

*Blog Post: Michael Garringer, Director of Knowledge Management, MENTOR: The National Mentoring Partnership*

## **Making effective match support and closure practices a bigger priority in youth mentoring programs**

### **Reflections from the 2016 Summer Institute on Youth Mentoring**

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One of the defining phrases of the modern youth mentoring movement has been “fervor without infrastructure.” This concept, applied to the emerging youth mentoring field in Marc Freedman’s landmark 1991 book *The Kindness of Strangers*, articulated an essential tension that was emerging at the time and has certainly played out in the years since: How can our movement build a strong foundation—stable funding, evidence-based practices, and skilled professionals—to adequately support the deeply personal mentoring relationships that are so impactful to so many? How can we scale this good work responsibly? How can we make sure that mentors, who are most often just regular folks volunteering their time, have the support they need to meet a child’s needs? And what are the implications when we follow the fervor *before* that infrastructure gets solidified?

These types of questions were percolating in my mind, and the minds of about 40 other mentoring researchers and practitioners, by the end of the **2016 Summer Institute on Youth Mentoring**, held August 1-4 at Portland State University. This annual event, organized by Dr. Tom Keller and sponsored in part by MENTOR, brings together experienced mentoring professionals, researchers, and policymakers each summer for presentations on emergent research and thoughtful discussions on how those findings will, or should, influence the mentoring field moving forward. The topic for the 2016 event (see sidebar for a list of presenters) was “the ending of mentoring relationships”—specifically focused on research that speaks to why matches end prematurely and how programs might prevent early endings from happening. The institute also featured research on how to best facilitate match endings when they do occur. By the end of the week, it was clear to the group that the youth mentoring field should increasingly emphasize the support we give programmatic matches and develop and honor policies that ensure as many matches as possible end on a positive and healthy note.

Obviously, the youth mentoring field has long emphasized the support of the mentor-mentee matches in its program structures and staff roles. And recent years have seen practitioners adjusting their practices around match support and closure in response to [compelling research](#) showing that matches that terminated earlier than expected can lead to worse outcomes for youth than if they had never been matched in the first place (and can leave youth less likely to benefit from a *new* match). But I walked away from the event with an invigorated sense of purpose and importance when it comes to how we support and ultimately end mentoring relationships. Simply put, the research suggests that far too many youth (as well as parents and mentors) are leaving our mentoring programs confused and hurt by the often abrupt ways that matches end. This research also, thankfully, pointed to some paths forward that can prevent matches from closing earlier than they should and support staff in helping mentors, youth, and parents find positives when those relationships do end, regardless of reason.

## Sidebar: 2016 SIYM Research Fellows and Presenters

### Host and Session Moderator:

- Tom Keller of Portland State University

### Research Fellows:

- Antoinette Basualdo-Delmonico of Boston University
- Michael Karcher of the University of Texas—San Antonio
- Elizabeth Papos of College of William and Mary
- Renee Spencer of Boston University

### Featured Presenters:

- Michael Garringer of MENTOR: The National Mentoring Partnership
- Meghan Perry of the Institute for Youth Success at Education Northwest
- Karen Shaver (formerly) of Big Brothers Big Sisters Canada
- Shannon Turner of My Life

## Research Presented

There is no way to adequately summarize the 20+ hours of research presented at the SIYM in a single blog post, but here are some of the highlights that will stick with me from each of the Research Fellows and Presenters:

- **Tom Keller** got the event rolling with a nice overview of the history of research-to-practice in the mentoring field over the years, showing participants how events like SIYM—which promote dialogue between researchers and those who work in programs—can improve both research and practice outcomes over time. He then offered a thorough review on previous studies of match closures and introduced his current Study to Analyze Relationships (STAR), a research project funded by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention and conducted in partnership with several other SIYM presenters. This groundbreaking new study is uncovering fascinating information about why matches end, what program staff do to prevent those endings, and how staff, mentors, youth, and parents experience the closure of a match. His presentation offered a sobering look at the longevity of matches in typical community-based programs. At the beginning of the study, 50% of mentors said they expected their relationship with their “little” to last either “forever” or “until my little is grown up.” However, the reality was that 30% of the matches in the study closed before fulfilling their time commitment and only 26% had an in-person final meeting at closure. The good news is that most matches closed because the mentor or youth was moving away or for other reasons that were not about the quality of the mentoring experience. But of the matches that closed, a shocking 35% closed “abruptly” or without warning. This set the stage for other STAR research presented throughout

the week and focused participants' attention on this topic, recognizing the harm that could come to youth, families, and volunteers if these often-sudden endings are not handled well.

- **Antoinette Basualdo-Delmonico** offered participants a great examination of recent research into *why* matches end and ways that those reasons influenced the closure process and the willingness of participants to say goodbye when the time came. Her qualitative work with Renee Spencer is shedding light onto how the strength of a mentoring relationship plays into the way participants adhere to a program's closure processes. Strong matches, where youth, mentors, and parents are all fairly satisfied with the match, have good follow-through on closure procedures (final meetings and gift exchanges, exit interviews, special outings, etc.). But her research is finding that in matches where one (or even all) of those parties is dissatisfied in the relationship, closure processes are often never even planned and are often skipped by a participant (most often mentors) when they are planned. As one would expect, strong matches tend to end with disappointments and sadness, but an overall tone that this was all worth it. And, paradoxically, very weak matches may be relieved that the match is ending and are willing to go through a closure process to be done with it. But when that match is out of sync, when participants don't agree on how things are going, then there is tremendous potential for the end of the relationship to be left dangling, for there to be confusion and hurt feelings by one participant (most often the child), and for closure practices to not be honored. Her work is highlighting just how damaging those unclear and indirect endings are to youth and families, as well as just how often staff had to take on that ending themselves in the absence of a participant who abandoned their obligation to say goodbye.
- **Michael Karcher** reviewed his research into several program features that influence participant satisfaction and persistence in mentoring relationships, especially the key role that match support-focused staff play in mentor retention. His research in school-based settings has found that participant satisfaction with the program decreased when the lead staff ran activities or engaged in other direct service tasks as opposed to focusing on supporting the relationships between mentors and mentees. His research highlights the dangers of putting too many other tasks on the plate of the staff members responsible for helping mentor, youth, and parents/guardians navigate the mentoring experience. Yet in many programs, those who check in with and support matches often have to train new mentors, do recruitment outreach, and design and run program activities. The reduced support that results from those other activities predicts reduced mentor satisfaction and decreased likelihood of renewal from year to year (at least in the programs Karcher has studied). Unfortunately, many programs are not in a position to provide dedicated match support without hiring more staff—which they often lack the funds to do—leaving them, essentially, with a chronic issue that frustrates mentors but little recourse to fixing it without major program changes.

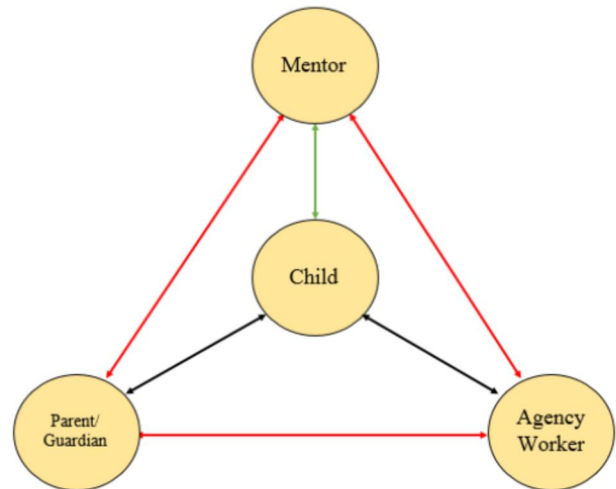
And Dr. Karcher also stressed the importance of giving participants some practice in saying goodbye, emphasizing the 3-2-1 goodbye activity from his [Cross-Age Mentoring Program](#) model, where every match meeting ends with participants sharing three things they liked about the meeting, two they didn't, and one thing they want to work on in the future (this framework is

then also used in closure ceremonies to great effect).

- **Elizabeth Raposa** presented some interesting new findings from work she is doing with Dr. Jean Rhodes, including a recent study of US Census data showing that rates of mentoring among the general population have remained steady and are even growing slightly in spite of the overall rates of volunteering declining over the last decade. This is obviously good news for those of us in the public awareness arena. But it was her second presentation on the impact of youth stress on mentoring relationships that really caught my attention. Their research suggests that youth who are under stress at home or in school struggle to maintain longer-term mentoring relationships, for a variety of reasons. However, there are certain mentor characteristics that can buffer the impact of this stress on the relationship. Mentors who have higher feelings of self-efficacy and previous experience working with youth in the community are much more likely to persist in relationships with youth experiencing stress. This has obvious implications for who programs recruit and how they prepare mentors to serve high-stress youth. For those young people, programs should consider finding experienced, confident mentors who can ride the ups and downs and bring their experience to bear on the relationship. This highlights that for some youth, an inexperienced, first-time mentor might not be the right fit. So while our field can feel good about bringing new adults to mentoring, we also need to make sure we are getting the best adults if we want to see fewer matches flame out early when youth experience stress. This study was recently published in the *American Journal of Community Psychology* (Volume 57, Issue 3-4, June 2016, Pages 320–329).
- **Renee Spencer** has perhaps studied the hidden stories behind match closure more than any researcher in our field. Her presentations at the SYM, particularly the new information coming out of her and Dr. Keller's Study to Analyze Relationships (STAR), really highlighted just how critical it is for all participants in a relationship to be on the same page and the negative experiences that can happen when program staff can't keep that communication between all participants flowing in an effective manner. Her qualitative research has found that participants, especially mentors and parents, often have unrealistic expectations as to what the mentoring experience will be like and often hide their dissatisfaction with these unmet expectations from staff—an issue that can be exacerbated when program staff are not checking in frequently or offering much in the way of deeper support. Many communication challenges among mentors, youth, and parents perhaps could have been avoided if staff were more involved in smoothing over differences and misinterpreted actions. But that takes the time and attention that we've already noted can be lacking for front-line match support staff.

Data from the STAR study are currently being analyzed, but the innovative social network approach based on Keller's (2005) systemic model illustrates why these matches ended (see graphic for a sample of how relationship strength among participants was depicted) and really tells a hidden story about mentoring relationships: the reluctance of participants to be clear and honest about the issues they are experiencing and the ways in which staff contribute to these challenges by not tempering expectations at the beginning and not checking in and nurturing the relationships as much as they could as they progress.

But perhaps even more notable was the STAR research on *how* matches were closed. Focusing on matches that ended in the first six months for reasons other than the mentor or child moving, in only 3 of the 20 matches they examined closely did the closure process get planned and completed as intended! In 14 of the cases, the staff had to end the match somewhat unilaterally because one or more of the participants wouldn't engage in the closure process. The other 3 cases had a planned ending that never occurred, usually because the mentor failed to show up. In many cases, the program staff had to urge participants to engage in the closure process, especially if the match had been dissatisfying to one or more of them. In other instances, though, the staff themselves had trouble following through on the organization's own policies about how closure should be handled. It was clear from Spencer's closer examination of these endings that match support specialists often have a hard time facilitating a planned and positive match closure process. There are many reasons for that, but the reality is that only 3 of the 20 youth examined here got the kind of positive goodbye that one would hope a mentoring relationship ends on. That's a tough number to swallow, especially when one of the main reasons for that closure breakdown seems to be a match support role that is stretched too thin to catch troubles before matches fall apart and juggling too many relationships to give each mentor and mentee the closure they deserve. Unfortunately, in my mind, *this is what it looks like when the fervor outpaces the infrastructure.*



- The featured guest speakers all did a wonderful job of supplementing this week of research: **Meghan Perry** led a highly-interactive session on tools and resources that can help facilitate closure, many drawn from other disciplines and from the [excellent packet on closure](#) developed by Institute for Youth Success. **Karen Shaver** offered a great overview of a recent policy shift at Big Brothers Big Sisters of Canada where they have decided to formally close all of their school-based matches at the end of the year, with no promises of rematching the following year. She explained how their research led them to conclude that a planned and formal ending was a better fit for those school-based programs and has led to more clarity and much less stress and disappointment for mentors and youth. And **Shannon Turner** gave a compelling glimpse into her work as a mentor in the My Life program, which takes a very self-determination-focused

approach to serving youth aging out of foster care. She highlighted the need for mentors to have some relevant life experience when working with these youth, as they can perhaps better understand and address the ups and downs of foster youth based on their own experiences (this ties in nicely to the findings Raposa noted about experienced mentors.) Turner also noted that an emphasis on self-determination in this program can help make their “goodbyes” a bit easier since the youth has been empowered to chart their own course and go in a bold new direction, without their mentor, from the beginning.

As for me, well, I closed out the week by offering an overview of several of the compelling themes of the event and by talking with the group about what they felt needed to happen to improve how relationships end in our field. Here are some of the key takeaways we discussed to wrap up the week:

1. **The issues around closure are most acute in community-based mentoring programs.** While we certainly heard about research on many types of programs over the course of the week, it became clear that much of the struggle was about the “life-long”—or at the very least, open-ended—relationships that many community-based models tout as ideal, if not the norm. School-based programs tend to have it a bit easier: they have finite calendars and youth who matriculate literally out of the building where services are offered. It can be easier to see the limits of a relationship in these contexts and the end of the school year offers a natural end point (and a much more captive audience) to say goodbye to one another. But in community-based programs, the open-ended nature of the relationship creates all kinds of looming expectations about closeness and duration that foster feelings of guilt or stress when things don’t go according to script. Some of this needs to get addressed in mentor and family recruitment, where the messages can be a little, to be honest, unrealistic. But it was also clear that community-based programs also face logistical challenges about meeting with participants in person, scheduling check-in calls, and ultimately, getting participants to actually plan a goodbye and follow through on it. So while school-based programs also need to watch for harmful early terminations, it’s the community-based programs that might be feeling the most pain here. (One potential solution for these programs would be to borrow a page from the aforementioned BBBS Canada school-based mentoring policy and intentionally “close” matches when the initial commitments are up, offering a planned celebration/reflection event that would allow matches to either end positively or make a firm commitment to a longer period.)
2. **We need more realistic recruitment messages.** As noted above, many of the issues that ultimately sunk the mentoring relationships in these studies were planted long before the match was ever made. They came from volunteer recruitment messages that too often presented mentoring as being something that literally anyone could do, as well as messages that painted mentors as saviors that could come in and wipe away the negative impact of everything that life has thrown at a child. Mentors are constantly told that their relationship will be close, if not emotionally intimate, and that they will feel all the good feelings that come from having someone thank you for your help. We all know that the reality of mentoring is often different: your relationship may be more of a working alliance than a deep friendship, your mentee might never express deep gratitude, and, in spite of all your help, your mentee might not find the success in life they were hoping for. Life is hard and messy, as our relationships, including

mentoring relationships. But we really need to grapple with how to create enthusiasm for the mentoring experience without setting participants up for failure. (It's also worth noting that youth and parents get "oversold" on mentoring during recruitment too.)

- 3. We need to find ways to increase the amount and quality of match support functions within programs.** If there was one tread that I felt cut through most of the research at the SYM, it was that there is a tremendous amount of pressure on match support specialists in most program settings. In many ways, the intervention of mentoring starts right at the point where program staff turn their attention elsewhere: when the match is made. There is always the next batch of mentors to recruit, screen, and train, not to mention a thousand other tasks that need doing. Yet, that is where the rubber meets the road in mentoring: then that mentor and youth start interacting, start working on challenges, start sharing who they are and what makes them tick. That is the time when one would hope that staff would be offering the most support and making sure that small hiccups don't grow into major concerns and that those lingering unrealistic expectations get checked and reframed.

But this is often the place where match support is lacking. Time and again during the SYM, we heard about match support staff failing to check in with participants, not offering helpful advice, not helping solve communication issues, not working effectively with parents, and not following their agencies' own protocols around how matches are closed. We heard stories of programs with staffing challenges supporting hundreds and hundreds of matches with just one or two match support specialists. We heard stories about this critical position often being staffed by the least experienced person in the agency, someone who brings "early career" knowledge for ridiculously low pay (which then results in subsequent stories about one match having *five* support specialists in just 18 months). We heard many confessions during the week that this is something even our best programs struggle with.

The answer here is not easy—it is one of funding and capacity. There are thousands of match support specialists around the country that do amazing work in their programs. We need to acknowledge that... But in talking with program leaders it is clear that this is also a position that, almost across the board, is overseeing too many matches without the depth of experience to address the challenges those matches have. Our field needs to seriously consider demanding more of this position, in terms of experience and expertise, and to *pay that position accordingly*. I find it curious that this role is the one where programs go lean... But fixing this would either mean serving fewer youth with the same amount of money or spending more per-youth, two choices that I think are a hard sell for those who fund programs. Better cost-per-match research would help the field get this right, but only if it realistically looks at what this role entails and sets an appropriate dollar amount on the expertise needed to do the job right. Unfortunately, the SYM highlighted that we have a ways to go in walking our talk when it comes to match support.

- 4. There are paths forward if we can get practitioners the right tools and resources.** Funding and staffing issues aside, the research presented at the SYM did highlight that there are things we can emphasize in running programs that can make all this better. Renee Spencer noted that



closure can be a much more positive experience, even if the match itself wasn't, when the process is:

- Planned (scheduled in advance with time to prepare)
- Process-oriented (with opportunities to explore and express feelings)
- Growth-promoting (celebrating good things and normalizing the act of saying goodbye and experiencing loss; one key idea that emerged from the practitioners is to have match support staff gather mementos and special "keepsakes" throughout the match that can be presented to participants at closure to remind them of the positives of the experience)
- Clear (no more mushy "Oh, I'll call sometime" comments to a child who will take them at face value)

But to support closure that builds on these principles, practitioners will need tools. To *prevent* early closures from happening as frequently, we need:

- Better training for mentors, parent, and youth on roles and expectations
- More training match support staff on a variety of topics (i.e., training on facilitating the mentor-PG relationship; assessing attachment styles in matches; strategies for doing check-ins more efficiently)
- Strategies for capturing positive moments from matches for sharing and "scrapbooking" at the end of the match
- Celebration and recognition strategies for all participants at all stages
- Guidance on creating mentor or parent "support groups" that can give different perspectives and reframe expectations

Over the course of the next year, MENTOR will be working with Dr. Keller and many of the 2016 SYM researchers and practitioners to build exactly these kinds of trainings and tools. We will also be exploring the development of more accurate cost-per-match estimates for various models and for mentoring certain groups of youth, both in terms of the actual costs programs are currently incurring, but also a more realistic dollar amount if we were to staff and compensate the match support role at the level it deserves.

This event is what good research-to-practice looks like: taking research that shows areas where mentoring programs could improve and then building on practitioner wisdom and innovations to try and fill that research-identified gap. This type of work is at the heart of MENTOR's programmatic supports and is one of the reasons why the Summer Institute on Youth Mentoring is one of the "bucket list" events for serious mentoring professionals. (Well, that and the fact that Portland, OR is lovely in July.)

