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# Breaking Up Is Hard to Do: A Qualitative Interview Study of How and Why Youth Mentoring Relationships End

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## Abstract

Endings in youth mentoring relationships have received little empirical attention despite the fact that many relationships do end. The present study utilized qualitative interview data collected from participants in a longitudinal study of community-based mentoring relationships to examine how and why the relationships ended and how participants experienced these endings. Interviews with 48 pairs of mentors and youth and the youth's parent or guardian conducted at the time the mentoring relationship ended were analyzed. Three types of procedural endings (formal goodbye planned and completed, formal goodbye planned but not completed, and agency ended) were identified as were five main reasons for relationship endings (changes in life circumstances, youth dissatisfaction or disinterest, mentor dissatisfaction, gradual dissolution, and mentor abandonment). Interrelationships between ending types and reasons are discussed, as are the roles of relationship strength and program support in these processes.

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youth mentoring, adult–youth relationships, relationship dissolution, qualitative research

Many programs that match youth with adult mentors hope that the relationships formed will grow into more natural ties that are sustained indefinitely, even into adulthood. Indeed, a number of formal youth mentoring relationships last a year or more (Grossman & Rhodes, 2002; Schwartz, Rhodes, Spencer, & Grossman, 2013) and a recent meta-analysis of evaluations of mentoring programs in the United States found that mentored youth demonstrated positive gains in a range of social, emotional, behavioral, and academic outcomes (DuBois, Portillo, Rhodes, Silverthorn, & Valentine, 2011). However, as many as a third to a half of formal mentoring relationships end before the initial time commitment, often a school or calendar year, is met (Bernstein, Dun Rappaport, Olsho, Hunt, & Levin, 2009; Grossman, Chan, Rhodes, & Schwartz, 2012; Grossman & Rhodes, 2002). Some research suggests that when relationships end prematurely they tend to have little positive effect and may result in negative consequences for the protégés, including decreases in self-worth and perceptions of scholastic competence (Britner & Kraimer-Rickaby, 2005; Grossman & Rhodes, 2002; Herrera, Grossman, Kauh, & McMaken, 2011; Karcher, 2005). Unfortunately, we know little about mentoring relationship endings, despite the frequency with which they occur (Spencer & Basualdo-Delmonico, 2014). Given the continued rapid growth in mentoring programs, there is a critical need to better understand relationship endings and their consequences, especially for the youth participants. In the present study, we examined in-depth qualitative interview data collected from a group of mentoring matches established through two community-based formal mentoring programs to understand why and how the relationships ended and how different types of endings were experienced by the mentors, youth, and the youth's parent or guardian.

The early phases of relationship formation and development have tended to receive the bulk of attention in both the empirical and practice literatures on youth mentoring. The recruitment and selection of prospective mentors, matching mentors and youth on the basis of shared interests, providing pre-match training and ongoing support once the relationships have begun are all considered to be critical components of an effective program and have been associated with greater benefits of mentoring for youth participants (DuBois et al., 2011). Less consideration has been given to processes and expectations for ending the relationship.

Keller (2005), in his stage model of youth mentoring relationships, proposes that mentoring relationships typically meet one of two ends—dissolution or redefinition. Mentoring relationships may end in response to some clear event, may fade out in the face of neglect of the relationship, disappointment, betrayal, or unresolved conflict, or may simply dissolve once they have served their purpose or outlived their usefulness. Others, rather than dissolve completely, may move through a process of redefinition and continue in a different form. Ideally, formal mentoring relationships would end when the prescribed commitment has been met in time-limited programs, or the need for or relevance of the mentoring has diminished in open-ended programs. In actuality, however, endings are initiated at varying time points and for a number of reasons by mentors, youth, the youth's parent or guardian, the mentoring program or any combination of these. Unexpected life events (e.g., moves) may preclude the continuation of some relationships. Young people's enthusiasm for mentoring may wane when other interests and time demands compete for their attention, especially if the wait for a mentor has been lengthy. Other endings may result from negative experiences, such as difficulty communicating and arranging outings or dissatisfaction and disappointment with the relationship (Spencer, 2007).

Along with accounting for why youth mentoring relationships end, an understanding of how they end and the impact different types of endings may have on the youth participants is needed. Parallels have been drawn between mentoring and psychotherapy relationships (Spencer, 2004; Spencer & Rhodes, 2005), and research on psychotherapy would suggest that the way mentoring relationships end likely matters. Well-handled terminations of psychotherapy relationships are thought to solidify gains made and prepare the client for the loss as well as offer opportunities to resolve issues that have arisen in the course of the relationship itself (Joyce, Piper, Ogrodniczuk, & Klein, 2007). Forced terminations of psychotherapy relationships tend to be harder for clients than natural ones (Gelso & Woodhouse, 2002) and can provoke a range of responses, including feelings of anxiety and loss, sadness, self-blame, and anger or a complex mix of these (Penn, 1990). In one study (Roe, Dekel, Harel, Fennig, & Fennig, 2006), clients who experienced premature terminations and those who indicated not processing the termination with their therapist tended to report more negative feelings about the treatment. Others have found that clients also have many positive responses to the ending of treatment, especially when planned and mutual, such as joy and pride in their accomplishments and in their movement toward greater independence (Marx & Gelso, 1987; Roe et al., 2006). Clients report desiring clear, planned endings (e.g., Marx & Gelso, 1987), and it is commonly accepted practice wisdom that abrupt endings have the potential to be harmful in both the near and long term (Gelso & Woodhouse, 2002).

In addition, endings may impact youth differentially depending on their prior experiences and the vulnerabilities they bring into the mentoring relationship. Many youth in mentoring programs have experienced significant loss and disruptions in relationships with important adults, whether due to parental separation, incarceration, or transfer to foster care (Herrera, DuBois, & Grossman, 2013). Dashed expectations in mentoring relationships may be of special significance to these youth. Here again, research on psychotherapy has found associations between termination experiences and aspects of the client, therapist, treatment approach, and course of treatment. For example, Marx and Gelso (1987) found that the importance of exploring feelings about the end of therapy was greater among those clients who had a history of significant loss, such as death or divorce of parents.

Adult mentors may vary in the way they handle the ending of the relationship and this may depend, at least in part, on the nature of the relationship they formed with the youth. For example, research on interpersonal relationships has indicated that adults tend to use more direct strategies for ending relationships when they perceive themselves to be at personal fault for the ending or the cause is external (e.g., moving) rather than due to some difficulty within the relationship, as well as when there is overlap in their social networks, and they are likely to continue to encounter the person (Banks, Altendorf, Greene, & Cody, 1987; Baxter, 1982; Sprecher, Zimmerman, & Abrahams, 2010). Importantly, more direct approaches to relationship dissolution have been found to be associated with less negative reactions to the ending and lower levels of personal distress (Collins & Gillath, 2012).

In the absence of empirical study of endings in youth mentoring relationships, we have little knowledge of why and how relationships end and how program participants experience these endings. The purpose of the present study was to begin to address this gap by providing descriptive accounts of endings among a group of youth mentoring relationships from the perspectives of the mentors, youth and the youth's parents or guardians. In-depth interview data collected at the time the relationships ended were analyzed to detail the participants' understandings of why and how these relationships ended and the impact of these endings.

## **Method**

### ***Participants***

Included in this analysis were all mentor–youth pairs participating in a prospective, longitudinal study of mentoring relationships whose relationships ended before the final data collection point at 24 months (48 gender-matched pairs; 31 female). The full sample for the larger study consisted of

67 mentor–youth relationships followed from the time of match up to 2 years, with data collected from the mentor, youth, and the youth's parent or guardian at multiple time points. The mentor–youth relationships in 18 of the 67 cases were still active at 24 months and were therefore not included in this study of relationship endings. One case, for which no data were obtained from any participants at the time the match ended, was also excluded. At the time the longitudinal study began, the youth were 9 to 15 ( $M = 12.5$ ,  $SD = 1.3$ ) years of age, and the parents/guardians were 29 to 61 ( $M = 39.4$ ,  $SD = 6.9$ ) years of age. Of the youth, 50% identified as Black (including African or Caribbean), 15% White, 17% Latino/Hispanic, and 17% Multiracial or Other backgrounds; two youth did not identify their race/ethnicity. Fifty-two percent of the parents/guardians identified as Black, 19% White, 17% Hispanic, and 10% Multiracial or Other backgrounds; one parent did not identify his or her race/ethnicity. The mentors were 20 to 55 years of age ( $M = 27.0$ ,  $SD = 7.01$ ), with 73% identifying as White, 10% Black, 4% Latino/Hispanic, 4% Asian, and 8% Multiracial or Other backgrounds. Sixty-seven percent of the parents/guardians reported having a household income of less than US\$29,999 per year, and 65% of the mentors reported having an income of more than US\$45,000. The mentor–youth pairs were matched from 2 to 24 months, with 43% ending prematurely, or before the end of the initial 1-year time commitment, and 57% ending between 12 and 24 months after being matched, as reported by the mentoring programs.

## Procedure

Participants were recruited through two affiliates of Big Brothers Big Sisters of America (BBBSA) in an urban area in the Northeast. The stated goal of these programs is to facilitate supportive, nurturing, and enduring one-to-one relationships between adult volunteer mentors and youth for a minimum of 1 year. Matches, as these relationships are called by the agencies, can be brought to a formal end by the mentor, youth, parent, or agency. The agency will step in to end a match when the mentor and youth are no longer meeting agency standards for frequency of outings and communication, they are unable to reach the mentor or youth, or the youth has aged out of the program. In the programs from which these participants were recruited, the closure plans typically contained clear steps for communication to all parties that the match has ended, which could vary from a goodbye phone call or personalized letter between the mentor and youth to a final outing or specific closure activity, such as creating a memory book.

Once a match had ended, the mentor, youth, and parent or guardian were contacted by a member of the research team to participate in final

“match-end” interviews, which were used for the present analysis. A total of 123 in-depth (Johnson, 2002), semistructured (Seidman, 1991), match-end interviews (38 mentor, 42 youth, and 42 parent) were conducted with participants from 48 matches. The mentor interviews were conducted by telephone, and the youth and parent interviews took place in the participants’ homes. The interviewers utilized a semistructured interview protocol, and topics addressed included how and why the relationship ended, the role the agency played in the ending process, participants’ experiences of the ending, and their perceptions of the overall nature and quality of the mentoring relationship. Participants were asked questions such as, “Whose idea was it to end the match?” “What were the reasons for ending the match?” “How was the ending of the match handled?” and “How did you feel about the match ending?” Youth and parents were assured that their individual responses would not be shared with the mentor or the agency and vice versa. Interviews typically lasted 40 minutes, the shortest ones lasting approximately 15 minutes (some youth) and the longest approximately 70 minutes (some parents and mentors). Mentor and youth participants received US\$15 gift cards, and parents received US\$50 in cash upon completion of the interview. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed with the transcriptions then verified before analysis.

## *Analysis*

A thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was conducted with all 123 mentor, youth, and parent interviews collected from the 48 matches. An initial codebook was established based on a first reading of 30 interviews. The fundamental descriptive information captured in the initial codebook focused on five areas we expected would provide insight into the nature of the match endings: (a) stated reason for match end, (b) procedural handling of the match end, (c) feelings about how the ending was handled, (d) impact of the match end, and (e) the strength of the mentor–youth relationship. The codebook was reviewed by three research team members, and additional interviews were coded by case (examining mentor, youth, and parent interviews together) using the qualitative software program Atlas.ti. After coding approximately a third of the cases, the codebook was refined and used to code the remaining interviews and to recode those interviews previously coded. One team member served as the master coder, reviewing the work of and providing feedback to the other coders to ensure consistency in coding across cases. Coders met biweekly to discuss questions and clarify definitions related to coding categories.

Once a case was completely coded, the coder constructed a narrative summary (Way, 1998) of the case organized by the coded themes, first describing the experiences of the mentor, youth, and parent/guardian individually and then summarizing the themes across the participants to construct an integrated account of the relationship ending. These case summaries were then reviewed by three members of the research team to discern distinct categories within three of the primary areas of focus: reasons for the match endings, procedural handling of the match endings, and the strength of the relationships. Agreement was reached about the mutually exclusive categories assigned to each match. Mentor, youth, and parent impressions of the relationships were considered together when determining each of the categories. Cross-case analyses of how and why matches ended were then conducted by compiling conceptually clustered matrices (Miles & Huberman, 1994) organized by case and using the coder summaries for each of the three primary areas of interest identified above (i.e., reason for match end, procedural handling of match end, and strength of mentor–youth relationship). The cases were sorted and analyzed multiple times, first by the procedural handling of the match end, followed by the reason for the match end, and finally by relationship strength to discern patterns in the themes, which are detailed below.

## Results

Five distinct reasons for mentoring relationships endings were identified in the data (see Table 1 for more detail on each): (a) genuine, unforeseen *changes in life circumstances* (e.g., one party moving away; 19 matches); (b) *youth dissatisfaction or disinterest* (7 matches); (c) *mentor dissatisfaction* (9 matches), rarely communicated to the youth as such but rather shrouded by a “cover story” offered by the mentor attributing the ending to a change in the mentor’s life circumstances; (d) *gradual dissolution* (8 matches), with neither party sustaining the effort to maintain contact; and (e) *mentor abandonment* (5 matches) by stopping all communication and essentially disappearing. Three types of procedural endings for these relationships were identified: (a) a *planned and completed* formal ending and goodbye between mentor and youth (20 matches), (b) a *planned but not completed* formal ending and goodbye (8 matches), and (c) an *agency ended* (20 matches) termination of the relationship at the request of the mentor, youth, or parent, or when no direct communication or contact between mentor and youth had occurred for some time. The strength of match relationships fell into five categories (see Table 2 for more details on each): strong (15 matches), adequate (4 matches), tenuous (3 matches), out of sync (9 matches), and weak (17 matches).



**Table 1.** Reasons for Relationship Endings.

Reason	Definition	Number of matches
Changes in life circumstances	Unforeseen changes in either mentor's (15 matches) or youth's (4 matches) life circumstances that precluded continuation of match (e.g., unexpected moves, significant job changes or loss, and mentors deciding to pursue continued education in another geographic area).	19
Mentor dissatisfaction	Unmet expectations, not feeling like they were making a difference in the youth's life, not feeling as close or connected to youth as hoped, not feeling appreciated by youth, more challenging and/or not as fun as expected.	9
Youth dissatisfaction	Youth no longer interested in having a mentor (e.g., did not feel like he "needed" it anymore) or dissatisfied with some aspect of relationship (e.g., did feel connected, not having fun).	7
Gradual dissolution	Relationship faded away in absence of steady communication between mentor and youth; participants gave up. Communication difficulties resulted in increasingly more time elapsing between outings, and these relationships seemed to lose what momentum they had and dissolved.	8
Mentor abandonment	All contact with the mentor lost in spite of multiple attempts on the part of the agency and/or family to reach the mentor. Parents and youth described experiencing a sudden loss of communication with the mentor or a lack of contact after several canceled outings. Youth and parent had no understanding of why the mentor was unresponsive.	5

Examining matches by the reasons for ending the match or the procedures for those endings alone did not reveal any discernible patterns. However, when these were considered together along with the strength of the match relationship, various patterns emerged. Figures 1 and 2 display trends in the reasons for ending and procedural endings, respectively, based on the strength of the relationship. Most of the strong relationships (10 of 15) ended due to unforeseen change in life circumstances that prohibited the continuation of the formal mentoring relationship, although almost a third of these planned to stay in touch. Nearly all (13 of 15) developed and completed a plan for

**Table 2.** Relationship Strength.

Relationship strength	Definition	Number of matches
Strong	Descriptions of the match indicated that both the mentor and the youth felt connected and were invested in the relationship.	15
Adequate	Descriptions indicated that the relationship met the basic program expectations, and all parties seemed generally satisfied; no clear evidence that a strong emotional connection had formed.	4
Tenuous	Some connection apparent in participants' descriptions of the relationships, but the connection seemed fragile, like it might easily disintegrate in the face of common threats to mentoring relationships (e.g., difficulties communicating, infrequent meetings) and/or no clear evidence that a strong emotional connection had begun to form. Participants seemed comfortable with where the relationship was going but spoke tentatively about the relationship.	3
Out of sync	Participants expressed distinctly different expectations of and experiences in the relationship, with youth often reporting more positive experiences, and mentors expressing personal dissatisfaction or perceptions of dissatisfaction on the part of the youth.	9
Weak	Participants' descriptions indicated that neither mentor nor youth experienced much of a connection and/or both expressed dissatisfaction with the relationship.	17

ending the relationship that involved some type of direct communication between the mentor and youth. In contrast, weaker relationships tended to end for a wider variety of reasons and were less likely to involve direct communication between the mentor and youth. Not surprisingly, most of the weaker relationships ended because of mentor or youth dissatisfaction. More surprising is that an almost equal number of the stronger and weaker relationships ended due to gradual dissolution of the relationship or mentor abandonment.

The interrelationships between the reasons for relationship endings, the procedural handling of the endings and the strength of relationship are further delineated in the sections below. These are organized around the three types of procedural endings—planned and completed, planned but not completed,

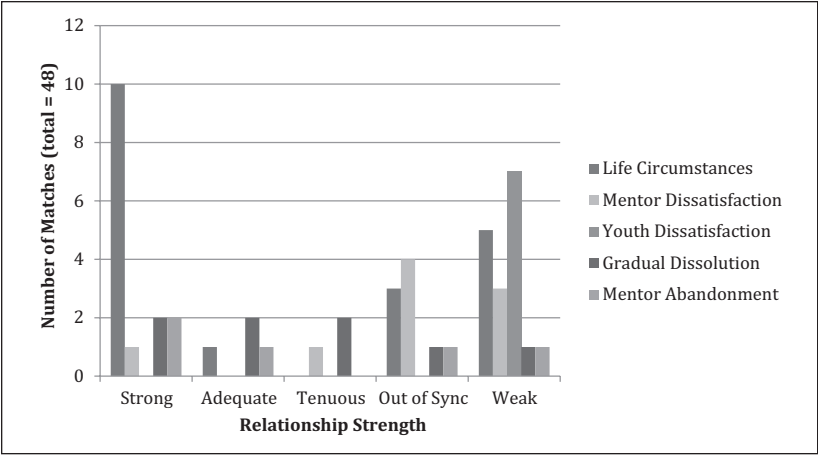


Figure 1. Relationship strength and reason for ending.

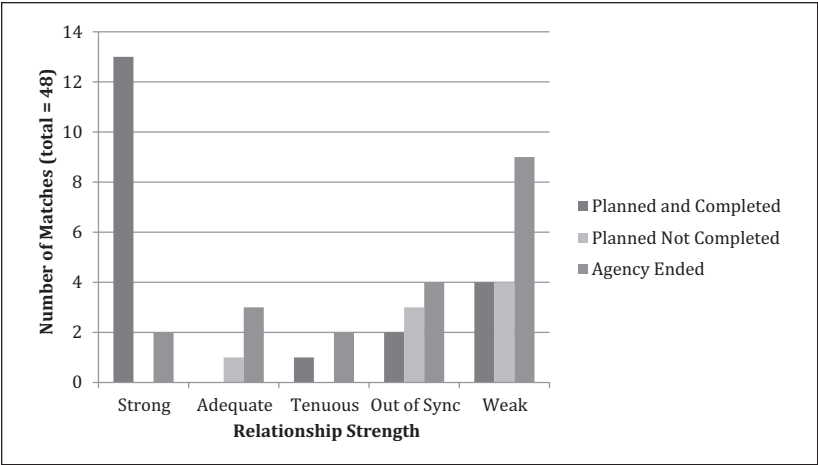


Figure 2. Relationship strength and procedural ending.

and agency ended. Within each group, mentors', youths', and parents' descriptions of the impact of these different types of endings are also detailed.

*Planned and Completed*

Not quite half of the mentors and youth in this study (20 matches) brought their relationship to an end by saying goodbye to one another directly, with

some goodbyes planned well in advance and others taking place with little to no advance warning. In most of these cases, the mentors, youth, and parents all had a relatively clear understanding that the relationship had ended and why. Agency staff members were often involved in planning and facilitating the closure process but were never the only conduit for communicating the relationship ending. The amount and type of contact between mentors and youth ranged from a single goodbye phone call to as much as 3 months advance notification, preparation, and multiple in-person meetings before the relationship was formally ended.

*Relationship strength and reason for ending.* Most (13 matches) of the relationships with planned and completed endings were strong, with five intending to keep in touch beyond the ending of the formal mentoring relationship. Among those with strong relationships, almost all of the match endings were necessitated by changes in life circumstances, typically for the mentor, but in one case due to the youth's family moving out of the area. The strength of relationship among the remaining matches in this group was determined to be either tenuous (1 match), out of sync (2 matches), or weak (4 matches). In both out of sync relationships, the mentors continued with the match until meeting the 12-month commitment despite not feeling connected to the youth. These mentors offered "cover stories" that allowed them to end the match without revealing their dissatisfaction with the match. What distinguished these cases from those in the "changes in life circumstances category" were statements by mentors indicating they would have continued the relationship despite these situational challenges had they been more satisfied and/or descriptions of their matches as being a "hassle" or "burden" or reports of feeling "drained" by the youth. Both mentors felt the need to honor their commitment to the agency and thought that closure was an important part of the relationship. Of the tenuous and weak relationships that ended with a formal goodbye, one gradually dissolved, three ended due to the mentor or youth dissatisfaction, and one ended due to a genuine life circumstance.

*Impact of procedural ending and relationship loss.* Although most of the participants in this group did express disappointment that the mentoring relationship was ending, they also tended to feel that the closure process was handled well, especially those with the most advance notice of the ending. The parents and youth in matches that ended due to changes in the mentor's life circumstances, whether genuine or offered as a "cover story," conveyed the greatest satisfaction with the closure process. No discernible differences were noted in the expressed experiences of the youth and parents with mentors who ended due to genuine life circumstances and those who offered "cover

stories.” What appeared to matter most was that a clear and plausible reason for the match end was communicated by the mentor. Furthermore, well-planned and clear endings appeared to make the loss of the relationship easier to bear for some youth.

For example, in one case, a mentor ended the match to attend his top choice graduate school in another state. The mentor contacted his mentee’s mother to discuss how to handle ending the match. The mentor then told the youth directly during one of their outings, and when they returned to the youth’s home, the mentor, youth, and parent had a conversation together about why the mentor was leaving, to explain what graduate school was and convey the importance of education for the mentor. As the mother said, “[the mentor] was good with explaining things to him and making him feel better about himself and things like that . . .” The mentor also made it clear to the youth that even though their formal match would be ending, they would be able to stay in touch. They then continued with their regular outings until the mentor moved. The youth’s mother noted the end was “hard” for her child and that for “a week maybe a week and a half” after the mentor’s departure, he was “moping around.” However, the mentor called frequently, and the mother stated that she observed that they “would laugh and they would joke, they would text message each other” so that “it was okay after a while.”

In cases where the endings were not as well-planned, or there was a mismatch between what the participants wanted or expected from an ending process and what actually transpired, participants tended to report feeling disappointed or angry about how the ending was handled. Parents and youth expressed surprise, disappointment or frustration when there was very short notice about the match ending or when the final goodbye was not in person (e.g., a letter was sent) or when they felt they were not provided with enough support from the agency to execute a proper goodbye. As one parent, who would have preferred to have more notice about her child’s mentor joining the army, expressed, “I was really surprised . . . that it came up kind of all of a sudden that he like was no longer going to be his match anymore. So, I was surprised and disappointed.” She was also displeased that she first heard the news from the agency rather than the mentor. One youth received a goodbye letter and small gift from her mentor but wished they could have spoken to say goodbye, “just to clarify things about why we had to end it.”

Despite the fact that most of the participants in this group felt satisfied with the way the closure process was handled, they still expressed feelings of disappointment and sadness that the relationship itself was ending. The greatest disappointment was expressed by the youth and parents in the strong or out of sync matches. They conveyed feelings of sadness about losing what was from their perspective a positive relationship that they expected to

continue were it not for outside intervening factors. Two parents even described their sons as being “devastated” by the end of the relationship. One of these parents stated, “it’s hard because he, it’s not like a day that he does not go without saying [mentor]’s name.” Some parents also expressed their own disappointment that the mentor would not be in their child’s life for several years as they had hoped when they enrolled their child in the program.

Mentors who had to end the relationship due to a change in their life circumstances described feeling guilty about having to end the relationship and badly about the impact they expected the loss to have on the youth. Some also indicated that they felt the weight of the parent’s disappointment. As one mentor explained, “I felt certainly as if . . . I had disappointed her [the parent] a little by not, you know, sticking it out.” Among the relationships that had gradually dissolved or were ended by youth who were dissatisfied, the mentors tended to express generally feeling fine about the relationship ending, viewing it as a natural progression or a reflection of the youth’s decision. In relationships where the mentors themselves were dissatisfied with the match, they tended to express feelings of relief about the ending, as they had felt unappreciated or otherwise frustrated in some way about the way the relationship was going. As one mentor said,

I feel a little sad, but I also feel relieved because it is quite a commitment, and, like I said, it wasn’t ideal. So . . . I hope that I did a good thing over the last year. But, I am glad that it’s done.

### *Formal Goodbye Planned But Not Completed*

For eight matches, there had been some intention or plan for the mentor and youth to say goodbye to one another directly, but for various reasons, this plan was never fully carried out. The plans for ending the relationship, however minimal, included steps that would be taken to ensure some form of direct communication between the mentor and youth (e.g., mentor will write a letter, the match will have one more outing) that the match was ending. In some cases, agency staff played a role in the development of the plan, but like those whose formal plans were completed, they were not intended to be the sole messenger regarding the ending. In many of these cases, there was some communication between the mentor and parent about the match ending, but there was no follow-up discussion or explicit closure meeting between the mentor and youth.

These endings often seemed messy or unsatisfying in some way. For example, in one case, the mentor called the family several times to end the

match but could not reach them. Instead of following up with a letter or visit, he informed the agency of the situation and then ceased contact. In another case, the mentor planned a final meeting with the youth, but when settling on a date proved difficult, the mentor gave up on saying goodbye directly. The mentor expressed regret about the way it ended, saying she felt as if she had “disappeared into the night.” The parent described the circumstances a bit differently, stating that the mentor had left a message asking them to call her back but the family’s attempts to reach the mentor were unsuccessful, leaving the closure process incomplete.

*Relationship strength and reason for ending.* None of the relationships whose endings were planned but not completed were characterized as strong, and all but one ended before a full year. The relationships in this group were characterized as adequate (1 match), out of sync (3 matches), or weak (4 matches). Half of these relationships ended due to genuine changes in the mentor’s life circumstances, one gradually dissolved, and the remaining three ended due to mentor or youth dissatisfaction with the relationship.

*Impact of procedural ending and relationship loss.* Even though most of the relationships in this group were relatively weak, many of the youth reported feeling sad and disappointed by the ending of the match and expressed some disappointment that the match had not met their initial expectations. Most youth also indicated that they wished they had the opportunity to say goodbye to their mentor and that they felt sad, disappointed, and upset about the way the ending had been handled. In three of these cases, the parent and mentor had spoken about the ending of the match, but the youth had not been included or given a chance to say goodbye. One youth, who considered his mentor to be a close confidant, said that the lack of a formal goodbye made him question how the mentor felt about him: “I don’t think he likes me no more . . . Because he left without saying, he just left without calling.” For another youth, the way the match end was handled led her to rethink what had been generally positive feelings about the mentor and about the relationship.

Some parents also expressed disappointment about the loss of the relationship as they had high hopes for the match and what it could have meant for their child. For other parents, the disappointment they felt was less about the loss of this specific relationship and more about how the ending was especially disappointing given how long it took to get a mentor in the first place. One of these parents described how the procedural handling had dampened her enthusiasm for obtaining a new mentor for her son. In contrast to the active role she took in encouraging her son’s first match, she was being more passive about a possible rematch: “After the way that it ended, I’m kinda leaving it up to him if he wants to do it [again] or not.” She added that this

experience had made her feel more cautious about trusting another adult to serve as a mentor for her son: “[the mentor] didn’t handle it the right way and . . . it discouraged me from wanting to put [youth] in a situation again.”

In contrast, although two mentors said they felt disappointed that things had not worked out, most did not indicate that they felt sad about the loss of the relationship. Some stated that they felt guilty either because they thought it was upsetting to the youth or because they had not met their 1-year commitment. One mentor expressed feelings of guilt and regret about the way she handled the end of the match. At the outset, she had “felt really excited about getting involved” but never having felt much of a connection with her mentee, meetings became an “inconvenience,” especially in light of the time it took to travel to her mentee’s home and the pressure she felt at work. After canceling several meetings, the mentor eventually called the agency and said that she needed to end the match. It was recommended that she have one last visit with her mentee, but efforts to schedule this meeting “just didn’t really ever work out” and the idea eventually “fizzled away.” The parent reported that she and her daughter had left “numerous messages,” but the mentor never returned these calls.

### *Agency Ended*

A large number of relationships (20 matches) in this study were brought to a formal close by the agency without any planned direct communication between the mentor and the youth or parent. These endings were either *initiated* by the agency because contact had been lost with one of the parties or were *mediated* by the agency in response to one party notifying staff that they no longer wished to continue the match. Among the agency initiated cases (9 matches), five were ended because the mentor abandoned the match and could not be reached. In agency-mediated cases (11 matches), although no direct communication (e.g., a final phone call, outing or letter) about the closure between the mentor and youth or family was planned, all were aware that the agency was in contact with the other party about ending the match.

The agency initiated endings when both parties had appeared to lose interest in the relationship or repeated attempts to reach one of the participants failed. In all but one case, the mentor was the unreachable party, leaving the youth and their parents without any explanation for why the mentor stopped communicating. One parent recounted her experience with a mentor who seemingly disappeared after two meetings:

They went to play basketball and they went to play ball in the park . . . okay that was fine so then the next week I think she had something to do and then the following week they went to . . . the Children’s Museum . . . And that was the



last time we heard from her and we called . . . left messages, never called back but I knew she was saying that she was, might, was going to go visit her grandparents . . . the . . . agency you know they kept calling and calling and they got no response from her.

This parent was both worried about the mentor, stating, “I don’t know what happened . . . I just hope she’s okay” and also frustrated by the way it ended, wishing that the mentor had “at least call[ed] the agency and let them know you know, just to not let us think it’s something bad that we did.”

*Relationship strength and reason for ending.* Most of the relationships in this group (15 matches) were weak, tenuous, or out of sync, and most ended because of either mentor or youth dissatisfaction. Almost all the cases in the sample that ended due to youth dissatisfaction (5 of 7) had agency-mediated endings. In the cases where the endings were a consequence of the mentor’s explicit dissatisfaction with the relationship, the mentors typically offered a “cover story,” such as demanding work or family commitments, that was often partly true to explain the end of the relationship and avoid having to convey their dissatisfaction to the child and family. In five cases, the mentor abandoned the match and could not be reached so the agency formally ended the match. Four were ended by mentors who genuinely attributed the ending to a change in their life circumstances, and four matches had gradually dissolved.

*Impact of procedural ending and relationship loss.* Given that most of these relationships were relatively weak and half of them ended early, it is not surprising that most of the youth and mentors did not express overwhelmingly negative feelings about the loss of the match itself. However, regardless of relationship strength, many participants expressed dissatisfaction with the way the relationship ended. Youth and parents described feeling confused about why the relationship ended and sad or even angry about not having an opportunity to have a final conversation or simply say goodbye to the mentor. As one parent said, “You just don’t stop returning people’s calls . . . Common courtesy, you know, you speak to the parent, explain the situation then you speak to that child.” Several youth indicated they were disappointed or hurt that they did not hear about the match ending directly from the mentor.

The ending of many of the relationships in this group were drawn out over an extended period of time, which seemed to contribute to some participants’ frustration with the process. As one parent said,

I would have assumed if it was gonna end it would’a been more uh, kinda planned out, instead of kind of fizzling out and sort of drawn out over a long

period . . . this would be easier if it was, if it was a more organized ending but it doesn't seem like that's how it was.

One youth, whose mentor decided to end the relationship, described his wish for greater efficiency and clarity in the ending process: “. . . it would've save[d] me some time cause I called him a lot . . . I would have stopped calling cause I knew it was, where he was at, and doing.” Lending insight into his perception about how the uncertainty affected him, he also surmised that if the ending been handled in a more timely way, he might not “have been so depressed and would have gone outside and stopped worrying about stuff” and could have pursued obtaining another mentor sooner.

Some of the parents whose children were abandoned by the mentor expressed frustration and anger at the mentors and the agency. About her child's mentor, one parent said, “I don't like the way it ended. I wish she would have said something or communicated some kind of way, like if there was something going on, just kind of said it.” Another parent thought that the agency should have done more to prevent these kinds of endings as she had experienced this with her daughter more than once: “They always come, and they never say bye.” These endings also seemed to take their toll on the youth. One youth, described the mentor and her as “a perfect match” and stated that the relationship “really ended up changing” her, but also said she felt “a little sad” about not having an opportunity to say goodbye to her mentor and that she was “not sure” she wanted to get another mentor because she was worried that the “same thing” could happen: “I don't want every Big Sister to just leave.”

In contrast, participants in the agency-mediated endings that were the result of youth dissatisfaction reported somewhat different experiences. The mentors, youth, and parents in these matches all seemed generally satisfied with procedural handling of the match since the youth were no longer interested. Some of the parents and mentors expressed disappointment about the relationship ending but were understanding and respectful of the youth's wishes.

## Discussion

This study is the first to empirically examine why and how youth mentoring relationships end. Among the relationships studied here, stronger relationships tended to end for external reasons, such as changes in life circumstances for either the mentor or the youth, and were typically ended through planned and direct communication between the mentor and youth about the ending. Weaker relationships were more likely to end due to dissatisfaction with the relationship on the part of the mentor or the youth or to simply dissolve.

Gradual dissolutions of strong relationships were rare, occurring in just two cases. Endings of weaker relationships were more passive and less direct, and in many cases were ultimately carried out by the mentoring agency. Although most participants expressed sadness and disappointment about the loss of the relationship, mentors, youth, and parents who experienced clearer and more direct endings indicated they felt more favorably about the process, whereas youth and parents in relationships that ended more indirectly expressed feelings of confusion, disappointment and even anger about how the ending was handled. In cases of mentor abandonment, the parents and youth were particularly distressed, with some youth wondering what they might have done to prompt the mentor's departure. In some cases, parents' descriptions indicated the impact on the youth of the match ending was greater than what was expressed by the youth themselves. Moreover, it was clear that parents were also impacted. Some parents expressed anger about the loss for their child and the distress they perceived it to have caused. Some indicated that this also felt like a loss for themselves and for their families as a whole.

These findings align with the research on endings in interpersonal relationships more generally that has found that people tend to use more direct approaches when relationship endings are due to external causes rather than as a consequence of some difficulty within the relationship itself, and that such endings are experienced as less distressing (Banks et al., 1987; Baxter, 1982; Sprecher et al., 2010). For many of the youth in this study, the ending of their mentoring relationship was distressing, even when the relationships themselves had been relatively weak. Placing these findings alongside studies that have found that premature endings are associated with decrements in youth functioning (Britner & Kraimer-Rickaby, 2005; Grossman & Rhodes, 2002; Herrera et al., 2011; Karcher, 2005) raises the question of whether these decrements may be in part a consequence of poorly managed endings.

Participants in the strongest relationships tended to engage in more planned and thoughtful closure processes and generally felt like the ending was handled well. The mentors' descriptions of the endings of these relationships conveyed a high level of investment in the process itself and in insuring that the ending was experienced as favorably as possible by the youth. In contrast, mentors and youth in the weakest relationships seemed less invested in the closure process and in many cases did not engage in a formal goodbye in a direct way. Mentors in weaker relationships who ended their relationships in a more planned and thoughtful way also conveyed that they felt it important to meet the commitment they had made to the agency and to the youth, and that engaging in a closure process was part of meeting their commitment. Poorly handled endings, even of the weaker relationships, were still experienced negatively, especially when the mentor was viewed by the youth

and parent as having initiated the ending. These findings align with those from research on psychotherapy. Relationships that have gone well tend to end well and less successful ones tend to be more vulnerable to poorer endings (Quintana & Holahan, 1992).

Although a number of these relationships ended as a result of some change in life circumstances that precluded the continuation of the formal relationship, almost two thirds of these relationships ended for some other, potentially preventable reason. There may be little that programs interested in fostering longer-term relationships can do to completely eliminate closures, but these findings do suggest that greater focus on the reduction of premature closures may be warranted. Furthermore, given that fewer than half of the pairs in this study engaged in a closure process that involved clear and direct communication about the ending of the relationship between the mentor and youth, there may be much that programs can do to achieve more favorable closures. This study suggests that weaker relationships and ones that either the mentor or youth are dissatisfied with are the most vulnerable to bypassing the closure process. Participants in these relationships may need significant support from program staff to first recognize the importance of engaging in a closure process and then to carry one out. The findings here indicate that the issue of match termination should be a part of prematch training, with the mentor and youth agreeing at the start to engage in the termination process. Moreover, given the lack of discernible differences in how youth and parents experience planned endings when mentors ended the relationship due to genuine life circumstance and those who used similar "cover stories" to hide their personal dissatisfaction, programs should consider other strategies for improving mentor accountability and making participation in the closure process more comfortable for participants.

Close to half the relationships ended because the youth or mentor was dissatisfied. The reasons for this ranged from the mentors feeling like they were not appreciated, not making much of a difference, or in some other way not having the experience they had expected to the youth feeling like they had outgrown their desire for a mentor. Many were plagued with difficulties keeping in touch due to inconsistencies in the telephone services of the youth's families and the changeable nature of their often complex family schedules, with some mentors being more persistent in the face of these challenges than others. This speaks to the need for close monitoring and ongoing support of mentoring relationships by agency staff. Prematch training may only go so far in preparing mentors for the challenges they may face, and some mentors may need ongoing guidance and support as well as reassurance that their efforts are meaningful. Some youth and families may need assistance with prioritizing the mentoring relationship if it is something they wish

to sustain. Considering the significant developmental changes that youth go through, mentors and youth may need guidance in how to renegotiate the nature and structure of the mentoring relationship to align with the youth's changing needs over time. Agencies should also closely monitor matches to identify when relationships may need to end and ensure that the closure process is handled well and completed in a timely manner.

Caution should be taken when interpreting and applying the findings from this study to mentoring relationships more broadly. The experiences of a small group of participants in only one form of mentoring program, namely, community-based programs, whose goal was to foster long-term relationships, are represented here. In addition, the interviews examined here were conducted at the time the match ended. Although this yields considerable insight into the participants' experiences of the closure process itself, a complete understanding of what led to the demise of these relationships is more limited. Furthermore, although we observed a connection between relationship strength and type of ending among these matches, there may be other individual (e.g., personality, attachment styles) and contextual factors that contribute to both. These should be examined in future research on match endings.

Future research should also seek to determine whether planned endings marked by discussions of the ending and reflections on the gains made or key relationship milestones serve to enhance or solidify the benefits of the relationship, as the psychotherapy literature would suggest. Conversely, do poorly planned, unprocessed endings diminish the efficacy of the experience as the evidence from this study suggests? It would also be important to discern whether unplanned endings due to changes in life circumstances (e.g., moving out of the area) versus some type of challenge or difficulty in the relationship (e.g., mentor inconsistency, mentor or youth abandonment) differentially influence youth outcomes.

Endings are a normal part of interpersonal relationships, and given the frequency with which endings in youth mentoring relationships occur, greater attention to the causes, consequences, and types of ending is needed. It can be difficult to say goodbye—especially when the end of the relationship feels like a loss or failure in some way to the participants. This study indicates that good closures to youth mentoring relationships require considerable scaffolding on the part of mentoring programs as well as follow through by all participants. The findings also indicate that close examination of endings can deepen our understanding of the mentoring process, as participants' reflections in these interviews highlighted challenges encountered along the way that went unaddressed and may have contributed to the erosion of some of these relationships. In many programs, a great deal is invested upfront in the

initial screening and matching process to launch new relationships, and much is often expected from participants during these early stages. The findings here indicate that the closure process warrants similar close attention and investment and that not attending to closure may contribute to diminished returns on that significant upfront investment by all involved.

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