

**PROMISE** *works*

**ACADEMIC  
RESEARCH PAPERS**

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

Clinical Child Psychology  
and Psychiatry  
2021, Vol. 0(0) 1–13  
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DOI: 10.1177/13591045211027567  
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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 +<br>disinterested | Secure,<br>disinterested<br>and needy | Needy and<br>disinterested | Needy  | Secure and disorganised |

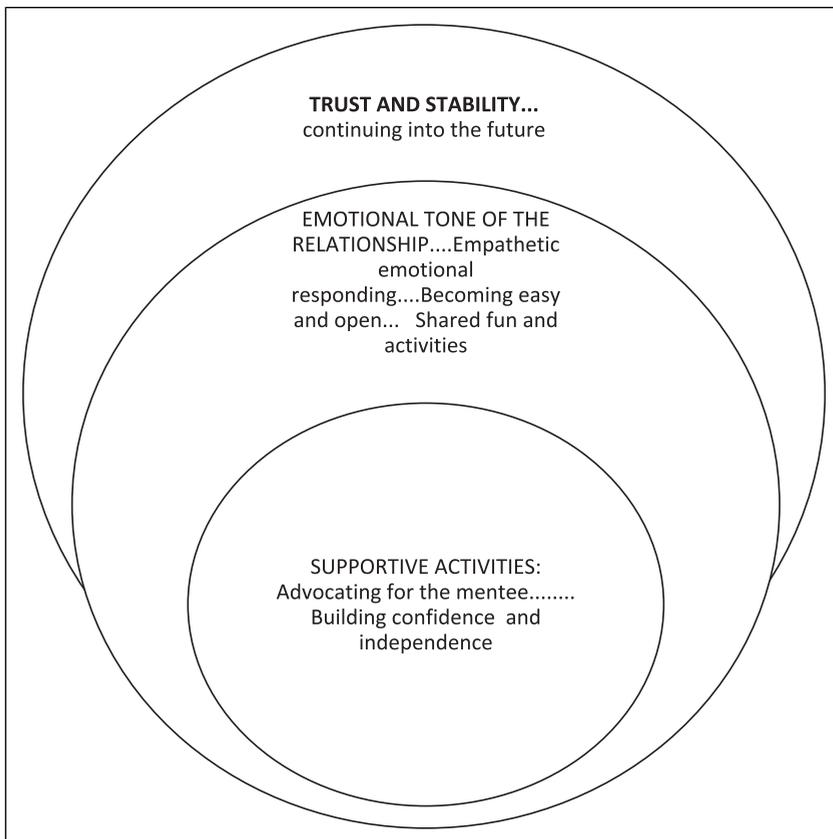
**Table 1.** Relationship orientation self-perception between the mentor and mentee.

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.

### Acknowledgments

We offer our special thanks also to Rod Salter who has been instrumental in developing the Promise scheme and in supporting this research financially and emotionally.

### Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This work was supported by Promise mentoring Somerset.

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## 2 Taking the stone from my heart

An exploration of the benefits of a mentoring programme (PROMISE) for children at risk of significant harm by:

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# Taking the stone from my heart: An exploration of the benefits of a mentoring programme (PROMISE) for children at risk of significant harm

*Clinical Child Psychology  
and Psychiatry*  
1–16

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DOI: 10.1177/1359104518805227

journals.sagepub.com/home/ccp



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## Abstract

This article reports on a multi-methods longitudinal evaluation of the PROMISE mentoring scheme which was developed in Somerset UK to offer a continuing relationship for vulnerable young people with a volunteer mentor. The overall findings indicate that mentoring was experienced very positively and contributed to both fostering a sense of trust and to reducing the insecure attachments of the young people. The findings are considered within a relational and attachment framework to offer a model of how mentoring achieves positive change. Implications for development of the service and encouragement for others to develop similar services are discussed.

## Keywords

Mentoring, children at risk, attachment security, evaluation, research

## Introduction

The PROMISE mentoring project has been running in Somerset UK since 1999. It includes over 170 volunteers who provide mentoring to young people who have experienced considerable disadvantage in terms of their circumstances. These children typically display extremely poor prognosis in terms of educational attainment, employment and general health and social well-being (Marmot, 2010). They are at high risk of needing mental health services and also of experiencing problems with the police and eventually of spending time in prison (Tarren-Sweeney, 2008, 2010). Apart from being morally unjustifiable, this situation can also incur an extremely high cost for services, for example, residential mental health and forensic placements (McCrone, Sujith, Patel, Knapp, & Lawton-Smith, 2008).

Children in the project have experienced physical, mental and emotional abuse or neglect, and most have a current or historic care plan in place. The scheme has been delivering support through

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weekly meetings between Mentors and Mentees, usually for a period of 2–5 years. This constitutes a substantial presence of a consistent and benevolent figure in lives of the children. A preliminary research study (Dallos & Comley-Ross, 2005) found that mentees found it extremely helpful. Likewise, general feedback from other professional working with the children suggests that the service has a substantially positive impact. However, there was a need to develop a more substantial evaluation including an attempt to identify some of the active ingredients contributing to the positive outcomes of the mentoring process.

The PROMISE scheme draws on a body of research and service experience which supports the idea that mentoring can offer the experience of a positive and supportive relationship which can help to compensate for the lack of such experiences in the children's lives (Evans & Ave, 2000; Rhodes et al., 1999). A review of 55 evaluation studies (Dubois and Karcher, 2005) showed that children at risk gained more than others. Furthermore, longer relationships were more effective than shorter ones (Grossman & Rhodes, 2002). Benefits to the mentee have been said to include the following: compensating for the lack of positive experiences (Evans & Ave, 2000; Rhodes, Haight, & Briggs, 1999; Zand et al., 2009), having a positive role model (Evans & Ave, 2000; Haensly & Parsons, 1993) and the opportunity for therapeutic outcomes such as insight, reassurance/relief and problem solutions as well as practical outcomes (Llewelyn, 1988). Importantly, it has also been suggested that mentoring can foster resilience, for example, Evans and Ave (2000), found the relationship could develop self-esteem and build a reservoir of successful and positive experiences that the young person could refer upon when later troubled.

### *Theories of mentoring*

Despite evidence supporting the effectiveness of mentoring, there is surprisingly little in the way of theory or research to guide its application and inspire its future development. As with many therapeutic approaches, research has often concentrated on evaluation and outcome: whether it works – rather than on an exploration of the process of how it works. In a previous study, Dallos and Comley-Ross (2005) found that the positive experiences appeared to be clearly related to the nature of the relationship formed with the mentor. The children mentioned the importance of a sense of being valued and appreciated by their mentors and of being held in mind by their mentors, including a sense that their mentors would be thinking about them and of holding the mentors in their own minds – being able to imagine how the mentor might advise and guide them. They also felt the relationship was fostered by positive actions that 'spoke louder than words', such that the mentors showed their care and commitment this way. Engaging in pleasant and memorable activities assisted in the process of internalisation and generated positive feelings when they thought about their mentor.

A number of studies have supported these findings; for example, Renick-Thomson and Zand (2010) found that the quality of the mentor-youth bond significantly predicted youths' relationships with others at 8 and 16 months. Dubois and Karcher (2005) identified that more contact led to greater closeness and greater benefits, suggesting that the relationship created the opportunity for change. Langhout, Rhodes, and Osborne (2004) argued relative to controls, that youths who perceived their relationship as providing activities, structure and unconditional support derived the largest benefits from the relationship.

Attachment theory has been employed to consider the development of the mentoring relationship and alliance. Spencer, Collins, Ward, and Smashnaya (2010) showed that the negative experiences of fostered children prevented them from establishing a close relationship with mentors. They argued that their internal representations led to biased interpretations of social stimuli, leading them to exhibit dependence or hostility towards the mentors when they were distressed. A core assumption of the mentoring intervention is that developing a caring and close relationship cultivates protective factors and places the youth on a positive developmental trajectory. However, the

exact mechanism through which mentoring exerts its influence remains unclear (Renick-Thomson & Zand, 2010). One theory is that the mentor served as a secure secondary attachment figure, which enabled the competency in other relationships (Bordin, 1994). Renick-Thomson and Zand (2010) conducted a survey of 205 mentored children and found that the quality of the bond in the mentor-youth relationship predicted other socioemotional development, including relationship-based outcomes outside of the relationship such as friendship with and self-disclosure to other adults at 8 and 16 months. Likewise, Zand et al. (2009) argued an alliance resulted in better family bonding, better relationships with adults, better bonding at school and better life skills. Alternatively, relational theorists have suggested interaction and positive emotional experiences become internalised, altering internal attachment models. For example, internal models are modified in a more positive way (Rhodes, 2005). Mentoring may alter the youth's perception of their interpersonal relationships with other peers, adults and teachers (Renick-Thomson & Zand, 2010).

But while these proposals describe the strength of the relationship between different factors, they are not sensitive enough to explore how mentoring impacts on the children's ability to trust in the relationship and thereby illuminate the mechanisms in play. Dallos and Comley-Ross (2005) found that when absent, mentees felt mentors still thought of them and cared for their well-being, in contrast to other professionals working with them. They had internalised how the mentor might advise and guide them. This insight into a possible mechanism suggested this process is worthy of more extensive evaluation.

### *Aims of the study*

The aims of this study were to explore the experiences of young people and how these changed over a year of PROMISE mentoring. Specifically, this study explores the following:

1. The personal circumstances and attachment needs in the sample;
2. How the mentor–mentee relationship changed and developed;
3. Changes perceived as resulting from having a mentor;
4. Changes in attachment security;
5. Changes in mental health and coping skills.

## **Method**

### *Research design*

A longitudinal design was employed with two data collection points, 1 year apart (T1 and T2). A multi-methods approach was utilised with attempts to integrate the data collected. Audit data provided a profile, and two semi-structured interviews explored the experience of the mentoring relationship. Responses to narrative attachment scenarios, the relationship questionnaire and the strengths and difficulties questionnaire produced a categorical frequency of profile that was compared across time, within subjects, and could be combined with the qualitative analysis to support the discussion (Burt, 2015). For the quantitative elements, a control group was not employed as it was inappropriate to not offer the service to children who might benefit.

### *Participants*

The sample of 20 young people was an average of 14 years old at T1, with an age range of 9–19 years. Sampling was opportunistic in terms of inviting children who fitted the inclusion criteria, who agreed to take part in the study and verbal consent was given by the guardian. The children were given informa-

tion about the study and gave verbal informed consent themselves. Attrition was due to practical reasons, such as illness, moving away, or the end of the mentoring period. All excerpts are anonymised.

## Measures

*Audit data.* The data were collected by two second authors in a mentor's structured report about participants, their family context, presence of abuse, mental health, education and offending behaviour.

*Semi-structured interview.* A half-hour interview was conducted at each time point, the former focussing more on the start of the relationship and the latter focussing more on its development and both focusing on the quality of the relationship. Following a thematic analysis framework (Braun & Clarke, 2006), each individual interview was transcribed verbatim, coded against the research questions into a coding frame, and inter-rater reliability was obtained through comparison, discussion and operational definition leading to calibration about coding decisions. Then themes were identified that embraced the children's experience of mentoring and development in their attachment orientation, and these were linked to quotations from transcripts.

Questionnaires provided categorical responses, which could be combined with the thematic analysis. In this respect, like a content analysis, they analysed frequencies, but the sample is not large or representative enough to provide enough power for a statistical analysis.

*Narrative attachment measure.* This assessed attachment insecurity and trauma and featured attachment scenarios depicted by photograph and vignette, examples are given in Figure 1 (based on the Separation Anxiety Test, Resnick, 1993; Wrigh et al, 2006). Dyadic scenarios depicted a same sex child with a friend moving away, mum taken into hospital, dad moving out and mum leaving, Triadic scenarios featured two friends ganging up against the third, both parents arguing over a school report in front of the third and a phonecall to the absent parent while the other listened. Responses were recorded and transcribed verbatim and scored for the presence of avoidant, anxious ambivalent responses, solutions to the dilemma, reflexive functioning and awareness of the triadic process (where appropriate). Scoring was done using a rating system (where 1=low and 9=high), and two researchers calibrated over six randomly chosen participants to achieve inter-rater reliability ( $k=.8$ ). A mean score was calculated for dyadic and triadic scenarios for each participant at each time point. It was also indicated whether the scenario reminded the participant of similar relationship trauma, and the number of participants affected was recorded.

*Relationship questionnaire.* This assessed self-reported attachment security and asked the young person to make a choice from four attachment orientations which best depicted them in relationship with others (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). It provided a categorisation of the dominant attachment style (secure, anxious/fearful, preoccupied/needy and dismissing/avoidant).

*The strengths and difficulties questionnaire.* This measured self-perceived challenging and prosocial behaviour that the young people reported, providing an indication of their perception of their social behaviour, in the context of their circumstances and experiences (Goodman, Meltzer, & Bailey, 1998). Participant's scores are compared to a benchmark to quantify current need (none, some or high need) and also compared within subjects across time.

## Procedure

Audit data were collected by two second authors prior to the main research study. Then either one of the first two authors conducted a half-hour semi-structured interview with a mentee in a local

|   |  |
|---|--|
|  |   |
| <p>Triadic: Parents arguing over a school report</p>                              | <p>Dyadic: other leaving to go into hospital</p>                                   |
|  |  |
| <p>Triadic: Phone call to absent parent</p>                                       | <p>Dyadic: Friend leaving</p>  |

**Figure 1.** Examples of separation and triadic photos employed to elicit attachment responses.

community centre, followed by the narrative attachment measure (based on Resnick’s (1993) Separation Anxiety Test), relationship questionnaire (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991) and strengths and difficulties questionnaire (Goodman et al., 1998). Each face-to-face meeting took about 1 hour to complete. The involvement with PROMISE continued throughout and the second data collection was repeated after a year by the first two authors.

## Results

### *Audit data*

Nine children had been with their mentor for 6 months or less, three for 7–12 months, six for 13–23 months, and two for more than 24 months. Most relationships had established before the start of the study, so it was impossible to assess the development of the relationship from a baseline position. Two had had more than one mentor for practical reasons.

While many children did live at home with a parent, 14/20 children had experienced an emotional/inconsistent, rejecting or neglectful relationship with their mother (and sometimes father), and the absence of a positive fatherly attachment was clear in nearly all cases. All the children had limited security in the place where they lived, or in the relationship with their caregivers. They came from families with considerable dysfunction, including substance abusers, offending behaviour, mental health issues, abusive or had physical health or learning difficulties. All the children had experienced at least one incident of neglect, physical and/or sexual abuse or caring for an adult with physical health or learning difficulties, and 7/19 children experienced two or more of these. Only two children had no

current or historic care plan in place. Some placements at home had entirely broken down and three children were currently living permanently away from their families in foster care or a children's unit. Most of those over 16 years old had already left home and were living independently. The impact of these difficulties was starting to emerge and 20% reported difficulties at school. Also, mentors reported that half the children clearly presented with a mental health issue, including high anxiety and anger (although this status was not provided for half of the children because some mentors did not wish to evaluate them in this respect). Two children exhibited violent or offending behaviour. A further child was reported to be so challenging that her behaviour was managed by the local authority.

Referring to the strengths and differences questionnaire (Goodman, 1997), 73% of children's self-reported challenging behaviour did not change significantly after a period of mentoring. It is important to note that 40% of the sample expressed a low need for intervention at the start of the study, and 66% of children recognised their high need at the end of the study. This possibly fitted with a profile of these children denying or minimising their needs and challenges and becoming more aware and able to express them. However, 66% showed a small improvement in their perception of their prosocial behaviour at the end of the study. This fitted with their qualitative interviews suggesting a sense of security and positive view or relationships being fostered by their mentoring relationship.

## Qualitative analysis

### *Dominant themes depicting the mentoring relationship*

*Mentor as like a good friend – a supportive, reciprocal relationship.* This theme contained the idea that the mentor was a source of emotional support and could be relied upon to be available when needed. It also involved the idea of the relationship being mutual and reciprocal – involving give and take from each other, being a team and working together and developing shared perspectives. First impressions were, in most cases positive, that the mentor continued to be friendly and approachable. The young people described the relationship in very positive terms overall and specifically in terms such as like a good friend, someone to do things with, someone to have fun with, like a member of the family and as having become a part of their lives:

Sarah: Oh, she just fits in really well cause she's just, she's like an auntie to me. She just feels really close to me.

Importantly, they did not see the mentor in professional terms and a number of the young people emphasised this. It was important for them that the mentors were volunteers who were not being paid and mentees felt that their mentor liked and cared about them. For many of them, this was quite a significant and evocative thought, which made them value their contribution to the relationship:

Danny: [He] thinks I am a Umm, a great guy.

Alison: I think that she's liked that my behaviour has changed and that I can be trusted with things and that I know that I can do things that I don't think I can do.

An important part of the relationship was a sense of a feeling of unconditional support, not being judged and being able to trust that the mentor would be able and willing to help and support them.

Helping to manage difficult feelings was an extremely important theme in that young people reported that the mentoring experience helped them to feel better:

Jessica: If like I need to talk to someone about depression she's the one to do it. Because then she doesn't judge me . . . She completely like understands everything. . . . I don't want to leave her to be honest.

At the second interview, Jessica described significant changes:

Jessica: I used to have depression and now I don't have it. I think mostly it's because I know she is there . . . . . it takes the stone? From my heart . . . I don't always need help with anything, like I can manage by myself, I . . . knowing that she's there I can turn to someone and someone will definitely sort it out for me. It just makes me feel better.

How mentors achieved this was not just through words, but in offering a presence:

Victor: Without even, without saying 'calm down', he was someone who'll calm me down without even saying it, so. . .

The young people described that their mentoring relationship equipped them to be able to cope more effectively, so they felt more confident about being able to manage their own feelings:

Danny: In the moment, I would just play music, calm myself down, so I don't have a go at someone that [. . .] is just trying to help. . . . He does say it's helpful because if you think about it, it's not like I'm going out, you know, doing what I used to do. . . I'm just calming down.

Talking things through was emphasised as an important part of the two features above. The young people clarified that their mentors did not push them to talk about difficult topics, but communicated that they were available for them to talk if they wanted to do so:

Frank: Yeah, he's the sort of person I can talk to about things like what's happened in the house. It might be when I've been upset, he's a person to talk to.

Other aspects of the relationship that were perceived to be important were assistance with practical issues, such as helping with problems at school or college, or advice about managing finances:

Jane: Now, she's finding out for me about my income support. She's helping me, ringing people.

### *Mentoring as psychologically beneficial*

Many of the young people described that they felt that they had become more confident as a result of the mentoring relationship. Frequently this was described in terms of the mentor helping them to try out new solutions or confront difficult situations:

David: Ohh, umm, when I was in year 11 he took me to a prom and umm, it was actually quite good fun. It was the first prom I ever had. I didn't really cope in large groups of people

when I was at mainstream so didn't get a chance to go to a prom with school. . . . now my confidence is pretty good so I can meet new people so I'm never getting nervous about it.

There were frequent references to difficulties in the young people's lives which were related to difficulties in managing feelings, but they felt that their mentors had helped them to deal with problematic situations, including conflicts:

Victor: I think [without a mentor], umm, my life would be a bit worse I think. Umm, mean I would have more arguments with my mother and my older brother. And, it would be more of a negative experience than a positive.

and

Lila: I used to be very horrible to other people and I used to take out my problems on other person. . . . And [she] helped me to get over that and she told me that I can't blame. . . . my problems on someone else.

### *Based in actions*

Actions speak louder than words – an important theme was that the relationship was also about doing things together, having fun and helping the young person to get out, meet people, do things and reduce their sense of isolation and loneliness. It was important for all of the young people, and this included a variety of activities that were meaningful to them – going for walks, shopping, going to the cinema, going swimming and so on. These activities were seen as having a host of positive effects, but a frequent report was that it gave them a break from difficult situations and feelings. However, the activities were not some form of avoidance or escape but were seen as contributing to the young people's opportunities to participate in activities and that helped them feel better. This, in turn, helped them feel more confident and more positive about themselves. Engaging in pleasant activities was something that was predominantly missing from the lives of many of the children, especially compared to children from more stable families. These beneficial effects continued across the two-time points in the study. Importantly, engaging in activities and a change of setting was also perceived as helping them to think differently about themselves and their situation. It facilitated possibilities for engaging in conversations with their mentors about difficulties and challenges in their everyday lives.

### *Building trust*

Without exception, the children reported that the development of the relationship featured becoming closer and developing more trust. It was, in fact, surprising that there was only one reported incidence of an argument, and this was fairly rapidly resolved:

Lila: Well, there was one when I went to a forest with her and the PROMISE group and we were playing a game and [she] told me to. . . she said we had to go and um, I said all we had to do was tag someone and she just. . . and we just had an argument and then I really upset her and then we said sorry to each other and we were fine.

Sometimes, they also communicated wariness in becoming too involved too quickly:

May: Well to start off with, like, a little bit of my space from her, but then as I got to know her . . . started to go lots of fun activities I then learnt how to trust her and since then I really have trusted her.

Interviewer: Could you tell me a bit more about trusting her?

May: I was bit scared when I actually in the car with her. I was like, oh my God! But now I know what we do and I trust. . . I trust her to take me out, to take me home, I trust her to walk with her, to look after me.

Trust was not perceived as resulting from any specific type of activity, but a relational and emotional approach which was supportive:

Interviewer: What helps you to think you can trust him?

Johnny: I can't really describe it. . . he's got banter, it's [. . .] someone that can talk to you, be serious, but have a laugh with. . . It's just the way he says things and how I say things, the way we talk to each other, it's good. Um, when they do come up [problems] He just chats to me about them and er, it just kind of makes them almost disappear. It doesn't actually go away but it just kind of makes, it puts my mind at ease.

Trust was also related more broadly to the idea that their lives would have been considerably worse without being able to rely on and trust the mentor:

Interviewer: Where do you think you might be if you didn't have a mentor?

Lila: Um, well I think I'd be quite in the middle of a lot of things because [she] is the one who's helped me with a lot of things and she trusted me and I trusted her.

This development of trust was an extremely strong and a universal component of the interviews. Without exception, the young people reiterated this, and it was combined with a sense of emotional openness with the mentor, along with a sense that the mentor would not let them down:

Interviewer: How often do you see him?

Daniel: Um, I see him once a week.: Er, he normally calls up, sometimes, to kind of see if everything's alright, and kind of, if anything changes just keep me in the loop and keep him in the loop. But if anything kind of happens, I kind of, I have my own of calming myself down.: I just listen to music, and if those problems come up again . . . . I just wait until I see him.

The development of trust was often expressed in terms of a sense that the mentor would be emotionally available, even outside of the 2 hours a week required by the project. It was clear that the mentors generally made themselves available outside of weekly meetings, but the young people did not generally make excessive demands and respected the mentor's needs and the boundaries of their relationships.

Importantly, the young people described ways in which the mentors helped them to contribute to the relationship, which helped build trust. This included the mentors communicating that they did not feel perfect themselves, or superior, but that they were ordinary people with imperfections and vulnerabilities. They allowed, and even encouraged, the young people to show them things, teach them skills, so helping them to feel more capable and competent as a result:

Kate: She like, tries to make me laugh like when we go swimming she like squeals cause the pool is cold. . . on the side of the swimming pool I can do a handstand for five seconds and then put my feet over and pull myself up . . . I'm training her to do that.

and

Robin: [about going on fair rides together] No cause she doesn't like going upside down, it makes her sick. She waved!

The stories of the development of the relationship indicate a developing sense of fun, trust, friendship and connection between the mentors and the mentees, which were indicative of the changes that occurred in thinking.

### *The mentor as part of me: internalisation of the relationship – mutual understanding and empathy*

This theme contained how the relationship had developed, particularly in their sense of understanding about how the mentor saw things, which helped them internalise the relationship and promoted different ways of seeing and understanding themselves and their problems. For instance, they could imagine their mentor's advice and hear their voice, helping them better cope with negative emotions and understand other people's perspectives. Talking things through and being shown paths and solutions through problems helped abstract thinking develop. This is regarded as important as they could turn to their internal representation when the mentor was not physically present or available to help them. For example, they might be able to remember what advice the mentor has given them about difficulties. For some children, this part of the interview was a little challenging and they found it hard to express their thoughts, while others could express this clearly, and others indicated a more implicit sense of calmness or containment that they carried with them:

Interviewer: If you your mentor is not around . . . can you imagine what she would say?

Robin: Yeah I and remembered that, because I think, what did she say to me? I imagine that in my head, I hear her talking, so I run upstairs and I do what I do [e.g. punch a pillow]

In the following passage, the young person poignantly indicates a continuing connection, but not specifically about dialogue:

Samantha: Umm, well she umm, bought me a toy snake once.

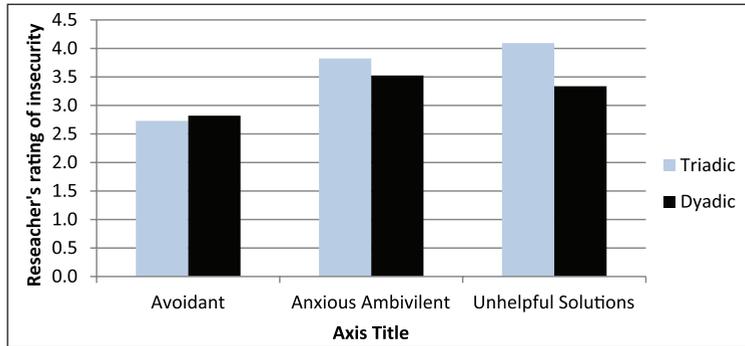
Interviewer: Did she? Do you like it?

Samantha: Yeah I play with that most of the time.

In some cases, this question appeared not to connect with the young people:

Interviewer: Sometimes, people say even when they are not with their mentor they can kind of imagine what they might say and think. Do you ever find yourself doing that?

Nick: No.



**Figure 2.** Attachment insecurity in dyadic and triadic scenarios.

Mentors appeared to differ on how they discussed the future with the young people and also how they recorded their time together. Many took photos and kept tickets and brochures, but some focussed more on keeping a record which could serve to maintain specific memories – for example, by using photos, notes, objects and memos of events to compile story books:

May: 'She's decided that we're going to make this photo book that we're going to put all our photos in and we're going to make one and when we don't see each other we're going to make two so she can keep and I can keep one so the memory always there'.

Overall, the young people varied in how explicit their internalisations were. It is also possible that what the young people most benefitted from was a more general sense of being able to stay relatively calm which short-circuited the negative escalations, for example, conflicts at home in which they had been involved.

### *Benefitting other relationships*

Although supporting the whole family is not explicitly the mentor's role, they potentially have an impact on the caregivers and friendships. Furthermore, it is important to consider how others view the mentor and the relationship, for example, if they were to become hostile or negative because this could place the young person in a conflictual triadic position, which Figure 2 indicates is particularly stressful:

Interviewer: What does your mum think about her?

Tony: She thinks that I've changed a lot since I've been with her. Yep. Better not worse.

and

Tony: Very well, um. They talk but they, um, they have a nice talk and they, mum trusts her with me.

### *An enduring relationship: future/continuing influence of the mentoring relationship*

The young people typically came to see the mentoring relationship as a very important part of their lives, and they intended to keep in contact informally when it formally ended and indicated that they were confident that their mentor welcomed this continuity:

**Table 1.** Attachment style self ratings.

|                 | Secure  | Anxious/fearful | Preoccupied/needy | Dismissing/avoidant |
|-----------------|---------|-----------------|-------------------|---------------------|
| Time 1 (n = 20) | 5.25%   | 11.55%          | 2.10%             | 2.10%               |
| Time 2 (n = 18) | 3.13.3% | 4.22%           | 5.27%             | 6.40%               |

Interviewer: Would you like it to continue?

May: At least a couple more years [hardly audible]. . . Umm probably at least until I go Uni, . . . Hopefully longer than that. . . Yeah, I think about her and I think we're going to get on very well. . . Unh, until she wants it to go, because if it keeps going on the way it is, how I like it, it's going to go on well. . . . Maybe we'll do more things, maybe talk about things if anything happens, talk about growing me up how I've changed my body and other things.

*Advice to other young people contemplating having a mentor.* Without exception, the young people stated that they would recommend mentoring to other young people who might be in similar situations:

Rachel: I'd tell them to have a mentor. . . Cause they can help them . . . By talking to them about anything .. It's really good to have someone there. Open up. . . Don't hide anything. . . . because, um if they are not going to get to know each other, then they might not under. . . , like, it might not go so well.

Rachel also went on to suggest, in a realistic manner, that if the specific relationship did not work, they should try and find another mentor. This was an important indicator that young people understood the value of the concept of mentoring not just that it was specific to a relationship:

Rachel: 'So I think if like, if someone would have one mentor and they wouldn't like her, go and try and find another one'.

## Quantitative data results

### *Relationship questionnaire*

Table 1 suggested that on the first research contact, the young people saw themselves initially as predominantly anxious–fearful–wanting intimacy but fearful of rejection (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). This indicated most often a disorganised or complex attachment insecurity, which is often associated with prior traumatic relationship experiences (Crittenden, 2015). At T2, this pattern has changed considerably so that the number of young people categorising themselves as anxious/fearful had dropped from 55% to 22%. However, the percentage of young people categorising themselves as dismissing had risen from 10% to 40%. There had also been an overall drop in the proportion of young people who categorised themselves as secure. A chi-square goodness-of-fit test confirmed significance from an equal distribution;  $\chi^2(2, N=18)=4.96, p < .05$ .

### *Narrative attachment scenarios*

Children gave responses that were indicative of avoidant, or more often anxious ambivalent attachment styles to the attachment scenarios. At T2, there was little difference in the change scores and

data from T2 are presented in Figure 2. Dyadic scenarios produced slightly less anxiety generally compared to triadic scenarios. It seems that unhelpful solutions arose more readily in the triadic situations compared to the dyadic situations.

With regard to trauma, 93.7% of children indicated that one or more pictures reminded them of their own negative experiences at T1, while 87.5% said so at T2. Also, in consideration of type of scenario, at T2, 53% showed trauma in the triadic scenarios, while 64% did so in the dyadic scenarios.

The findings also indicated that children showed an increased ability (T1  $n=10$ , T2  $n=16$ ) to understand what the other person might be thinking or feeling (person-accurate empathy) and increased faith that their needs would be met by the other person (reflective functioning). Mentees also produced more reasonable and helpful solutions to the attachment problems depicted at T2 ( $n=16$ ) compared to T1 ( $n=9$ ).

## Discussion

This multi-method approach has provided evidence that the mentoring relationship is beneficial to children at risk of significant risk of poor mental health. This has been explicit and all of the young people expressed positive views of mentoring as helpful. The quantitative measures were less able to capture evidence of a group-based changes in attachment orientation and social behaviour, but some evidence has been provided which describe more constructive attachment styles.

Self ratings of attachment style suggested some change in the young people's sense of security, with a move towards a self-reliance and confidence that led them to feel less in need of support from others. Given the high number of anxious/fearful patterns at T1, this can be seen to represent a process of transition from more complex and disorganised attachment feelings to a more coherent, dismissive and self-reliant pattern. This interpretation was consistent with responses to the narrative attachment scenarios which indicated reductions in the extent that emotional attachment issues were anxiously avoided and reduced negative emotional responses to relationship dilemmas.

Regarding trauma, the results suggested that children's own experiences impacted to a lesser extent after a period of mentoring, which is consistent with the idea that children were changing in a positive way. However, percentages were still high and, while this may indicate validity of the situations depicted in scenarios, it may also illuminate the fact that this sample has experienced considerable instability, as supported by the audit data and strengths and difficulty findings.

It may be that mentoring was particularly helpful in helping to resolve the triadic relationship issues in the mentee's life; for example, the mentor might provide a constructive and helpful perspective of the position of other people in the young person's life, which helps them cope better with relationship dilemmas and be more resilient. This could suggest a key mechanism through which having a mentor is helpful to children who lack a stable attachment figure.

The findings indicated a positive impact of mentoring. The children were at high risk and extremely vulnerable; hence, evidence of lack of deterioration was a positive outcome. The combination of qualitative and quantitative data suggests that far from deteriorating in terms of emotional well-being and behaviour the children largely show considerable gains. Children indicated that they regarded mentoring as having helped them with emotional problems, coping with family conflicts, managing school or college, providing practical support and raising their self-esteem. They described that they perceived their mentors in positive terms and had grown to trust them and felt their mentors liked them and were warm, positive and caring towards them, and that positive relationships with their caregivers had been beneficial for them. These feelings cultivated a development of trust and a consolidation of the positive aspects of mentoring. All of the young people said they would recommend mentoring to others.

The children described benefits in terms of engaging in shared activities, having fun, shifting their mood, being able to talk about problems and providing practical help and there was an overarching sense that they could rely on their mentor if they needed help or support. It was also clear that 'actions spoke louder than words' in the development of trust. This relationship enabled constructive everyday life problem-solving skills and positive strategies for seeking support when facing future challenges.

The young people showed reduced anxiety about relationships after a period of mentoring, with fewer intrusions of previous trauma with indications of a change from highly complex and insecure attachment orientations towards a greater sense of self-reliance and confidence. However, there was an indication that, although they felt a secure and trusting relationship with their mentors, this had not fully generalised to the world in general, but this greater sense of self-reliance was a step towards feeling fully secure. Continued confidence in the relationship seems extremely important in consolidating progress towards trust and security.

The mechanisms by which positive changes occur require further research, but this study suggests that attachment theory offers a credible explanation, in that the mentors clearly provide a reliable sense of safety. Attachment theory (Bowlby, 1988) argues that attachments are multi-layered experiences and come to be represented at both embodied and verbal levels. Hence, 'doing' and being with their mentors appeared to facilitate an embodied sense of trust. This appeared to be a prerequisite for the young people being able to develop more self-awareness, coherent ways of expressing themselves and an ability to effectively form plans and strategies for keeping themselves safe and happy. In effect, they appeared to be developing a more coherent inner world which allowed them to be able to develop a self-reliance. But importantly, they appeared to become more confident they could find support when needed. There were variations apparent in this process of change and while some of the young people appeared to be able to explicate this, others operated more implicitly or had yet to develop this capacity. Given the challenging experiences of the sample, it is perhaps not surprising that developing a generalised sense of trust will be a gradual process.

The limitations of the study are that there was not enough power to provide a statistical analysis of difference, so quantitative changes were merely descriptive. A very large sample, which was not available, may have enabled this analysis. Furthermore, in this vulnerable group, large change scores are not to be expected because attachment insecurity can cause enduring emotional damage (Bowlby, 1988). There was, however, powerful experiential change reported in the qualitative data, indicating embers of hope in the children.

Given that this group of young people had experienced severe problems and challenges in their lives, the benefits of mentoring were impressive and clearly indicated a need for the PROMISE scheme, and the development of similar schemes support securely attached relationships between disadvantaged children and supportive adults in the United Kingdom.

## **Acknowledgements**

Thanks to Sarah Parker for her assistance in developing the materials. Especial thanks also to Rod Salter who has been instrumental in developing the PROMISE scheme and in supporting this research financially and emotionally.

## **Funding**

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article: This research was funded by PROMISE to evaluate their mentoring project. PROMISE assisted with the recruitment of participants and provided a venue for data collection, but were not involved in the data collection, analysis, interpretation or writing of the report. They had no access to the study data,

but were involved in the decision to submit the report for publication. They did read drafts but made no substantive changes were made.

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