Youth Mentoring in Ireland
Weighing up the Benefits and Challenges

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Abstract
Internationally, mentoring for young people has become increasingly attractive to policy makers as a micro-level response to the needs of young people deemed to be ‘at risk’ or in need of support. The Big Brothers Big Sisters (BBBS) youth mentoring programme was introduced to Ireland in 2002 and, based on its success and popularity to date, is due to expand considerably over the coming years. This paper outlines key findings from the international body of empirical knowledge in relation to mentoring and from research into the Irish experience of BBBS. It is suggested that implementation of an internationally recognised programme in an Irish context can bring many benefits, but also presents a core set of challenges to social policy in respect of young people who are potentially ‘at risk’.

Keywords
Youth mentoring; social support; prevention.

Introduction
In recent years, increasing attention has been paid by academics, policy makers and youth workers to the potential of mentoring to support young people in their development. Mentoring relationships can be categorised as either ‘natural’ or ‘formal’. Natural mentoring is a relationship between a young person and a non-parental adult (such as teacher, neighbour or sports coach) that develops spontaneously and fulfils functions such as guidance, encouragement and emotional support (Baker and Maguire, 2005). Formal mentoring is traditionally understood as one to one mentoring between an adult and child or young person that is organised through a designated mentoring programme. Whether natural or formal, Freedman (1992) suggests that definitions of mentoring have a consensus in relation to three core elements: the mentor is someone with greater experience or wisdom than the mentee, the mentor offers guidance or instruction that is intended to facilitate the growth and development of the mentee and there is an emotional bond between mentor and mentee, a hallmark of which is a sense of real friendship and trust (DuBois and Karcher, 2005).

While adult mentoring programmes have been in operation in Ireland for many years, formal youth mentoring programmes are a relatively new development. For example, the Youth Advocate Programme (YAP), an American mentoring model introduced to Ireland in response to the 2001 Children Act, uses a wraparound
approach, whereby a paid mentor or advocate is allocated to a young person deemed to be ‘high risk’ (Fleischer et al., 2006). Whereas YAP is targeted at young people in need of intense support, Big Brothers Big Sisters (BBBS) is positioned as a preventative community-based mentoring programme. It matches an adult volunteer with a young person deemed to be in need of support and friendship and they meet once a week for a minimum of one year, during which time their ‘match’ is supervised by a professional project worker. The model of youth mentoring used in the Big Brothers Big Sisters Programme differs to YAP in that mentors are unpaid volunteers, the programme is less time-intensive and the participants are young people who are experiencing risk and adversity but not to a degree that would render them unsuitable for volunteer intervention.  

In Ireland, the BBBS programme has been piloted in Galway, Mayo and Roscommon by Foróige, a national youth work organisation, since 2002 (with the support of the regional statutory health service executive, HSE West). BBBS Ireland is one of the affiliated organisations of BBBS international, which in turn is linked to BBBS America, the best-known mentoring programme in the USA. In the USA, the organisation has been in operation for over a century and currently serves over 225,000 young people in 5,000 communities, through a network of 470 agencies. In the USA, BBBS is a stand alone programme, but in the Irish context it is offered through existing youth services, such as Neighbourhood Youth Projects. In 2005, the Child & Family Research Centre (a joint initiative of HSE West and NUI Galway) undertook an evaluation of the Irish BBBS programme (Brady et al, 2005). As the BBBS Ireland programme is due for national expansion, it is timely to consider some of the lessons from research in relation to youth mentoring, with a particular emphasis on the BBBS programme. This paper outlines the rationale for youth mentoring, empirical evidence in relation to outcomes and factors associated with effective mentoring programmes and relationships. Key findings from a retrospective study into the implementation of the BBBS programme in Ireland are highlighted, and – based on the Irish and international research outlined – the benefits and challenges associated with the development of youth mentoring in Ireland are identified.

Why Youth Mentoring?

In practice, mentoring involves a mentor (adult) offering emotional and tangible advice and support to a mentee (child) through friendship and regular shared leisure time. Overtly, the relationship is about spending time together and having fun but at a deeper level it is about offering a supportive relationship to a young person in need. Mentoring is based on the idea that a created relationship between an older and younger person will act to prevent future difficulties or be a support to a young person facing adversity in their lives. Having a caring adult friend can help to build positive assets for young people to enable them to have:

- A commitment to learning
- A positive sense of self and the future
- Values of caring, social justice, honesty and responsibility; and
- Social competencies of making friends, planning, making decisions and resisting negative behaviour (BBBS, 2001: 2).
Rather than focusing on ‘deficits’ or what the young person lacks, the programme adopts a positive youth development approach that addresses the young person’s full range of needs and the competencies required to help them to become productive and healthy adults.

The rationale for youth mentoring can be considered from a number of perspectives. Firstly, demographic and societal changes are seen to have impacted negatively on relationships and support between adults and young people in communities. Irish society, like many others, has experienced a major change in the structure of the family over the past decade, with an increase in lone parent households, separation and divorce. Advocates of mentoring argue that young people are making their transitions to adulthood in very different contexts from that of previous generations and that opportunities for informal interaction between caring adults and youth have diminished. Secondly, theories such as resilience, social capital and social support offer a theoretical basis for such an intervention. Through ‘strengths based working with children’, these theories have been the foundation for policies aimed at reducing risk for youth, emphasising positive adaptation and areas of competence. Instead of focusing on problems, youth programmes seek to identify ‘developmental assets’ which are competencies and resources within young people’s lives that enhance their chances of positive development. Among the 40 assets conducive to adolescents’ healthy development identified by the Search Institute (2006) are ‘support from three or more other adults’ and ‘adult role models’. Rutter (1995) argues that a long-term relationship with mentors can provide a steeling mechanism, which helps young people to overcome adversity.

Thirdly, mentoring increasingly fits with international policy directions, which favour micro-level interventions (one-to-one work) in the context of an ecological approach (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), to tackle the needs of youth deemed to be ‘at risk’. In Ireland, while youth mentoring is not currently a central policy provision, the principles and approach it espouses are reflective of trends and thrusts in policy and legislation over the past two decades that emphasise common themes of prevention, family, community, interagency co-operation and children’s rights. For example, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child highlights the importance of the ‘four Ps’ of prevention, protection, provision and participation when working with vulnerable children. Other key developments include the Child Care Act (1991), the Children Act (2001), the National Children’s Strategy (Department of Health and Children, 2000), the Best Health for Children Reports (2002) and the Youth Work Act (2001), all of which emphasise the need for preventive programmes to enhance the personal and social development of young people in disadvantaged communities and families.

Is Mentoring an Effective Intervention?

Public/Private Ventures, an independent social research agency, conducted a large-scale randomised control trial evaluation of the Big Brothers Big Sisters Programmes across eight sites in the USA to assess whether the mentoring programme made a tangible difference to the young people’s lives. The results of the evaluation were largely in favour of the programme’s methods, finding that: participants were less likely to start using drugs or alcohol; were less likely to hit someone; had improved school attendance and performance; had improved attitudes towards completing
schoolwork; and had improved peer and family relationships (Tierney et al., 1995). Young people in relationships that lasted for a year or more reported the largest number of improvements, with fewer effects emerging among those in relationships that lasted for six to twelve months. The study concluded that the organised structure and support of the programme was key to the programme’s effectiveness. Intensive supervision and support of the mentors by paid staff, a requisite of the BBBS approach, was especially critical to successful outcomes (Furano, 1993). The meta-analysis by DuBois et al. (2002) of over 55 studies of mentoring programmes found that there is a small, but significant, positive effect for mentees in the areas of enhanced psychological, social, academic, and job/employment functioning, as well as reductions in problem behaviours.

The results of evaluations of one-to-one mentoring provide evidence, therefore, that involvement in programmatically created relationships with unrelated adults can yield a range of tangible benefits for young people. But not every mentoring programme will produce these results. Good relationships supported by adequate infrastructure are necessary in order to achieve success (Sipe, 2002). In terms of the characteristics of effective mentoring programmes, DuBois et al. (2002) found that larger effect sizes emerged when programmes were characterised by practices that increased relationship quality and longevity, including ongoing training for mentors, structured activities for mentors and youth, expectations for frequency of contact, mechanisms for support and involvement from parents and monitoring of overall programme implementation. Frequency of contact between mentors and mentees greatly influences the extent to which processes of change have an opportunity to occur. Greater amounts of time spent together have been associated with higher levels of emotional and instrumental support in mentoring relationships (Herrera et al, 2000) and increased likelihood of the young person nominating the mentor as a significant adult in his or her life. Important programme components are screening of volunteers to ensure they keep their commitment and understand the need to earn the young person’s trust, and orientation and training of volunteers so they understand their role and what is to be expected. Rhodes (2002) states that, since greater numbers of these practices predicted more positive outcomes for youth in mentoring programmes, one-to-one programmes that have met these criteria can assume positive outcomes. Matches that take into account the young person’s and mentor’s preferences are more likely to result in relationships that are satisfying to both members of the pair. Young people who report greater similarity with their mentors report greater liking and satisfaction with their mentors.

A body of research evidence also draws our attention to the fact that some styles of mentoring may be more effective than others. For example, when Slicker and Palmer (1993) evaluated the impact of a school-based mentoring programme on 86 at-risk students, the initial results showed no difference between the treatment and control groups. However, when the differences between those students who were effectively mentored versus those who were ineffectively mentored were evaluated, they found that effectively mentored students had a lower dropout rate than ineffectively mentored students. DuBois and Neville (1997) hold that greater understanding of relationship characteristics and their implications for mentoring effectiveness could aid in the development of more successful programmes. To aid this process, Morrow and Styles
(1995) identified two broad categories of relationship, which they labelled prescriptive and developmental. Developmental mentors devote themselves to developing a strong connection to the young person, centering their involvement on developing a reliable, trusting relationship. They place a strong emphasis on maintaining the relationship and ensuring it is enjoyable. Only when the relationship is strongly established, do they start to address other goals, such as strengthening the young person’s good habits. They include the mentee in the decision-making process about activities and are willing to change their plans according to the young person's preferences. Young people in developmental relationships report feeling a considerable sense of support from their adult friend – believing their friend would be there for them in times of need. 'Just listening' and 'being able to talk about anything' were perceived by young people as helpful in resolving or coping with difficulties. Providing opportunities for fun was one of the ‘mainstays of the relationship’. These volunteers are more likely to make the relationship last long enough to be helpful to the young person. Prescriptive relationships are those in which the goals of the volunteer are primary, with the adult setting the pace and ground rules for the relationship. The researchers found that mentors in prescriptive relationships had unrealistic ideas regarding how the goals could be achieved. They believed that their efforts could transform young person’s values, habits and skills within a year or two. Others required the mentee to take equal responsibility for the relationship and for providing feedback about its meaning. In this way, according to Morrow and Styles, they set the basic ground rules of the relationship beyond the capacity of most early adolescents. Both the mentor and the mentee were frustrated in these relationships. These mentors did partake in some fun activities but were more likely to push for ‘good for you’ activities and offer fun as a reward for ‘good behaviour’ (Morrow and Styles, 1995: 5).

**BBBS in Ireland: The Experience to Date**

As mentioned at the outset, an evaluation was undertaken of the BBBS programme in Ireland in 2005. This section describes the methodology of the study and briefly reviews some of the research findings.

**Methodology**

The research objectives were to provide a descriptive account of the history and operation of the BBBS programme, to locate the programme in its wider service context, to establish how it has been implemented to date and to find out the views of stakeholders involved with the programme including young people, mentors, project workers and programme staff. An assessment of outcomes will be made in the next phase of the research, which will involve an in-depth longitudinal study of young people participating in the programme.

The research focused on all community matches (n=61) made over the period from the programme's establishment in 2002 up to the end of 2004. To access mentees, the research team worked through the BBBS project workers, who sent them a letter explaining the study and seeking consent (from them and their parent/guardian) for their participation in the research. Six young people/parents denied consent and a further five could not be contacted. The research team examined 50 files containing detailed case notes kept by project workers, from which a profile of mentees and an
assessment of match progress could be made. Mentees were also invited to complete questionnaires designed by Public Private Ventures, the American agency which evaluated the BBBS America programme. Accessing mentees to take part was difficult in some cases for reasons such as they had moved away or they did not want to take part. A total of 26 mentees completed questionnaires, representing 43 per cent of all participants. Aggregate data in relation to the programme was also gathered through a questionnaire about the programme which was completed by the project workers in each county. Letters were also sent to all mentors informing them of the study and seeking their participation. A total of 29 mentors (48 per cent of population) completed questionnaires, 13 of whom also attended one of three focus group sessions. Interviews were held with programme management and frontline staff, including co-directors, childcare managers and project workers, while two focus group sessions were held with project workers.6

Structures and Implementation
Foróige and the HSE West developed an interest in youth mentoring as a result of an identified need for a means of supporting young people on a one-to-one basis. The BBBS programme was chosen because it is a model that has proven effective and popular on an international basis, its procedures ensure that risk to the child is well managed and it involves volunteers, which is in keeping with the Foróige commitment to volunteering and civic contribution. In contrast to the US experience, where mentoring programmes are ‘stand-alone’, the Irish BBBS programme is delivered mainly through Neighbourhood Youth Projects (NYPs) in Galway, Mayo and Roscommon. The evaluation found that the strategy of basing the programme in local Neighbourhood Youth Projects was a good one as it ensured that appropriate young people could be selected to participate, the service was non-stigmatising and offered as part of a menu of options. Project workers were trained and experienced youth workers, ideally placed to manage such an intervention. Furthermore, the regional spread of NYPs meant that BBBS achieved a wide geographical range and became embedded in areas of socio-economic disadvantage. Furthermore, essential inter-agency relationships and networks were in place through which referrals could be made. A BBBS programme manual was developed, which clearly set out the standards and procedures governing the programme in Ireland. While the standards and procedures are very detailed and time consuming, they have the support of staff who feel that they are essential to uphold the quality and safety of the programme. Evidence suggests that the intensive intake and application process is followed in all cases and has proven successful in identifying suitable and unsuitable mentors and mentees for the programme.

Maintaining a supply of volunteers is a time intensive task, due to the need for widespread publicity campaigns, postering, answering queries, assessing applications, training and other matters. In a context of limited resources, staff found it difficult to keep up to date with the assessment of volunteer applications. Yet, on the demand side, pressure for places on the programme is strong and staff believe that many more young people could benefit if the capacity was there. Lack of capacity in terms of time and dedicated full-time workers has slowed up the process and resulted in waiting lists for both mentors and mentees.
Profile of Referrals and Participants

From its establishment in 2002 up to the end of December 2004, 61 matches were made by the BBBS programme. Two thirds of participants were referred by NYP staff, while social workers, teachers, residential care staff, parents and a variety of other professionals also made referrals. Analysis of the files undertaken as part of the research indicated that young people participating in the programme were ‘at risk’ of or experiencing adversity and were thus in line with the target group that the programme aims to reach. Participants were faced with a range of issues and difficulties both individual (e.g. poor self-esteem, victim of bullying) and family-related (e.g. parental mental illness, alcoholism, domestic violence). The following pen pictures give some indication of why young people were referred to BBBS:

Boy (12) lives with his parents and sister. Both parents attend psychiatric services. His Dad has a history of alcohol abuse and was abusive at home. The boy has difficulty making friends and wants to be at home with his Mum all the time. The referrer feels he would benefit from new relationships and experiences.

Girl (15) lives with her father and three siblings. Her mother died a few years ago and the girl takes on a lot of adult responsibilities in the home. Her referrer feels she would benefit from having a female friend to talk to and offer her an opportunity to get out of the house.

Although there was a greater demand for places for boys than girls, four out of five participants were female due to a difficulty in recruiting male volunteers compared to female volunteers. The majority of the young people participating fell into the 11–14 age range on intake, with 12 and 13 years the most common ages for young people on the programme.

Benefits to Young People

A survey of 28 young people participating in the programme showed that the majority felt emotionally engaged, satisfied with the match and believed that the relationship was youth-centred. An assessment of the match files found evidence that a strong relationship developed in 52 per cent of cases, while a reasonably strong relationship developed in 28 per cent of cases. The conclusion reached was that approximately four out of five matches made develop into good relationships. Approximately one out of five matches did not become well established, having encountered some difficulty as a result of poor bonding, personal difficulties on either side, one party moving away or other problems. In a small number of cases it was because the young person did not engage or the relationship did not ‘click’, which underlines the need for careful matching. Close scrutiny of the mentees’ survey offers insights into how they perceived their relationship with their mentor – for example, none of the respondents agreed that their mentor made fun of them in ways they did not like, but 23 per cent said that it was true or sort of true that they could not trust their mentor with secrets for fear that they would tell their parent or guardian. These areas highlight the importance of the development of trust between the mentor and mentee. Open-ended questions answered by the young people highlighted their broad support for the programme, as the following quotes exemplify:
'We got to do a variety of different things, we got to do things I wouldn't do otherwise, we had loads of fun, (mentor) is great craic, we got to meet loads of different people.'
(Girl, 12, Mayo)

'It's a brilliant idea, I could talk to him about anything that I wouldn't be able to say to others.'
(Boy, 16, Galway)

'I like having a mentor because its interesting to meet different people and my mentor is very nice. She always takes an interest in what I want to do and she takes an interest in my life. She is very cool.'
(Girl, 14, Mayo)

'It should continue, it's really good, especially for children who are sad. It's really good for them.'
(Girl, 14, Galway)

'It's good for a person who has no brothers/sister or doesn’t see his/her brothers/sister very much.'
(Boy, 16, Mayo)

Almost three quarters of mentors felt that the young person had benefited, while just over a quarter were unsure. Gains in confidence, communication skills and a more positive outlook were witnessed by some mentors in relation to their mentees. Having someone to confide in and help him or her to deal with problems was also felt to be beneficial for the young person. The following are examples of mentors’ views:

'I think my little [i.e. mentee] has more confidence and a more positive outlook on life than previously. I also think the other members of her family have benefited by seeing her having a positive relationship.'

'He has now very little attention-seeking behaviour (used to be different). He “behaves” in groups different now than 1 year ago.'

'I see myself as a good friend, support and advice giver to my little sister. I am a person who she can discover or experience a different perspective with. I see myself as someone who can be there when she needs me and learn new ways of doing things.'

Those who were unsure if the young person had benefited cited the lack of feedback from the mentee or the difficulty in establishing if he or she had benefited as a reason.

'As he is very quiet, you don't get much feedback. At least he learned how to swim and we went to the pool most of the time.'

'I really don't know – she always pretended that everything was nice and that life was great when I know it is far from perfect. But we did have fun and she always met me and seemed interested in the match.'
Foróige project workers believe that the programme is very beneficial to the young people. They have witnessed positive changes in ‘little brothers and sisters’ and believe that the majority of matches result in positive outcomes. Furthermore, BBBS is perceived as ‘cool’ by young people, an important factor in youth services.

**Evaluation Conclusions**

There is a high level of demand and support for the Big Brothers Big Sisters programme in Galway, Mayo and Roscommon from young people, parents, volunteers and professionals, who have welcomed what they believe to be a positive, preventative intervention programme. Through providing one-to-one support to a young person, it clearly fills a gap in service provision and yet is complementary to existing youth provision. The model has proven to be cost-effective, through building on volunteer inputs and working through NYP structures. The programme manual provided welcome clarity and guidance for project workers. However, while what has been achieved represents good value for money, the evaluation found that outcomes from the programme could be improved if additional resources were available. It is in the area of practices to increase relationship quality and longevity that the programme has most room for improvement – for example, through the provision of greater support to mentors in the form of training, group activities and facilitating mutual support between mentors. While BBBS Ireland is working very well, there is a need to focus clearly on making sure that every match is as good as it possibly can be in order to maximise outcomes for young people.

**Weighing up the Benefits and Challenges of Mentoring**

Like most other interventions to improve outcomes for children, mentoring programmes such as BBBS have both distinct benefits and clear challenges, illustrated in Figure 1 as a weighing scale, balanced in favour of the benefits of the programme.

**Figure 1: Weighing up the benefits and challenges of Big Brothers Big Sisters from a policy and practice perspective**

**Benefits**
- A proven model
- Draws on non-professional (informal) support in the context of a professional programme
- Popular appeal
- Volunteers and youth gain from experience
- Low cost to implement

**Challenges**
- Minimising risk to child
- Involving and encouraging parents
- Targeting youth most likely to benefit rather than youth most ‘at risk’ (i.e. maintaining preventative focus)
- Resourcing to support high quality matches

**Benefits**

Social support literature emphasises the importance of informal support networks (comprising parents, siblings, friends and extended family) for young people, as they tend to be favoured by young people as a first source of support in times of need or crisis (Cutrona and Cole, 2000; Tracy et al., 1994). At a most basic level, it could be argued that friendships and trusting relationships prevent most of us from needing professional services. Therefore, as policy, anything that can create such a bank of
support should be tried (if pragmatic) ahead of more ‘heavy duty’ intervention. Mentoring is undertaken outside of ‘nine to five, Monday to Friday’ and therefore has the capacity to provide support to young people when needed and at times that many social services are unavailable. Moreover, informal relationships are a non-stigmatising way of working with young people, who may value the fact that the mentor is not paid to help him or her but does so out of what is perceived as genuine interest and caring (Ghate and Hazel, 2002).

As outlined above, BBBS was subject to a large-scale randomised control trial evaluation, which found improvements for the intervention group relative to the control group on a range of outcomes (Tierney et al, 1995). While there is consensus in the research community that additional research is needed into youth mentoring and that many questions remain unasked and unanswered (Rhodes, 2002), available evidence to date justifies the confidence that mentoring advocates have in the model. But from a policy perspective, in order to measure the impact of BBBS more robustly, further research is needed. The decision of Foróige, the host agency of BBBS Ireland, to complete a longitudinal experimental design evaluation is therefore a welcome one.

The Irish experience of BBBS suggests that it is a model that has great popular appeal among young people, parents, youth workers and referrers from a range of agencies. All stakeholders spoke very highly of the model due to its simplicity, high standards and the opportunities it offers both young people and volunteers. From a policy perspective, therefore, the model is attractive on the basis that it is proven, popular, relatively inexpensive and facilitates the emergence of flexible and informal support to vulnerable young people.

Challenges

Some particular issues and challenges associated with the implementation of mentoring are worthy of consideration. Despite comprehensive screening of volunteers, there is the obvious risk of introducing a child to the company of an unsafe adult. However, it should be noted that BBBS has stringent protocols and safeguards, which are well implemented. There is also a risk that if the match between mentor and young person does not work, the effects on the child may be negative. A US BBBS evaluation found that young people in relationships that terminated within six months reported disimprovement in several areas, including increases in alcohol use (Grossman & Rhodes, 2002). Another consideration is that parents who are under stress and lacking confidence in how they deal with their offspring may feel undermined by their child’s mentor who they might perceive as ‘doing things’ with and for the young person that they cannot offer. The approach taken by the programme is to involve the parent in discussing and reviewing the match, but a balance has to be struck between ensuring the parent is informed and included and protecting the bond of friendship between the mentor and mentee.

In terms of targeting the service, it is essential that policy makers and programme planners remain cognisant that the BBBS model of mentoring is more effective at preventing problem behaviours among young people who are ‘at risk’ for developmental problems or personal factors than turning around those who are already manifesting such problems. In designing services, it is essential to be realistic about what a mentor can do and what a young person can take in the relationship.
Largest effect sizes are evident among youth experiencing environmental risk and disadvantage, alone or in combination with factors constituting individual-level risk (DuBois et al., 2002). There is no evidence of a favourable effect for young people identified as ‘at risk’ solely on the basis of individual-level characteristics (e.g. academic failure). Furthermore, enhanced benefits are apparent in the context of low levels of perceived family support, indicating a need for more refined measures of risk associated with the existing support networks of youth than, for example, just targeting single parent families as has been practice in some programmes in the USA (Rhodes, 2005). Thus, service creation needs to be aware of not just need and social geography but also of issues such as maturation and maltreatment.

Experience of the Irish programme suggests that maintaining a flow of volunteers and young people is crucial to the health of the programme. The larger the programme, the bigger the pool of young people and adults from which appropriate matches can be made. For smaller programmes, options regarding matches are narrowed and there is a risk that matches will be made on the basis of necessity rather than compatibility. In all areas, there were difficulties in achieving a gender balance among matches due to the shortage of male volunteers. Resources influence the degree to which the programme can achieve a healthy supply and demand. Therefore, while the cost per match is low, adequate investment must be made to ensure that programmes are resourced to operate on a scale that facilitates optimal matching.

According to Sipe (2002), one of the strongest conclusions that can be drawn from the research on mentoring is the importance of providing mentors with support in their efforts to build trust and develop a positive relationship with young people. The Irish study showed that volunteers can be insecure about their ability in the face of perceived apathy from the young person, illustrating the need for ongoing support and reassurance from practitioners, many of whom struggle with the same issues. Ongoing availability of staff support is necessary to sustain high levels of mentor efficacy, while opportunities for mentors and youth to participate in agency-sponsored activities are also beneficial in helping bonds to develop (Parra et al, 2002). The findings that children may actually experience negative outcomes from short-lived matches indicate that vulnerable children would be better left alone than placed in relationships that cannot be sustained (Rhodes, 2002). Keller (2005) proposes that the qualities that constitute a positive relationship – such as closeness, duration, mutuality, trust – are enhanced by the effort of the caseworker and parent to support the relationship. For these reasons it is incumbent on programme staff and management to ensure that every match is the best it can be.

**Conclusion**

Based on the emerging body of evidence in relation to mentoring, practitioners and policy makers should give it due consideration as a work model above other, sometimes safer but less effective, traditional professional service interventions. However, there is a need to develop mentoring to a realistic scale (in terms of resources and size), to respond to the demands of care-giving for mentors and to be sensitive to the sometimes tenuous nature of accessing support for vulnerable young people. Specifically, in the context of developing the programme further in Ireland, consideration will also be needed in relation to specific cultural nuances. For example, Ireland is a relatively
small country and the proximity of extended family living nearby who could also be enlisted as supporters and possibly as mentors, needs some consideration. Furthermore, as Foróige offer the programme as an ‘add-on’ to youth work, BBBS is not strictly a stand alone intervention. A rigorous evaluation possibly through the use of a randomised control trial methodology of any increase in effect size of the benefits which accrue from the mentoring relationship, would now be both timely and helpful. Finally, there is an increasing interest in enhancing volunteerism in Ireland (Task Force on Active Citizenship, 2007). Identifying the exact benefits which ‘Bigs’ get from providing friendships to young people in need would be most helpful in furthering volunteering both in policy and practice terms.

Notes
1 Formal mentoring can also include new forms such as group mentoring, team mentoring, school-based and cross-age peer mentoring.
2 For example, Homestart (McCuley, 1999) which focuses on parent-to-parent support mentoring, builds on early projects such as the Community Mothers Programme (Mullin et al., 1990)
3 Big Brothers Big Sisters also runs a school-based mentoring programme which matches an older student with an incoming first year student in secondary schools. This article refers only to the community-based programme which matches an adult volunteer with a young person.
4 http://www.bbhsa.org
5 Colley (2003) questions the assumption that the benefits of mentoring can be replicated in planned and institutional contexts on the basis that it is impossible to conclude whether the mentoring relationships created are a cause or an effect of resilience. They may be neither, but ‘just a researcher-constructed correlation’ (p.524). Less resilient young people may have difficulty bonding with adults, in which case mentoring may reinforce their sense of isolation.
6 The fieldwork for the research was greatly supported by the co-operation and commitment of many people, particularly the BBBS Project Leaders and Project Workers.
7 It should be noted that the Irish programme followed the USA BBBS norm of having same sex matches only, in part as a child protection safeguard.

References


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