents or teachers). This was explained by one coordinator, as follows:

*I think the biggest impact is the mentor and the mentee and the relationship. However, if the support behind the mentor and mentee isn’t there, I feel it would be a lot more difficult.*

(Coordinator)

All mentors in this study were volunteers, and were not paid to work with the young person. Some were offered reimbursement for expenses but no more. How the coordinator or other program staff worked with the mentor and young person was vitally important. Programs differed in the detail of their arrangements but all programs offered support and guidance to mentors about how to build (and repair) the mentoring relationship.

The most effective coordinators anticipated key points in the mentor-mentee relationship and offered individualised tailored support to mentors and mentees. Coordinators used initial training and on-going supervision to try to ensure that mentors developed a clear understanding of the program goals and methods, however, it was acknowledged that mentors in some settings only really gain a full understanding of the program after they have been matched with a young person. For this reason, ongoing supervision was of vital importance. Even with the best processes in place, some mismatches between the mentor, the mentee and program are unavoidable. In each of the programs that participated in this research the coordinator was aware of how to identify signs that a relationship might be in trouble, but mentors and mentees did not always convey to coordinators information that might enable them to intervene early. Where necessary the coordinator may have been required to bring a relationship to an end. This was carried out in a supportive manner to minimise detrimental impacts for all parties.

The relationship of the program staff with schools and families was also identified as an important interaction. The coordinator must have a well-developed understanding of the program goals and desired outcomes in order to communicate these to participants and other parties involved in the program. In school-based programs the school-based coordinator provided an essential link for the teachers at the classroom level in terms of identifying appropriate young people for participation in the program and then ongoing support for the teachers as well as the mentors. In community-based programs, where there were more influences on the mentor-mentee relationship, the coordinator was the central figure to whom these parties may turn for advice and support. The role of the coordinator and their relationship with all participants was critical in many of the cases of breakdown reported as part of this study and in the strategies used to avoid breakdown.

When establishing mentoring programs agencies and organisations need to ensure that there is sufficient ongoing funding for continuity of the coordinator role. Ideally the same person would perform the role of coordinator for the duration of the program or for the duration of each of the mentoring relationships. In practice, this does not occur and during the research several coordinators/caseworkers left apparently due to employment insecurity.
The interviews with coordinators and mentors provided rich data. The smaller number of young people interviewed means that the young person voice was not as well represented as that of other participants. The researchers believe that it is important to include young people’s voice in research on matters that affect them. This can be overcome by working out ways for young people to feel more comfortable to participate in research on this more sensitive aspect of mentoring relationships.

The study also provides a basis for future research to investigate the efficacy of different types of strategy interventions that focus on particular interactions between the mentor and mentee and the program. These might include how to better support initial training, individualized support and guidance at different points in the relationship, supervision practices, selection and matching processes, mentee access to other support programs, re-matching after an unsuccessful relationship and strategies for effective mentor and mentee support after relationship breakdown.
References


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