



MENTORING IN THE TIME OF COVID-19: ONLINE DISCUSSIONS WITH MENTORS TO YOUTH (PRELIMINARY RESULTS)

BACKGROUND

The COVID-19 pandemic has had an incredible impact on humanity as a result of devastating effects on health and those stemming from social distancing measures, cancellation of in-person education, and extensive job loss. Young people who are just learning to function in their relationships and communities may find it especially difficult to navigate these changes, including the dissolution of their normal routines and contact with friends and supportive adults. Mentors, who play a significant role in the lives of youth, have had to adjust not only in their personal contexts but also as mentors in the wake of drastic alterations to the structure of mentoring programs.

The objective of this research study was to better understand the extent to which mentors are maintaining their relationships with youth during the pandemic, their concerns specific to mentoring, and what further resources they require to continue to support youth under these extraordinary circumstances.

METHODS

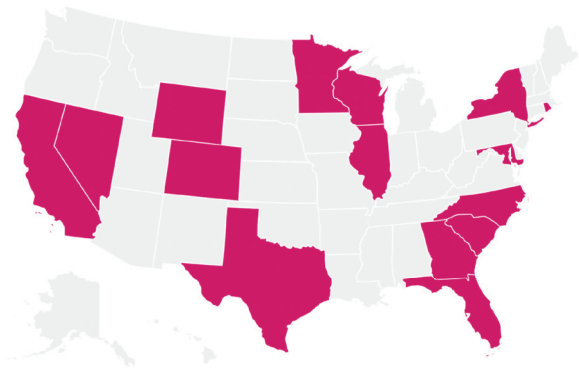
A series of 6 online focus group discussions was conducted with mentors from across the U.S. using Facebook private groups. Eligible mentors registered for the study, were assigned a group, and joined the group at the designated time. Facilitators posted a new question every few minutes over the course of an hour, and mentors responded at their own pace using the comment feature. Facilitators asked follow-up questions by replying to participants' comments. Mentors were also able to interact with each other (and often did!).

It should be noted that the findings reported pertain only to the mentors who engaged in the focus groups and may not be either representative or fully reflective of those of mentors of youth more generally.



FINDINGS

39 mentors from across the U.S. participated in the groups. Mentors were part of school- and community-based programs and individual and group mentoring models. Their mentees ranged in age from 4-22.



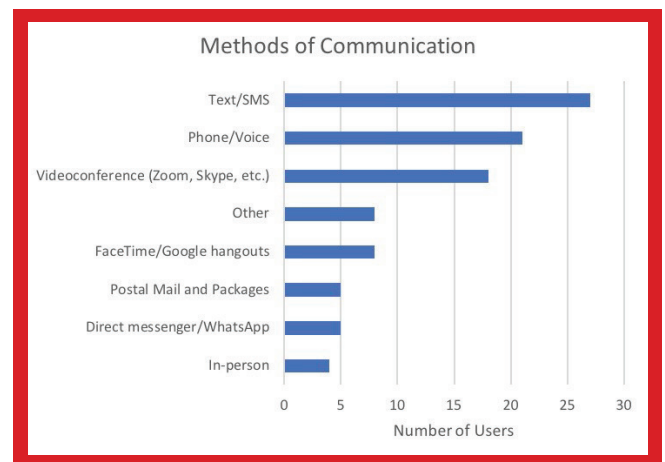
States represented by mentor focus group participants.

Mentors who engaged with the focus groups are still in touch with their mentees, although in new ways.

Mentors largely reported still being in touch with their mentees with about the same frequency as before the pandemic, but some said communication does not last as long and is not as high quality as in person. Some noted their mentees do not have sufficient access to a phone or computer and that communication occurs less frequently when this is the case. Some discussion revolved around difficulties conversing through virtual means due to a lack of comfort with verbal expression within certain age groups (particularly younger mentees). Others expressed frustration related to the need to plan conversations through a parent or program rather than being able to contact their mentees directly or the inability to guarantee their mentees' access to communicating in a private setting.

Although some mentors shared that they are sending their mentees hand-written letters or visiting them in person with social distancing, most mentors listed alternative technologies they are finding helpful for connecting with youth:

- **Apps:** Marco Polo, House Party, Heads Up
- **Games using video conference platforms:** 20 Questions, Would You Rather, Pictionary
- **Virtual joint activities:** Netflix Party, Dolly Parton's bedtime stories, online drawing lessons, virtual book club, video games, creating dances, cooking classes



“I’ve tried to convey that ‘someone is thinking about and cares for her’ through all times.”

Northeast Florida;
Female Mentee age 10

Mentees have a lot of questions and worries.

Mentors repeatedly talked about their mentees expressing feelings of boredom, anxiety, stress, and sometimes loneliness and isolation. Mentees have a variety of concerns and questions (many of them still unanswered):

- How is the virus spread? Can I/should I go outside?
- When will I return to school? Can we catch the virus at school? When will school trips happen again?
- How will graduation look? How will I get a job? Will I still be able to go to college?
- Why isn't distance education more organized?
- When will social distancing be over?
- Will there be football? I miss sports practice.
- When can I go to the barber shop?
- How will we celebrate my birthday?
- When can we (mentor/mentee) hang out again?



Other mentee concerns shared by mentors are much more serious:

- Health and well-being of parents/siblings; heightened concern for single parents
- How is a parent making money to buy food if they are staying home?
- How will I get a summer job? How will I contribute to the household income?
- Poor treatment from others in the household (verbal, emotional abuse)

Mentors expressed worries about their mentees.

Mentors also shared a wide range of worries about their mentees and their families:

- Mentees' academic progress
- Finances (parents' loss of employment); families who are not eligible for government support and working in the informal sector
- Nutritious food for low-income families when many free meals were provided by schools
- Mentees' mental health (and mentees not being able to share their true feelings due to limited privacy at home), especially for mentees with depression and previous suicidal ideation given the increase in isolation
- Tight living spaces (apartments); constant parental supervision potentially limiting freedom of expression
- Mentee substance use, parent substance use
- Mentees' homes are not always safe, loving, or supportive; concerns of child abuse, domestic violence, negativity/tension (and concerns there are fewer calls to child welfare on behalf of mentees)
- Who in the family may have contact with others who may be infected?
Teenage mentees not being as careful about observing social distancing.

- Incarcerated relatives' increased risk for the virus and not being able to receive visitors
- Older siblings having to play a parenting role during quarantine
- Mentees' lack of exercise

Mentors are supporting their mentees in new ways, often going above and beyond for youth.

Mentors discussed the difficulties of knowing their youth need more support than ever during this time—sometimes more than a mentor is equipped to provide. However, despite the challenges, mentors are rising to the occasion and supporting youth in new ways, many of which go beyond their typical roles:

- Listening to mentees' concerns about the effects of the pandemic
- Providing guidance on life skills focused on when people/places/experiences change
- Bringing food and supplies (masks, hygiene supplies, arts and craft supplies, laptops) to mentees' homes
- Dropping off school packets for mentees; virtually helping with schoolwork
- Assisting with vocational support (resumés, job applications)
- Helping mentees' parents to resolve problems with health insurance, food stamps, stimulus checks, unemployment
- Providing vital information so youth can translate to non-English-speaking parents
- Notifying families of places to receive free meals, free WIFI, free laundry service
- Teaching mentees how to make masks
- Instructing how to handle encounters with the police given the new social restrictions and social unrest

Some programs discourage providing services outside of mentorship under normal circumstances, so mentors feel they are often treading a fine line.

Some mentors also reported finding it a delicate balance in terms of how much to engage their mentees about pandemic-related concerns.

“Sometimes, I feel like I want to help more but I have to set boundaries.”

Northeast Florida;
Female Mentee age 10

“I don't think I am doing enough but I don't know what I should be doing to help more... I do think that the hour we spend together on Fridays is something she looks forward to and is a relief from anything else going on.”

Baltimore, MD;
Female Mentee age 12

Mentors need support to be strong and effective during the pandemic.

When asked what they need right now to continue being an effective mentor, mentors had several suggestions:

- A virtual group for mentors. Many mentors expressed wanting a place to share thoughts/experiences with each other and to come up with solutions. In fact, several mentors said they learned a lot just by reading other mentors' comments and concerns during the focus group discussions.
- New ideas on how to stay connected and engaged with mentees despite distancing guidelines
- Positive stories about youth overcoming crises to share with their mentees
- Resources or training on how to engage youth using technology to maintain strong relationships; ways to use common forms of technology (rather than learning new platforms), especially with mentees who are not native English speakers; how to keep a child safe during online interactions
- Resources on how to talk to kids about the pandemic in an age-appropriate way, including how to manage anxiety, help them accept what the coming months will look like, and mindfulness practices for youth
- Ways for mentees to contact their mentors outside of program restrictions to avoid a lapse in their relationship
- Tips for how a mentor can manage personal stress to prevent burnout and to reduce the likelihood of mentees picking up on it

“I’m thankful for technology during this time, but I also think it puts a spotlight on new forms of mentoring that need to be developed. In-person mentoring...isn’t the norm anymore. The more challenges are introduced, the more ways we need to evolve.”

North Carolina;
Multiple Mentees ages 16-22



“I think the support of other mentors is helpful - seeing everyone’s responses here has reminded me that we’re not alone in our work/struggles in being a mentor.”

Illinois;
Female Mentee age 10

CONCLUSION

Mentors are doing the best they can to meet the needs of their mentees by providing basic necessities, emotional support, and academic/vocational assistance, and by encouraging a sense of normalcy and hope. As the pandemic continues and our lives evolve around it, mentors will continue to show up for youth using current means as well as in new and more impactful ways.

“Sometimes I feel anxiety and worry she won’t enjoy our time but then my contact says her mom emailed and is loving our activities. The relationship is important, and I think you have to quit trying to be perfect and just be what you can be. Your mentee values you more than you realize.”

Wyoming;
Female Mentee age 11



“Mentoring during this time is a unique and rewarding challenge...It is offering an opportunity to self-assess while assessing the needs of those I serve. In this season of life, human connections are being strengthened like never before. I count it an honor and privilege to serve at a time like this.”

Maryland;
Multiple Mentees ages 11-19

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