


Developing bonds: An exploration of the development of bonds between mentors and young people

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Abstract

The article describes a piece of research exploring young people's experience of a mentoring service (PROMISE). The scheme has been developed to offer vulnerable young people a supportive relationship to assist their lives. This article explores the nature of the mentoring relationship, including how mentors and mentees view its development. Conjoint interviews were conducted which also permitted an analysis of the nature of the conversational processes between the pairs, including how they constructed shared meanings of the development of their relationship. This provided a window into the emotional dynamics of their mentoring relationships. Implications for similar mentoring programmes are discussed alongside wider implications for assisting this group of young people.

Keywords

Mentor, vulnerable children, attachment security, evaluation, co-construction

Introduction

Mentoring has been applied and found to be effective in a variety of contexts, such as education, psychotherapy, forensic and counselling. Despite evidence in support of the effectiveness of mentoring (Walker, 2005), there is surprisingly little in the way of theory or research to guide its application and inspire its future development. Some studies focus on conditions that may facilitate positive mentoring relationships (Rhodes et al, 2002; Keller, 2005). Such research has often concentrated on evaluation and outcome, rather than on an exploration of the process of how it works. We have conducted a previous study of its application in a social care context (PROMISE) assisting young people who are a risk to themselves or others (Dallos & Comley-Ross, 2005). The findings indicated that the relationship between the mentor and the young person was a primary

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positive factor. Specifically, in our previous study, the children mentioned a sense of being valued and appreciated by their mentors. Important to this was an awareness of being held in mind by their mentors, such that even when they were not with them, they felt that mentors were thinking and caring about the [Renick and Thomson \(2010\)](#). This internalisation of their relationship with their mentors included being able to imagine how the mentor might advise and guide them at moments where they felt unsure about how to act. They also mentioned that the relationship was fostered by positive actions, such as spending time with them in meaningful activities and sharing and promoting their interests ‘spoke louder than words’. Engaging in pleasant, interesting, fun and hence memorable activities assisted in the process of the relationship with the mentor becoming internalised and generating positive feelings when they thought about their mentor.

These findings have been supported by a number of studies, for example, [Renick and Thomson \(2010\)](#) found that the quality of the mentor–youth bond significantly predicted youths’ relationships at 8 and 16 months ([Keller, 2005](#)). Likewise, argued that when mentors were less connected to their mentee-youths, this could contribute towards a premature ending of the relationship. [Dubois and Neville \(1997\)](#) identified that more contact led to greater closeness and greater benefits, suggesting that the relationship created the opportunity for change rather than these being due to specific events. It has been found that youths who perceived their relationship as providing activities, structure and unconditional support derived the largest benefits from the relationship. Further, the benefits of mentoring have been found to be reciprocal ([mech et al., 1995](#)). This led [Thompson and Zand \(2010\)](#) to argue for research looking at how the relationship is co-constructed and how the accounts may converge.

Attachment theory has been employed ([Spencer et al., 2010](#)) to suggest that the negative experiences of fostered children prevented them from establishing a close relationship with mentors. They argued that their internal representations led to defended interpretations of communications from mentors leading them to exhibit dependence or hostility towards the mentors when they were distressed. In contrast, children employing more secure patterns were more easily comforted when distressed and were more co-operative in interpersonal relationships ([Mennen & O’Keefe, 2005](#)). However, the mechanism through which mentoring exerts its influence remains relatively unclear ([Thompson & Zand, 2010](#)). One theory is that the mentor served as a secure secondary attachment figure which enabled the competency in other relationships ([Bordin, 1979](#)). [Thompson and Zand \(2010\)](#) conducted a survey of 205 mentored children exploring the nature of the bond and its relationship to other relationship-based outcomes and found that the quality of the mentor–youth relationship predicted other socio-emotional development including relationship-based outcomes such as friendship with and self-disclosure to other adults at 8 and 16 months. Likewise, [Zand et al., 2009](#) argued a positive alliance was associated with more positive family bonding, relationships with adults, relationships at school and life skills. It has also been suggested that interaction and positive emotional experiences with the mentor become internalised so that positive views of the relationship with the mentor generalise to more positive construals of relationships with other peers, adults and teachers ([Thompson & Zand, 2010](#)).

[Dallos and Comley-Ross \(2005\)](#) found that when absent, mentees felt mentors ‘held them in mind’, in that they perceived their mentors to still think of them and care for their wellbeing. [Dallos and Carder-Gilbert \(2019\)](#) conducted a longitudinal study which indicated that important to the development of a positive relationship was a process of internalisation of conversations and interactions with their mentors. The young people described that dysregulating intrusions from prior traumatic events became less frequent as the relationship developed. They described, for example, being able to imagine how the mentor might advise and emotionally guide them when they were not present.

Aims of the study

The current study aimed to explore children's ability to trust in the mentoring relationship through their conversation and social behaviour.

The broad aims were to explore the experiences of a group of young people taking part in the Promise mentoring programme who were developing a relationship with a mentor. Since the scheme is based in an attachment theory framework, we wanted to both hear not only how the relationship was experienced but also to observe how the sense of security was jointly constructed through talk and action. The specific aims of the study were to

1. explore the themes that mentors and mentees jointly articulated about their experience of mentoring and their relationship,
2. explore children's and mentors' understanding of how the relationship developed,
3. observe how the young people and their mentors interacted during their discussion. Specifically, we were interested in how open the discussions were and the balance of the contributions between them.

By employing joint interviews with well-established dyads of Mentor and Mentee, the intention was to be able to elicit their individual and shared understanding of the relationship as well as the process of how they discussed this together. In effect, the joint interview allowed a window into how the nature of their relationship although, of course, there is a risk of over generalising from such a research interview. To our knowledge, no studies have yet explored this in relation to mentoring. However, we conducted a study of the development of relationships between foster carers and fostered children (Carter and Dallos, 2016), which found that in joint conversations, foster carers could take over and talk for the young person in their care. One specific way they did this was to make assumptions about what the young person was thinking and feeling and a consequence of this typically was that the young person's contributions decreased.

The local university where the authors were employed gave full ethical approval.

Method

Participants

In the joint interviews, the six mentees in the sample were an average of 19.3 years old and in the age range of 15–23 years. All of the mentors had been involved with the scheme for over 2 years and had mentored more than two young people. Their relationship had lasted between 2–6 years. One of the joint interviews was retrospective in that the mentoring relationship had formally ended, but the mentor and mentee were still in contact. Sampling was opportunistic in terms of inviting well-established dyads who were available and had been in their mentoring relationship for over 2 years. All of six pairs approached, agreed to take part. Both the mentor and mentee were given information about the study and gave verbal informed consent themselves, and where under 16 years, this was also given by their family or social worker. All excerpts reported are anonymised.

The interview was conducted with the mentee and mentor together and followed a set of prompts: First impressions of each other, experience of mentoring, how the relationship developed, challenges, changes in the relationship, benefits of the mentoring and views of their future relationship. Then the relationship questionnaire was completed by the mentee (and if joint by the mentor also). They were also free to discuss anything else they felt was relevant.

The Relationship Questionnaire (Bartholomew and Horowitz, 1991)

The mentee and the mentor completed this questionnaire as a measure of the similarity between the couples in their attachment security and the similarity between them and self-perceived in style.

Procedure

Semi-structured interviews were conducted in a local community centre by the first two authors. Both the mentor and the mentee completed the Relationship Questionnaire.

Analysis

The joint interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim (Y = Young person, M = Mentor, I = Interviewer). The analysis was in two parts: The first was a thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). All of the interviews were coded, and then indications of the process through which the bond was expressed were summarised as a set of themes. A shared analysis of three transcripts was conducted to foster validity enhancement. No substantial disagreements were evident but the theme labels could differ and were discussed to produce agreed theme titles.

The second was an observational analysis of the process of their conversation which employed a conversational analysis approach which was developed by Veroff et al. (1993) and Hirst and Manier (1995). Conversations were analysed using a coding system consisting of the following typology of contributions to an interaction: *collaboration*; *conflict*; *confirmation*; *laughter*; *continuation*; and *non-response*. We have elaborated this system in adding a category capturing a ‘meta’ conversational process which constituted a form of speaking for the other. This was exemplified by the use of two types of questions: The first, we have termed *imputation questions*, which effectively implied the answer, typically by assuming what the other person thought or felt. The other style of questioning we have termed, *invitational questions*, a question which was open ended and expressed a wish to know how the other person thought or felt and invited a contribution to the conversation (Clarkson et al., 2017)

Findings

The findings from the Relationship Questionnaire (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991) are shown below.

Table 1 shows that all of the mentors indicated secure attachment patterns with one showing some complex attachment orientations. In contrast, all of the children indicated anxious attachment patterns – emotional neediness or dismissal of their attachment needs. The young people also

Table 1. The relationship questionnaire.

	Dyad 1	Dyad 2	Dyad 3	Dyad 4	Dyad 5	Dyad 6
Mentor	Secure	Secure	Secure	Secure	Secure	Secure and disorganised
YP	Needy	Secure + disinterested	Secure, disinterested and needy	Needy and disinterested	Needy	Secure and disorganised

Table 1. Relationship orientation self-perception between the mentor and mentee.

revealed complex organisations with a preference for more than one style in 4/6 cases, suggesting their attachment orientation was more disorganised in nature.

Thematic analysis

Overall, the interviews between the mentor and mentee all indicated a sense of warmth, humour, mutual respect and caring in their relationships, and it was apparent that the relationship between them was experienced as mutually safe and supportive. An overall meta-theme that captured this was that of trust and stability. This included a number of other themes, such as a positive emotional tone to the relationship, having fun and feeling that they understood and respected each other. Inherent in this overall theme was also a view of the relationship as continuing rather than transient and more than a ‘professional’ relationship’. In effect, the mentors and mentees felt that they had become like friends or a form of extended family. A schematic representation of the themes is offered in [Figure 1](#) showing how trust and stability embraced a range of sub themes:

Trust and stability. This was the dominant over-arching theme that captured the sense of the mentee feeling that the mentor understands them and being confident that the mentor would be available

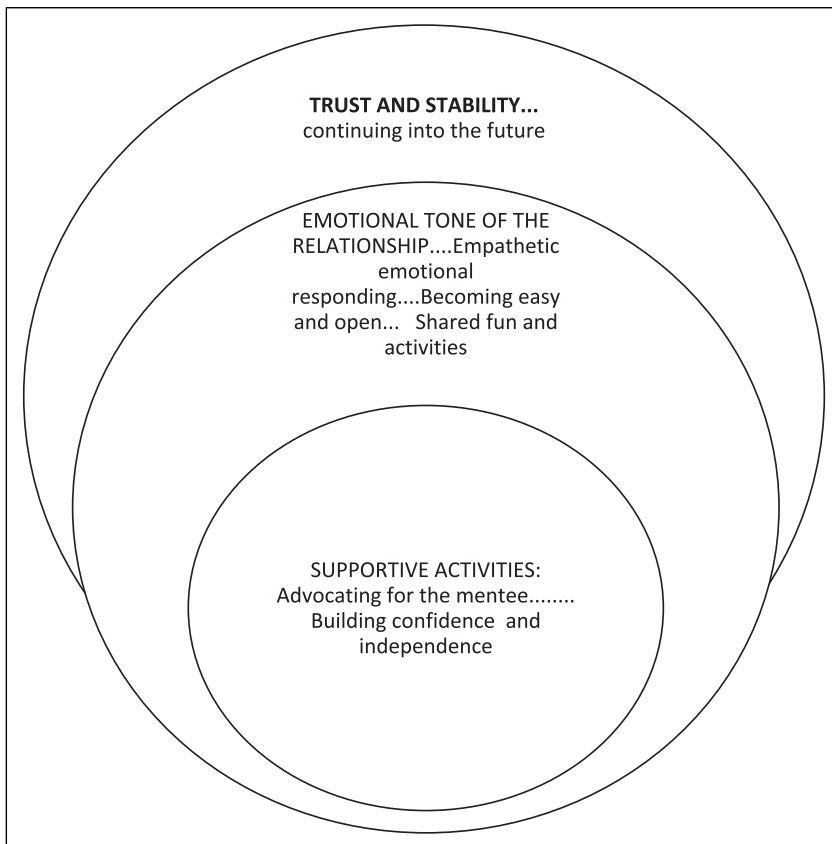


Figure 1. Themes encapsulating the nature of the mentor–mentee relationship.

when they needed them, would be able to meet their emotional needs, and to provide support for them when times were difficult. There was a thread through this that the mentor was experienced as viewing the mentee now not as a young person but as having had difficult life experiences and as still having some vulnerabilities. Having dealt with a range of challenges and difficulties now meant that the mentee was confident that they could rely on the mentor.

YP: With me personally, like er, if I'm expecting to meet someone or something I'd be like, I'd start getting ready or whatever, now I always get ready sooner than I have to be, and I'm just sat around waiting. So as soon as it's like, I'm meant to be meeting someone I'm like oh I wonder where they are. Do I still have to be waiting around here?

M: But I think that is a big difference, it's exactly what [YP] said, we know each other so much better now...and you know, I mean [YP] knows if I said I'll be there about 10.15 that I will be there within a minute or two of 10.15. He knows that and equally [.] [YP] was somewhat unreliable at times when we started, I think that's fair to say...

And

YP: Oh um, [.] I don't know really. Most of the people I know already know [M] and I can't really remember how I first described him, but he's a friend and a mentor. He started out as my, as a mentor that I was given through leaving care and um, you know, that hasn't stopped, and at the same time it's kind of more than that now... We ain't breaking ice, you know what I mean?

Empathic emotional responses. This captured the concept of the mentor as emotionally supportive about the issues that the young person faced in life. However, both the mentor and mentee shared their personal life experiences quite openly and cared about the wellbeing of each other. They understand what the other is experiencing emotionally and try to say things and do things that were supportive and encouraging.

M: We've talked about so many things. I think um, I think probably family stuff really isn't it?and I think certainly it's good for normalising things, she might have been a little bit, you know difficult before for YP. And handling family relationships and those sort of things. Those sort of things stick out for me. Both our sides really. Yeah

YP: Umm [nodding]

M: So all these, all these relationships that I have and the emotional ties that I have with those. Elements of those are all there but because they are from so many different directions I think that is why the mentoring works because you're taking, unconsciously, little bits of other relationships that you've had and building this other relationship.

YP: All wrapped up into one.

Becoming easy and open with each other. They expressed the importance of a relaxed emotional tone, where they each respected the other, liked them and felt comfortable in their presence and in the relationship. The young person clearly felt confident in the relationship, and able to make a useful contribution to its quality. It was also noteworthy that disagreement, which barely existed, tended to be short-lived and non-personal.

YP: I'll probably ring her up and say 'can I come and stay' and she'll be yes of course you can, and she'll be at work and I'll just bumble on over down on the train or something and don't know, just chill out.

M: Yeah. Cause I think... you can relax at ours can't you?

YP: Yeah, that's exactly it.

Shared fun and activities. They described that they had done many things together that were fun and/or practical or both which they had both contributed to and defined. These provided memorable occasions which they had both enjoyed and found constructive. Importantly, their shared sense of humour was abundantly expressed when reliving memories of these activities. This was quite unlike professional relationships the child liked as it was more personal in nature.

M: and we got into a little routine sort of quite quickly ... um, there was quite a bit of child labour, in there as well wasn't there? He helped me decorate and gardening and all that sort of stuff. Cause you can have a conversation with a paint brush in your hand can't you, so? Yeah.

YP: It's like she'd have me in ball and chains.

M: Yeah.

Acting as an advocate for the mentee. This captured the theme of the mentor helping to facilitate the interests of the young person in education, work, housing, health and other matters of life importance by offering practical help. The mentor listened to the young person, validated their thoughts, acted in their best interests and helped them express their wishes and needs to others.

I: What did you do and what did you talk about [the last time you met]?

YP: That was this, last week weren't it? This week? This week. Yeah.

M: Yeah.

YP: Um, talked about [...] job centre, cause I had to go and obviously sign on.

I: Right.

YP: Which she helped with. I talked about housing. She helped me fill out the application form. Um.

.....

M: I did have to have a bit of a straight talk with [YP] once or twice about what she would need to do to make some changes.And I knew YP didn't want anyone else to take charge of her condition or her future... Because everyone had been kind of [...] treading on eggs shells really a bit, and I think [YP] knew that there were things that people weren't saying, which wasn't very honest, was it? Really at the time.

YP: Yes, I asked M to speak for me at a meeting, or several meetings there were at the hospital. She was helpful.

Importance of building confidence and independence. This theme captured the idea of the mentor as having faith in the young person's character and thought processes, and helps them feel confidence in what is meaningful to them, as individuals. As well as being a non-judgemental safe base, they also cultivate independence and so the young person does not feel dependent on the mentor when

they are apart. The young person is also given a valid role in the contribution to the relationship, which cultivates confidence.

YP: Found out my girlfriend was pregnant so, we talked about that quite a lot didn't we? Um, I think that's probably the most significant, not problem, but the most recent event that we've had lots of chats about.

[And later in the interview]

YP: It's been, been on and off for a few weeks Um...

M: But you wants to be involved with the baby.

YP: Yeah, I still want to be involved with the baby.

M: So that will be interesting, but hopefully things are back on the up again, aren't they, so?

YP: Hopefully, it's going to stay this way this time because obviously every time I've got, for the last 7 years, every time I've got something sorted, something drastic has happened.

M: Well it does, yeah it does go like this doesn't it, but you know, I had a a an amazing parents and a great upbringing and my late teens were pretty shocking so it's, it's part of being a young adult isn't it..

Continuing into the future. This was a theme of the relationship as something they wanted to continue into the future, and for two of the pairs, this was evident in the fact that they were still in contact despite the mentoring relationship having formally ended when the YP was aged 18. The wish for continuing contact was mutual although they both understood the amount of contact between them would change; the bond between them will continue to exist.

Mentor: It's been a sort of relationship that's kind of become a friendship and it's just sort of run and run and run.

YP: I hope to get a nice little job and actually ring [M] up for once and say 'come down, I want to take you out of dinner', or something like that, you know what I mean, that's what I want to do.

I: Ok that's nice.

YP: Obviously, I know she doesn't, I know I don't owe her anything, but I feel like I owe her everything.

Conversational processes

We were also interested in not just what was said but the process of their conversation and what this revealed about their relationship. A sense of safety is communicated both at verbal and non-verbal levels, in particular, the extent to which there is open communication in a relationship (Clarkson et al., 2017; Crittenden, 2006). We utilised a typology of contributions to an interaction derived from (Clarkson et al., 2017; Veroff et al., 1993). This consists of positive and constructive communicational types – *collaboration*; *conflict*; *confirmation*; *laughter*; and *continuation* as opposed to more negative or disengaged communications including negative aspects of these (and also *non-response*). In addition, we have developed what we term *meta conversational processes*, namely, imputation questions and invitational questions to further indicate how they express openness and the ability to empathetically hold each other in mind.

The broadest and most telling aspect of their conversations was that there was little indication of negative communications and an equality in their contributions. Put simply, the young people talked, and the mentors were clearly able to adopt a calm and non-intrusive role in which they did not feel compelled to speak for the young person. They appeared to communicate a confidence that the young person could and would speak for themselves and that they would be willing to contribute if needed.

Collaboration –

Extending of the idea presented by the other, questioning for information, answering questions that further the story or continuing the storyline that had been previously begun.

All six interviews indicated that this was the most typical conversational process. It relates to invitation, in that, the mentor in particular would invite the young person to add to and elaborate the story.

Conflict – Disagreeing or interrupting the other with a negative response. In this study, this also included offering fuller responses that contradicted the information presented by the other.

There were very few instances of conflict in the interviews. Where these occurred, they were quasi conflicts, for example, the YP contradicting the mentor by saying something even more positive about them or occasional minor points of detail, such as dates that things had occurred.

Confirmation – A statement of agreement; saying yes or um-hum.

These responses were frequent, but this also relates to imputation in that the mentor did not take over the conversation so that the young person only had a choice of saying yes.

Laughter – Positive shared laughter as opposed to mocking or attacking.

There was extensive laughter in the interviews and some gentle teasing both ways, for example, on our dress sense, tastes in music and so on.

Continuation – Continuing the narrative without reflecting on the previous comment of the other.

There were occasional instances of this but usually this was in the context of the young person becoming excited about telling a story, but this was rare and generally there was clear indication of listening to each other and continuing each other's narratives.

Non-response – Explicitly avoiding responding to the other's previous comment. There were no clear indications of the use of this type of response. There were instances where the other was invited to continue through the use of nods and uhms but no instances of a clearly deliberate negative non-response.

Imputation – A question which effectively implied the answer, typically by assuming what the other person thought or felt. These also had the quality of closed or rhetorical questions.

There were instances where interpretations about the other's thoughts and feelings were offered but this was invariably followed by an invitation... asking whether the young person agreed.

Invitation – A question which was open ended and expressed a wish to know how the other person thought or felt and invited a contribution to the conversation. These were very frequent. The mentors engaged in more of these but not exclusively. There appeared to a patience by both to inquire and listen to the other.

Communicational examples

The extracts from one of the mentor and mentee pairs below are representative of the characteristic pattern of the six joint interviews. Here, the young person started a conversation in a section about asking for clarification of the co-construction of their story:

'YP: I don't know. Um, er, I think at that time, was I having my tuition?...

M: *The first year you were at home, you were home tutored weren't you?'*

In all of the joint interviews, we found that the mentor did not take over the conversation or talk over the YP, and instead, as illustrated below, offered a collaborative, continuing and invitational question, checking the response with the mentee:

M: We found working together like that actually was a lot more relaxing, wasn't it really? It's easier to open up the conversation channels, isn't it? When you're doing something. So we had quite a lot of laughs over that really, didn't we? [pause].

The mentors consistently showed a concern to check the narrative with the mentee and invited them to participate. What was very apparent was that the mentors paused after questions, which could have been simply imputation by waiting for the mentee to respond. Here, they paused to invite a response from the young person, rather than allow this part of the conversation to be closed off. This process of pausing after questions and suggestions appeared to be extremely important not least in that it communicated a sense of patience and calmness to their conversation.

Instead of talking over the young person and assuming how they felt and thought as seen in [Clarkson et al.\(2017\)](#), here, the mentors were showing a sensitivity to the mentee and did not talk on their behalf or impute their thoughts and feelings. This generally led to a balanced and equal conversation between them.

Another example related to helping the mentee with a crisis is shown below:

M: *Well I think the biggest thing with [YP] is knowing that she can rely on you so if I say something, I don't think I've let you down at all, I mean tell me if you think I have, but I try if I say I'll do something to do it and then if I'll be there, I will be there, but obviously like the time she wanted to leave [name of Home] I couldn't, do that, so we talked it through, didn't we in the end? You didn't unpack, you left all your stuff there, but you did stay, didn't you?*

Interestingly in this passage, the mentee revealed that instead of starting to talk for them, the mentor attempts to offer support by helping to lift their emotional state and prompting a smile.

Interviewer: *What about you? What do you think your mentor feels is the best way to help you in that situation?*

YP: *I love chatting ... but when I'm in a mood sometimes I don't, she asks me questions and she tries to get a smile out of me.*

Discussion

The findings indicate that the core themes for mentors and mentees consist of being easy and open with each other, having fun and sharing activities together, and offering advocacy and practical help. The mentors were regarded as being a reliable, stable and continuing presence, which helped to cultivate a sense of self-confidence and independence in the mentee. Both mentors and mentees saw themselves and each other as responding empathically to each other's emotional needs. This wider context of support provided by the Promise organisation was also seen as fostering this emotional sensitivity. The observations of their conversations supported this in that they were collaborative, tended to agree or show support for what the other said, and disagreements or interruptions were

infrequent. Mentors checked if the young person agreed with their interpretations about them. Interruptions were also infrequent and references to stories of difficulties were managed with mutual respect of each other's perspectives and humour.

The findings suggest evidence that the bond of the relationship between them was internalised to promote positive changes in the mentees 'working models'. Shared references to memories of pleasant activities and interactions appeared to help build and consolidate this. It was also evident in the dynamics between them in their discussions of a sense of warmth, humour, openness and mutual respect and caring had been cultivated. It may be that the mentor provides a good role model for the emotionally vulnerable mentee and provides ways of responding constructively to the challenges of life. Mention was made of times when things had been very difficult for the mentees, which had been overcome by the mentees with their mentors' support, including practical help and guidance. Importantly, their relationship was not perceived as a 'professional' one. However, this emotional dimension contrasted with other professional relationships and was one based on more personal 'friendship' featuring inner warmth and kindness which mentees valued enormously.

The findings of the current study are consistent with our previous studies (Dallos, & Carder-Gilbert, 2019), but this current study provides additional themes which indicated that the mentors regarded it as important to respond empathetically to the young person's needs and emotions. It was also interesting that the mentor acknowledged that, like the young person, they valued the shared elements, such as the humour, help and empathic support. The support from the Promise organisation was also very important, and the mentees appreciated that this was available for their mentor. It seemed that the mentees felt reassured that their mentors were well-supported, which in turn helped them to feel able to use their mentor and not that they were over-burdening them.

Some limitations of the study are that this is a small study, of just six dyad pairs. Furthermore, it is important to note that this sample is quite mature, having left childhood and are transitioning towards adulthood. It will be interesting to conduct conjoint interviews with younger children and mentors in on-going relationships.

Conclusions

The findings of this study indicate that the bond between mentors and mentees is an extremely important aspect of the positive benefits that result from mentoring. The children described that the initial contact was very important in setting the tone for nature of the relationship and that they typically felt that the mentors were emotionally available, positive, fun and on their side. They also described that as the relationship progresses they felt that the mentor had become a part of external and of their inner world. Likewise, the mentors described that they thought, and sometimes worried about the children while away from them. We found the analysis of the conversations between them in the conjoint interviews to be revealing and offered a stark contrast to a previous study of conversation between foster carers and children in their charge. The mentors were more sensitive and invitational towards the children and enabled them to speak rather than taking over and speaking for them. This may have been because the mentors did not see themselves in a 'professional' role and as trying to change the young people. Perhaps paradoxically, this less intrusive approach fostered more change, certainly in the abilities of the children to express themselves. We think that exploration of conversational processes in such supportive relationships is an important direction for future research.

A specific application is that training for mentors and other supportive staff could include discussions of the sort of dyadic conversations that we recorded alongside conversational role-play

activities to encourage rather than suppress the abilities of young people to articulate their experiences and feelings.

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