

Big Brothers Big Sisters of Ireland:

Qualitative Evaluation

Research Context:

The Big Brothers Big Sisters youth mentoring programme has been run in Ireland by Foróige since 2001. The core of the programme is a 'match' or friendship between an adult volunteer (mentor) and a young person (mentee), who meet weekly for a year or more and receive ongoing support from programme staff. The goal of the BBBS programme is to develop a caring and supportive friendship to support the young person's positive personal and social development.

The backdrop of this study is a large body of research showing the benefits of social support during adolescence, including better mental and physical health. Studies of mentoring programmes also show benefits in emotional well-being, education and risk behaviour. However, there are moderating factors – mentoring does not affect all young people in the same way.

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Research Questions and Methodology:

In 2007, Foróige commissioned the UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre to evaluate the effectiveness of the BBBS programme in providing support for young people in Ireland.

This two-year, large-scale, mixed methods study included a qualitative analysis of match processes and stakeholder perspectives. Three research questions were asked in the qualitative analysis:

1. What types of support are provided to young people through the programme?
2. Is there evidence that mentoring impacts positively on young people in the areas of emotional well-being, education, risk behaviour and relationships? If yes, in what ways?
3. What factors influence or moderate whether these outcomes are realised?

Findings:

1. There are many different types of support provided, including:
 - a. Practical support, like introducing the young person to new activities and people.
 - b. Emotional support, where some young people draw on the mentoring relationship as a daily life support and others use it to deal with difficult situations.
 - c. Esteem support, where mentors are seen as being able to provide advice and guidance in a way that makes it accepted by, acceptable to, the young person.
 - d. The better the quality of the mentor-mentee relationship, the more seamlessly these forms of support can be given. This reflects the consensus in the literature.

2. In terms of the impact of mentoring, the evidence is that:
 - a. The strongest outcomes are for boys and girls experiencing personal and family issues that negatively affect their sense of well-being and behaviour at school.
 - b. Outcomes are also stronger where the mentoring relationship has gone into its second year and there is a genuine friendship between mentor and mentee.
 - c. Young people enjoy greater emotional well-being during their match; and benefit from the support and encouragement they get on school and education issues.
 - d. Relationships between young people and their parents are reported to be better; and young people have more friends and are better able to 'get on' with friends.
3. There are some moderating or influencing factors affecting the impact of mentoring:
 - a. The closeness of the mentor-mentee relationship is crucial to realising its benefits.
 - b. Programme practices are critical in enabling matches to overcome problems, in building mentor effectiveness, and in providing safe places for matches to meet.
 - c. Matches lasting 12 months or more are the most beneficial, especially for young people experiencing behavioural problems, bullying and lack of confidence.

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