MENTORING YOUTH
Key Messages for young people

Characteristics
- Diversity
- Personal development
- Inclusive
- Relationships
- Family

One mentee to one mentor
Different mentors

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This youth summary was written by members of the SAYes Alumni group: Carly Jacobs, Bertin Kalombo, Destino Kazika Nzonzidi, Amina Pululu, Zizipho Quluba and Lauren Ramos, with the help of Neziswa Titi, Researcher at the Children’s Institute, University of Cape Town.

The summary is based on a case study evaluation of the SAYes mentoring programme for young people living in and leaving care in Cape Town. The full report can be accessed from Queens University Belfast: https://pure.qub.ac.uk/en/persons/mandi-macdonald/publications/

Introduction

In South Africa, like in many other countries, a large number of young people do not live with their families but grow up instead in alternative care. They often lose touch with their birth family and home communities. Their social workers and carers can help them develop independence skills in preparation for leaving care, usually at the age of 18 years old. However, many care leavers find that this is not enough. They can feel isolated and anxious and need social support to help them cope with the challenges of adult life. This study aimed to understand how a mentoring programme might help young people as they prepare to move out of care and begin to live more independently.

This short report is co-written by care leavers who have taken part in mentoring. In it we summarise the key messages for the young people who participated in the study and other youth living in or leaving care.
What is mentoring?

Mentoring is a supportive relationship between a young person and an adult who is not their parent or carer but who provides guidance, encouragement, and support. SAYes is an organisation based in Cape Town, South Africa that provides mentoring to young people aged between 14 and 25 years old who are preparing to leave or have recently left care. Mentors are adults who volunteer their time and want to use their life experience to support young people to develop independence. SAYes finds mentors, provides them with training and matches them up with young people. Mentees meet with their mentor for one hour a week for around 9 months. Mentors guide young people to set and achieve personal goals for their own wellbeing and development.
The study

We wanted to understand the ways in which young people leaving care in South Africa might benefit from mentoring. To do this, researchers from Queens University Belfast and the Children’s Institute at the University of Cape Town joined with staff at SAYes to find out the views and experiences of the people directly involved in the Transition to Independent Living (TIL) mentoring programme.

We interviewed 35 young people involved in the TIL programme who were living in Child and Youth Care Centres in Cape Town or had recently left care. Some were getting ready to take part in the programme, some were already meeting with their mentor regularly, and some had taken part in mentoring several times. We asked them about the goals that were most important to them, what they liked or did not like about mentoring, and any suggestions they had for changing the programme.

Each interview lasted an hour and was recorded on a digital voice recorder so that we did not forget anything important. We also interviewed 3 social workers, 5 Child and Youth Care Centre staff and 2 groups of mentors. This is a summary of what everyone told us.

We plan to share our report with other researchers, child and youth care workers, and policy-makers to help develop policy and practice that will meet the needs of young people leaving care.
1. Certain characteristics help mentees make the most of mentoring whilst other traits can create barriers.

- Mentees who are motivated and engaged with the programme get the most out of it. Young people should take time to understand how the programme can help them set and achieve their goals, and how often and for how long they should commit to talking with their mentor.
- Communication between the mentee and mentor is very important. The more a young person engages in the programme activities and asks their mentor questions, the more informed decisions they are able to make for their life.

“The more actively you engage and the more actively you want, the more you are going to get.”

“Our role as mentors is to give them tools, equip them, assist them, support them, direct them in terms of achieving, if I can call it, independence, post the exit from care.”
2. Mentors offer a **one-to-one relationship** and focus on the young person’s individual interests for a specific period of time.

- Social workers in children’s homes have many children and youth that they must take care of and sometimes cannot give young people the individual attention they need. Mentoring programmes such as SAYes assign **one mentee to one mentor** which enables youth to access individual support focused on their own personal needs and interests in a safe, secure environment. Mentees have described their mentors as reliable as they play the roles of a counsellor, big sister/brother and confidant.

- Life in care can leave youth with **difficult feelings** such as sadness, worry, anger or resentment. Mentors can help young people cope with some of these issues if they are willing to develop a **trusting relationship**.
- The relationship between mentors and mentees has **clear boundaries**, and both will have their privacy protected and respected. The boundaries govern the scope of what mentors can contribute so that they do not interfere with the role of social workers and carers.
- The relationship with the mentor is **time-limited** and it can feel sad or disappointing to say goodbye. Having a final meeting to celebrate all they have achieved together can help young people and mentors to move on at the end of the programme.

“I was angry that why do I have to grow up in a home, so I was emotionally broken... I was ravelled and angry. So, I talked to my mentor about it, even till date I still call my mentor to talk through those things... I can now freely speak about it.”
3. Mentoring helps young people to identify and work towards their **personal goals**.

- The SAYes mentoring programme helps mentees to identify areas for personal development and to achieve this by setting short- and longer-term goals.
- Mentees can decide on what they would most like to focus on and what areas of personal development are most important for them.
- Mentors can help to identify career paths that suit the young person's strengths and interests, but which might not have been obvious to them.
- They can help access information on courses or job opportunities.
- Often reaching career goals is hard and it is sometimes easier to go for the next available job even if it is outside the career path you set. Mentors can help young people stay focused on their goals.
- Mentors can help with budgeting and financial planning.
- Mentors can help young people to develop social skills, for example, to be more self-aware in their relationships with other people.

“I needed someone who could help me be realistic in terms of the decisions I made in my life... she was very honest about that. Maybe I say I wanna be a paramedic, she will say there’s also nursing.”

“Before I didn’t really know what I wanted, but then I realised my interest, I didn’t know what it was until I was helped to identify it.”
4. Mentoring is an opportunity to develop social skills and meet new people.

- The SAYes Mentoring Programme is diverse in terms of racial and social representation and mentees can learn to adapt to people from other nationalities and countries. Being open-minded about race, other people’s personalities, their belief-systems, spirituality and religions exposes young people to a range of people that may potentially help them.
- If young people enrol in the mentoring programme more than once, they get a chance to work with different mentors who can each introduce the young person to new ideas, interesting people from their own networks, and help them work towards attaining their goals in different ways.

“Like my mentor has advised me about such things, like my physical health (...) she also suggested that for my health, I should go to hospital every month, just for check-ups so that I know I’m fine.”
5. Some youth do not have family to go back to when they leave care. Mentors can fill a support gap for young people who have transitioned out of care to independent life.

- Young people spoke of having grown up away from parents and siblings and rarely having contact with them. Mentors can help navigate life’s challenges and provide the guidance that young people who are separated from their family might miss.
- Mentoring can expand the support network of mentees who are living in the community.
- Some mentees, but not all, stay in touch with their former mentors after the end of the mentoring programme.
- Anyone can enter the SAYes mentoring program regardless of nationality and non-South African youth can get specific support to help resolve problems with citizenship.

"Me and my family we don’t really interact like a family because we see so very little of each other, and whenever we see each other we never like, talk about important stuff that family needs to talk about."
“When we are in the children’s homes we only know the people that look after us, and you’re expected to, when you are 18, to just go out into the world where you have been almost in this little box where your food is provided, your schooling is paid for, you’re taken to school and now you are going into this new world where you basically need to be independent.”
6. The formal mentoring programme provides a **structure and support** for mentors and mentees.

- SAYes selects mentors who can commit their time to the programme and also provides them with training.

- Relationships can sometimes be tricky for mentors and mentees. SAYes understands the need for mentees to feel safe and protected. As such, there is a protocol in place that should mentees have a need for mediation in their relationship with mentors they can contact the **mentee liaison** officer to talk over or report any discomforts or concerns, and this would then be resolved in amicable manner.
7. Conclusion

- All of the young people who took part in the evaluation of the SAYes programme identified a range of benefits from mentoring, similar to those experienced by care experienced youth in other countries. Mentees who were living in group care appreciated having **individual attention** from ‘someone who is there for them’ even though this was time limited. They enjoyed being able to talk to mentors who would listen without judging them. They and their carers said that they benefitted from better **emotional wellbeing**, greater **self-confidence**, staying **focused** on school or work, feeling better **able to cope** with life’s challenges, and developing **social skills**. Mentors helped them with processes that other South African youth have identified as central to a ‘successful’ transition out of care thinking about their **family connections**; identifying supportive **social networks**; understanding how to set and achieve their **goals**; making the most of **opportunities**; feeling **hopeful** for the future. This all worked best for mentees who invested time and energy in their relationship with their mentor and were **committed** to taking part in regular mentoring sessions, and when mentors were dependable and understood their situation.
If you think you would like to take part in the SAYes mentoring programme, you should ask your social worker or carer to contact the organisation for more information. You can find out information about the organisation and how to contact them from their website: www.sayesmentoring.org

SAYes is based in Cape Town, South Africa, but there are other organisations that offer mentoring in other regions. You should ask your social worker or carer to find out about programmes that operate in your area.
The team would like to thank everyone who took part in this project, and the UK Government’s, Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF) and Queens University Belfast for funding the study, and the UK Economic and Social Research Council for supporting the alumni group to develop this summary.

To find out more about the research that this youth summary is based on you can contact Dr Mandi MacDonald at Queens University Belfast: m.macdonald@qub.ac.uk
This youth summary was prepared by SAYes alumni, a group of care experienced former mentees who act as ambassadors for the mentoring programme. The group offers a discussion forum for care leavers and advocates for better in-care and aftercare support. To find out more about the group you can email: alumni@sayesmentoring.org