



YWCA of Adelaide
Big Brothers Big Sisters Program

Evaluation Report

November 2010

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Executive summary

This report discusses the findings and the implications of the evaluation of the Big Brothers Big Sisters (BBBS) program of the YWCA of Adelaide. The evaluation has explored a range of factors around the success and challenges of the BBBS mentoring program by examining the roles and experiences of mentors, the experiences and outcomes for mentees and their families, and the experiences and ideas of staff. The aims of the evaluation are to explore the development of protective factors for 'at-risk' young people, the quality of mentor-mentee relationships, the engagement of volunteer mentors, factors affecting recruitment and retention of mentors, opportunities for parents/carers to build parenting skills and reduce isolation, and implementation of BBBS program processes.

The evaluation uses a mixed qualitative and quantitative approach including focus groups, interviews, online surveys and vox-pops with mentors, mentees, parents/carers, and program staff.

Outcomes for young people

In evaluating the impacts on young people, the protective factors of interest were increased knowledge and life skills, and increased networks. It was recognised that the impacts of the program on mentees are not immediate and often hard to identify:

I know that the mentoring influence is not immediate, so I didn't have high expectations to "see" an immediate effect. One hopes that (mentee) will at some stage recognise herself the value of our association, in her own time. (Mentor survey)

There are examples of obvious changes in Littles which are attributed directly to their involvement in the program:

I'm better at friendship skills now because (my mentor) is always confident in speaking to people. (Mentee interview)

The life skills and development of mentees were commonly seen as the biggest outcomes of the program. Mentors and parents/caregivers reported that young people had improved their social skills and self awareness as a result of the program:

She (daughter) has more confidence and style. (Parent/carer interview)

Behavioural and personality changes were also commonly seen in young people:

Mine loves it - she's taken really well to it. For somebody who would never talk to anyone, she's really clicked (with her mentor). She's come right out of her shell. You find this child you never knew you had! (Parent/carer focus group)

Group days were seen a forum for building new skills and knowledge through experiences:

Today we've learnt about healthy lifestyles and healthy eating (Mentor vox-pop)

BBBS has opened up some new networks for young people through simply having new experiences (such as the zoo, the movies, window shopping) and connections with different types of people, including positive role models:

I'd never seen a waterfall. I'd never (gone) to Rundle Mall. (Mentee interview)

The quality of the mentoring relationship underpins successful mentoring outcomes. The majority of participants felt that their relationship had been well supported by BBBS staff, and that it was strong and meaningful:

We had an excellent connection right from the start and it has only grown stronger during the course of our matching. (Mentor survey)

She makes me feel like a good person and we have the bond of friendship. She's a good support. (Mentee interview)

Outcomes for mentors

Mentors were attracted to the program for a variety of reasons and generally continued their commitment because of the satisfaction of helping a young person. Although they reported challenges along the way, mentors felt well supported in their role, and received some benefits themselves. These included having fun and improving skills such as communication, negotiation and self awareness. The relationship with their mentee was important in determining the outcomes/satisfaction for mentors:

The fact that my friendship with my little is beneficial for her keeps me motivated. (Mentor survey)

I believe I am showing my little that there is an alternative to the life that her family provide for her. (Mentor survey)

We seem to spend a lot of time laughing. (Mentor survey)

Outcomes for parents/carers

The benefits to the Parents/carers were often about offering a break for those 'not coping' rather than through any specific intervention to help them:

It gives me a bit of a break – he comes home and tells me what he did, what he got up to. (Parent/carer focus group)

Parents/carers also felt that attending family events offered them some benefits. These included the opportunity to experience new things, the chance to meet new people, and feeling less isolated:

I think it's good to know you're not the only one struggling. Sometimes it gets too much and you feel isolated. (Parent/carer focus group)

Parents/carers expressed relief that BBBS offered their children and family something which otherwise was missing, and in doing so reduced the burden on them:

For me it's (good) to have a role model around them because they never had their father around them. So they have someone to be out with them and to talk to... especially if they're upset or angry or something happened at school. (Parent/carer focus group)

Outcomes for the community

Participants found it difficult to articulate any benefits for the community attributable to the program. However, the overwhelming praise for the program and the changes which it creates for individuals and families can logically be extended to community benefits. Overall, there is a very strong opinion amongst almost every participant that BBBS is providing a worthwhile and effective program which improves the lives of, and meets the needs of young people and the people around them:

Thank you so much – if I could ever repay financially, to ensure no one missed out, I would. (Parents/carer interview)

It is a fantastically well run program and is assisting the community in so many ways. (Mentor survey)

Introduction

The Big Brothers Big Sisters youth mentoring program links young people aged 7-17, in need of additional adult support and friendship, with a volunteer mentor and positive role model. Young people ('Littles') are matched with a carefully selected and trained volunteer mentor who becomes their 'Big Sister' or 'Big Brother'. The match is made taking into account the young person's needs, interests, personality, family circumstances and location, in addition to the skills and qualities the volunteer offers. The matched 'Big' and 'Little' agree to catch up weekly to have fun and get to know each other. Often these relationships develop into strong, long lasting friendships.

The aims of the Big Brothers Big Sisters mentoring program are:

- Development of increased resilience and protective factors in young people, to reduce the likelihood of being involved in crime, through
- Engagement of 'at risk' young people in an early intervention one-to-one mentoring program, with
- Provision of group based adventure/recreational activities for young people, and
- Provision of services to the family of young people via case management and social and educational workshops (group days).

This report discusses the findings and the implications of the evaluation of the Big Brothers Big Sisters (BBBS) program of the YWCA of Adelaide. The evaluation was conducted through 2009 and 2010 by the SA Community Health Research Unit.

Phase one of the evaluation explored a range of factors around the success and challenges of the BBBS mentoring program by examining the roles and experiences of mentors, the experiences and outcomes for mentees and their families, and program processes. Phase two of the evaluation has continued to explore these areas, with some additional areas of focus including the experiences and ideas of YWCA staff.

The evaluation was developed to address reporting requirements to the Attorney General's Department, and for internal program improvement purposes.

The aims of the evaluation were to explore:

- The development of protective factors for 'at-risk' young people
- The quality of BBBS mentor-mentee relationships
- How social capital has been built through engaging volunteers to increase their leadership skills and community participation
- Factors affecting recruitment and retention of mentors
- Opportunities for parents/carers to build parenting skills and reduce isolation
- Implementation of BBBS program processes
- The ways which BBBS challenges gender stereotypes

This report presents the results of the evaluation in 5 sections: Outcomes for and experiences of young people; Quality of mentoring relationships; Outcomes for and experiences of mentors; Recruitment and retention of mentors; Outcomes for parents/carers. There is also a program description at the start of the report detailing the program logic and the case management model. The discussion considers the results in the context of the evaluation questions, identifying strengths and areas for improvement.

This report uses the terms “Big (brother or sister)” and “mentor” interchangeably and “Little (brother or sister)” and “mentee” interchangeably.

Methods

The evaluation used a mixed qualitative and quantitative approach to address the evaluation questions. The evaluation data was collected using the following methods:

- A focus group with mentors to explore their experiences in the program, factors impacting on recruitment and retention, and their perceptions of the impact of BBBS on mentees and their families (n= 4)
- An electronic survey administered to mentors to build upon the findings of the focus group, exploring similar issues across a larger group of respondents and in quantitative/qualitative form (n=40)
- Interviews with young people involved in the program for about one year, to explore their experiences of the program (n=8)
- Interviews with a parent or carer of young people interviewed to explore perceptions of the program (n=8)
- Focus group with BBBS and other YWCA staff to explore case management processes within the program (n=5)
- Brief vox-pop style (very brief, informal) interviews with mentors and mentees at 2 group days to explore their opinions of group days – conducted by YWCA staff (n=12 Bigs, 14 Littles)
- Focus group with parents/carers at a family day event to explore their perceptions of the program and the outcomes for their children and themselves – conducted by YWCA staff (n=9).

All participants were recruited to the evaluation by YWCA staff – participants were individually approached for interviews and focus groups, and mentors received YWCA emails requesting their completion of the online survey. All were afforded voluntary participation. As a result it is possible that data reflects the experiences of more involved or enthusiastic mentors and the young people and parents/carers of more involved or less busy families.

Data from interviews and focus groups were captured with an electronic recorder and handwritten notes. The mentor survey data was collected using Survey Monkey internet based survey software. The data was analysed for and presented as themes that directly address the evaluation questions, and for other emerging and interesting ideas. Quantitative data is reported based on the number of responses to each question (i.e. as a percentage of responses for that question regardless of whether that question was skipped by some respondents).

The Flinders University Social and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee approved the evaluation.

Ongoing internal YWCA evaluation and monitoring processes also complement the evaluation findings in this report.

Background

BBBS program description

Big Brothers Big Sisters Adelaide is part of an international network of programs offering youth mentoring programs for disadvantaged and isolated people aged 7-17 years. It is a community based one-on-one mentoring program which also incorporates group activities. The match is made taking into account the young person's needs, interests, personality, family circumstances and location, in addition to the skills and qualities the volunteer offers. Bigs and Littles catch up weekly to have fun and get to know each other with the aim of developing a mutually beneficial, supportive and trusting friendship. The BBBS program staff support the mentoring relationship for a minimum of 12 months through mentor and mentee assessment, mentor training, and ongoing and individualised relationship support and monitoring.

BBBS case management description

A focus group discussion with YWCA staff was held to discuss and explore the case management approach and processes which are used in the BBBS program. The purpose was to articulate and clarify internal program processes, to identify strengths and areas for improvement, and to ultimately develop an understanding of the ways and the extent to which case management supports the attainment of program goals. Most of the program processes derive from the national BBBS program, although BBBS Adelaide undertakes some optional program elements and reporting. In essence, case management consists of establishing, supporting and monitoring mentor-mentee relationships, and also working with young people who are not 'matched' but who are involved in the program or affiliated programs including Connect 4 (group mentoring).

Staff were keen to identify some of the differences between the way BBBS does case management compared to external programs. They felt that the tailored and individualised nature of the way they interact with all program participants was a real strength. It also means that there is no set process for establishing and monitoring mentor-mentee matches. Many themes and consistencies emerged however.

Staff conceptualised non-match case management as consisting of two levels. Firstly, volunteers undergo a screening processes to assess their suitability for the program, and to then decide who may be an appropriate young person for them to be matched with. Potential volunteers who are not suitable for BBBS may be referred to other relevant programs (external or within the YWCA). The training for BBBS volunteers is an intensive process which aims to inform them of their roles, rights and responsibilities, and how to prepare for the expectations of mentees and difficult situations. They are also facilitated to recognise their own strengths and what they can bring to the relationship. Group training is generic, and aimed to meet the needs of all potential mentors given that they are not 'matched' at that point.

Secondly there is an eligibility assessment process for young people, which includes liaison with referring workers regarding the circumstances and needs of the young person, and a comprehensive Child-Family Assessment which identifies the whole context of the young person including schooling, relationship and personality factors as well as their interests. Young people are classified as low, medium or high needs to help decide which mentor may be appropriate. All

assessment information is used to find a mentor (considering geographic location, personality, and skills of the mentor to meet the needs of the child), and to support the mentor in their role.

Once mentors and mentees are matched, case management is conceptualised as time intensive 'management' (support for mentors and mentees) and 'monitoring' (follow ups and formal reviews of the match), both of which are designed to support quality mentor-mentee relationships and to enhance the outcomes of the program for all participants.

Mentors receive regular and strong support from BBBS staff through emails, monthly support meetings, and phone calls. The purpose is to monitor the match progress, to enhance mentoring skills, to build mentor confidence, and to ensure there is an accessible point of contact for mentors to discuss problems. Feedback from mentors to staff often prompts staff to offer other services, referrals or support to families.

Staff use referrals to other agencies to address the needs of mentees and their families which fall beyond the scope of the program. Usually, staff would hear about family's need for other services through mentor supervision. Staff may then contact the parent/carers to see if they are interested in receiving additional help. Unless it's a safety issue, staff are limited in the amount of additional case management assistance that can be provided, and the amount of assistance is often driven by the parent/carer e.g. whether they request help, whether they use a pamphlet or call a number that's been given to them. It is rare for BBBS staff to become involved in advocacy for young people or their families. Case management also may involve making abuse reports.

For those young people who are not eligible for the program, they may receive more 'ad-hoc or informal' case management. For example, Connect-4 clients (who are not in a mentoring match) may get referred to other services. Indeed, people who are not part of YWCA programs but who make contact with the organisation, may receive referral or other assistance if there are no programs on offer to meet their needs.

Participants in the Connect-4 program (which is in a sense a waiting list for BBBS), may be informally 'assessed' for entrance to the BBBS program. For example, having undergone a comprehensive Child-Family Assessment, participants may be in Connect 4 for three months to two years waiting to be matched, so staff get to know participants better and are able to create better suited matches for those who move into BBBS. There may be potential for Connect-4 and BBBS staff to more formally interact regarding young people waiting for a match, so as to maximise the benefits of having young people engaged in a program which channels clients into BBBS. BBBS staff have also found it useful to interact with Connect-4 events and young people.

BBBS case management principles

The staff discussed the ways that BBBS case management is aligned with some best practice features of case management, derived from the Case Management Society of Australia's discussion paper on Case Management and Community care (www.cmsa.org.au):

Staff agreed that BBBS case management provides a **single point of contact** for everyone involved in the program. That is, there is one staff member identified as the contact person for each participant, and there are processes in place to for when that person is unavailable. Often, participants will defer non urgent contact until their contact person is available.

There was some discussion around what aspects of BBBS use a **strengths based approach**. Staff felt that they were routinely building on the skills and attributes of volunteers and bolstering their strengths. Some mentors require ongoing assurances that their skills and reflective capacity are

enough to support their mentee and staff always take a positive approach in this situation. Staff were unsure about whether they use a strengths based approach with young people also. Certainly, staff encourage and train mentors to interact with mentees in a positive, affirming way and so it is assumed that the interactions they have are affirming and empowering. However, the roles of BBBS staff is such that they have limited interactions with young people and their families, and more interactions with the mentors so they feel that working with mentors to be strengths based is where they are best placed to do this.

The assessment of young people is partly strengths based in that it investigates what young people like (rather than what they don't like), but also aims to understand why they need a Big Brother or Sister and the events which led to the decision to contact the program, and therefore inevitably raises deficiencies in the child's life. The matching process is also focused on the deficiencies of the child and their context in the sense that the skills of mentors need to be suitable in dealing with low, medium or high needs children.

There is a lot of investment into being **flexible** and **individualising** case management for requirements of different program participants. Staff felt that they are very mindful of the individual preferences of mentors, mentees and families regarding forms of contact (e.g. email, phone), frequency and timings. Also, the assessment, matching and ongoing support done by staff is very responsive to the needs of each program participant.

Group days are seen to be very **creative** and challenging to participants and to stereotypes (including gender stereotypes), and may include guest speakers. Group days have also been used as a forum to creatively address issues raised through mentoring relationships, or to get mentors engaged in addressing that issue (e.g. body image issues). Staff also highlighted how they support mentors to be **creative** in their choices of activities, and in their responses to and interactions with mentees. Creativity was also important in engaging with young people and parents/carers, and in coming up with ideas for mentor-mentee outings.

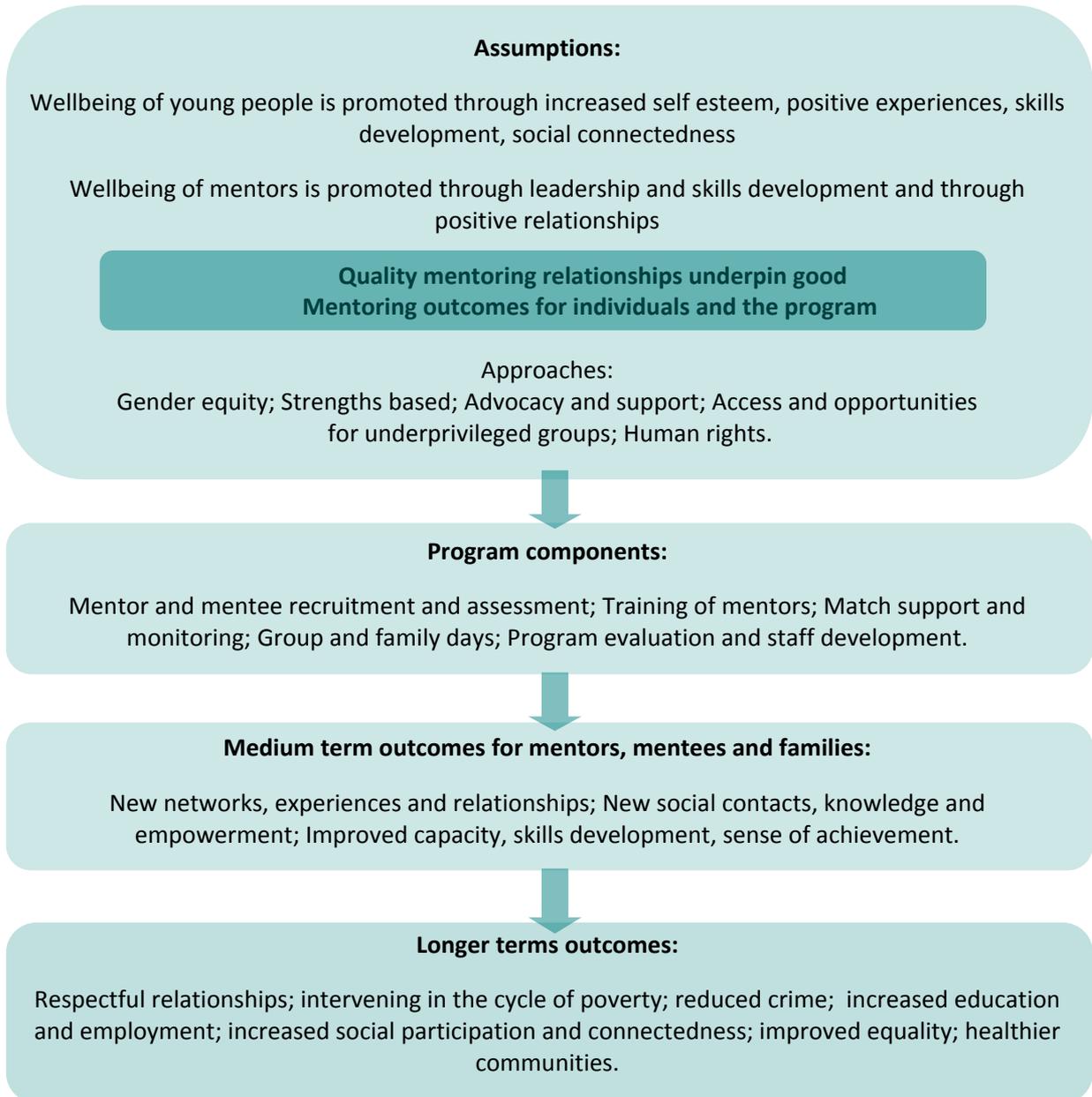
BBBS staff use personal networks in other agencies to be **collaborative**, thereby enhancing the program by accessing services for clients. Also, inter-agency partnerships have been built over time, mainly around referrals, but staff felt that these links relied a lot on personal contacts also. There is a Project Support Network which is a collaboration between councils where BBBS has been implemented, and that network keeps everyone updated on the program in the different areas, about other youth services, and helps feed in more young people or mentors. The Project Support Network has also initiated some collaborative events (e.g. youth week). Internal collaboration occurs within the YWCA and BBBS teams with good communication and discussions on common areas of interest. BBBS Adelaide also liaises with BBBS Australia.

BBBS Program Logic

The case management processes and principles used in BBBS underpin the entire logic of the program. That is, the establishment and maintenance of a supportive mentoring relationship will result in longer term outcomes for young people, their mentors and the community more broadly. In other words, the evidence strongly suggests that the quality of the mentoring match is the key determinant of individual and program success (Wiese 2009), and all program processes and principles need to support that approach. The program logic model which is depicted below was developed with BBBS staff during a half day workshop. It outlines the assumptions which underpin the BBBS program, the activities which are part of the program, and the outcomes which can be expected if the program is implemented in a way which puts the quality of the mentoring match as a central principle. An important part of understanding the logic model is to

be mindful that that BBBS *contributes to* broader outcomes but that it may not be possible to see measurable change in those outcomes as a direct result of the program. The results of this evaluation therefore show evidence along a continuum of change for participants from short term concrete changes, to longer term less tangible changes. The results also provide evidence for a *contribution to* broader community outcomes.

Big Brothers Big Sisters Program Logic Model



Results

Outcomes for young people

The overarching aim of the BBBS program is to improve the lives and future potential of young people. One set of indicators for this is the development of protective factors, meaning that young people are more resilient and better placed to seize opportunities.

In evaluating the impacts on young people, the protective factors of interest are:

- Increased knowledge and life skills
- Increased networks

It was recognised that the impacts of the program on mentees are not immediate and often hard to identify:

I suppose I am a very 'results' oriented person ... so obviously with this sort of commitment, the 'results' may be subtle or may be small or may be a long time coming to fruition. (Mentor survey)

I know that the mentoring influence is not immediate, so I didn't have high expectations to "see" an immediate effect. One hopes that (mentee) will at some stage recognise herself the value of our association, in her own time. (Mentor survey)

The value of the mentoring experience is not tangible, and more often characterised by subtle changes and a slowly developing relationship and role modelling. For example, one mentee simply described the time with their mentor as “happy” and that they now find it easier to speak up for themselves. A mentor described how the mentoring relationship in itself was an outcome:

We don't talk about anything too deep and meaningful or any life issues. We focus mainly on having fun and it's funny how our outings become semi-educational without really trying. (Mentor survey)

However, there are certainly examples of more obvious changes in Littles which are attributed directly to their involvement in the program:

The difference between when I first met him and now is amazing. He talks more, laughs more and is always enthusiastic about anything we do. (Mentor survey)

I'm better at friendship skills now because (mentor) is always confident in speaking to people. (Mentee interview)

Some of the main areas that mentees had improved their **knowledge and life skills** were around how to interact with other people, and in practical skills such as cooking, sports and arts. Parent/caregivers commented on how shared interests between the mentor and mentee tended to facilitate enjoyable activities and thus learning experiences:

She tries to get into the kitchen and cook. You pretty much have to tie her up so she can't go in there. (Parent/carer interview)

Knowledge was increased through mentors acting as a sounding board for mentees to make decisions on their own, to discover new things and to grow with a supportive person by their side:

So I take that [opinion of mentor on board]; I think about things a bit more, before I decide what to do. (Mentee interview)

By showing interest in her, being upbeat, respecting her choices and trusting her we have developed a strong and rewarding friendship. Of course dealing with a teenager there are ups and downs and I have learnt to read her silences, pouts, body language and most importantly not to take it personally. I think I have taught her a lot, but I know she has also taught me a lot about myself, communication and being a kid again! (Mentor survey)

He asks questions of me, and is actively involved in choosing what we do on outings. My experiences include giving my little the opportunity of an independent outlet to vent his thoughts & feelings, and the ability to try new things and get out of his comfort zone at home and explore new opportunities. (Mentor survey)

It's the full sisterhood thing. (Parent/carer interview)

The life skills and development of mentees were commonly seen as the biggest outcomes of the program. Mentors in particular reported that their mentees had improved their social skills and self awareness as a result of the program:

He got more relaxed and he was okay. It's subtle but... (Mentor focus group)

My little has been able to really open up with me and her social skills have developed substantially. (Mentor survey)

She (daughter) has more confidence and style. (Parent/carer interview)

Behavioural and personality changes were also commonly seen in young people by parents/carers. Being in the program meant their children had something to look forward to, and had an outlet for feelings and experiences which didn't exist before:

My daughter loves it and always looks forward to it. (Parent/carer focus group)

Mine loves it - she's taken really well to it. For somebody who would never talk to anyone, she's really clicked (with her mentor). She's come right out of her shell. You find this child you never knew you had! (Parent/carer focus group)

She's more open and talkative now. BBBS is something outside of the 'circle' – it's not like at her counsellor – there's no pressure with her mentor to talk about anything other than what she wants to talk about. (Parent/carer focus group)

My daughter has changed a fair bit, and the program has contributed to that. (Parent/carer focus group)

I think he's opening up a little bit more. (Parent/carer interview)

Absolutely she has (changed for the better). (Parent/carer interview)

She's settled, adjusted and confident. (Parent/carer interview)

I'm more confident now. (Mentee interview)

I think the group days have made my Little a much friendlier and social person in regards to connecting with other girls and boys. (Mentor survey)

Some participants felt that young people involved in the program were exposed to experiences and ideas which challenged gender stereotypes:

I enjoy spending time with my little to allow her to have different understandings of other females' potential, communication, career ideas and healthy attitudes etc. (Mentor survey)

BBBS offers a wide variety of activities/ group days, they cater for boys and girls. The group days expose the Littles to new experiences. (Mentor survey)

(Little) has continued to develop her interest in sport including tennis, basketball, running, soccer - even football which she loves and is good at, regardless of society's expectations of girls. (Mentor survey)

Simply taking the Little outside of their home/comfort zone, and allowing them the freedom to express themselves and their personalities in a non-threatening environment... (Mentor survey)

However, mentors more often brought up examples of outings or issues which potentially confirmed gender stereotypes.

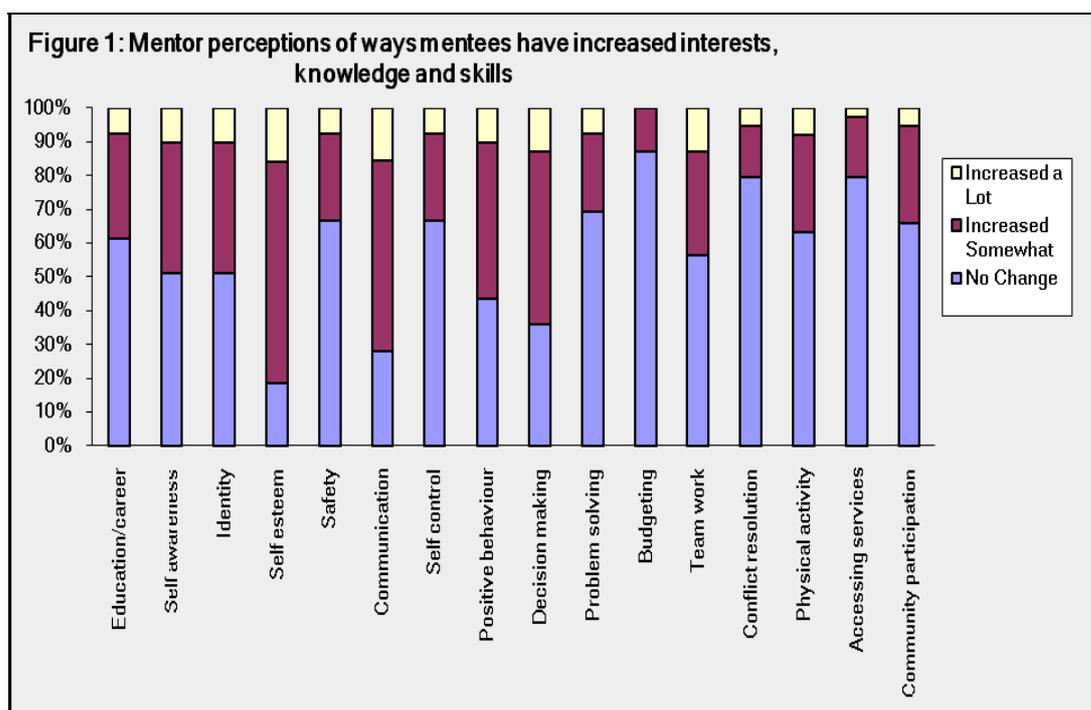
Boys are about action and doing things and this is what we have experienced. (Mentor survey)

Especially at the initial stage, and more so with a boy, it is important to share interests as so much of the initial friendship development occurs while doing something. Males tend to communicate more freely and develop stronger relationships if there it is tied to a tangible/physical activity. (Mentor survey)

Mentors often found it useful to understand and work with their Little's needs and interests, regardless of whether these challenged or conformed to gender stereotypes:

I told him how a car operates, I have let him put on the hand brake... while I drive. I have told him everyone has strengths and weaknesses, things they are good at and not so good at. So he is more open about not being good at English. (Mentor survey)

The mentor survey asked respondents to identify ways that they thought their mentee had developed more knowledge or life skills as a result of being in the program, as shown in Figure 1 below. In most categories, the majority of mentors reported no change in their Littles, with exceptions such as 'self esteem', 'communication' and 'positive behaviour'. These align well with comments made by Littles and their parents/carers and are possibly changes attributable to the mentoring relationship which are easier to notice and perhaps easier to achieve.



Group days were seen by mentors and mentees as a forum for building new skills and knowledge through experiences:

We did a cooking day, we went to see a play, and today we're doing 'go girls'. (Mentor vox-pop)

Today we've learnt about healthy lifestyles and healthy eating (Mentor vox-pop)

We learnt how to pot a plant and how to make cuttings. We may do some herbs at home. (Mentor vox-pop)

I learnt nothing. Ok - I learnt how to plant a pot. (Mentee vox-pop)

Group days also provided a forum in which young people could experience new things:

Well obviously I'm having fun today! Of course! Because you get to meet new people and try new activities. I come to group days whenever I can. Me and my Big did the Fringe workshop and a couple of days ago me and my dad went to the Family Fun Day. My best memory of a group day was making friends with someone at the Fringe day and here today. (Mentee vox-pop)

We've done orienteering, bowling, painting drums at the Fringe parade. (Mentee vox-pop)

We get to do things we wouldn't normally do, like activities that you need more people for, like bowling. (Mentor vox-pop)

Our best memory was going on the One and All. (Mentor vox-pop)

Networks have been increased for mentees with their peers through group days, within their community, and with their families. However, mentees clearly valued the relationship with their mentor the most:

(We) mostly catch up and talk. (Mentee interview)

She's fun... really nice and funny. We talk and go out. (Mentee interview)

It was hard for participants to identify many new networks which had been created, beyond the immediate relationships formed at group days and between mentor and mentee. Nevertheless, the data shows that BBBS has opened up some new networks for participants through simply having new experiences (such as the zoo, the movies, window shopping) and connections with different types of people, including positive role models:

My Little likes to interact, play sports, she likes to be in there. (Mentor focus group)

The group days are good. They're fun. (Mentee interview)

I get to hang out with a guy. (Mentee interview)

I'd never seen a waterfall. I'd never (gone) to Rundle Mall. (Mentee interview)

We went skating and out for breakfast. (Mentee interview)

Group days offer the potential for many new friendships and networks to be formed between all program participants. Some mentees reported making new friends:

It's good because there are a lot more people involved and not just 2. I've met other people and made new friends. (Mentee vox-pop)

Group days are good cos u get to meet new people. (Mentee vox-pop)

We've met some new people. It makes groups days more fun. I sometimes like lots of people! (Mentee vox-pop)

I met new people today... There are more new kids here. (Mentee vox-pop)

We've said hi to a few new people. (Mentor vox-pop)

However, there were other mentees that stated they hadn't connected very much with other group day attendees:

I haven't really met many new people today but it's nice to meet new people. (Mentee vox-pop)

We need more boys (here) though! (Mentee vox-pop)

Many group day attendees really enjoyed having another forum during which to spend time with their matches:

My best memory [of a group day] is of spending time with (Big). (Mentee vox-pop)

One mentor articulated that meeting other people at group days isn't very important whilst some stated that the social aspects and broadened social experiences are quite important:

[Meeting other matches]... I don't think is that important... I don't personally. To be honest. (Mentor vox-pop)

It's cool to catch up with a group of people and see other Bigs and Littles. (Mentor vox-pop)

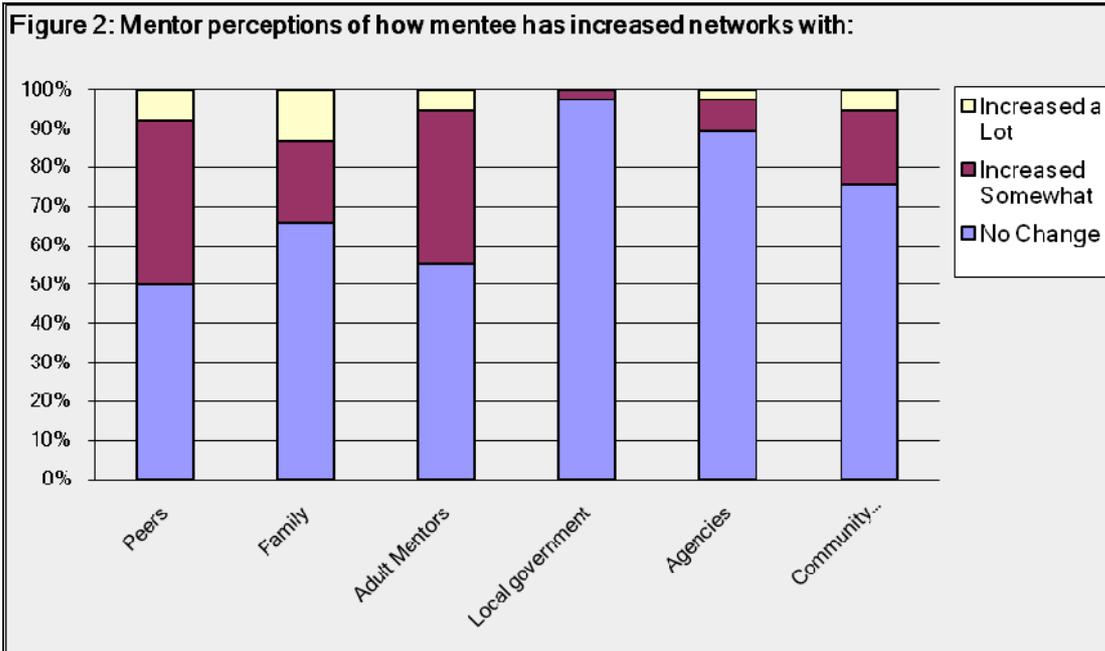
My children realise now that there are others out there who have similar issues and who are feeling the same. (Parents/carer focus group)

Mentors did not mention that group days offered them new opportunities for creating networks, but many felt that having lots of people at group days made it more fun, and had some value for their mentees:

It's definitely more fun with more people. (Mentor vox-pop)

It's good to come to group days to meet new people, then it's good to know faces at other group days. But I don't think it's changed our relationship. (Mentor vox-pop)

The majority of mentors reported no change in any form of networks for their Littles, as shown in figure 2 below. However, as discussed below, this probably reflects the way that mentors conceptualise 'networks' as this data conflicts with qualitative data on the formation of networks.



Overall, there is a very strong opinion amongst almost every participant that BBBS is providing a worthwhile and effective program which improves the lives of, and meets the needs of young people. Furthermore, some participants could see the benefits to the community:

Thank you so much – if I could ever repay financially, to ensure no one missed out, I would. (Parents/carer interview)

It is a fantastically well run program and is assisting the community in so many ways. (Mentor survey)

Staff are fantastic and the training, recognition and support for volunteers is what makes it very different from some other volunteer organisations. (Mentor survey)

The staff are really fabulous and have been very supportive. (Mentor survey)

Quality of mentoring relationships

Establishing and maintaining quality mentor-mentee relationships, with a strong bond, are critical factors in the success of any mentoring program (see Wiese 2009a for a review of the literature on quality mentoring relationships). Quality matches are less likely to terminate early and underpin the achievement of the young person's goals and may be characterised by longer duration, a feeling of closeness between mentor and mentee, and better outcomes for the young person (Wiese 2009a). Mentoring programs are more likely to establish and maintain quality relationships if they incorporate a broader best practice approach, including mentor screening and training, appropriate levels of contact, structured activities, monitoring of relationships, individual supervisions, mentor group support, and formal parent/carer involvement (Wiese 2009a).

A number of themes have emerged from the data regarding the quality of mentoring relationships in BBBS. In various ways, participants identified that the match is critical. This was

expressed as 'liking' each other, 'getting along well', 'having things to talk about' or 'finding common points of interest.

Mentors could see that the matching process had been an important determinant of the success of the relationship with their mentee. Most felt that having similar interests or being similar types of people helped the match. However, mentors and mentees are not always the same gender or of similar age, and some did not have similar interests. These factors were generally not seen as problematic by participants, and were regarded as strengths by some. Not all mentors feel that their Little is well matched to them:

It's hard - (our) relationship doesn't seem to be really suited. (Mentor survey)

Opposites attract as the saying goes. It's a great experience for both sides to spend some time with people different to themselves. (Mentor survey)

It is important as we can understand each other and see where we are coming from. (Mentor survey)

Mentors welcomed the support they received through YWCA to help make their match a success, particularly through challenging periods. Having regular contact with staff to get feedback or to work through problems was considered critical to forming a successful mentor-mentee relationship by some mentors. However, others had been lucky to avoid such challenges and therefore did not use as much support from YWCA. Being able to reflect on their own behaviour and role was also found to be important for some mentors in dealing with difficult behaviour from their mentee:

I believe the support and guidance we have received from the YWCA has been crucial to the match with my Little. Their staff are extraordinary and are only a phone call away and prepared to discuss issues related to our matches. (Mentor survey)

Mentors found that their peer networks were important for learning from each other. Again, whilst some relished group support, or catching up at group events, others did not feel that they needed that type of support as much.

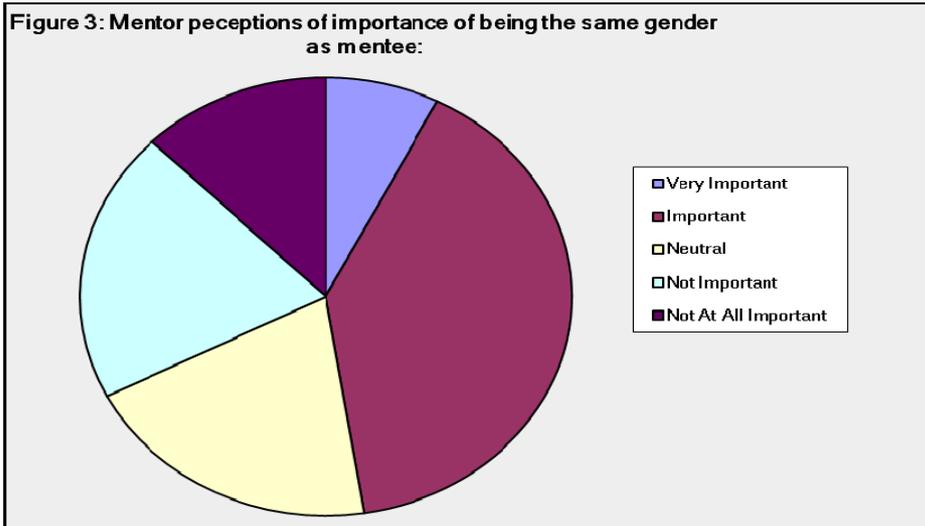
Many participants noted that it took some time to develop a relationship with their mentor or mentee, and some reported awkwardness early on. Some 'hit it off' right away though. The initial feelings did not seem to relate to the long term success of the match:

Took a while to fully develop. Initially it feels a bit strained but only because you don't know each other very well and naturally that takes time to develop. (Mentor survey)

Friendship is still evolving, very slow but progressing still. (Mentor survey)

We had an excellent connection right from the start and it has only grown stronger during the course of our matching. (Mentor survey)

Mentors had varying opinions on whether it is important to be matched to a Little of the same gender (see figure 3 below). 47% thought it was 'very important' or 'important' and 33% thought it was 'not important' or 'not at all important'.



Mentors also had varying opinions regarding the importance of having similar interests and personality as Littles:

You need to be similar so you enjoy the same activities together (Mentor survey)

It doesn't bother me that we have some differences in our personalities, however if we were very different people I feel that we may clash. (Mentor survey)

Most participants reflected that their mentoring relationship had strengths, which included trust, shared points of interest, having compatible personalities, and support from parents/carers. Many of these factors are inherent determinants of a quality relationship but they were often framed as 'making the job easier' from the point of view of mentors and 'liking them more' from the point of view of mentees.

I didn't go into the program with many expectations, because I did not know what it would be like. I went in knowing that we would meet weekly and do fun activities - which we have. We are also developing a good friendship, so that is beyond expectations I had. (Mentor survey)

Relationships were often described as 'friendships' and as being underpinned by elements of respect:

She (mentor) is a real role model. (Parent/carer interview)

Our friendship is going well, I think it gets stronger each time we hang out. (Mentor survey)

We seem to spend a lot of time laughing. (Mentor survey)

Overall, there was overwhelming evidence for positive and strong mentoring relationships being created through BBBS. The program was reported as being very conducive to quality matches, and staff were very supportive during any challenging periods. The quality of mentoring relationships appears to be central to driving the success of the program.

Case study 1: Experience of a mentor

I heard about the BBBS mentoring program via advertisements years ago. It is something that I always wanted to do, it's just been a matter of waiting until I'm not too overcommitted with other things in my life. To become a mentor I had to fill out a lot of paperwork, attend an interview, do a psych test, have an in depth interview at my house, attend training etc. My Little and I immediately connected from the moment of our first meeting - we both had similar interests, we enjoy both indoor & outdoor activities, and we share a similar sense of humour, are very outgoing & active but also can be reserved/reflective. All outings/activities were very positive and have included both indoor and outdoor activities, repeated experiences, new experiences, activities that have involved cost and/or lots of planning but also lots of free and simple activities such as playing sport, going to the movies, going to St Kilda playground, bowling, going to the library, checking out the zoo, doing art and craft etc. Basically it didn't really matter what we did together, we just enjoyed each other's company, and chatted and joked about everyday things but also had a lot of deep and meaningful conversations.

I tried to focus a lot on building my Little's self-confidence and self-esteem and supporting her to try new things. Within the first few weeks of the match, my Little also initiated disclosing a lot of difficulties that she has been experiencing. Over time some of these things have been quite serious and required making reports to the Child Abuse Hotline. Barriers to the match have been related to family chaos, an inability to reliably make contact with my Little (their phone is frequently off or disconnected) and often driving out to her place for an outing and the whole family being asleep or not at home. This impacted from the point of view that we weren't able to catch up as much as we both hoped....but it hasn't affected our relationship.

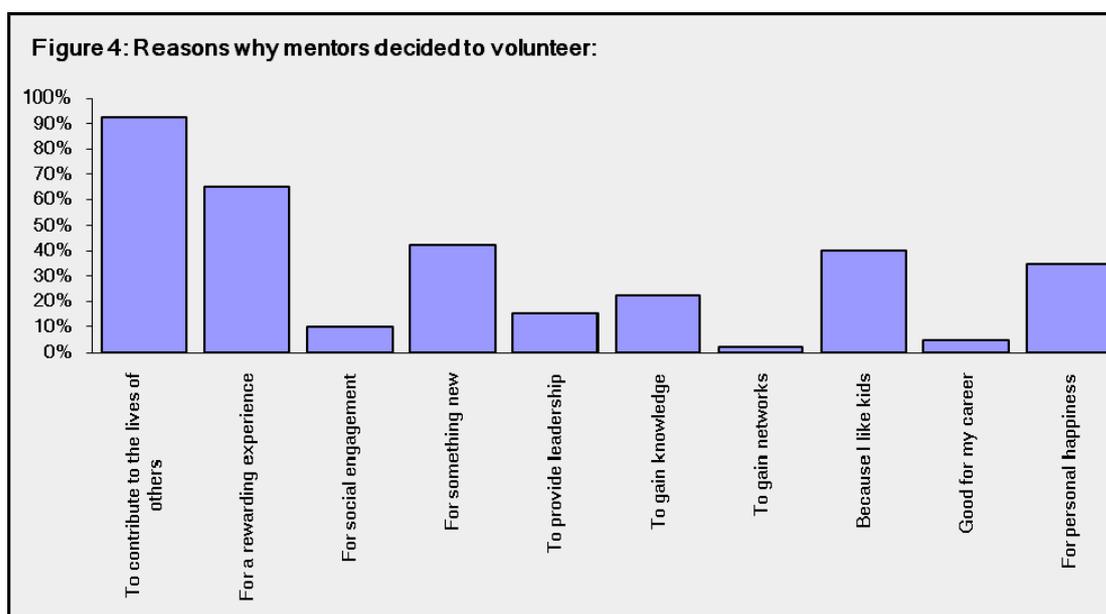
Over time, I have developed a greater understanding of my Little and her situation which has in turn enabled me to better gauge how she is doing and more effectively respond to her needs. I have noticed a change in the dynamics of our match - that is, my Little takes more of an active interest in me and my life than she used to and has increasingly shown greater responsibility in trying to catch up despite how she feels or what is happening at home. She also seems more thoughtful of others, more mindful of how her behaviour impacts on people, and is starting to express a bit more interest in school.

Although there have been a lot of challenges, let downs... I suppose the mentoring friendship has continued to evolve and if anything it has grown stronger and more settled in terms of how outings are arranged. Sometimes it's like I'm a mentor, other times it's like we're friends, sometimes it's like literally being an older sister. Other times it almost feels like you're a parent or a teacher or a counsellor... although it is a very personal experience, I still remain very conscious of maintaining a professional approach in making sure that I am always doing what is in the best interests of my Little's welfare and development.

Experiences of mentors - recruitment and retention

Mentors had heard about BBBS through a number of avenues. Some had been looking for volunteering opportunities and had come across the program, whilst others had heard of BBBS and decided to find out more information when they felt they could become involved. Almost half of the mentor survey respondents reported that they had first heard about the program through the internet, whilst a quarter had seen a TV commercial and one fifth had heard about it through a friend or family.

Mentors became involved in BBBS for a variety of reasons as shown in Figure 4 below. Almost all mentor survey participants identified that they wanted to “contribute to the lives of others” and 65% identified that they were “looking for a rewarding experience”.



Other reasons included:

I was looking to do something in the community. (Mentor focus group)

I am especially concerned about the lack of positive role models in many boys' lives. (Mentor survey)

To use my experiences growing up in a positive way to help a Little in a similar situation. (Mentor survey)

The recruitment and training processes were generally well regarded by mentors. All respondents to the mentor survey thought that the level of support in the training process was either ‘very appropriate’ or ‘appropriate’. Three quarters of respondents thought the level of difficulty was ‘very appropriate’ or ‘appropriate’ and one quarter were ‘neutral’ (with one person reporting that it was ‘inappropriate’). All respondents also felt that their interactions with BBBS staff were ‘very appropriate or appropriate’.

Although some felt that the time commitment was significant, or drawn out over too long a period, most agreed that this was necessary and appropriate. There were varied opinions regarding the training but most could see the importance of being more comprehensive and stringent rather than quick:

I don't believe I would change the process, I think it ran smoothly although it went over a three month period. (Mentor survey)

I think it does need to be rigorous to protect the children. However each component could have been closer together i.e. first interview, psychological test etc. It did drag out over some months. (Mentor survey)

I think that this (time commitment for training) does deter some really fantastic people from applying... and is also a drawback from attracting more male volunteers. (Mentor survey)

Some mentors suggested specific ways to improve the training:

(Do) more role play. Provide some difficult questions or difficult situations that Bigs have encountered in the past and use these to teach/show how trainees should react. (Mentor survey)

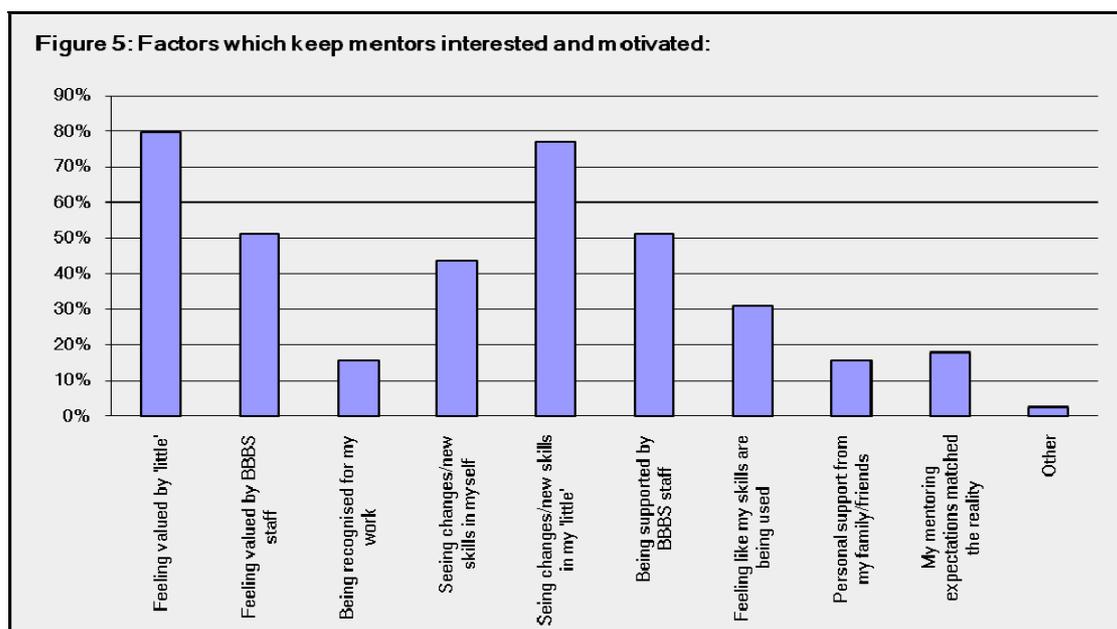
Consider a training session that only takes one weekend instead of 3 nights. (Mentor survey)

I think all mentors should have some level of first aid training. (Mentor survey)

Maybe an online component? (Mentor survey)

I think there needs to be more discussion on symptoms of various issues with kids i.e. recognising neglect, recognising low self esteem, recognising symptoms of abuse. (Mentor survey)

Mentors reported that once in the program, their motivation to stay involved often centred on feeling valued, and on the sense of achievement in seeing changes in their Littles, as shown in Figure 5 below.



Mentors also feel that it's important to follow through with their relationship and to demonstrate commitment:

I'm very fond of him. (Mentor focus group)

I made a commitment and I want to see it through. I believe the act of the commitment itself says something to the Little in a world where they have been let down by adults. (Mentor survey)

Some mentors felt that the changes they were seeing in their mentees kept them motivated, providing them with a sense of achievement and satisfaction:

The fact that my friendship with my Little is beneficial for her keeps me motivated. (Mentor survey)

They model themselves on you, watch you, pick up manners. (Mentor focus group)

I know I have made enormous changes to someone's life, and these changes will help this person for the rest of their life. (Mentor survey)

Supporting mentors through all aspects of their relationship with their Littles is a crucial factor in retaining mentors. Many mentors stated that the support from YWCA staff absolutely helped to keep them motivated and focused, with minimal difficulties. However, a few participants have felt lacking in support at times. Depending on how demanding the Little is, some mentors require more support than others:

The people working on the program are critical, if they weren't good it'd be difficult. (Mentor focus group)

There has been ample support and I have felt very comfortable throughout this process. (Mentor survey)

I don't need much support, so it's not that it's unhelpful, just don't require much. (Mentor survey)

I feel very supported. (Mentor survey)

From a professional point of view re training, guidance, information, feedback.....yes I definitely received the support I needed... From a personal point of view in terms of the experience... it would have been helpful to have some more support... whilst I have supportive people in my life....it has not been helpful in regard to this experience because both personally and professionally they can't relate to it. Consequently on a personal level, I have felt very alone in this process. (Mentor survey)

Not really, I feel that the BBBS leaders need to be on top of checking in with Bigs once every 2 weeks, it should not be our responsibility. (Mentor survey)

Sometimes my coordinator is not available for me to chat to which can be challenging. (Mentor survey)

The Bigs weekly update email was a valuable tool for me and I really valued the suggestions and insights offered by this. (Mentor survey)

Whilst a few participants in the survey did not find the volunteer support meetings useful, the overwhelming majority found meetings and 1-on-1 staff support ‘very helpful’ or ‘helpful’.

Mentors who participated in the focus group and survey reported that, whilst they had clearly not left the program, there are some factors that could challenge mentors and perhaps cause them to want to leave. Another factor that was mentioned as being likely to deter a mentor from continuing with the program was an inappropriate match. However, mentors generally framed these challenges as hurdles to be overcome, rather than as obstacles to staying in the program:

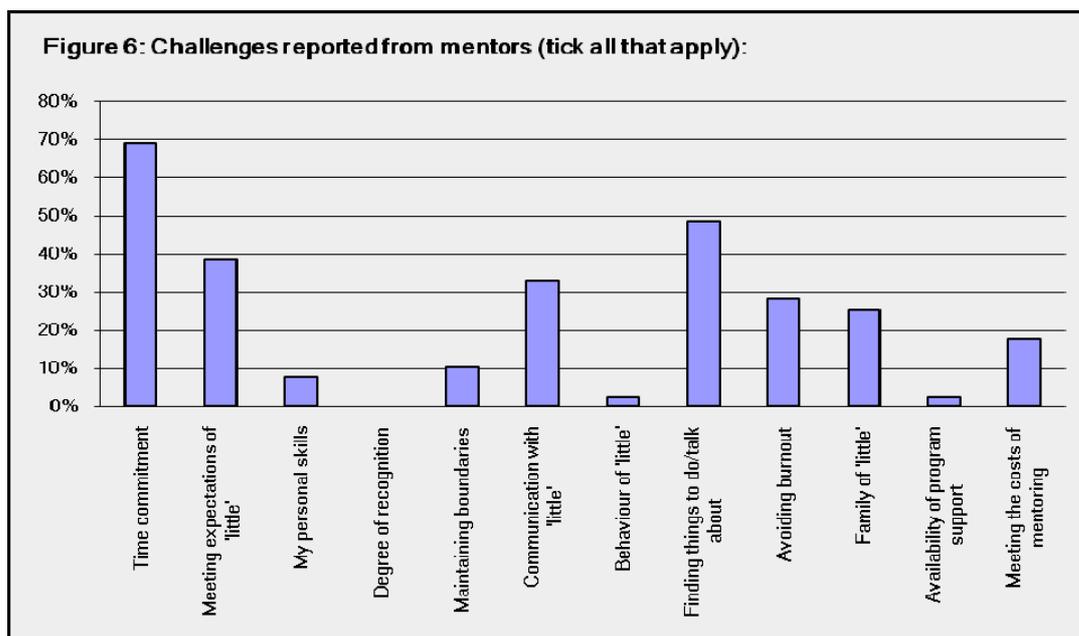
Generally (mentee) is communicative but sometimes he is not so... can be a bit moody. However nothing that is not normal to my mind. I find the boundary element difficult as far as money and time boundaries. Also the little does think I'm available a fair bit more than I my life allows. I don't always know whether my personal skills are good enough or relevant. (Mentor survey)

Where possible some more background on the family situation and reason for being on the program might have helped up front. (Mentor survey)

For some mentors, the expected time commitment with their Little and with the ongoing support was an issue:

Not sure if mentors could agree to fortnightly catch ups instead of weekly? This would probably result in more people joining the program, lots of people who have asked me about it have said every weekend is too much for them but they would like to do it. (Mentor survey)

In fact, the mentor survey identified the most commonly experienced challenge of being a mentor as the expected time commitment (69%), followed by finding things to talk about or do with their mentee (48%), and meeting the expectations of their mentee (38%). Interestingly, only 3% of mentors identified their Little’s behaviour as a challenge, as shown in Figure 6 below.



Mentors reported that feeling valued was a very important part of staying motivated. The mentor survey identified that feeling valued by their mentee is the most commonly given reason (80%) for staying motivated and interested in being a mentor. Whilst some stated that it can be a thankless task, others asserted that they felt constantly thanked and reassured in their roles. Data suggests that in the absence of recognition from the mentee, it may be particularly important for mentors to feel valued by other sources (e.g. from family or the program staff):

It's sometimes a fairly thankless task. I do not get much verbal appreciation from the mentee, however I suppose the mentee remembering outings and mentioning them is the sign of positive feedback. The mentee has given me a Christmas present and a 'one year' anniversary present... after a strong hint I give (them) one. (Mentor survey)

YWCA at every opportunity reinforce their thanks to us for donating our time and support. They never miss an opportunity and in a way I feel self conscious as I don't think it is anything out of the ordinary. Then again if we didn't hear it you start to feel unappreciated. There is nothing I can see that would improve this. (Mentor survey)

I got my first thank you from my Little recently which was a bonus. It sounds selfish as you shouldn't expect anything but it is a big commitment and costs me to be a mentor so a thank you after 7 months was lovely. (Mentor survey)

Sometimes I feel valued by my Little but more often than not I don't feel this way. My time & effort is not valued nor respected by my Little/her family. (Mentor survey)

I would like to get more verbal feedback on the mentee's views, also any 'improvements' in behaviour or self esteem etc... (Mentor survey)

I am not worried about receiving recognition. (Mentor survey)

Other challenges included finding cheap activities to do with their mentee and the issue of negotiating finances (e.g. with parents/carers, or obtaining vouchers from staff). As the quote below illustrates, this mentor's concerns were exacerbated by the demands of the mentee around financial outlay:

That's probably the only issue, the money doesn't come and particularly when [the parent has it to spend on other things]... Just recognising that there is a cost... often she (mentee) hasn't had lunch, even though it's a 2.30pm pick up. So I usually buy lunch. (Mentor focus group)

Initially we had issues with money....her not having any and expecting me to pay for things. I have had to think of free activities for 7 months now which has been very challenging. (Mentor survey)

Mentors faced other challenges such as working with the family of the Little:

Constantly being left hanging every weekend in terms of what/if a match outing would go ahead (often there would be last minute changes from my Little and her family that they would never tell me about and I was rarely able to make contact with them to arrange outings as their phone was frequently off or disconnected). Often I would cancel personal commitments to work in with my 'Little' only to often drive out and them not be at home/still all asleep in the afternoon. (Mentor survey)

Perhaps more emphasis on the relationship between the parent/carer and mentor so that issues can be addressed earlier and ground rules are set and adhered to. (Mentor survey)

Mentors appreciated group days as they provide a break for mentors from having to organise an outing, and supported mentors in having fun with their mentees:

We don't have to think about what we want to do, we just turn up and it's all organised so that makes it easier! (Mentor vox-pop)

Group days are more structured so we don't have to worry about what to do. (Mentor vox-pop)

It's fun. And I don't have to pay for lunch or think of an activity to do with (Little). (Mentor vox-pop)

Case study 2: Experience of a mentor

I have always had in the back of my mind that I wanted to do volunteer work but nothing crossed my path that hit a chord with me. When I finally had time to sit and think about it I asked myself 'who did I want to help?' and children was the answer. My next question was what did I want as a child and that was easy - an older sister or brother and a mentor in life. When I thought of that I had a vague recollection of the Big Brother Big Sister program, so I hopped on the net and Googled it and the rest is history.

My Little is one of the most engaging 12 year olds I have ever met. Her life revolves around everyone and not just herself. She has a real interest in other people and their lives and her inquisitiveness is contagious. I quickly realised that she was in the program as a preventative method as she had just started showing signs of delinquency and stealing. These were all attention seeking actions, she needed to be seen and noticed as her own person, not just the oldest at home to help look after everyone, or the last one to live with her guardians.

By showing interest in her, being upbeat, respecting her choices and trusting her we have developed a strong and rewarding friendship. Of course dealing with a teenager there are ups and downs and I have learnt to read her silences, pouts, body language and most importantly not to take it personally. I think I have taught her a lot, but I know she has also taught me a lot about myself, communication and being a kid again!

Praise for mentors

The praise for mentors in BBBS rates a special mention. Whilst most mentors do feel valued, perhaps this isn't verbalised often enough, particularly by mentees or parents/carers. However, participants in the evaluation were gushing in their praise for mentors in all regards and were keen to convey their messages of thanks. There is no doubt that this appreciation is a reflection of the benefits which young people are gaining through their mentors:

*They really enjoy it, my children. They (mentors) really do a good job. It's wonderful!
(Parent/carer focus group)*

I think it's admirable that people volunteer their time so often in the beginning and they're very reliable. It's a lot out of their life once a week. But that's what we need in society at the moment. There are a lot of people like us who need help. (Parent/carer focus group)

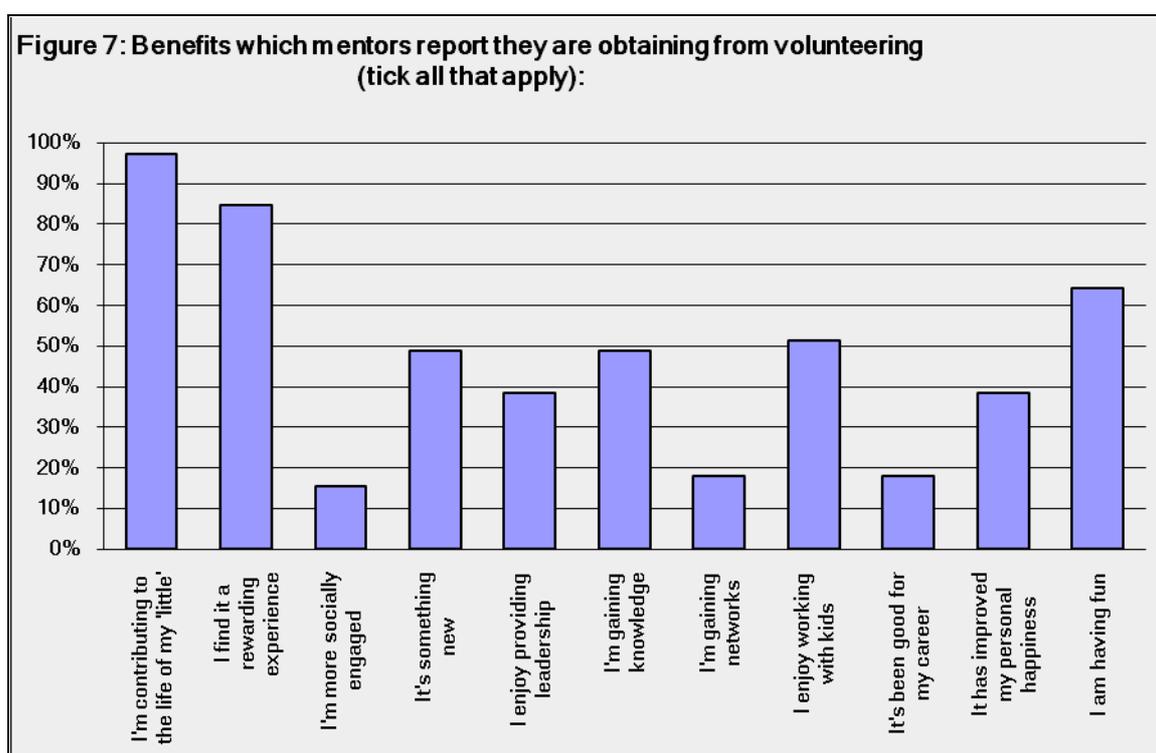
I'm very happy, it's very positive. Gold! More than I expected. (Parent/carer interview)

*It's more than I expected – (mentor's) time and flexibility and emotional investment.
(Parent/carer interview)*

She's generous, very caring and positive. (Mentee interview)

Mentor outcomes

Volunteerism is known to offer many benefits to volunteers such as mentors, including a sense of satisfaction, social benefits, personal development and insight and empathy into others' lives (Wiese 2009b). BBBS mentors identified numerous ways that they had benefited from, changed or developed as a result of being part of the program. As shown in Figure 7 below, most respondents found benefits in contributing to another person's life, and in the sense of reward. 64% also found having a Little a fun experience.



The mentor survey asked mentors to consider whether their expectations of the program and their relationship are being met:

Absolutely. I have changed a person's life and this was all that I wanted to do. (Mentor survey)

Being a mentor has outlived any of my expectations: personally it has been extremely satisfying and I have absolutely loved the time spent with my Little. (Mentor survey)

Not just yet because I don't feel like I am making a difference. (Mentor survey)

Yes they have been. I was expecting that I would feel proud of myself throughout my experience, I was expecting that I would gain a friend with my mentee, and I was expecting to get out there and do different things that I would not normally do. All of these have been met exceptionally. (Mentor survey)

The aims of the evaluation set out to explore how these changes have contributed to social capital through having built new skills, knowledge and opportunities for new connections. Therefore, although mentors often did not frame their responses in these terms, the data will be presented to address the three areas of interest for 'building social capital', which are:

- Building leadership skills
- Increasing knowledge
- Increasing networks.

Mentors reported that their **leadership skills** had been developed in ways such as improved problem solving skills, conflict resolution, communication, role modelling and decision-making. These skills were often developed as part of their usual relationship and interactions with their mentee, and sometimes through interacting with YWCA staff or mentor peers.

Mentors and parents/carers described how important role modelling is in the mentoring relationship:

I think (mentor) is a fabulous role model for my daughter... the way she holds herself and presents herself. She hasn't changed from day one – what you saw is what you got, it's admirable. And for my daughter to see that she's a genuine person and that you just have to be yourself and people like you the way you are... (Parent/carer interview)

I believe I am showing my little that there is an alternative to the life that her family provide for her. (Mentor survey)

On a lot of occasions, I mean there was no conversation at all... but he just really watched how I interacted with the waitress and how I sat and how I engaged with everything – and that was interesting. (Mentor focus group)

Training, mentor group sessions, and staff support were considered important in supporting these skills, which are vital in mentoring relationships. In particular, learning to self-reflect was described as a valuable tool that was facilitated by staff.

Other ways that leadership skills had been developed for mentors were through team work, and via engaging with young people and families. Team work was particularly developed through group days, between mentor and mentee as well as the group more broadly. Team work was also developed through the mentor-mentee relationship dynamic:

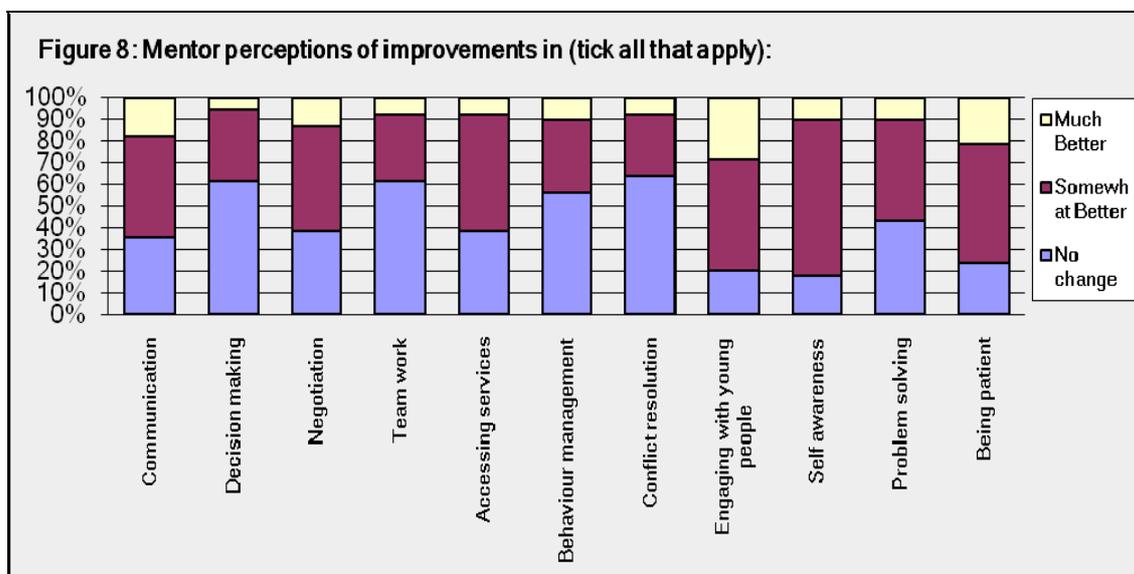
But I think some of the better days have been the ones at my place when we've played games... played music, done some cooking. They were the good days I think, when we actually did something together. (Mentor focus group)

Mentor leadership skills were clearly reflected in the positive perceptions of mentees:

She makes me feel like a good person and we have the bond of friendship. She's a good support. (Mentee interview)

She gives me good talks about studying. (Mentee interview)

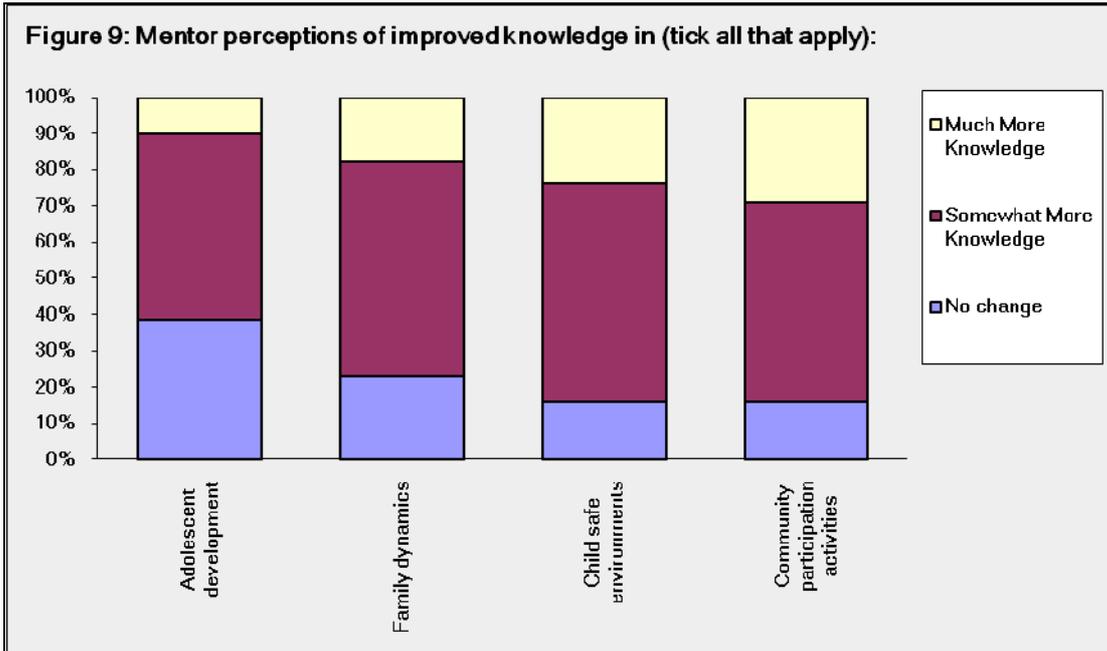
The mentor survey asked respondents to rate their improvements in aspects of leadership as a result of being a mentor, as illustrated below in Figure 8. Many aspects of leadership, such as 'being patient' and 'negotiation', were rated as being 'somewhat better' or 'much better' by the majority of respondents, however, some aspects such as 'decision making', 'team work' and 'conflict resolution' had improved for a minority of respondents.



Although a minority of survey respondents reported that their skills in behaviour management had improved, many mentors referred to this skill in various ways during the focus group and the survey comments:

I probably struggled with it, early on it wasn't easy and there was a rough patch and I think I lost sight of the unconditional positive regard, and I was lucky that (the staff) jogged my memory on that, so the rest of the time, making that commitment to unconditional positive regard, no matter what... So I think that's changed me, making that commitment to it. (Mentor focus group)

The **knowledge** of mentors was examined in the mentor survey, where mentors reported an increased in knowledge areas such as adolescent development, family dynamics and community activities. In each aspect, the majority of respondents reported 'somewhat more' or 'much more' knowledge. As illustrated in Figure 9 below, there were between 5 and 15 participants who reported no improvements in knowledge in each category.



There were many aspects of mentoring which improved over time, and most of these hinged on becoming familiar with the Little and their family, and gaining confidence in the role of mentor. Learning how to be more self aware was considered an important skill for mentors, and was often recognised through the process of role modelling. That is, in realising that their mentee was learning from them, mentors became more aware of, and learnt how to analyse their own actions:

(He'll) see things that I do, and that I'm generally a courteous person or friendly person... (Mentor focus group)

YWCA staff helped mentors gain knowledge on how to manage difficult behaviour in their Littles:

She always had another perspective to just sort of skip me out of what I was thinking, to just sort of go 'Ah... okay'. Even if I didn't go with hers, or something else would come up, it was just valuable to get me out of the way I was seeing it. I found that very helpful. (Mentor focus group)

Mentors did not report many opportunities or instances for increasing their knowledge about community resources, although in reflecting upon the need to think of new outings for their mentees, mentors often identified accessing community resources:

We'd go to the Central Market... down to the beach for a walk or to McDonalds for pancakes and a coffee... (Mentor focus group)

Mentors had increased their **networks** as a result of being involved in BBBS. Peer networks were considered important for some:

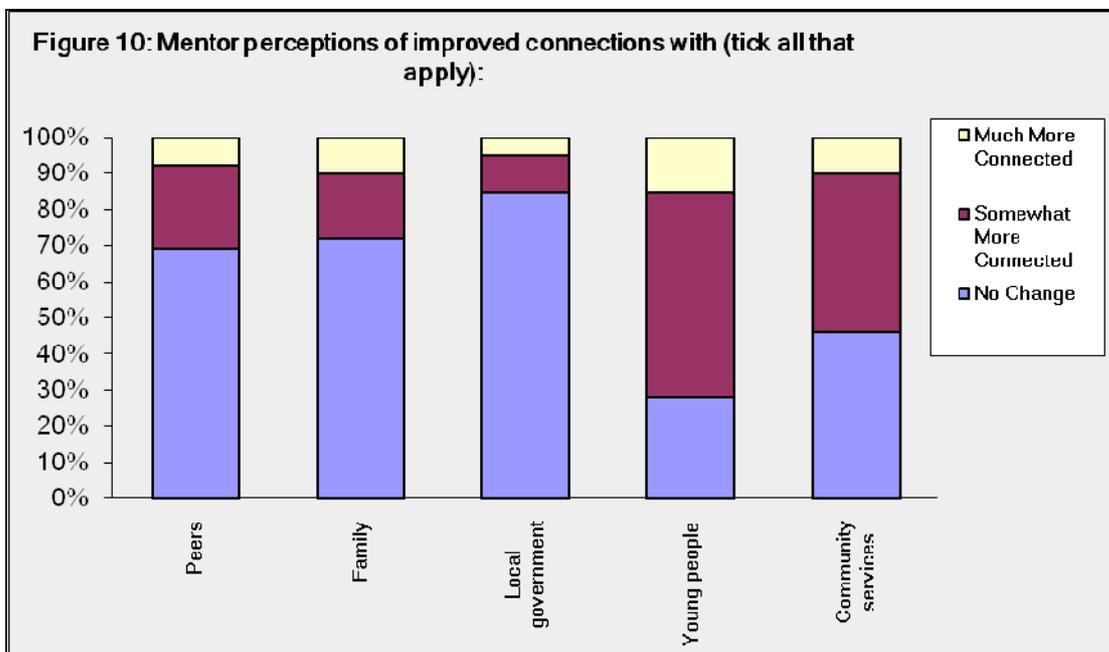
I found that still being at the beginning of the match, going to the couple of meetings I've been to, I've actually been meeting with a couple of the girls I'd been training with... Having the familiar faces from training and knowing that we're all at the same point and chatting at the same level, that's been really good. And you've got the opportunity to be with more experienced volunteers as well. (Mentor focus group)

Yeah I found getting to know some of the other volunteers at the support meetings and then having the group days, it helped with the social modelling because you already have the rapport with the other Bigs. (Mentor focus group)

The other main form of network which had been developed for mentors was with the YWCA, which was stressed as an important network for the success of mentors:

I found that I really did check in every week with the coordinator and came to pretty much every volunteer meeting that I could and almost every group day. I think that made it easier for the match because any issues I had, I don't think he (mentee) saw any of it. (Mentor focus group)

The mentor survey asked respondents to identify ways that their networks have improved as a result of being a mentor, as shown in Figure 10 below. These survey results indicate that this could be an area for further investigation, as the majority of respondents identified 'no change' in their amount of networks in three of the areas of interest.



Outcomes for parents/carers

Parents or carers who participated were very supportive of the program and unanimously agreed that their children were enjoying the experience:

When she goes and comes back I think we hear the story about twenty times a day. (Parent/carer interview)

...and also, kids need more than their Mums, sometimes. (Parent/carer interview)

I think (child) is very excited about it... He lights up. (Parent/carer interview)

Parents/carers reported that the program was not only beneficial for their child but also for the broader family dynamic and themselves. The benefits to the Parents/carers were often about offering a break for those 'not coping' rather than through any specific intervention to help them:

I found out from Sister Pat and Sister Maureen... they knew I had 5 kids and I need some help. It's really good (Parent/carer focus group)

It gives me a bit of a break – he comes home and tells me what he did, what he got up to. (Parent/carer focus group)

My kids just want to punch the hell out each other and my son is getting to the stage where he wants to punch me and I don't like it and it's stressing me out a lot. (Parent/carer focus group)

I'm in need of a bit of support so for (daughter) to be able to do new things, she can do things that I can't take her to. It's a bit of a break from one another. (Parent/carer interview)

Parents/carers also felt that attending family events offered them some benefits. These included the opportunity to experience new things, the chance to meet new people, and feeling less isolated:

...we went for the craft day which was nice for something different. (Parent/carer focus group)

Today I said 'woo hoo, let's go' – so we came (to the family day)! Give it a whirl because you never know and we may not ever get that opportunity again. (Parent/carer focus group)

I think it's good to know you're not the only one struggling. Sometimes it gets too much and you feel isolated. (Parent/carer focus group)

It's good for me (Family Fun Days) because I get to get out and socialise with the outside world as much as I can rather than sitting at home. (Parent/carer focus group)

One parent was concerned about the behaviour of other children at group days however:

The family days are well planned and we've been to things we may not have otherwise had the opportunity to go to, like Channel 9. The only thing I'd say is that my children find it difficult with some of the other children at times because for whatever reason some of the behaviours are unacceptable... It's only on some occasions. On a positive note, it's good for the children to see people from other walks of life... to experience that. (Parent/carer interview)

Parents/carers expressed relief that BBBS offered their children and family something which otherwise was missing, and in doing so reduced the burden on them:

I felt that my son really needed a mentor because I'm a single mum, as of 11 years ago. Because I have a disability I'm fairly restricted in what I can do in terms of play and other things, which children really need. (Parent/carer focus group)

I've lost a daughter so (child) is by herself now, so I thought it was a good idea because I've got no (other) family here... (Parent/carer focus group)

For me it's (good) to have a role model around them because they never had their father around them. So they have someone to be out with them and to talk to... especially if they're upset or angry or something happened at school. (Parent/carer focus group)

Parents/carers were happy with the mentors who were matched with their child. Parents/carers found that having contact with mentors put them at ease, as they felt secure that their child is not only having a good time, but is in safe hands. One parent reflected on learning to trust the mentor, and one was particularly happy that she could rely on her child's mentor to 'back her up':

She (mentor) always communicates via me and we get on well. She's been a support to me also as we're like minded. (Parent/carer interview)

I've learnt to trust strangers with my daughter. (Mentor) is lovely and of course it's not that she's not trustworthy, but from a parental point of view I had to learn to trust her over time. (Parent/carer interview)

When they're spending time together I never worry about them. (Mentor) has shown me that (child) is always safe, always watched, always cared for; and if anything comes up (mentor) talks to me about it. (Parent/carer interview)

(The match was) spot on... How well they are actually matched has shocked me; I didn't think you could actually get it that well. (Parent/carer interview)

BBBS builds the capacity of parents/carers through providing them with a break, to worry less about their child or circumstances. The potential to build networks appears strong for those parents/carers with the capacity to become more involved in the program, such as at group days. However, for those parents/carers who are not involved in family days it is possible that they are gaining less personal benefit aside from having a break from their child. Potentially engaging more parents/carers, either through group days or through offering other kinds of support, could be further explored by the program, to offer the same level of support as reported by just one parent:

I was supported in ways I hadn't even thought of. Brilliant! (Parent interview)

For example, parents in the focus group had not considered or heard about how BBBS could link them to other services:

*I wasn't aware we could do that [ask YWCA for help in finding other services].
(Parent/carer focus group)*

It appears that there is a link between parental involvement and a stronger commitment to the program, and benefits accrued to the child and parents/carers. Mentors and parents/carers generally felt that they valued links with each other and that these could be developed more in some cases:

Perhaps (I'd like) more emphasis on the relationship between the parent/carer and mentor so that issues can be addressed earlier and ground rules are set and adhered to." (Mentor survey)

YWCA called once a week in the beginning to see how each outing went. That was nice. If we needed help it was there. It was nice to know the support was there, and when they said they'd call they called. (Parent/carer interview)

Results indicate that parents are very supportive of the program and that they are personally benefiting from BBBS by being given a 'break', by seeing positive change in their child, and through the support offered to them personally by the program, such as through referrals or family days.

Outcomes for the community

Participants found it difficult to articulate specific benefits for the community which are attributable to the program. However, there is overwhelming praise for the program and the changes which it creates for individuals and families can logically be extended to community benefits:

*Thank you so much – if I could ever repay financially, to ensure no one missed out, I would.
(Parents/carer interview)*

*It is a fantastically well run program and is assisting the community in so many ways.
(Mentor survey)*

Youth mentoring is becoming more popular across the world, as it is assumed that the benefits to individual young people (including positive development and mitigation against risks which may have otherwise befallen them due to circumstance) are in some way transferable to the broader community (Rhodes, 2002). However, it is particularly difficult to show that communities benefit from youth mentoring programs due to the long term nature of the benefits, and the difficulties of demonstrating causality. Nevertheless, there is evidence to show the link between the medium term outcomes of BBBS and longer term community outcomes. For example, Scales (1999) discusses evidence which suggests that 'building developmental assets' in young people can result

in lower risk behaviour patterns and increased 'thriving behaviour'. This potentially has implications for community wellbeing in areas such as connectedness and reduced crime. Hancock (2000) highlights the value of investing in 'human capital' (which is the rationale for mentoring programs) as a means of developing 'community capital'. These types of links can be demonstrated in the data from this evaluation, with improvements in knowledge, life skills, empowerment and participation for young people (and mentors and parents/carers), leading to improved wellbeing. These improvements can be logically linked to community connectedness and social capital, and safer and healthier communities.

Feedback on BBBS processes

The implementation of best practice principles in youth mentoring programs significantly increases the chances of positive outcomes for young people (DuBois et al 2002). Best practice in youth mentoring essentially centres on a range of factors which support quality mentoring relationships (Wiese 2009a).

The feedback from participants around the way the program is run was overwhelmingly positive, and although participants expressed some ideas for improvement in particular areas, there were no negative comments or experiences regarding the program. Staff also described BBBS case management in ways which are aligned with best practice.

The staff meeting which discussed case management raised some areas for potential improvement however. Having opportunities for staff development, external exposure to new ideas, and keeping up to date with external program contacts were raised as potential opportunities for growth within the BBBS program, although they were not seen to seriously impact on core program business. In some ways, staff felt that the program was somewhat isolated from other parts of the sector, but on another level, staff agreed that they received communication and information about events or new issues which were relevant to them. The issue of whether BBBS is 'known' in the sector was raised, as referrals tend to always come from the same people or agencies. Staff raised the question of whether there were enough opportunities to review and consider the way case management is done within the program, and one person felt that she was unsure about some of the 'nitty-gritties' of case management protocol and that this could be an area for development.

Also regarding case management, it seems that there may be room to investigate further using a strengths based approach in the assessment (e.g. not just asking about problems but also asking about strengths, goals etc) and matching of young people, and also in the way that matches are managed. Clearly the program is a strengths based program, but staff felt that there may be some areas which could be further developed in that way, such as promoting strengths in all interactions with participants, even if they are actually assessing or working on deficits.

Discussion

The results of this evaluation have shown overwhelmingly positive support for BBBS. Participants in the evaluation were very eager to convey the message that young people were benefiting from having a mentor and that there are broader benefits for mentors and the community also.

The overarching aim of the program relates to improving the lives and opportunities of young people. In particular, this evaluation considered whether protective factors of young people have been increased, in areas such as life skills, knowledge and networks. The broader goal of the program, by changing the lives of individuals such as young people and mentors, is to contribute to social outcomes such as increased community connectedness and reduced crime.

Young people

The benefits of youth mentoring programs are varied – it cannot be assumed that having a mentor is automatically beneficial for young people despite the logic of having a role model and friendship (DuBois et al, 2002). However, there is no doubt that BBBS is changing the lives of young people in the program. For some Littles, their mentoring relationship is perhaps the only happy and stable relationship in their lives. For many, their mentoring relationship is a true friendship built on trust, generosity and respect. There are some young people who took longer to ‘warm’ to their mentor, or longer to show obvious signs of benefit, but all were benefiting in some way.

The evaluation triangulated data from three sources to examine the changes in young people – from mentors (survey, vox-pops and focus group), young people themselves (interviews and vox-pops), and their parents/carers (interviews and focus group). Some mentors reported that it took a while for a meaningful relationship to develop with their Little, but all felt that their relationship was valuable and helpful to their Little’s positive development.

It seems that mentors were sometimes reluctant to identify changes in their little when prompted in the survey. For example according to the survey, the reported improvements in networks in mentees was moderate (see Figure 2), and perhaps reflects the wording of the survey. When survey data is supplemented by the qualitative data, mentors identified many and varied ways that their Littles had improved their networks. Often, these changes were framed in different, occasionally simpler ways. For example, many comments clearly identified strong and important new networks had been formed, with new friends, by visiting new places, and with their mentor. But this did not seem to translate into the survey with only 50% reporting improvements in networks with mentors – an example where close to 100% would be expected given that each child has a mentor. Similarly, few mentors reported improved community networks for their Littles, but data indicates that all Littles are engaged in visiting new places and trying new experiences almost every week. If the survey data reflects the level of new networks being created for young people, this is an area which could be considered for program improvement. For example, perhaps mentors are not fully utilising the weekly mentor support email for ideas about how to entertain and engage their Littles in new activities. Perhaps training could include advice on accessing community resources.

Parents and young people clearly valued the new networks which were available to Littles. Parents saw such new networks as opportunities which their child otherwise may have missed out

on. Young people were often in awe and very happy about the opportunity to meet new people, to go to completely new places, and to have a trustworthy friend in their mentor.

The networks created for young people have clear benefits for their wellbeing and for the community. Mentors provide young people with a window into a new world, and a new set of opportunities and networks. Young people who are engaged in those new opportunities have potential to carry those beyond the program and to use them as protective resources into the future, with reduced isolation and improved connectedness. Combined with improved life skills, new networks potentially create opportunities for a better life.

The life skills of all young people in the program had improved in some way. All participants in the evaluation could identify ways that Littles had 'bettered themselves', including examples from practical tasks to behaviour and self perception. Perhaps the most heartening results come from the young people who clearly identified changes in their own self-esteem, self-confidence and ability to relate to other people as a result of having a mentor. Mentors and parents/carers could also see (sometimes slow) but definite changes in young people which they directly attributed to the program. In particular, behavioural changes and confidence came through as recurrent themes.

Improved life skills are protective factors for young people in navigating the challenges of life and in seizing opportunities. The positive influence of mentors on young people in this program is without a doubt improving their life skills, particularly through role modelling and through the benefits of a trusting relationship where young people can discuss their thoughts. Improved life skills for young people also has the potential to offer benefits to the community, as young people are more likely to become productive and happy members of the community and follow the leadership of their mentors, and less likely to engage in risky or socially unacceptable behaviours.

Mentors

The mentors who volunteer in the BBSS program are clearly very dedicated and committed people. The time which they invest into their Littles, and the associated training and support requirements, is quite significant. Beyond that, there is a strong feeling of care and kindness which is projected by the mentors themselves and by other participants when they refer to them.

Mentors are benefiting from their involvement in many ways, but probably the clearest reward for them was the satisfaction of helping a young person. Mentors entered the program for different reasons, but all generally felt that their contribution was making a change, and that they were valued. Mentors generally reported strong feelings of being supported in their role, with few exceptions.

Possibly one obvious area to consider into the future is whether mentors and families can be better connected from the beginning of the match, as this appeared to be an issue for some mentors, and also seemed a useful way of engaging and helping parents/carers in the program. Mentors also offered a number of specific ways which they thought training and support could be improved so these could be considered in the future.

The main ways that mentors were benefiting from their involvement was the self-satisfaction of helping young people. However there were also other less tangible ways, such as developing leadership skills in role modelling and communication, and improved knowledge in a variety of areas. In the mentor survey, mentors reported only moderate improvements across different areas (see Figure 8) but the qualitative data from mentors and other sources suggests that mentors are generally very skilled in all areas. The same is true for new networks created by

mentors (see Figure 10). Perhaps the mentor survey questions e.g. “Have you seen *improvements* in...?” does not capture the fact that people who are attracted to the mentoring role were *already* very good at those things!

Mentors often reflected on the fun and new experiences which they were having as a Big Brother or Sister. They were engaging with different activities, places, and people and learning new skills. These factors are potentially building social capital amongst program participants, but also through the ways that mentors interact with their communities more broadly. Mentors also felt that the skills and experiences from being a mentor had equipped them with understanding young people’s viewpoints which is valuable in building community connectedness, trust and social capital.

Parents and carers

The benefits of the program to parents/carers were less obvious compared to Bigs and Littles. Most parents/carers are not very actively involved in the program apart from sometimes attending family days, and the phone call catch ups with program staff. Most parents/carers saw BBBS as greatly benefiting their child, and the benefit to them was about having a break, and potentially a child who is better behaved. That is not to say that parents down-played the benefits of the program, but rather that they could not easily articulate benefits for themselves in terms of improved skills or networks. Those who attend family days enjoyed the social engagement, and a few had received additional assistance from BBBS staff with referrals. However, there were limited benefits for parents and this could be further considered. How can family days engage parents/carers in meaningful ways (i.e. which are educational but not off-putting)? Is there capacity for staff to more actively support parents with any additional needs? Many parents/carers may already be receiving outside assistance and not require BBBS support, but this is certainly worth investigating given the general assumption of parents that the program is just about the children.

Nevertheless, there are intangible benefits for parents whose children are in the program. These include knowing that their child has new opportunities which they otherwise may not have had, having regular contact with mentors and program staff, and the benefits associated with having a happier child such as reduced individual and family stress.

Summary

This evaluation has revealed some detailed and nuanced results regarding the outcomes of the BBBS program. The individualised nature of the program is reflected in the results – everyone has had slightly different experiences and outcomes. In particular, the qualitative data has provided a depth of understanding across a range of themes, which is potentially very useful in informing and shaping the future of the program in meaningful ways.

Participants in the evaluation have been positive and grateful for their involvement in the program. The case studies in this report highlight the ups and downs of mentoring relationships and the reality of the relationship building process from the point of view of mentors. They also demonstrate how meaningful and important mentoring relationships can be. Each story is individual and reflects the personalities, skills and ambitions of the mentor and mentee. The case studies reflect the broader responses of participants in the evaluation – that the relationship between Bigs and Littles are dynamic, important, worthwhile and inspirational.

Big Brothers Big Sisters Adelaide is a high quality and responsive program which is contributing to improvements in the lives of individuals, as well as safer and better connected communities.

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