

## Quick Guide

# MENTORING AND BEFRIENDING PRACTICE GUIDE

This Practice Guide primarily relates to Outcome 4 of the Children's Social Care National Framework: children in care and care leavers have stable, loving homes. It is also relevant to Outcome 2: children and young people are supported by their family network, and Outcome 3: children and young people are safe in and outside of their homes.

## INTRODUCTION

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This Practice Guide has been produced to support senior leaders in local areas to develop, deliver and commission effective mentoring and befriending interventions and practices for care experienced children and young people and those at risk of entering care. It includes recommended interventions and practices for children and young people aged up to 25 years old. Mentoring and befriending programmes aim to support children and young people to build safe, supportive relationships with trusted adults to help them overcome adversity and trauma and reach their full potential.

This Guide contains actionable key principles and recommendations for senior leaders.

- **Key Principles** draw out evidence on the views, experiences, and preferences of children and young people in the UK and internationally on how to engage and work with them. They also cover evidence on effective design and implementation of mentoring and befriending interventions. This evidence helps to ensure that accessible, acceptable interventions can be effectively implemented.
- **Recommendations** draw out the best-evidenced interventions for improving outcomes for children and young people. We only make recommendations where at least one rigorous impact evaluation has evidenced that the intervention achieves positive outcomes for either children and young people or parents/carers in the UK or in countries with similar children's social care systems to the UK.

# KEY PRINCIPLES

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**Key Principle 1: Model strong leadership that promotes collaboration, maps local programmes, and understands their interactions to improve outcomes.**

**Why?** Effective collaboration and communication across agencies (such as health, local authorities, education and the police) can improve the mentoring relationship. It can support mentors to communicate with other agencies working with a child or young person and act as a positive link for the mentee to access other services. Knowledge of local mentoring and befriending services and their benefits should be shared with practitioners and children and young people's networks as this can encourage engagement. Mentors report that they value mentoring programmes that have good leadership. It is also an important enabler for successful implementation.

**How?**

- Senior leaders should focus on building and maintaining relationships between agencies to foster supportive environments in which mentor-mentee relationships have been found to be effective.
- Practice supervisors across all relevant agencies should stay informed about locally available programmes and actively share this knowledge with practitioners. That includes services such as Independent Visiting and Personal Advisors, and those delivered by youth services and charities.
- Practitioners should engage a child or young person's wider network when trying to encourage the child or young person to engage in a mentoring programme as this can help increase uptake.

**Key Principle 2: Develop flexible programmes that allow tailored support to be provided to a child or young person so they can sustain a meaningful mentor-mentee relationship.**

**Why?** Mentoring relationships work best when they are flexible, responding to the specific needs of the child or young person. This should include children and young people who have the most difficulty forming relationships – such as those with experiences of trauma, attachment difficulties, development or learning disabilities, and experiences of adversity – as they could see some of the biggest improvements in outcomes.

**How?**

- Practice supervisors should consider the specific needs of the child or young person, paying particular attention to the potential barriers they may experience when forming a positive connection with their mentor, and ensure the appropriate support is provided. This may include support to develop resilience, communication skills or regulate their emotions.

### **Key Principle 3: Give children and young people autonomy and control over the form and purpose of their mentoring or befriending relationship.**

**Why?** Mentoring sessions led by children and young people's interests, preferences, and goals facilitate engagement. Encouraging children and young people to lead sessions can also help increase their overall self-confidence, as well as their confidence in the programme's ability to meet their specific needs.

#### **How?**

- Encourage children and young people to input on when and where they meet their mentor, what activities are planned and what goals they want to achieve.
- Support the use of flexible contact between children and young people, mentors and service providers in between sessions through the use of smartphones. Demands on mentors' time should be carefully managed and agreements made between mentors, mentees and practice supervisors about the level of contact outside of mentoring sessions.
- Consider how to involve parents and carers. While encouraging children and young people's autonomy and protecting the confidentiality of the mentor-mentee relationship, it is important that parents and carers are informed about details such as where the child is. To help parents and carers support the mentor-mentee relationship, it may be beneficial to work with them to increase their understanding of the role of the mentor in their child or young person's life.

### **Key Principle 4: Target mentoring support at young people leaving care, living in supported or temporary accommodation, and living independently.**

**Why?** Young people leaving care or those living in a residential home, semi-independent accommodation, high needs placement, or secure children's home are more likely to be struggling with isolation, feelings of rejection, and a lack of community and emotional support, than children in foster care. Mentoring programmes can also help young people develop valuable skills as they transition to adulthood.

#### **How?**

- Services should proactively engage in outreach with these young people to ensure they can access this form of support. That could include, for example, supporting them to continue their relationship with an Independent Visitor, strengthening Personal Advisor practice, or including mentoring in the local authority's Staying Close offer.
- Mentors can be used to support young people to access employment and education, learn to live independently, manage finances, and make links to their community.
- Some mentors reported finding it easier to establish a trusting relationship before the young person has developed a greater desire for autonomy and independence. Effective support for young people therefore may involve engagement in mentoring programmes earlier on in their childhood and adolescence, to allow time for a close and supportive relationship to develop with a mentor.

### **Key Principle 5: Carefully match mentors and mentees, taking into consideration interests, experiences, and personal attributes.**

**Why?** Matching mentors and mentees with similar personal attributes (such as race/ethnicity or gender), interests and experiences (such as care experience) is perceived to lead to more trusting and mutually meaningful relationships. Efforts should be made to match by minoritised ethnic backgrounds as this was perceived by some parents, children, and young people to reduce stigma and discrimination and facilitate engagement and trust.

#### **How?**

- Allow mentees to have a say in choosing their mentor, for example, by providing them with the opportunity to meet potential mentors before a match is made, supporting or coaching them to choose a mentor, giving them a say on what information is shared with a potential mentor, or exploring who in their existing network could be their mentor (see Key Principle 7 for further information on this).
- Encourage and support mentors to share things about their own lives, including any similar experiences, to help develop two-way relationships and establish trust.

### **Key Principle 6: Ensure mentors are supported to meet the needs of mentees through training and supervision.**

**Why?** Ensuring mentors have the right support, knowledge and expertise to support their mentee is important. It can help mentors stay committed to their role and manage any premature endings, avoiding feelings of loss for the child or young person. Peer mentors may require more intensive training and supervision.

#### **How?**

- Deliver both informal and formal training to mentors so they have knowledge of trauma-informed approaches, boundary setting and assertive communication, for example. This could be delivered as part of wider workforce training or other programmes.
- Mentor co-ordinators play an important role in recruiting, training and establishing the commitment of mentors. They can also offer regular support and supervision to help maintain long-lasting relationships between children and young people and their mentors.
- Provide opportunities for peer support between mentors.
- Supervisors should support mentors to plan for endings of mentor-mentee relationships by ensuring that mentees have the end date clearly communicated with them, that they're provided with resources and contacts to other organisations where they can get support, and that time is taken to celebrate progress made during the child or young person's time on the programme.

**Key Principle 7: Consider using self-motivated (volunteer, natural, or peer) mentors who can foster an independent relationship with a child or young person.**

**Why?** Children and young people strongly value an authentic and personal bond with their mentor and expressed a preference for volunteer mentors over one that is paid to support them (although there is no evidence to suggest volunteer mentors deliver better outcomes). Children and young people perceive volunteer mentors as more independent from statutory services and report that this allows them to be more open with their mentor.

**How?**

- Explore a child or young person's existing networks to identify a natural mentor. This could be, for example, a trusted teacher or older friend. The relevant safeguarding checks must take place before a young person is matched with a natural mentor. Where a child or young person has a small existing network, practitioners should work creatively and flexibly with them to explore other potential options.
- Using peer mentors can encourage closeness between mentors and mentees, increase reciprocity and offer the chance to form a relationship which feels authentic and independent from statutory services. Peer mentors are more likely to require more intensive supervision, support and training to achieve the intended outcomes of a programme.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

RECOMMENDATION	STRENGTH OF EVIDENCE FOR EACH RECOMMENDATION		
	STRONG EVIDENCE	GOOD EVIDENCE	PROMISING EVIDENCE
<p><b>1. Offer evidence-based mentoring programmes to children who are in out-of-home care due to experiences of significant harm, to support their general mental health and improve post-traumatic symptoms.</b></p> <p>Mentoring programmes which comprise of skills development and one-to-one mentoring can support children in out-of-home care to have improved mental health outcomes. For these children, it can lead to improvements in their self-esteem, social acceptance, and coping skills.</p>	✓		
<p><b>2. Offer evidence-based mentoring and befriending programmes to children and young people who are involved, or are at risk of involvement, with the youth justice system to reduce offending and re-offending.</b></p> <p>Evidence-based mentoring programmes have been found to reduce violent, non-violent, and total offending charges in children and young people, including those in out-of-home care. They have also been shown to reduce re-offending.</p>		✓	
<p><b>3. Offer evidence-based mentoring programmes to children in out-of-home care to improve successful (and long-term) reunification.</b></p> <p>Evidence-based mentoring programmes have been found to support children in out-of-home care to return to their birth families. They have been found to be particularly effective for children with adverse childhood experiences such as experiences of significant harm or parental incarceration.</p>			✓
<p><b>4. Offer evidence-based mentoring programmes to children in out-of-home care due to experiences of significant harm to achieve greater permanency.</b></p> <p>The evidence shows that mentoring programmes can significantly improve self-reported permanency outcomes for children aged 13 to 15 in out-of-home care. Mentoring programmes which build on the young person's strengths and interests and focus on improving the wellbeing of young people in the longer term, rather than focusing on achieving short-term outcomes, can reduce adverse outcomes.</p>			✓

RECOMMENDATION	STRENGTH OF EVIDENCE FOR EACH RECOMMENDATION		
	STRONG EVIDENCE	GOOD EVIDENCE	PROMISING EVIDENCE
<p><b>5. Offer evidence-based mentoring programmes to young people with special education needs, or severe mental health challenges, to increase self-determination skills and support their transitions from care.</b></p> <p>Mentoring programmes with components that help young people feel accomplished, develop skills, provide encouragement, build confidence, and which provide outreach programmes, for example, have been found to increase self-determination skills for children with special educational needs or severe mental health challenges in out-of-home care.</p>			✓
<p><b>6. Offer evidence-based mentoring programmes to children and young people to improve employability.</b></p> <p>Evidence-based mentoring programmes that involve enhanced youth-led outreach, co-ordinated mentoring, job readiness training, and externship services (e.g. internships or apprenticeships) have been found to improve employment outcomes among young people in extended foster care (known as a Staying Put arrangement in England).</p>			✓

**STRONG**

A rating of 'strong' is given if the evidence is from a meta-analysis or a narrative synthesis of at least two high-quality randomised controlled trials and/or quasi-experimental studies that were conducted in the UK or comparable high-income country, with a minimum sample size of 20 in each group (the intervention and comparison group) and demonstrates effectiveness of the intervention(s).

**GOOD**

A rating of 'good' is given if the evidence is from a meta-analysis or a narrative synthesis of at least two moderate-quality randomised controlled trials and/or quasi-experimental studies that were conducted in the UK or a comparable high-income country; with at least 20 participants in the intervention group and less or more than 20 participants in the comparison group; and demonstrates efficacy of the intervention(s).

**PROMISING**

A rating of 'promising' is given where the evidence is from one high- or moderate-quality randomised controlled trial or quasi-experimental study that was conducted in the UK or a comparable high-income country, with less or more than 20 participants in each group (the intervention and comparison group); and demonstrates efficacy of the intervention(s).



## Useful links

- Mentoring and Befriending Practice Guide: <https://foundations.org.uk/toolkit/practice-guides/mentoring-and-befriending>
- Reflective tool: <https://foundations.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/reflective-tool-mentoring-and-befriending-practice-guide.pdf>
- Find out more about Practice Guides: <https://foundations.org.uk/about-practice-guides/>
- Other relevant What Works Centre Toolkits:
  - Youth Endowment Fund's focuses on the use of mentoring to reduce youth violence: <https://youthendowmentfund.org.uk/toolkit/mentoring-2/>
  - Youth Futures Foundation's focuses on the use of mentoring to improve youth employment: <https://youthfuturesfoundation.org/tools/youth-employment-toolkit/toolkit-item/mentoring-and-coaching/>