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Youth mentoring as a supportive resource for young people involved with CAMHS: *An exploratory study*

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1

Introduction

1. Introduction

Adolescence is an important developmental stage in which lasting patterns of health and wellbeing are established (Sawyer et al., 2012). Due to the social, mental and physical changes that occur during this transitional period, adolescence is regarded as a time of increased sensitivity and vulnerability, with research suggesting that mental health issues surge during the adolescent period (Schwarz, 2009; Malla et al., 2018). Epidemiological evidence from both national and international research suggests that adolescent mental health and wellbeing has deteriorated significantly over the last two decades (Cosma et al., 2020; Centre for Disease Control, 2020). There is widespread concern that this decline in youth wellbeing has been exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic (Fegert et al., 2020). Mental health problems can have a severe impact on the social and emotional development of the young person, are linked to poorer long-term health, and are also a major risk factor for suicidal behaviour (Collishaw & Sellers, 2020; Patel et al., 2018).

Public health professionals and policy makers have identified the need to respond to this decline in youth mental health as a public health priority (Collishaw & Sellers, 2020). In Ireland, youth mental health is widely recognised as an area in need of increased policy focus, with Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures, the National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2014–2020, acknowledging the importance of integrated policy solutions to promote youth mental health and wellbeing.

In recent years, it has been increasingly recognised that while clinical interventions are important and necessary, young people with mental health needs may also benefit from community intervention and support (Hart et al., 2021). Young people experiencing mental health issues may become isolated from their peers and community and may have few opportunities to interact socially with others or may find these interactions challenging. It is argued that community and social networks have the potential to enrich the lives of young people experiencing mental health issues and provide multiple layers of support to help address problems or difficulties. In the context of youth mental health, community services have been found to aid recovery and promote wellbeing (De Wit et al., 2016; Jorm, 2012) and may help to relieve the pressure on primary and secondary care services (Chatterjee et al., 2017).

Youth mentoring is a community-based intervention which can help extend the reach of psychological support for young people and is a potentially powerful tool for the prevention of and intervention in youth mental ill-health (Cavell et al., 2021; DuBois et al., 2018a; Hart et al., 2021; Munson & Railey, 2016). Youth-mentoring programmes create a 'match' or relationship between a young person and a volunteer mentor and they meet weekly for a year or more. The youth-mentoring model recognises that many young people benefit from support and friendship from a caring adult outside of their family and peer group (Dolan and Brady, 2012). Research has indicated that youth who participate in mentoring programmes, such as Big Brother Big Sister (BBBS), show improved social, emotional, cognitive and behavioural outcomes (Goldner & Ben-Eliyahu, 2021). The national youth organisation Foróige has been operating the BBBS youth-mentoring programme in Ireland since 2002. A Randomised Control Trial (RCT) evaluation of the programme in Ireland found evidence of enhanced emotional wellbeing and perceived support among young people participating in the programme (Dolan et al., 2011).

In Ireland, the Health Service Executive (HSE) Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) is responsible for the provision of youth mental health services. In 2018, CAMHS entered a partnership with Foróige's Big Brother Big Sister programme with the aim of facilitating access to youth-mentoring relationships as an additional support for young people attending or exiting CAMHS. It was envisaged that the mentoring relationships would help young people to build and develop protective factors, such as emotional resilience, self-esteem, positive social networks and community engagement, while also building capacity to address risk factors, such as bullying (Foróige, 2018). The partnership arose in the context of the HSE National Service Plan (2018), which aimed to improve access for young people to appropriate locally based early intervention and prevention services.

The purpose of this study is to examine the working partnership between CAMHS and the Foróige BBBS mentoring programme and explore the value of youth mentoring from the perspective of multiple stakeholders, including youth, parents/guardians, BBBS mentors, BBBS staff and CAMHS staff. As part of the study, 40 participants (10 mentors, 10 youth, 10 parents/guardians, 10 staff) took part in semi-structured qualitative interviews exploring their experiences and opinions of the BBBS mentoring programme.

Results indicated that young people typically developed trusting, empathic friendships with their mentors, with participants identifying several factors which they believed influenced the strength of the mentoring bond which developed. Participants typically regarded the BBBS programme as a beneficial resource for young people and their families, with programme participation frequently linked to positive social–emotional, identity and cognitive development. While certain programme features, such as the provision of support from a non-familial adult, were frequently commended by participants, participants also made recommendations for how the BBBS programme and/or its relationship with CAMHS could be enhanced. Overall, the findings from this report provide unique insights into the utility of youth mentoring as an additional supportive resource for young people involved with mental health services, and have notable implications for research and practice.

1.1 Adolescence

Adolescence is considered a critical period of development, one which is characterised by extensive mental, physical, social and emotional changes (Dahl et al., 2018; Rapee et al., 2019; Sawyer et al., 2018). During this period, the teenage brain undergoes significant changes, establishing neural pathways and behavioural patterns that last into adulthood (Schwarz, 2009). As children advance through the adolescent period and into adulthood, they progress through a number of developmental milestones and learn various social and cognitive skills which enable them to function effectively in a variety of social settings (Chicchetti & Rogosch, 2002). However, due to the transitional nature of this developmental period, adolescence is often regarded as a time of increased vulnerability (Steinberg, 2005), in which young people's lived experience can have disproportionate and lasting impacts on their future health and happiness (Hertzman & Boyce, 2010; Sawyer et al., 2012). Hence, adolescence is considered an important developmental stage as the social skills and experiences young people acquire during this period can have a huge impact on quality of life and psychological wellbeing throughout their lifespan (Goldbeck et al., 2007; Sawyer et al., 2012).

1.2 Prevalence of youth mental health issues

The teenage years mark a period of peak onset for several mental health problems (Gyllenberg et al., 2018; Lee et al., 2014). Findings from national surveys with adolescents (aged 12–17) in the US indicate that between 13–20% of young people report experiencing mental, emotional or behavioural disorders each year (Ghandour et al., 2019). Recent estimates from the Institute of Health Metrics and Evaluation (2019) suggest that approximately one in seven young people (aged between 10–19 years) experience mental health problems. Similarly, findings from a meta-analytic review assessing the prevalence of mental health disorders among young people in 27 different countries, indicated that 13.4% of children and adolescents experience serious mental health concerns (Polanczyk et al., 2015). In fact, research suggests that of all the health conditions affecting young people, problems with mental health are the most prevalent (Lee et al., 2014), accounting for approximately 45% of the disease burden in adolescents and young adults worldwide (Gore et al., 2011). A recent study conducted by Auerbach et al. (2018) with 13,984 first-year college students across eight countries (Australia, Belgium, Germany, Mexico, Northern Ireland, South Africa, Spain and the United States) found that 31% of students

reported experiencing at least one DSM-IV listed mental health disorder over the last 12 months. Notably, across these eight countries, those who were found to be experiencing mental health concerns typically reported experiencing an onset of symptoms in early to mid-adolescence (Auerbach et al., 2018). Due to the high prevalence of mental health problems, it is now estimated that mental health costs are the highest single source of global economic burden in the world and mental health issues that emerge before adulthood impose a ten-fold higher cost than those that emerge later in life (Bloom et al., 2012; Lee et al., 2014).

High prevalence estimates of youth mental health concerns have also been observed within the Irish context. In Ireland, findings from the national 'My World Survey' indicated that the number one health issue affecting young people is their mental health (Dooley et al., 2019). Other research by Healy et al. (2013) revealed that mental health issues were one of most common reasons for young people presenting at General Practitioner (GP) offices in Ireland, with 17% of youth patients reportedly experiencing mental health problems. Recent epidemiological research has indicated that high numbers of young people in Ireland are experiencing mental health concerns at any given time (Cannon et al., 2013; McMahon et al., 2019). For example, Coughlan et al. (2014) found that 27% of 11–13-year-olds in Ireland met the diagnostic criteria for a current diagnosis of an Axis I DSM-IV disorder. Furthermore, Cannon et al. (2013) estimated that by age 13, one in three adolescents in Ireland is likely to have experienced some type of mental health problem and that young Irish people may experience higher rates of mental disorder than similarly aged young people in other countries. This is concomitant with reports from the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (2020) which identified Ireland as having one of the highest youth suicide rates in the European Union.

1.3 Rise in youth mental health issues

Both national and international evidence suggests that the number of young people experiencing mental health concerns is increasing (Dooley et al., 2019; Gyllenberg et al., 2018; De Looze et al., 2020). For example, large youth-screening studies have evidenced sharp declines in youth happiness and life satisfaction in recent years, while rates of loneliness, anxiety, depression and self-harm have increased (Keyes et al., 2019; Twenge, 2020). A comprehensive review of secular trends in child and adolescent mental health found evidence of a substantial increase in the diagnosis and treatment of a wide range of psychiatric and neurodevelopmental disorders in recent years, including emotional issues and antisocial behaviour (Collishaw, 2015). Furthermore, evidence from a recent investigation examining changes in adolescent mental wellbeing from 2002–2018 across 36 European and North American countries indicated that there was a significant rise in psychosomatic complaints among young people over this period, particularly in high-income countries (Cosma et al., 2020).

In the US, a 2019 report from the National Institute of Mental Health suggested that youth mental health concerns have risen sharply over the last ten years, with increases in youth sadness/hopelessness (up from approximately 26% in 2009 to 37% in 2019), suicidal contemplation (up from 14% to 19%), and suicide attempts (up from 6% to 9%) were well documented. Similarly, research by Mojtabai et al. (2016) found that the 12-month prevalence of major depressive episodes among adolescents had increased from 8.7% in 2005 to 12.5% by 2015. In the UK, a five-fold increase in the number of university students reporting mental health problems was observed from 2007 to 2017, despite only a modest rise in student numbers, while other research found evidence of a 68% increase in hospital self-harm presentations among 13–16-year-olds in the UK between 2011 and 2014 (Carr, 2017; Gunnell et al., 2018). In Ireland, findings from the 'My World Survey 2' indicated that there had been a notable increase in anxiety and depression among young people from 2012 to 2019 (Dooley et al., 2019). Additionally, Griffin et al. (2018) found that from 2007 to 2016 there was a 22% increase in the rate of self-harm among Irish adolescents presenting to hospitals.

Recently, researchers and health professionals have expressed widespread concern about the impact that the Covid-19 pandemic may have on youth mental health and wellbeing, with preliminary evidence suggesting that youth mental health issues have been exacerbated by the pandemic (Creswell et al., 2021; Magson et al., 2021; Racine et al., 2020). Although young people may be less likely to suffer severely from the Covid-19 virus, children and adolescents have nonetheless experienced massive changes in their daily lives as a result of the pandemic – including school closures, home confinement and social distancing rules – which can take a toll on emotional and social wellbeing (Ravens-Sieberer et al., 2021). Last year, a rapid review examining child and adolescent mental illness found evidence of an increase in depressive and anxiety symptoms among children and adolescents since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic (Racine et al., 2020). This year, research from Germany indicated that two-thirds of children and adolescents felt burdened by the Covid-19 pandemic and reported lower life satisfaction and poorer mental health following the onset of the pandemic. Furthermore, findings from the CO-SPACE study in the UK evidenced an increase in attentional, behavioural and mental health problems among children, and that these increases aligned with the introduction of national restrictions (Creswell et al., 2021). Research has also highlighted the negative impact that the Covid-19 restrictions appear to have had on young people's wellbeing within an Irish context, with children and adolescents reporting adverse mental health effects, including heightened feelings of social isolation, depression, anxiety, and increased maladaptive behaviour (O'Sullivan et al., 2021). Other research indicates that since September 2020 the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) in Ireland has been experiencing unprecedented referral rates, which are placing a strain on service provision (McNicholas et al., 2021).

1.4 Supporting young people

Adolescent mental health is a major public health concern, not only due to the high prevalence of mental health issues experienced during the Covid period, but also due to the substantial impact poor mental health can have on the young person and their family (Auerbach et al., 2018). Research shows that experiencing mental health issues during childhood or adolescence can interfere with young people's capacity to cope with daily life and may impede their ability to achieve social, emotional, cognitive and academic milestones (Ghandour et al., 2019), leading to a downward spiral of disadvantage and suffering for young people and their families (Malla et al., 2018). As such, the promotion of mental health and wellbeing among adolescents has been identified as an important policy objective by researchers and health professionals alike (Collishaw & Sellers, 2020; Patalay & Simmons, 2018; WHO, 2021). Recently many researchers and health bodies have advocated for a holistic approach to mental health promotion (Rickwood et al., 2019). In particular, it is argued that a more flexible, integrative approach to service provision is needed, with several scholars proposing that community-based initiatives can help support mental health services to address the mental health needs of young people (Cavell et al., 2021). Some recent research provides support for this integrated approach, with findings suggesting that community services may play an integral role in nurturing youth mental health, and can help reduce mental health stigma, foster social inclusion, and aid recovery (Jorm, 2012; Hart et al., 2021). Other researchers contend that community-based services are important resources that can help address health and social inequities by promoting social wellbeing (Castillo et al. 2019). Similarly, research investigating the impact of healthcare workers referring patients to link workers in (non-healthcare-based) community services, and other forms of youth social prescribing, has provided preliminary evidence to suggest that this type of integrative approach can help ease the demands placed on primary and secondary care services (Chatterjee et al., 2017). Of these community-based services, research suggests that youth mentoring can help extend the reach of psychological support for young people and is a potentially powerful tool for the prevention of and intervention in youth mental ill-health (Cavell et al., 2021; DuBois et al., 2018a; Hart et al., 2021; Munson & Railey, 2016).

1.5 Youth mentoring

Youth mentoring is an umbrella term used to describe a special dyadic relationship that develops between a young person and a non-parental adult (Cavell et al., 2021). In these relationships, the older adult often takes on the role of a 'mentor' to the young person, providing friendship, guidance, and support when needed (Rhodes, 2002). The formation of a strong, emotional bond between the mentor and young person is often regarded as the hallmark of a successful mentoring relationship (Raposa et al., 2019a; Silke et al., 2019). Theory and research suggest that the establishment of long, close, supportive youth–mentor bonds is key to the success of mentoring (Cavell et al., 2021; Rhodes et al., 2017). Although these types of relationships may develop naturally, various one-to-one formal mentoring programmes have been established which aim to formally match a young person (who is typically 'at-risk') with an adult volunteer (DuBois et al., 2011). Formal mentoring programmes have grown in popularity in recent years as they are thought to enable young people to develop social relationships and access forms of social support that they may not otherwise be exposed to (Goldner & Ben-Eliyahu, 2021; Raposa et al., 2017). Of these formal mentoring initiatives, the Big Brother Big Sister (BBBS) programme is one of the most established, and one of the few programmes to have been extensively evaluated in a number of countries (Grossman & Tierney, 1998; DeWit et al., 2014; Dolan et al., 2011; Matz, 2014).

Over the last number of decades, a body of research has accumulated to suggest that mentoring can be a vital asset for young people (Goldner & Ben-Eliyahu, 2021; Van Dam et al., 2018). Research has highlighted the positive impact that formal mentoring programmes, like BBBS, can have on various developmental outcomes (Du Bois et al., 2011; Matz, 2014; Raposa et al., 2019). For example, mentoring has been linked to lower antisocial behaviour, including reduced juvenile offending, delinquency, aggression and substance use (Cavell et al., 2009; DuBois et al., 2018b; Jolliffe & Farrington, 2007; Tolan et al., 2008). Mentoring has similarly been associated with improved cognitive development, with research indicating that quality mentoring relationships and mentor support can promote positive changes in young people's school engagement, school attitude, sense of school belonging, academic self-efficacy, and problem solving (Erdem et al., 2016; Larose et al., 2018; Randolph & Johnson, 2008). Research also supports a connection between mentoring and youth social–emotional development. Studies have found that young people who participate in community-based mentoring programmes show increases in their self-esteem, social connectedness, confidence, social skills, prosocial behaviour and perceived social support (Erdem et al., 2016; King et al., 2018; Marino et al., 2020; McGregor et al., 2017). However, it is important to note that other research has found that mentoring programmes produce inconsistent or weak effects on youth development (Keller et al., 2019; Raposa et al., 2019; Rhodes, 2020). These variations in findings have led researchers and theorists to hypothesise that the type of developmental changes evidenced by young people, and the magnitude of these developments, may be influenced by the quality of the relationship that the young people develop with their mentors and by other specific programme practices (Christensen et al., 2020; DeWit et al., 2019; Raposa et al., 2019).

Recently, researchers have proposed that mentoring may be a useful tool to help support the mental health needs of young people (Cavell et al., 2021; Meyerson, 2013; Munson & Railey, 2016). Evidence from a number of evaluation studies suggests that young people who take part in formal mentoring programmes show significant improvements in their wellbeing and mental health functioning (DeWit et al., 2016; Haft et al., 2021). For instance, Herrera et al. (2013) examined the impact of mentoring on a wide range of youth outcomes and found that mentoring was linked to fewer depressive symptoms among young people. Additionally, research by DuBois et al. (2018a) found that young people attending outpatient mental health services who were paired with a mentor as part of a community-based mentoring programme showed significant improvements in functioning, according to clinician reports. Moreover, a review by Meyerson (2013) found that for young people who experience

mental health problems participation in mentoring programmes has been associated with reduced internalising, externalising and interpersonal difficulties. Nonetheless, despite these initial promising results, it is generally agreed that further research is needed in order to draw firmer conclusions about whether mentoring can be a supportive resource for young people who are involved with mental healthcare services and/or are experiencing significant mental health concerns.

1.6 Partnership between the Foróige BBBS programme and CAMHS

Foróige is a large Irish youth organisation that works with over 50,000 young people aged 10–18 annually through volunteer-led clubs, staff-led youth projects and youth cafes throughout Ireland. Foróige has been the host organisation for the internationally recognised BBBS programme in Ireland since 2001. Foróige's Big Brother Big Sister mentoring programme matches an adult volunteer to a young person (aged between 10 and 18 years) of the same gender. The aim of the programme is to facilitate the development of a caring and supportive friendship that will reinforce the positive development of the young person. The target group for the programme is young people who would benefit from additional support in their lives, including those identified as being at high risk (McGregor et al., 2017). In this programme, the mentoring relationship is known as 'the match', the mentor is referred to as the Big Brother or Big Sister, and the mentee is known as the Little Brother or Little Sister. Participation in the programme is voluntary for both the young person and mentor. The mentor and mentee meet once a week, for one to two hours, and the initial commitment is for one year. The friendship between the mentor and mentee is considered the most important aspect of the intervention. The 'matches' are managed by Project Officers who are employed by Foróige.

The Irish BBBS programme was evaluated using a randomised control trial methodology with a sample of 164 young people in 2011 (Dolan et al., 2011). Standardised survey measures were used to assess outcomes for young people aged 10–14 years at four time points over a two-year period for intervention and control groups. The RCT results show that the mentoring intervention was effective in relation to emotional wellbeing and social support. The research also found the Irish BBBS programme showed strong adherence to best practice standards in youth mentoring (Dolan et al., 2011). Subsequent qualitative studies of the Irish BBBS programme have found positive outcomes from mentoring for young people in the youth justice system (Murphy & Brady, 2016) and those in care and leaving care (Brady et al., 2020).

The HSE Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services is a specialist service for people under the age of 18 experiencing mental health difficulties. The service provides assessment and treatment for young people and their families who are experiencing mental health difficulties, which may include moderate to severe depression, anxiety, eating disorders and self-harm. Young people must be referred to CAMHS by a health professional such as a GP, social worker or psychologist. CAMHS is provided by multi-disciplinary teams, including psychiatrists, psychologists, nurses, social workers and childcare leaders. In 2018, approximately 1.6% of the adolescent population (just over 19,000 young people) in Ireland were attending CAMHS at any one time (HSE Standard Operating Procedure, 2019).

1.7 The current study

Research suggests that mentoring shows promise as a potential intervention and prevention tool for young people who experience socio-emotional and mental health difficulties (Cavell et al., 2021; Haft et al., 2021; Munson & Railey, 2016). However, further research is needed to gain greater insight into the ways in which these young people are impacted by their mentoring experiences, the type of relationships they form with their mentors, and the processes or practices that contribute to successful mentoring outcomes. The purpose of this study is to explore the mentoring experiences of young people who have been referred to the Big Brother Big Sister mentoring programme from Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services in Ireland. The research uses a qualitative research design to gain a more in-depth understanding of the perceived value of formal mentoring programmes for young people who experience mental health concerns, from the perspective of young people, parents, mentors and staff involved in the programme.

The specific aims of this research are:

- To explore the mentoring experiences of young people who have been referred to the BBBS programme from CAMHS and their perceptions of the value of the BBBS programme for young people who experience mental health concerns.
- To explore the experiences of parents, mentors, and staff of the BBBS programme and their perceptions of the value of the mentoring programme for young people.
- To explore staff's perceptions of the relationship between CAMHS and BBBS.

2

Methodology

2.1 Study design

The current research employed a qualitative research design. Qualitative, semi-structured interviews were undertaken to explore the perceived outcomes, benefits and challenges associated with young people's participation in the BBBS programme. A multi-informant perspective was employed in the current research in order to gain greater insight into the perceptions of young people, parents, mentors and staff involved in the BBBS-CAMHS referral, matching and/or mentoring process.

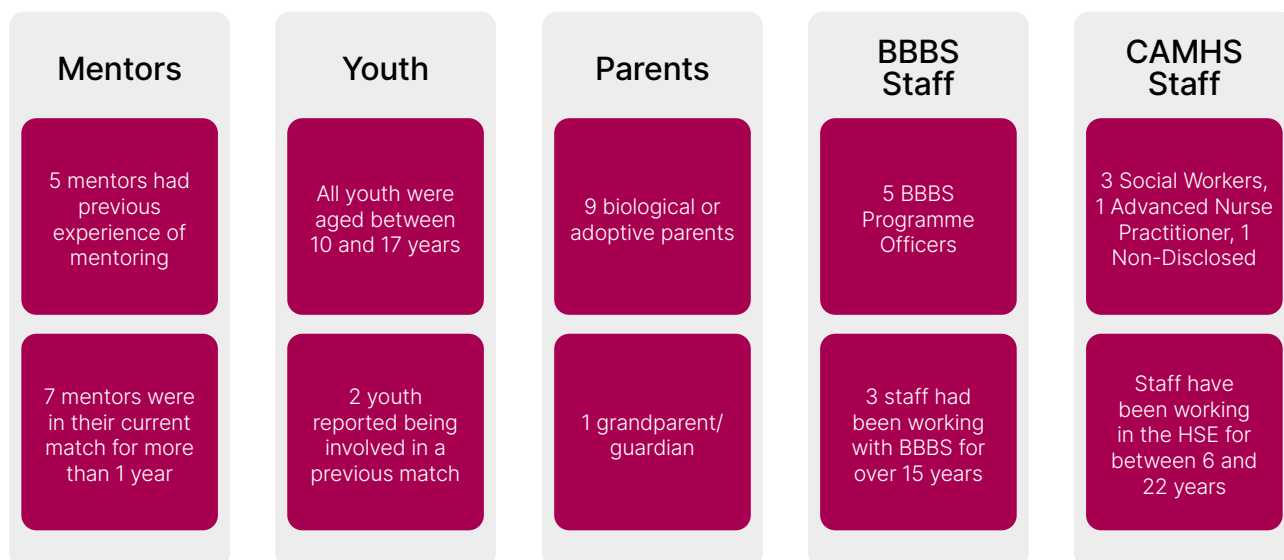
2.2 Participants

In total, 40 participants (13 male, 25 female, 2 transgender) took part in this research. All participants were actively involved with the BBBS programme in December 2021. Specifically, this research included:

- 10 (6 female, 4 male) volunteers (i.e. mentors) who were currently matched with a young person who had been referred to BBBS from CAMHS;
- 10 (4 male, 4 female, 2 transgender) young people who were matched with a mentor on the BBBS programme following a referral from CAMHS;
- 10 (8 female, 2 male) parents/guardians whose child was involved in the BBBS programme following a referral from CAMHS;
- 5 (4 female, 1 male) BBBS programme staff who were currently involved in matching young people referred from CAMHS with mentors on the BBBS programme;
- 5 (4 female, 1 male) CAMHS staff who had a history of referring/recommending young people from their service to the BBBS programme.

Further participant characteristics are outlined in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1. Additional participant characteristics



2.3 Procedure

2.3.1 Ethical approval

Prior to conducting this research, full ethical approval was sought from the Research Ethics Committee at the University of Galway. Additional ethical approval was sought from each of the relevant HSE research ethics committees. Full ethical approval for this research was granted by both the HSE and University of Galway research ethics boards.

2.3.2 Participant recruitment

All participants were recruited to this study through Foróige, which acted as gatekeeper for this research. Young people who had been referred to the BBBS programme due to their involvement with CAMHS were contacted by Foróige staff members, on behalf of the researchers, and provided with detailed information about the study. Only young people who were currently involved in live matches were invited to take part in the study. All young people interested in taking part in the study were required to provide written assent and parental consent. The mentors and parents of these young people were simultaneously contacted by Foróige and also invited to participate in the study. Only mentors and parents that provided written informed consent were eligible to participate in the research. Following the recruitment of the parent, young people and mentor participant groups, BBBS and CAMHS staff were contacted and invited to participate in the research. All BBBS and CAMHS staff were contacted by a Foróige staff member and provided with detailed information about the research. Only staff members who returned written informed consent forms were eligible to participate in the research.

2.3.3 Semi-structured interviews

All participant interviews were carried out online via Zoom. All parent, mentor and staff interviews were carried out on a one-on-one basis and were facilitated by a trained member of the research team. Due to child safety precautions, all interviews with young people were facilitated by two trained members of the research team. For each interview, the researchers followed a semi-structured interview schedule which was designed to explore participants' perceptions of the BBBS programme and opinions about the utility of mentoring for vulnerable young people. Adult interviews typically lasted for 40–60 minutes, while interviews with young people lasted for approximately 20–30 minutes. All interviews were audio recorded.

2.4 Analytic approach

All interviews were transcribed directly into Microsoft Word and analysed using a thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2012). All analyses were carried out using Nvivo software. Thematic analysis is a widely used tool for analysing qualitative research data and involves the identification of emerging 'themes' from the collected data (Terry et al., 2017). Typically, this approach consists of reading and re-reading the interview transcripts, making notes, generating and refining codes, and creating themes from the coded data (Rice & Ezzy, 1999). Thematic analysis is a popular analytic tool as its flexibility allows it to be used in both inductive and deductive methodologies (Alhojailan, 2012). Inductive methodologies involve generating codes directly from the observed data and are considered a data-driven analytic approach (Boyatzis, 1998). Deductive methodologies involve using an a priori template or theoretical framework to generate codes and direct data analysis (Crabtree & Miller, 1999). The current research used a hybrid thematic analysis approach which incorporated both deductive and inductive analytic frameworks. This approach was considered advantageous as it enabled the research to be both data-driven and theory-informed.

The theoretical framework underpinning the current analytical approach is the Rhodes (2005) model of mentoring, which suggests that quality mentoring relationships (characterised by empathy, mutuality and trust) promote social–emotional, cognitive and identity development among young people, which in turn leads to positive outcomes (good grades and emotional wellbeing). Following an examination of the youth-

mentoring literature, the authors developed an a priori codebook based on this theoretical framework. Using the Rhodes (2005) model of mentoring, four major thematic areas were identified: Relationship Quality, Moderators, Processes and Outcomes. The theme of Relationship Quality was created to capture any aspect of the transcript which referred to the nature or quality of the youth–mentor relationship. This theme was originally characterised by three codes: Empathy, Mutuality and Trust. The second theme identified by the Rhodes Model of Mentoring is Relational Moderators, which is used to denote any characteristics, features or practices that appear to strengthen or weaken the youth–mentor relationship or impact the mentoring experience. Seven potential moderators were identified and coded a priori: Community Context, Family Context, Time, Interpersonal History, Social Competencies, Programme Practices and Developmental Stage. The third theme, Mentoring Processes, captures the processes, practices and activities through which the mentoring experience appears to facilitate or promote change in young people. Six a priori codes were developed for this theme based on the Rhodes model: Broadening Horizons, Social Capital, Relationship Modelling, Emotion Coaching, Role Model and Advocate and Fun and Escapism. The final theme identified, Programme Outcomes, reflects the changes or developmental outcomes young people, parents and mentors have experienced or observed throughout their BBBS journey. Outcomes were coded into three sub-categories reflecting Social–Emotional Development, Cognitive Development and Identity Development. A full description of all codes used in the codebook is provided in Appendix A in the online supplement. Once the codebook had been finalised, the authors tested its reliability by piloting the framework on a number of selected transcripts. Two authors independently coded these transcripts using the codebook and met to discuss discrepancies. During this stage of the analytic process, the researchers applied an additional inductive analytic approach, whereby new codes that emerged directly from the raw data (and were not accounted for by the a priori codebook) were identified and added by the researchers. Both coders met regularly to discuss any disagreements/inconsistencies in the coding and to identify new potential codes. Only relevant codes/themes that were identified by both coders were added to the codebook. All remaining transcripts were coded by one reviewer using the modified coding book and checked by a second reviewer.

In order to identify similarities and differences between the perspectives of mentors, young people, parents and staff, transcripts from each group were analysed separately. Select transcripts from the young people, mentor, parent and staff groups were first analysed by two coders using the themes and codes identified in the codebook. Where data was found that did not fit the classifications specified in the codebook, new codes were generated. Each transcript was then analysed again by one reviewer using the modified codebook for that group. Overall, while similar themes/codes were found across each group (young people, mentors, parents and staff), a number of unique codes/themes within groups were also identified.

3

Findings

3. Findings

For the purposes of this report, findings are reported across three major subject headings:

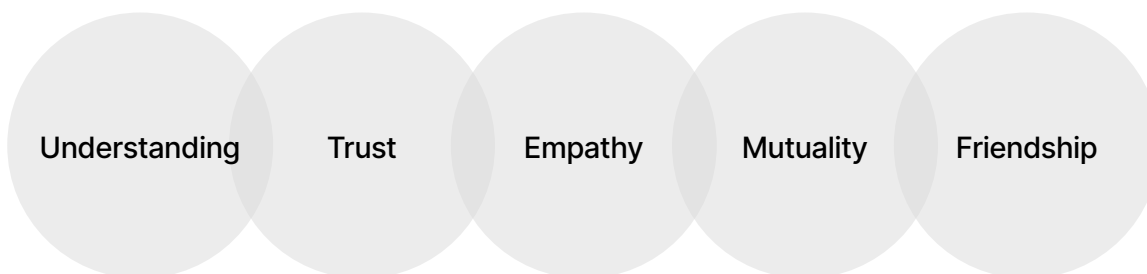
- Types of relationship formed between youth and mentors on the BBBS programme
- Outcomes associated with the BBBS programme
- Features of the BBBS–CAMHS partnership.

An overview of the themes and sub-themes that emerged under each of these headings, and a comparison of the similarities and differences between participant groups, are provided below. Additional findings are presented in Appendix B and C.

3.1 Type of relationship formed between young people and mentors on the BBBS programme

An important finding from the current research is that the majority of young people who were referred from CAMHS to the BBBS programme appeared to develop ‘good’, ‘close’ relationships with their mentors. When describing the relationship between young people and mentors on the BBBS programme, participants typically characterised these relationships in terms of mutual, empathic, trusting friendships. From participants’ classifications, three distinct aspects of the mentoring relationship were identified: Mutuality and Friendship, Trust, and Empathy and Understanding, which generally correspond to the three indicators of mentoring quality proposed by Rhodes (2005). A visual overview of the characteristics associated with the BBBS young people–mentor relationships is provided in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Overview of the characteristics associated with BBBS mentoring relationships.



3.1.1 Mutuality and friendship

Evidence from young people, mentor, parent and staff interviews indicated that young people typically enjoy participating in the BBBS programme and look forward to meeting up with their mentors.

I like meeting up with him... I look forward to it
– Youth 8

It's good. The person I was matched up with is very nice and we get along really well
– Youth 5

She really is happy to meet every week and if she can't come for whatever reason she kind of misses not meeting
– Mentor 1

Like the feedback I've gotten is that his mother is delighted; he's loving the match
– Mentor 7

I think he just genuinely does look forward to chatting with [his mentor] ... he seems to enjoy his conversations with him

– Parent H

They just seemed to hit it off so well. It was just nice that when mentor came to pick up [youth] she was just so excited to see her and go out with her

– Parent I

... the very fact that they're there every week and the young person is showing up every week; there's learning all the time you know and there's enjoyment all the time

– BBBS Staff 5

Parents would always be very, very positive about it as well. They will always comment on the relationship their son or daughter built up with the Big Brother or Big Sister and you know they have a kind of a relationship with that person as well because they're calling to the house and they get to know them. So I think you know it is embraced by all in the family really. It has been really positive

– CAMHS Staff 1

Most young people and mentors felt that they had formed a close 'bond' with each other, with some participants appearing surprised at how natural and enjoyable this relationship was.

Matches have been pretty natural; nothing was forced either, to get to know them or anything. It was very easy and naturally led to be honest. You look forward to meeting them as well and they've always attended

– Mentor 10

I suppose I'm surprised that it is a genuine relationship that has developed you know what I mean?

– Mentor 9

It's good, it's friendly. It's natural; it's not forced. I was worrying it would be a thing of like us just sitting there ... I was really happy with it

– Youth 5

I get along with her very well. We pretty much share everything with each other

– Youth 9

It's almost like herself and [mentor] have become friends, on a real friendship level as opposed to someone older and someone younger. And I couldn't have foreseen that happening

– Parent F

In fact, the most dominant characterisation of the relationship between young people and mentors was one of friendship, with young people and parents believing that the mentor acted as a 'friend' or 'older sibling' to the young person.

Just friends like ... It's like I'm basically talking to another boy about boy stuff

– Youth 4

... It's definitely like having an older sibling. It's very comforting

– Youth 7

I don't know, they're just really good friends you know and they have great fun ... They really are like a big brother and a little brother

– Parent C

[Mentor's] just like a big sister to her. Looks out for her, offers her advice as much as she could, and helps her out with things and that's exactly what she was, just like a big sister to her

– Parent I

Similar descriptions were provided by the BBBS mentors, who frequently described the young person (i.e. their 'Little') as a friend or 'little brother' or 'little sister'.

I would say our relationship really is like that of a big sister and a little sister
– Mentor 1

I think we're good friends; we're confidants you know
– Mentor 2

It's really taken off into more of a friendship you know. You can do a Big Brothers Big Sisters programme but certainly I'd consider him much more of a friend now than a Little
– Mentor 5

This bond of friendship did not appear to be tied exclusively to the BBBS programme with some young people and mentors indicating that they will try to keep in touch with each other even after the match formally ends. Some parents also believed that the young people and mentors had become 'friends for life'.

She's going away now so we're still trying to do like pen pals and write letters to each other, still keep in contact because it would be really nice to keep in contact with her
– Youth 6

I wouldn't lose contact with her anyway I don't think ever; I think we'll always be you know somewhat connected because I do feel a big connection with her
– Mentor 2

... We'll always be friends. It doesn't matter about the programme like, the programme is the programme
– Mentor 9

I'm pleased that although in principle you know the programme has come to an end as such. I'm very pleased that they're going to continue to stay in touch. I mean that in itself I think shows what a great success it was you know
– Parent E

However, for two matches, participants appeared to be disappointed that a stronger bond had not yet developed between the young person and the mentor.

I look forward to the day when [youth] would ask me for advice. He hasn't to date. He wouldn't; like between the ending of one meeting and the beginning of the next there wouldn't be any communication
– Mentor 3

I would say they have a good relationship but he'd a better relationship with [his previous mentor]
– Parent B

I would say good, but I wouldn't be going any higher than that you know just because it's one of those things where we know very little about each other even though we've been partnered now for two years... So like I say, it's a good relationship but it's not a great one you know
– Mentor 8

3.1.2 Trust

Several participants identified 'trust' as one of the defining features of these youth–mentor relationships. Specifically, the concept of trust was discussed by eight of the young people in this study, who described their matches as trusting relationships and noted that being with their mentors made them feel safe.

It was really nice because as soon as she walked in the door the two of us just really clicked straight away. It made me feel like a sense of, like feeling really safe

– Youth 6

Like I have very bad anxiety and kind of slightly bad mental health so it is quite nice to kind of have that company and companion who I can tell my worries to and my troubles... She's just very easy to talk to and to trust

– Youth 7

Being able to talk to them like, have confidence in them, being able to trust someone; a friend

– Youth 3

Young people appeared to feel as though they could confide in their mentors, with some noting that would tell their mentors things that they would not share with anybody else.

It's nice to sort of have that person to talk to you that you can sort of confide in and tell them everything. I have told her stuff that not even my parents would know

– Youth 9

Like with my own friends I could probably like – I obviously hang out with them every day and I can talk with them – but then I can talk about more serious stuff with [mentor]

– Youth 4

Like I could really open up to [mentor] and I can definitely be more social with her than I would be with my friends

– Youth 2

Most mentors believed they had developed trusting relationships with their matches, with several recounting times when their Little had shared or disclosed things to them that they did not appear comfortable sharing with others.

He has told me more about his stuff. He had a bit of an illness that he had to deal with and we'd a great chat one day a few weeks ago and he was very honest. I got the impression he wouldn't talk too much about it

– Mentor 7

This sentiment was echoed by parents and staff who believed that young people involved in BBBS typically trusted their mentors and felt that these young people would talk to their mentors about things that they may not disclose to their parents.

I could give you countless stories where a young person has shared things with their Big Sister or Big Brother that they haven't shared with anybody else in the world you know. The young person who has come out you know as being gay and has shared that with a volunteer even though their parents doesn't know, who has struggled with their sexuality you know, who have suppressed this secret and yet the volunteer was able to support them with that. That's the level of trust; that exists in a lot of matches you know

– BBBS Staff 4¹

¹ If a young person shares information with their Big Brother/Sister that leads BBBS staff to believe that they are at-risk, information will be shared appropriately with the parent/guardian or the relevant authority under their Safeguarding and Child Protection Policies and Procedures.

They can talk to somebody, confide in somebody that they may not have been able to confide in before

– CAMHS Staff 1

Like [youth] would tell [mentor] stuff that he might not necessarily say to me, stuff about girls now, you know, that kind of thing or any problems or stuff at school... ... They're very honest with each other. Very open; they've a great open relationship. They'd say anything to each other I think you know

– Parent C

[Youth] would once or twice have brought things to her that she was either embarrassed to talk to us about or scared to talk to us about and wanted to have a sounding board first to kind of go, ok, what do you think? And she disclosed things to her that she would have been terrified to disclose to us first

– Parent G

3.1.3 Empathy and understanding

Another important aspect discussed by participants was the empathetic and understanding relationship which developed between young people and mentors. Three young people highlighted how important having an empathetic mentor was for them and appreciated that their mentors not only listened to them but tried to understand their perspectives.

I think one of the most things that I really like is that she listened a lot and she really kind of took into thought things I cared about

– Youth 6

She kind of like understands things that I like talking about; not a lot of people understand you know... The way that she could listen to things that I said and the way she could understand

– Youth 2

Likewise, a small number of mentors described how they try to approach their interactions with their Littles with empathy, care and consideration.

I really think before I speak because I know that my words can carry so much weight to her because she trusts me so much. So I have to be more disciplined in what I'm saying and I really consider what I say before I say it because of the effect that it could have

– Mentor 1

This perspective was supported by a BBBS staff member, who believed that mentors often approach their mentoring relationships with understanding and empathy.

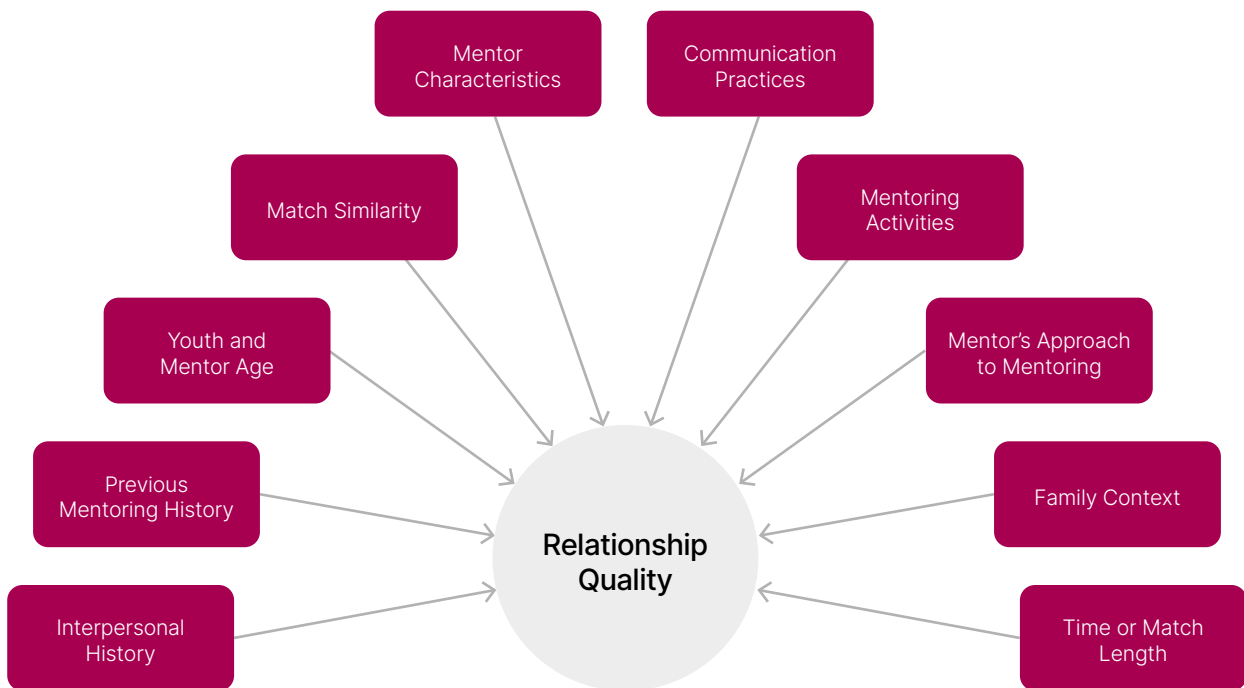
When they meet with the young person they are fully present you know... they really try and get into their space, stand in their shoes and understand what's going on with them... they actually get into that space and try and understand where they're at, where their head space is at so that when they do meet with that young person they're fully, fully present and actively engaged with that young person. Again we have some fantastic volunteers who are really tuned into that you know; having that ability to be empathetic I suppose is the word towards the young person

– BBBS Staff 4

3.1.4 Factors impacting youth–mentor relationship dynamics

Within the current research, participants identified several factors (i.e. relational moderators) that appeared to influence the quality of the youth–mentor relationships. Specifically, participants indicated that factors such as youth/mentors’ interpersonal history, previous mentoring experience, mentor characteristics, mentor’s approach to mentoring, match similarity, youth or mentor age, communication practices, mentoring activities, youth’s family context, and/or match length may moderate the strength of the relationship that develops between young people and their mentors. A visual overview of the moderators of relationship quality identified in the current research is provided in Figure 3. For a more detailed overview of these proposed moderators see Appendix B.

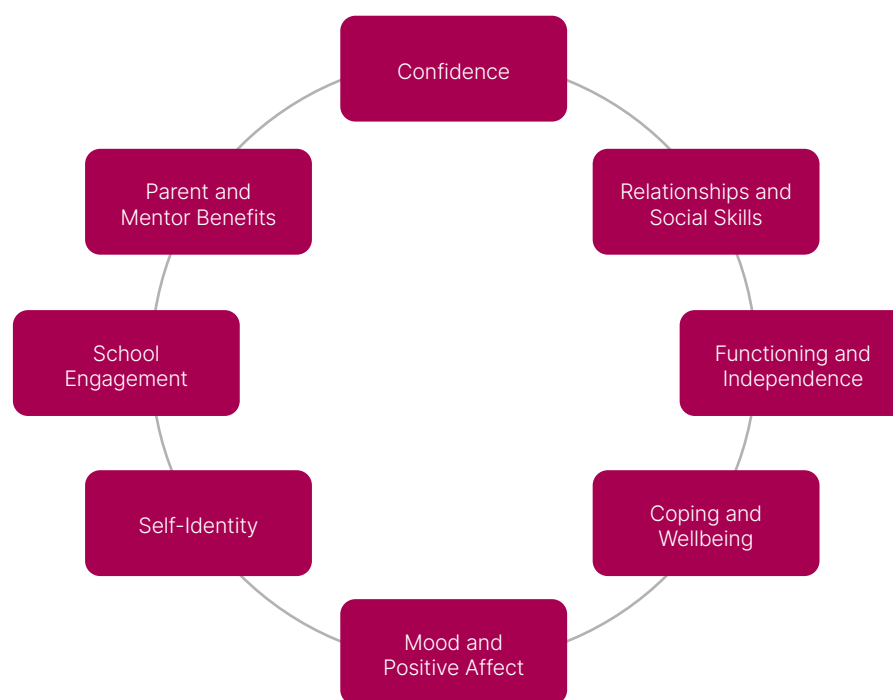
Figure 3. Diagram showing factors that may strengthen or weaken the quality of the relationship formed between young people and mentors.



3.2 Outcomes associated with young people's participation in the BBBS programme

Findings from the current research suggest that participation in the BBBS programme promoted growth and facilitated positive youth development across a variety of domains, including young people's social-emotional, cognitive and identity development. In addition to these youth outcomes, participants suggested that involvement with the BBBS programme had positive implications for parents and mentors as well. A visual overview of the outcomes association with BBBS participation is displayed in Figure 4.

Figure 4. Diagram showing outcomes association with young people's participation in the BBBS programme.



3.2.1 Relationships and social skills

Young people's relationships with others and their general social skills were areas where participants felt young people show the most improvement and/or appear most impacted by their involvement in the BBBS programme. Almost all the young people in this study believed that their relationships and social skills had improved as a result of being involved in the programme. For instance, some young people noted that their communication and conversational skills had improved since joining the programme and suggested that their mentors helped them in this regard.

We talk quite a lot so I found new words to come up with my ideas
– Youth 10

When I first met him I was really, really quiet and now when I meet him I'm really chatty
– Youth 8

I'm definitely kind of growing with my communications skills and making friends with people. So that's definitely helped a lot in that area ... It's definitely good for meeting new people and just kind of very encouraging
– Youth 7

Some young people shared stories of times when their mentors had helped them to make new friends, while others noted that their mentors helped them to feel less lonely or isolated.

I think I have changed in my trust and friendships... I have a lot more friends than I did at the start and I can definitely trust more people

– Youth 2

I was able to make more friends in secondary school, like that. I've had a lot of friends like in school now; he definitely helped me with that like, making friends and stuff

– Youth 3

I like it quite a lot because it prevents me from being a bit too lonely because most of my friends live a bit far away from me, so I don't get to see them often. So having someone who lives near me and can meet up whenever is quite nice

– Youth 10

Mentors and parents noticed similar changes in the young people, feeling that these young people had become more sociable or more engaged with others.

I remember [youth name] she was a bit quiet to start but you see her coming on, interacting

– Mentor 10

He's well able socially whereas when he was younger, it was like full-on-in, and it had to be all about [youth]; whereas he's kind of learned – a bit of give and take you know; how to be in a group and you have to listen to other people – all of those skills you know... Big Brothers Big Sisters has given him loads of opportunities to do that

– Parent C

It helps her build up social skills as well and understand what's acceptable and what's not acceptable in a social situation. She's a little bit clueless when it comes to certain social cues but it helps a bit at least

– Parent G

Some mentors provided examples of times when they had helped young people make friends or socialise more with others. For instance, one mentor shared an example of a time when she encouraged the young person to approach a new girl at school and highlighted how happy the young person was to have made a new friend:

I said ... you go up and see; it's up to her to take your offer of friendship, not even friendship, just politeness or not and then you'll know by her reaction if she's the type of person you want to be friends with or not. And again she went back to school and then she told me the next week that she was delighted; she went up to the girl and they had a great chat. They had loads in common; they liked the same Netflix shows and read some of the same books. And now she has started sitting with her and her friends at lunch and she's delighted to have made friends as well

– Mentor 1

Several BBBS and CAMHS staff also appeared to believe that mentors were key social contacts that can help young people expand their networks and increase their social skills.

Some people are so isolated that the Big Brother or Big Sister might be the only person that they meet in the week ... Some kids we might have – they might be home schooled or they may have school refusal because of anxiety and sometimes that contact with Big Brother Big Sister is usually very vital because it might be the only contact they had

– CAMHS Staff 1

I suppose the main supports around the young people that come in here are us therapists that are adults and their parents that are adults; if they're maybe an only child or they don't have older brothers or sisters they just might need somebody a little bit older than them, like a kind of a mentor to kind of just help them learn about social interaction in their age group with what's current and relevant to their age group but with a safe person that they can confide in and they can just have literally like a big brother, big sister

– CAMHS Staff 2

I often think of them with young people who are a bit isolated you know be it where they live or within their own community. It can be a way of integrating them back into their community or building up their self-esteem or building up their skills of going out and about, going for a coffee

– CAMHS Staff 4

I can definitely see the change in that young person; she's a lot more social now. A lot of the stuff that was going on for her was like just finding friendships hard and kind of like ignoring friends and then they'd kind of drift away and she wouldn't understand why whereas now she understands oh, I have to do this in order for the friendship to keep going; I can't ignore people or this will be the consequence. So that's definitely something she's learned

– BBBS Staff 1

3.2.2 Confidence

Several participants noticed changes in young people's confidence, with this appearing to be an area where young people show substantial growth over the course of their involvement with BBBS. In their interviews, many young people noted that their confidence had improved since joining the BBBS programme and felt that they were no longer as shy as they used to be.

Confidence boosted a lot since I met [my mentor]

– Youth 3

I'm more like not shy at all. Like before I was really shy. Now I'm not

– Youth 4

It made me more confident; I never used to like to talk to people about how I felt

– Youth 6

Parents echoed these views, with the majority believing that the programme had helped young people become more confident in social situations, more confident in themselves, and more confident in their decisions.

I think you know particularly for say a child that doesn't have any siblings, who has had struggles in school with different aspects or mixing or whatever yeah, I think it has helped her grow in confidence without a doubt. And I think it has been of great benefit

– Parent E

There is like a confidence to her which I can notice and I'm really pleased to see that you know? From somebody that's gone through so much therapy and so on, you know? Self-esteem and issues like that. It's great to see that she is growing and developing and more comfortable with herself

– Parent A

She suffered massively from social anxiety you know and she wasn't very, um, used to people, but I think like from being in the programme, building up her confidence with [mentor], I think it's gone on to serve her massively with her feelings now. She's in transition year now but her friends in school didn't – and she chose something different from her friends and I never thought she would do something like that, and that's from being in the programme and getting advice from [mentor]

– Parent I

Similarly, mentors noticed changes in young people's confidence levels. However, while some mentors felt these changes were attributable to the mentoring programme, others were less sure.

I think as well he's a bit more confident; whether or not it's the programme or it's something else

– Mentor 8

A couple of BBBS and CAMHS staff noted that mentoring was useful for helping young people build up their confidence, which they believed may motivate young people to engage more in other contexts, such as in school or with their peers.

What you find is definitely it builds their confidence, their trust in people as well

– CAMHS Staff 5

I think it can help their confidence and their self-esteem; it opens up their networks

– CAMHS Staff 1

I suppose through building confidence with their mentor it gives them a bit more of a drive or a push to engage with more peers; they maybe start in a club, give things a right good go, really, where before they wouldn't have had the motivation

– BBBS Staff 2

I think that Big Brothers Big Sisters provides that kind of step above that where it can give them just that confidence and that bit of self-belief and that ok, I can do this and I can talk to this person and I'm out and about. Then that can maybe transfer into the school or your friend group, you know

– BBBS Staff 5

3.2.3 Functioning and independence

From the perspective of BBBS and CAMHS staff, mentors act as useful 'bridging agents' who can help improve young people's level of functioning across different social situations. Staff noted that young people referred to the BBBS programme from CAMHS often struggle to engage with simple tasks, such as being able to go out and order a cup of coffee, and believed that one strength of the BBBS programme was mentors' ability to help young people become comfortable engaging in these tasks and helping them regain their independence.

They do exceptional work in moving young people on in getting back into being able to function in their life the way most young people do; being able to go to school, being able to enjoy it, being able to mix with groups or develop a talent or an interest that they might be interested in as well as supporting families, parents in connecting more in their parenting with their child. I think they do really good work

– CAMHS Staff 2

Just having a Big Brother or a Big Sister or a mentor who can actually kind of get a bit more proactive, you know, going to the scouts or the GAA or the football group is all well and good but someone has to get them up, get them out of the house, do a bit of motivational interviewing whether that's with a capital MI or a small MI but someone needs to get them there. If the parents aren't able to do it and they're not able to do it themselves well then a Big Brother or a Big Sister or a mentor is a good sort of bridging agent to do that

– CAMHS Staff 3

It's much more valuable really for them you know to be able to go out and meet somebody for a cup of coffee and do all those things that teenagers should be doing but for one reason or another they're just struggling with all of that

– CAMHS Staff 5

... It's those little things like ordering the coffee or you know being able to walk down the town yourself and go into a shop and feel like you're able to do that you know. A lot of the matches would be more like that you know for the young people. It might be harder to see kind of but the parents really notice it you know. They do. And the young people they notice it too I suppose, they do, sure they must
– BBBS Staff 5

Some staff suggested that the BBBS programme supported young people in gaining their independence and motivated them to become more outgoing.

We've had kids that take up new activities like kick boxing and other activities that they wouldn't have before; with the support of a mentor they can do that
– CAMHS Staff 1

It goes really well because the young people really just want that thing that they can say right Mom I'm away now to do my own thing you know. You'd see a lot of them; they would be maybe tagging along with younger siblings you know who'd have more social engagements than them really. So it's nice for them to have something of their own and to be gone
– BBBS Staff 5

We have young people right now who do not leave the house unless they're meeting their Big Sister or Big Brother you know. They're not attending school; they have limited social networks yet every week they're meeting with their Big Sister or Big Brother you know. That's the reality
– BBBS Staff 4

Some young people also noted that the BBBS programme had helped them to become more outgoing and acknowledged the role that their mentors played in getting them out of the house, exposing them to new things, and helping them step outside of their comfort zones.

She did bring me out of my comfort zone a lot
– Youth 6

Normally I'm just at home, I don't do anything whereas being part of Big Brother I'll actually get to go out and do stuff. Before I was with Big Brother and like I wasn't really; I was kind of like keeping to myself and then when I got my first Big Brother I was just like kind of getting out there. Then when I got [mentor] I was just more out there. More experiencing stuff
– Youth 4

I've definitely gone out of the house more; Like definitely with getting out and about and not being stuck in my room all day ... It's just positive in general; getting out of the house, doing new things that you don't really think you could do
– Youth 7

Likewise, several parents reported observing notable changes in young people's willingness to leave the house or motivation to engage in different situations/activities, and believed that mentors played a key role in promoting these changes.

I think [youth] was very much in a bit of a shell and it was made worse with the Covid you know. She'd got to the stage where not only did she: she didn't want to go to school, she basically didn't want to go out either. She didn't want to go anywhere. So having the Big Sister, having that mentor actually pulled her out of the shell as such and encouraged her to get out and it got to the stage where she looked forward to it rather than it being you know a chore or whatever. It helped her a lot
– Parent E

I think he's realised that there is more out there in the world, like you know [youth] had so long out from school, medications and treatments and stuff; now it's even to encourage him to go out into the socialising a little bit more. It's not all about coming home because [youth] goes through phases of not leaving the house but then [mentor] would always say oh just go and do something you know once or twice a day, just go for a walk with the dog

– Parent H

He has got more outgoing; he's gotten braver in doing things just like even going out on his own, outside like playing

– Parent B

Notably, although the concept of functioning and independence did not emerge as a theme with mentors, a few parents provided examples of how they believed mentors had helped young people become more independent:

When [youth] used to go out before [youth] wouldn't go and pay for stuff for herself you know, she used to be nervous and anxiety. But since she's with her Big Sister she gradually got to do it; an approach to it. It was lovely for [youth], she didn't push her or pressure her but she encouraged her and now [youth] can actually go and she can pay and ask for something herself you know. So that's a huge step for [youth]

– Parent D

3.2.4 Mood and positive affect

Young people's mood and positive affect is another area where participants noticed several positive changes. First, a small number of mentors noticed that young people seemed happier or appeared to feel more positive after meeting or talking to their mentors.

The young people have been attending every time we meet up and they'll arrive in a good place and they go back to the home happy and things like that

– Mentor 10

I think it's really rewarding; seeing her happy and being like 'oh I really enjoyed today, like, thank you so much' – that is so nice to hear... Like even my match's Mum, like she would say that [youth] is always in such a good mood when she comes home and things like that

– Mentor 1

In turn, a number of young people reported that their mood had improved since joining the BBBS programme, with some suggesting that their mentors helped them to keep a clear mind and to feel more positive in general.

I like to think I'm a bit more positive a lot of the time. I'm a bit more goofy, just like ... less like 'urgh, I'm sad today kind of thing.' Yes it has been a positive change anyway

– Youth 1

Sometimes I just want to spend my weekends studying a lot but I did end up going out. It made me feel more calmer. It was nice

– Youth 6

I'd be in quite happy form for a couple of days [afterwards]

– Youth 10

Some parents also observed significant changes in their child's mood and positive affect, which appeared to provide comfort and reassurance for these parents.

It's been a life changer really you know. It really has because when we first started he was in the depths of – he was in a very bad case; He was attending Pieta House; he didn't want to live anymore – at eleven years of age saying that kind of thing. Yeah, it really helped ... it boosted him, boosted his confidence and made him feel like that he was a nice person and a good person and worth getting to know and was good fun and other people thought he was good fun you know; that the people in school didn't really matter. Here was somebody else that had only just met him and could see that he was a nice guy; that he was worth getting to know

– Parent C

You could see her, she was happy when she came back; she's always smiling when she comes back after it, seeing her Big Sister. So it definitely does help her to talk to her

– Parent D

It's helped her tremendously I would say in terms of her anxiety

– Parent E

For some staff, the potential benefit that mentors could have on young people's mood and mental health was a key strength of the BBBS programme, which could potentially supplement young people's care plan.

They're invaluable in service really, in helping young people from a mental health perspective

– CAMHS Staff 2

Just about every mental health difficulty, you know, neurotic disorders, anxiety disorders, mood disorders and some of the really heavy ones, anorexia and your bipolar and that kind of stuff; you know exposure programme fits into it. So depression, you're talking behavioural activation, get up, get out of bed, get down the stairs, get dressed you know, eat food, get out of the house, go for a walk. An anxiety programme is just exposure, exposure, exposure. So the Big Brother Big Sister is just ... they're really, really good for that, for the behavioural aspect of their care plan, of their treatment and quite frankly for depression, behavioural activation is fundamental and for anxiety, exposure is fundamental really, I can't emphasise enough how fundamental it is

– CAMHS Staff 3

3.2.5 Coping and wellbeing

For parents and mentors, participating in the BBBS programme, and being paired with a mentor whom they trusted, was a crucial support for young people. Findings from this research indicated that parents and mentors believed that the BBBS programme had helped young people become more resilient or better able to cope with difficult situations.

I do think that it was certainly one of the pieces in the puzzle that – in the jigsaw puzzle – that helped us to support [youth] to stay healthy you know through her later teen years

– Parent F

It has given her a little bit more resilience I think in the actual official term resilience if you know what I mean

– Parent G

I think before he was very, very introverted and probably a little bit kind of catastrophising things a little bit. So if something happened to him because he'd have nobody to talk to he'd build it up to something that it wasn't whereas now I think where he's learning more is that it's not the end of the world if somebody says something to you or it's not the end of the world if somebody excludes you; more to the point it's their loss that they're not including you. And I think that helps him an awful lot [to] deal with things that happen to him in life in general really

– Mentor 5

A few mentors and parents also spoke about the role mentors played in helping young people deal with specific health issues and/or disclose their engagement in risky behaviours.

There was an instance for example of self-harm which we didn't know about which she brought to the Big Sister and she said, why don't you tell your parents ... She was able to bring that to the Big Sister which I don't think she would have, actually, have brought it to us if she hadn't said it to the woman first. It's great. It's brilliant. It's heart-breaking to see that; despite the fact that she knows she can talk to us about anything she wants too, having the Big Sister there allowed her to feel a bit more brave

– Parent G²

² If a young person shares information with their Big Brother/Sister that leads BBBS Staff to believe that they are or have been engaging in risk behaviours, information will be shared appropriately with the parent/guardian or the relevant authority under Foróige's Safeguarding and Child Protection Policies and Procedures.

Furthermore, one CAMHS staff member suggested that the BBBS programme may indirectly help young people to cope, while one BBBS staff provided an example of a match where the mentor supported the young person and helped her cope in a time of crisis.

A lot of that stuff then I think helps them to cope when maybe they're feeling anxious or sad or different things are happening and maybe they can cope much better when they have other aspects of their life that are going well or being fulfilled

– CAMHS Staff 4

We have one match that's meeting even though a family member passed away there a few months ago... that volunteer has continued through that whole episode; it was a really tragic situation, the volunteer continued to connect with that young person ... just supporting that young person. That young person is getting through that, is getting through this really difficult, challenging time ... she's going to come through this adversity quicker than maybe other family members in my opinion ... that volunteer there is helping that young person; coping skills, developing strategies to deal with difficulties, journalling you know ... just simple practical strategies to overcome challenges. If they're feeling down or they're struggling you know the volunteer is able to kind of maybe help the young person shift a little bit and work through problems and stuff

– BBBS Staff 4

3.2.6 Self-identity

A small number of participants suggested that the BBBS programme helped young people develop their identities and explore who they are or who they want to be in the future. Young people noted that participating in BBBS had helped them to develop new skills, feel more comfortable in themselves, and/or had given them a new outlook on life.

I've definitely benefitted from the programme. It's made me more aware of just like how life actually works. It's not just do your Leaving Cert, get good job, live from then on. There's a lot more to it than that. He helped me with those

– Youth 5

It's very good to develop skills that maybe you'd like to develop

– Youth 7

The way that [my mentor] listens to all the things that I'm saying is really, really cool. That makes me feel like more comfortable with her and comfortable about myself

– Youth 2

A couple of parents and mentors believed that the young people had become more mature after taking part in BBBS, and suggested that the mentors not only played an important role in helping young people explore their identities, but also helped young people feel more comfortable in who they are.

It helped her to grow up a bit. It helped in her maturing. I would see her now as quite a mature 17-year-old

– Parent F

That relationship as I say is incredibly positive; it really, really does; I think it has really built her up as a person and helped her and kind of reinforced her

– Parent G

I'm just saying that there's been a really fast progression from where he was to where he is now in terms of you know maturity levels I would say

– Mentor 5

Some CAMHS staff also spoke about the connection between mentoring and young people's identity development. Specifically, one CAMHS staff member appeared to believe that mentoring provided young people with an opportunity to explore who they were outside of their issues and outside of their family contexts, while another implied that mentors can help shift the internal dialogues young people have with themselves.

I think that's what would be really important for the young people; a focus away from maybe whatever challenges or difficulties are going on in other parts of their life as well. It gives them their own sense of identity maybe or helps them to build on their own sense of identity and who they are as an individual person away from their family
– CAMHS Staff 4

You can be fairly sure that someone who has an anxiety disorder, neurotic disorder, mood disorder; you can be fairly sure their internal dialogue is not very person centred, it's not very humanist. They're not saying nice things to themselves ... So then what other conversations are they having? Are their parents able to deliver the right type of conversation? Are the parents able to sort of get in there and influence through external conversation, you know, influence them, support their self-esteem, their identity? ... So then the Big Brother Big Sister or the mentor is bringing someone in, if I can use this metaphor, under the radar, you know, someone who they can trust, someone who they can engage with, someone who they can be open to hearing what they're saying ... So the Big Brother Big Sister mentor can bring in that alternative influence to help influence, shape, mould identity
– CAMHS Staff 3

3.2.7 School engagement

Although cognitive development was the outcome area discussed by the fewest number of participants, the link between mentoring and young people's cognitive achievements nonetheless emerged as a notable theme within the current research. In particular, a couple of BBBS staff, mentors and parents believed that mentoring was associated with greater school engagement. One CAMHS staff member also seemed to believe that mentoring can have an indirect effect on young people's school engagement, suggesting that mentors can help increase young people's confidence and social skills, which in turn may help young people feel less anxious or more comfortable at school.

Like [youth] used to struggle terrible in school and when he met [mentor] he brought him out of his shell and he helped him with school and things like that
– Parent B

I think that the skills that they build on through the mentoring programme are transferable so they transfer to school, into their friendships, making new friendships, getting more confidence, taking up a new activity, sticking at that activity whereas before they may go through a few things; getting out of the house for a walk you know; pushing themselves to do things out of their comfort zone. So they become quite transferable; I think their social circles can enlarge because of that; their schooling and education because they're now more confident so they're more confident in school and then less anxious. Their attainments are better in school; teachers would notice that they're more confident, that they're mixing better in the yard. School attendance can improve because they now have that confidence to go to school because they maybe have made more contacts at school so they feel they can talk to someone at break time whereas before they wouldn't and that would often be a deterrent in going to school. So it kind of has ramifications
– CAMHS Staff 1

One mentor shared an example of a time when she encouraged her Little to engage in an activity that was taking place on a university campus, and noted how this had prompted the young person to consider engaging in third-level education.

We joined that [group] class, it was on campus ... and I was like oh you might come here to university and she was like no, I'm not going to university; more school – who would do that? And by the time we finished the class, after ten weeks she was like I might come here to university. I wonder what courses they have, you know? So even that! And even now she's talking about it

– Mentor 9

Other BBBS staff recounted similar times where the BBBS programme appeared to be pivotal in encouraging a young person to pursue work or educational pursuits.

We'd a volunteer who was a lecturer and we'd a young person whose family, no members had ... done their Leaving Cert ... so that young person, number one, completed their Leaving Cert and was the first person in their family and immediate relations to proceed on to a course or some form of education past the Leaving Cert ... The volunteer I suppose helped the young person prep; gave them mock interviews, advised them when the young person was wondering what shall I wear to the pre interview, things like that. Just let the young person know about what was involved and I suppose broke down any barriers or worries the young person had about proceeding on to further education for example

– BBBS Staff 2

3.2.8 Implications for mentors and families

Across a number of interviews, participants implied that parents and mentors were also affected by their involvement with the BBBS programme. First, nine out of the ten mentors who participated in this research indicated that they had benefitted, in some way, from volunteering with the programme. In general, mentors implied that they had grown by virtue of becoming a mentor and that their relationships with these young people had helped them to learn more about themselves; improve their own social and communication skills; and become more understanding of others.

It was a journey in itself getting to know a young person, getting to know what my communication skills were like as well. Yeah building on my own personal development and skills while I'm getting to know a young person. And that would only benefit the next person I'm working with and the next person you know

– Mentor 10

I think you become more aware of other people and you'd be amazed at what small little things can do to help other people or at least even make people aware that the supports are there for them. And I think that's probably what's kind of; this programme and in general the last two or three years has made me more aware of what, like little things can make big impacts in people's lives you know

– Mentor 5

Obviously she's younger but she wouldn't necessarily have been a type of person I would have been friends with in a friend group but now that I've met her I kind of became more open myself, more open-minded which is really nice, yeah. That's probably it

– Mentor 6

Like I've benefitted hugely. I've learned so much about myself and about everything in the world from her you know; she's opened up loads of different doors that I would never have known were there

– Mentor 2

However, some mentors noted that they occasionally struggled with the weight of the issues young people were experiencing and sometimes found it difficult to accept that there was not more they could do to help the young people in these situations.

The most challenging part is kind of taking in all the difficult and negative things that are happening in her life. For a while I felt like I was taking them on to myself and just like worrying about her just in my own head

– Mentor 1

Some bits are still tough, you obviously want to fix her problems, you want to help as much as you can, but you can't really

– Mentor 4

For parents, most noted that they benefitted from seeing their child being happy and knowing that the young people had a trusted support network.

As parents, like any help to [youth] is a huge benefit to us then as well you know. Happy [youth], happy parents you know

– Parent J

Well just knowing that there is another safe person that she can talk to you know? That's a good feeling

– Parent A

I suppose for me it boils down to like I'm just happy that if [youth] feels he's worried or anxious he can tell us and if he wants further advice he can say look, will you get on to [mentor] and [caseworker]. If he wants to hear from them and their opinions which I do think he values; it's kind of good at the back of my head to know that if I have any issues or worries I have someone else I can ring about and share that with him

– Parent H

Anything that benefits [youth] benefits us you know. We're all in this together. So yeah; I think as a parent I think it is a fantastic thing. It's really great just to have another person there to help her, reinforce her and bolster her up

– Parent G

Some parents suggested that having another trusted adult who could take the young person out gave them an opportunity to 'have a break' and find time for themselves.

Well it has given me a little bit of time. They have an hour or so a week when he goes off to do his activities where I can do something; that's a pretty selfish way to look at it but it's given me a little bit of downtime

– Parent C

Even like if he's in [town] or something I might just go into one of the coffee shops and sit down with my cup and wait for him but I still get a break you know. Ever since he's small he's with me 24/7, it's just the two of us. Yeah so he's with me all the time so I go to work for a break!

– Parent B

A number of CAMHS staff also voiced their belief that the BBBS programme can help young people improve their relationships within the family context.

Sometimes it can help with the relationships at home as well because they've the space to go out and do things with somebody. It can have a knock-on effect then with their relationship with their siblings at home, less aggro, less conflict because they have space for an hour a week just to get out and to offload on somebody other than at home. So they can talk to somebody, confide in somebody that they may not have been able to confide in before

– CAMHS Staff 1

... supporting families, parents in connecting more in their parenting with their child. I think they do really good work
– CAMHS Staff 2

3.2.9 Practices and process that influence BBBS outcomes

In their interviews, participants identified several mentoring practices and processes which they believed help young people grow and develop. Specifically, the current research found that mentors appeared to promote positive developmental outcomes for young people by broadening their horizons and facilitating social capital; providing young people with an outlet for fun and escapism; helping them regulate or make sense of their emotions; acting as a role model for the young person; modelling healthy relationships; and being an additional source of support for the young person. A visual overview of the practices that may help facilitate positive youth development is provided in Figure 5. A more detailed overview of these processes/practices is provided in Appendix C.

Figure 5. Visual overview of the mentoring processes that may help promote positive youth development.



3.3 Features of the BBBS and CAMHS partnership

The findings from this research provided several insights into participants' perceptions of the BBBS programme and its partnership with CAMHS, as well as the characteristics of young people referred to the programme through CAMHS. Participants across each group (e.g. Mentors, Youth, Parents, BBBS Staff and CAMHS Staff) commended certain features of the BBBS programme, including the non-clinical nature of the mentoring programme and the in-depth matching process, and generally appeared to view the BBBS programme as a supportive resource for young people associated with CAMHS. However, a number of participants identified shortcomings with specific operational features of the programme and made recommendations for how the programme and/or partnership with CAMHS could be improved.

3.3.1 Characteristics of referrals

One unique feature of the current cohort of youth participants is that they were referred to the BBBS programme due to their involvement with CAMHS. In their interviews, young people and parents frequently noted the BBBS programme had been recommended to them by a mental health professional, who suggested that the programme may help the young person with certain difficulties or issues they were experiencing, such as anxiety or feeling socially isolated.

I went to CAMHS for a little while and they suggested that I do it because it would be good for me to kind of; my socialisation skills and to help with my anxiety and stuff
– Youth 7

I was going to CAMHS and they just said it'd be better for me to do it. I just thought it'd be like a good experience, new stuff and meet new people kind of
– Youth 4

We were told through CAMHS; [youth] attended there for ADHD and dyspraxia and we were told, his doctor way back then, that we may be entitled to it. It would be a help for him to have it for socialising and all that because he wasn't good at the time for socialising
– Parent B

In fact, almost all the young people and parents in this study noted that at the time of the referral, the young people involved were experiencing significant social, emotional or mental health issues and the belief or hope that the BBBS programme would be an extra resource that could help the young people navigate these difficulties appeared to be the driving motivation for young people/parents joining the BBBS programme.

You know he'd [youth] been having a few difficulties. His Dad died... So he kind of lacked a male role model... So I thought maybe this would be another way of you know [youth] having a trusted male figure in his life you know
– Parent C

My actual therapist recommended it to me ... I went on a Zoom to see about it and I thought it was really, really cool. I thought if I could have someone bigger to you know to talk to who might have some experience with this or just to hang out with you know
– Youth 2

My Mum told me about it and I thought it was interesting ... The fact that I can meet up with someone and go out for like little day trips because it gets quite lonely here; it's just me and my Mum
– Youth 10

CAMHS staff noted that the young people they would refer or recommend to the BBBS programme would typically be those that they identified as being socially isolated, withdrawn or anxious; those with low mood or low self-esteem; and/or those they thought would benefit from greater social interaction or community engagement. However, some staff noted that BBBS may not be suitable for severe or complex cases.

Usually if we have a young person who is predominantly quite isolated, maybe school refusal, maybe not and not involved in any activities or were involved in activities in the past but because of maybe low mood and depression or anxiety they have withdrawn and lost their confidence in their ability to socially interact. So those bases
– CAMHS Staff 2

The people I would identify the most would be children who are quite isolated, wouldn't have friends, may be bullied, have low self-confidence, low self-esteem; they're the people that I would always identify as needing a little bit of mentorship, a little bit of support around social skills, taking up hobbies, building that self-confidence, self-esteem
– CAMHS Staff 1

It's not for some of our ones that have been quite unwell. We would be eager to kind of move things for them but you know I suppose they need to be at the moderate range I think; there needs to be some functionality as well
– CAMHS Staff 5

Likewise, BBBS staff indicated that in their experience referrals from CAMHS tended to be young people who were socially isolated or anxious, had low mood or self-esteem, or showed low school engagement.

So typically young people that they would refer in are maybe young people that are in mainstream school and maybe they've been in and out of an ASD unit you know but they would maybe typically don't have many peers; they wouldn't have many social outlets; spend an awful lot of time with Mum and Dad and don't have the social skills. All the while they're trying tremendously to fit in as normal teenagers you know; trying to navigate that while being very self-conscious that they're different you know. So this programme, yeah, it was a good fit
– BBBS Staff 4

More often than not though the young people that come from CAMHS you know a lot of times there would be the anxiety, there would be particular things that would come up on a regular basis like social anxiety; there could be a history of low mood, low self-worth, self-esteem issues, parental separation; I suppose all of those things because of maybe an occurrence like parental separation or maybe deceased parents or other family members. That might have been the start of their challenge around their mental health and their need maybe for CAMHS in the first place. And the transition maybe from 6th class to 1st year didn't go so well; that might have kicked off their low mood or their presentation. Just in a different space, not being themselves compared to when they were in primary school, compared to where they're at in 1st year etc

– BBBS Staff 2

Some staff believed that the BBBS was an advantageous service for these young people, as they may not be connecting with other professional or community services.

We have very anxious kids who would be school refusals and you know who we can't even get into the clinic. So then we will sometimes have made a referral to see whether Big Brother Big Sister can get in at that stage and sometimes they can

– CAMHS Staff 1

It does tend to be those CAMHS referrals that come in that might be young people living in isolated areas that don't have access to other youth services or youth supports. But the Big Brothers Big Sisters is an ideal programme for them because it might be the only service that could reach out to them from where they're living. So I suppose that's kind of a challenge and it's a way that our programme can offer a lot of support as well to young people living in rural areas

– BBBS Staff 3

Most mentors appeared to be aware that the young people referred to the BBBS programme were dealing with significant social, emotional, cognitive, behavioural or health issues, with some noting that their Little had a formal diagnosis. However, some mentors and BBBS staff felt that, at the early match stage, mentors can find it challenging to support young people with these issues and/or felt the relationship-building process may take longer in some cases.

My Little is a little bit on the spectrum so sometimes in social scenarios he can get really hyper as well you know... I guess I'd never worked with anybody or met anybody like that before in my life, so it was certainly a learning curve for me

– Mentor 5

Some mentors might find the match a little bit more difficult. The young person, you know, if they're lacking motivation or they present with low mood or for example mutism could be one thing

– BBBS Staff 2

At the very beginning it was very hard to get to know her because the first thing she would do was hand me a sketch book ... She's really into games so she had made up her own characters and she was trying to tell me all about herself through the characters that she had made up... ...So she tells me things very indirectly

– Mentor 2

3.3.2 Key features and practices of the BBBS programme

Several aspects of the structure or operation of the BBBS programme appeared to impact participants' perceptions of the utility of the mentoring programme, with participants commending certain programme practices and/or identifying areas for improvement.

The voluntary, non-clinical nature of the BBBS programme

For both BBBS and CAMHS staff, the non-clinical nature of the BBBS programme was an important feature of the service. From their experience, BBBS staff believed that young people responded well to the informal, voluntary nature of the support and friendship offered by the mentors on the programme, and that mentors were attracted and reassured by the programme's focus on friendship building.

That's what Big Brother Big Sister is, we're not a counselling service, we're friends and listeners so you know, they didn't mind what presentation the young person came forward with, they were just focused on building a friendship, meeting the young person where they were at and going from there

– BBBS Staff 2

I guess sometimes young people can say to us that they find CAMHS very clinical, sometimes, ok? It's their GP and it's this service or that service, you know, whoever is involved with them ... if a young person is on medication or they're experiencing anxiety or they've self-harmed; there's a lot of terminology and focus on doctors and psychologists maybe ... But when it is Big Brothers Big Sisters it's not about any of that really and we're not the people to kind of, we're not the counsellors or the professionals. It's the youth workers and the volunteers working with; the volunteer obviously most importantly with the youth worker support building a relationship

– BBBS Staff 3

I suppose Big Brothers Big Sisters is about relationships and it is about trust and I don't think you can get that trust, the same level of trust in other youth projects and youth services

– BBBS Staff 4

These sentiments appeared to be shared by several CAMHS staff, who felt that young people benefitted from the informal, community-based support provided by the BBBS programme.

I suppose by the time they come to us, like we are a tertiary service so they would have moderate to severe mental health difficulties so that would be impacting on their daily life you know. It's just great if they have a mentor to kind of I suppose make that link; somebody within the community as well. I always think that's important that it is not associated with us; do you know what I mean? That it's not under the umbrella; it's not somebody from services, that it's something separate ... You know that it's more community based

– CAMHS Staff 5

Why Big Brother Big Sister? ... I think it's more that kind of informal piece really. It's specifically for the young person; it's got a very different focus. Maybe I'm wrong, but in my mind there's nothing to achieve from a care plan perspective, or a job, or a moving-this-somewhere-so-we-can-discharge-them type of a feel to it. I think it's that more relaxed informal, mentor type, you know, that's so valuable and probably a bit more genuine in its approach possibly... I think it's that informal piece that's so important; a friendship type piece as opposed to you know another number or a care plan

– CAMHS Staff 4

A number of mentors and parents also discussed the voluntary, non-clinical nature of the BBBS programme and appeared to view this as an important asset. These participants believed that young people appreciated that the mentors were there voluntarily, as a friend to the young person, and were not there as carers or professionals. Some participants believed that the type of support provided by the BBBS programme was different to that provided by other professional services.

... There's always going to be something you can't talk to your family about just because you don't want to or because they don't want to listen or they won't understand, whatever the case may be and the alternative then I guess would be going to see a professional whether it is a counsellor or psychiatrist, something like that. Again that has its own you know stigmatisms [sic] around it you know... And even your friends sometimes you think oh if I tell them this they'll laugh at me or they won't understand you know. So I think the thing with a mentor, it's kind of all of those things rolled into one without any of the doubts like. Look, I'm not a family member so if you tell me how much you dislike your brother or something I'm not going to try and defend him you know. I'm not your classmate so if you're saying you cried in the toilets for half an hour in school I'm not going to laugh. You know so there is that element to it. So I think that's why mentoring has that unique way of helping people because you're just chatting to essentially a random person in some ways and then you build your friendship around that support as opposed to going to somebody and just having to tell them your problems or your issues or whatever the case may be
– Mentor 8

She has an SNA at school that she gets on well with but those SNAs change frequently, so you might have six months and then it's somebody else you know? They rotate. So I kind of think there is a consistency with the Big Sister programme in that it's the same person throughout and there [are] no changes and you can become friends and you know? There is a rapport with them
– Parent G

One-on-one support from non-familial adults

Young people, parents, mentors and staff all felt that young people benefitted from having access to support from an external, trusted adult and highlighted this as a key feature of the BBBS programme. Several youth participants remarked that they enjoyed having a companion who was not part of their family or friendship group and felt that because their mentor was not part of their existing social circles they could open up to them more.

Probably like with my own friends I could probably like; I obviously hang out with them every day and I can talk with them but then I can talk about more serious stuff with [mentor]
– Youth 4

It's nice to have someone there to talk to; it's nice to have someone who is maybe not at school like a teacher or classmate. You just have somebody else there entirely. It's nice really
– Youth 9

It's good to have someone who isn't in my normal social circle to talk to. Gives me a new look at how life actually is ... My friends are on the exact same level as me so it's good talking to someone who is like past that and still able to look back on it
– Youth 5

Mentors and parents appeared to hold strong beliefs about the importance of young people having access to another 'good adult'. Some mentors believed that they provided young people with another perspective on life and exposed them to different values or ideas than those they would have access to at home or with their friends. By being a step removed from youths' inner circle, mentors felt they could provide an unbiased perspective, which they viewed as helpful.

I think it's so powerful just to have someone who's not within your family, not within your friend group ... the fact that it's somebody who is removed from any situation in their lives and speaking to them and getting an unbiased opinion let's say on a certain situation; someone who is removed from the entire situation, I think that would be a benefit

– Mentor 1

I think sometimes for guys like [youth] it's nice to have someone else outside of their circle, outside of their family and outside of their friends; they can have just a bit of a chat and a bit of a rant and get a bit of advice if they want it but you don't give advice unless they ask ... A lot of the time if they de-stress with their friends the bit of bias is there, or their friends will say something that will piss them off

– Mentor 7

It's always good to have exposure to a lot of different things and you know? Obviously your parents are your primary influence but if you know? There's no harm in learning other ways of you know? That there is other types of families, there is other types of people, there is other ways to do things. It's not all just the way you know in your own home

– Mentor 9

Parents echoed these beliefs and believed that young people might find it easier to share things with a stranger who was not part of their family or friendship circle and that this helped the young people to bond with their mentors.

I think for [youth] it's because it's someone from the outside you know; they had a bit in common and I think because we know so much I think, talking to someone else that didn't know what was going on and that she could kind of you know talk to them about it as well. And I suppose like she just let it out which was great you know

– Parent D

I think it's useful for a child in general to have a contact with an adult who is not necessarily in their family but can be trusted. It gives an outside perspective on things because I think kids believe that, you know; they love their parents, they're very involved with their parents and all that but they probably also believe there's a certain bias with their parents

– Parent G

I just think the fact that it's another adult that could maybe, I suppose, give her different kinds of advice than maybe I could have, you know when it's your parents they may offer you advice but ... you know when it's someone who is not related to you I think you tend to take on that advice more than when you do your parents

– Parent I

While a number of BBBS and CAMHS staff appeared to agree that young people benefit from having access to a support source outside of the family environment, staff also believed that a key feature of this support was that it was provided on a one-to-one basis from a person who was solely focused on that one young person.

I suppose because it is a friendship at the end of the day; like you know and, that's the important thing I think that a young person takes from it really because this is another adult in their life that's not a parent or a guardian but who still puts in place the boundaries that need to be there for a young person, that are still acting like an adult but not with the same responsibilities that a parent would have

– BBBS Staff 1

It kind of goes into that whole one good adult you know and building that whole; just another support around the young person that can help them with whatever they're going through. You know yourself; you mightn't always want to talk to your Mum or your Dad about stuff, especially stuff that is maybe you know, I don't feel very happy or I'm having trouble at school you know

– BBBS Staff 5

I suppose it is the level of trust that can be generated in a match situation that perhaps can't be generated in a Foróige youth group or an after-school group where there might be ten or twelve, twenty, thirty other young people you know

– BBBS Staff 4

What's holding it together? What's the glue that's holding all of this together, the behavioural stuff and the influence of identity, the relational piece? Well it is one good adult who the young person can trust and actually has the skills to use that and to do something with that. And the more that someone else is able to do that before they can do it for themselves or the parents who could do it or they have a Big Brother Big Sister mentor or whatever, or a teacher, whoever, then the less I have to do

– CAMHS Staff 3

The matching process

Several staff, parent and youth participants commented directly on the BBBS matching process. In general, young people and parents commended the BBBS matching process, noting that BBBS staff appeared to put a lot of thought into the matching process and in ensuring that the young people are paired with suitable mentors.

Good job whoever did it anyway. Thank you! Like I can see that they don't just do it based on people's similar interests, they do it based on personalities and how you think people would do with others and it's very thorough

– Youth 1

[My caseworker] did a very good job in matching me with [my mentor]. If she hadn't done that then I'd probably still be like a really shy person like

– Youth 3

I think they pair them very well. There's a lot of thought that goes into matching the two together which is great you know

– Parent G

It was very carefully handled, and it was kind of with the utmost kind of respect and care and due diligence around my daughter and her emotional reaction to the whole thing

– Parent F

Furthermore, several CAMHS staff believed that the attention BBBS staff gave to the matching process, their willingness to find new mentors where a match was not working or ended early, and their ability to extend matches where there is a perceived benefit were key strengths of the programme.

I think that process is quite good. I know with the most recent family, it was very clear to the family from the outset that we have someone but we don't know if they're going to be your Big Brother or Big Sister; you have to meet them and see how you get on and then we'll review it. I think that's really helpful. There's a bit of work put in place to make sure that it will be successful I suppose, that it's a good match

– CAMHS Staff 4

I suppose the big thing for me is the matching of the mentor to the child and the suitability... I have had conversations with [caseworker] in the past, she might ring and say you know I'm not sure they're quite suited; we might look at re-matching and I like that aspect, that they you know, that they really look at what the child, you know, the interest of the child and the characteristics and to match up the mentor because everyone wants this to go well

– CAMHS Staff 1

Nevertheless, while some parents found the matching process to move rather quickly, others remarked that – after joining the programme – it took an extended period of time for their child to be paired with a mentor.

[The caseworker] got on to me from Foróige and it kind of happened quite smoothly actually. As soon as she got in touch with me she kind of already had someone in mind for [youth], that she felt they would be a good match; that their personalities wouldn't be too dissimilar

– Parent G

I don't think it was very long at all to be honest; I thought it was pretty quick ... it wasn't a very long wait in fairness. I think it was pretty fast that she was matched. She was lucky

– Parent D

Once I made contact with them I was on kind of a waiting list for quite a long time and occasionally I would follow it up with an email and just sort of prompt them and say you know? We are still here. So I think that drifted for quite a while and then eventually I kind of chased them a little bit more often and then they connected with me

– Parent A

Equally, most CAMHS staff had experience of referrals taking a long time to be matched. Crucially, the long waiting times for matches was a notable limitation from the point of view of CAMHS referrers, who noted that due to the long wait times they may forget about the referral and/or move on to other services, or that young people's circumstances may change over the intervening period.

From the Big Brother Big Sister service the biggest issues I've got is the long wait for somebody who has agreed to do this and then they're waiting and waiting for it to start and they could be months, maybe a year, a year and a half waiting. I might have discharged them by the time the Big Brother Big Sister is saying we could offer it

– CAMHS Staff 2

My only concern about referring is ... so the concern is the availability of people in different areas. So that's the only reason I don't mention it now to people. I kind of find out first; you don't want to get people's hopes up

– CAMHS Staff 4

There used to be massively long waiting lists so like put in a referral and maybe in 10 months' time you might get a Big Brother or a Big Sister in which case I'd probably moved ... the referrals used to take so long before they'd get someone, I'd kind of forget about it

– CAMHS Staff 3

Sometimes if there's a delay in the time that they're taken up there may be a deterioration in their mental health status ... if they're not taken up for a year, year and a half their status may have changed

– CAMHS Staff 1

However, several participants believed that difficulties recruiting volunteers – male volunteers in particular – was contributing to these longer waiting times for young people and their families.

There are so many referrals, when they come forward we try our best to make as many matches as we can but that's reliant on suitable volunteers coming forward where the young person is based or near to where they're based
– BBBS Staff 2

I do know the local Big Brother Big Sister; I find them very good, but they just struggled to get people; they struggled to get volunteers and that's been my biggest issue with them – if you want to say an issue. It's not that I have an issue with them, I understand; I refer people in to them and they could be a long, long time waiting to get a Big Brother, Big Sister because they just don't have the volunteers
– CAMHS Staff 2

From the very beginning [the BBBS casework] was very reassuring and said that she had no doubt whatsoever that she'd find a match for us you know, but it might take time. That was her only kind of caveat really... I think they had a particular issue recruiting young men to be Big Brothers; they'd loads of Big Sisters but very few Big Brothers so that was her biggest issue really
– Parent C

Additionally, BBBS staff contended that there were also difficulties recruiting volunteers in certain regions (e.g. rural locations), which may similarly lead to longer waiting lists in some geographical regions.

It's a wide enough geographical spread the area that I work in and it is very rural ... A challenge that comes up a lot of the time is that we may have a young person living in [place-name] for example but we'd have no volunteers; the closest volunteer could be an hour away. So unfortunately it means that young people remain on the waiting list, particularly boys, for maybe a little bit longer because of the rural nature
– BBBS Staff 3

Lack of funding and resources were also cited as potential factors impeding BBBS caseworkers' ability to pair all youth referrals with suitable mentors in a timely fashion.

Look it's resources... There are so many phone calls where I'm having to say we don't have the volunteers there or I'm maxed out in terms of my caseload, can't do anything for you for six months you know. There are so many of those conversations and that's the most difficult part... There are so many young people that just need one-to-one support; there's no other option for them you know... that's the main thing; if the resources are there, we can facilitate more of these young people
– BBBS Staff 4

I suppose capacity is an issue being honest like you know. We do prioritise our CAMHS matches here but we can only match so many young people in a year. So you don't want to raise the expectation that we can service a lot ... You have to be realistic about how many young people we can offer the programme to for capacity reasons, for ourselves to manage and support in a period of time
– BBBS Staff 3

In response to the issues they identified with the matching process, a number of participants provided suggestions for how these issues could be addressed. A few staff queried whether mixed-gender matches could be identified and suggested this could be one way to alleviate the long waiting lists for referrals. Some parents and mentors suggested publicising the BBBS programme more widely, in order to recruit more mentors, with some noting that they had approached friends or other contacts about volunteering in the programme.

Part of me feels oh could we explore the cross-gender matching case and we would have had referral agents that would have stated in the referral form that the young person doesn't mind if the worker or mentors are male or female
– BBBS Staff 2

Obviously it's difficult to recruit people. Yeah I suppose look I know it's Big Brother Big Sister but I suppose I do wonder in certain circumstances is it possible to have you know Big Sister, Little Brother you know, that you could mix it up as well. The young guy I'm thinking of you know he would have worked quite well with either. It wouldn't have been a problem if it was male or female. I'm sure there's lots of reasons why it is Big Brother Big Sister and all of that but yeah I wonder could there be some flexibility with that
– CAMHS Staff 4

I've mentioned it to friends and people I know that I'm doing this programme and they all say oh, I'd love to do something like that, I never heard or knew there was something like that. So I think a lot more people wouldn't mind acting as mentors as well if they knew about it. It's only by chance that I found out about the programme
– Mentor 1

I think it's a brilliant idea, it is a brilliant concept. In a way it should be more widely known about because I can even think of people of my age who'd make great mentors who maybe haven't got that much going on in their lives, who could give back you know what I mean but who maybe don't know about it or whatever
– Parent F

Mentor training and support

Several mentors noted that the training they received from Foróige at the start of their mentoring experience helped them to feel more confident and informed about their mentoring roles. These mentors indicated that the training provided a realistic overview of what could be expected from the mentoring experience and provided helpful guidance on how to handle certain situations or issues that may arise, which in turn helped the mentors feel more prepared to support the young people. Nonetheless, some mentors recommended having more 'refresher' training courses.

There was extensive training actually... it was of great benefit to me because it did make me take the whole endeavour seriously you know
– Mentor 9

Obviously they go through training and a lot of it is to do with the actual protocols in place themselves, what you can and can't do. But it also teaches you the softer skills as well, like, empathy, listening, I suppose engaging and listening to your Little
– Mentor 5

It would be great if they had booster training if matches take a while to set in; I think that would be very beneficial
– Mentor 6

Additionally, the BBBS caseworkers appeared to play a key role in supporting young people, mentors and families; helping young people and mentors establish meaningful relationships; and ensuring that all those involved enjoyed their experience. Several parents noted that the BBBS caseworkers provided ongoing support to them throughout the match and would contact them regularly to check in about the young people and/or mentor. Parents appeared to find this contact comforting and seemed reassured knowing that should any issues arise they could contact the caseworker for further guidance or support.

They check in and make sure everything is going fine... they've a light hand on the tiller at all times I think. They really seem to be aware of what's going on
– Parent G

[Caseworker] and the team are very, very supportive you know, they really are. You could pick up the phone any time to [caseworker] you know and say: at the beginning she would have been on a lot: How are they getting on? How did the first meeting go? How did the second meeting go? We have no concerns at all really; they just got on so well from the very beginning but you kind of knew she was always at the end of the phone you know

– Parent C

Mentors felt that there was good communication between them and the BBBS caseworkers, and that the ongoing support they received from the caseworkers not only helped them feel more confident in their mentoring roles, but also helped them to better understand how best to support their Little.

You quickly run out of activities right, you run out of things to do with your Little so they're constantly let's say sharing a library of activities or things that you can do or suggestions. And they're also putting on activities as well ... so they offer a world of supports in terms of keeping your relationship with your Little fresh and not just doing the same things over and over again

– Mentor 5

I speak to the leader at Foróige about anything that I find particularly concerning because obviously she's aware of the overall story... So I could talk to her because she already knows and obviously I don't talk to anyone in my family or friend groups because it's all confidential information

– Mentor 1

I suppose every teenager has different needs and every match will have different things ... I was asking the case worker where do you feel the difference I can make is you know

– Mentor 2

Although a few CAMHS staff expressed reservations about whether the BBBS mentors would be equipped to deal with the array of issues/difficulties young people may be experiencing, several BBBS staff noted that they assessed the mentors' coping skills at the matching stage, and provide extra support to CAMHS matches if/when needed. BBBS staff believed that the combination of training and ongoing support provided to mentors helped ensure that volunteers can be a reliable, supportive resource for those youth referrals.

I also tend to get a little bit protective of my clients as just about every therapist does and sometimes, and I would say unfairly... can I trust the mentor with this person? This is a very vulnerable person ... I do find myself, I'm hearing myself say unfairly but I kind of go, sure I don't know who you're going to get. I think that's my issue

– CAMHS Staff 3

It is really important in CAMHS matches that volunteers get the support they need depending on the type of volunteer and the skills of the volunteer because some volunteers could find it overwhelming if a young person is having a really difficult time. So you need to be sure; know your volunteers and be careful about that you know and know that some will need more check-ins, more support, more training, more encouragement, more reassurance as volunteers that you're doing a really good job and the young people are telling us that and they're telling you

– BBBS Staff 3

Like support is always there and I would say to all of them look, I'll ring once a month but if something comes up in between those calls or in between any meetings always feel free to ring me if there's anything concerning you or if there's anything you feel I need to know that may have happened for the young person

– BBBS Staff 1

I suppose the way the volunteers are coached and encouraged and trained up and given support and given the heads up on different things that a young person might want to do through supervision that they've shared or items that they've shared during their supervision, that all helps

– BBBS Staff 2

BBBS–CAMHS communication practices

Although the majority of staff commented on the communication practices that existed between BBBS and CAMHS throughout the referral process, participants from different organisations appeared to hold differing opinions about the quality or frequency of this communication. On one hand, some BBBS staff believed that there was a good level of communication between the two services.

The people that referred to me I always got on great with them; they kind of know the programme inside out; they know who will be suitable and who it might not be suitable for; they would know the time, the good time to kind of refer a young person to the programme. So yeah, so it has always been; we've been fine

– BBBS Staff 1

We'd have a great connection there with CAMHS in W and X and Y and Z and different areas like that. There are always different staff members changing around so I suppose we need to be constantly communicating with new staff members and going on to team meetings sometimes just to chat about the programme and keep it fresh in their minds

– BBBS Staff 2

On the other hand, some BBBS staff indicated that it can be difficult to get in contact with referrers and that the level of communication may vary depending on who the referrer is or how long the young person has been matched.

There can be times where you mightn't hear back from certain people and you will have to kind of keep at it and keep contacting them. ... I suppose in a way once the match is made, like I wouldn't have a lot of continuing communication regarding that referral then

– BBBS Staff 1

There are some staff that I suppose; you link in with more than others and you know it's great just to be able to pick up the phone or send that email you know, you're saying oh they'll definitely get back to me

– BBBS Staff 2

I'm finding that across the board, that it's different depending on who refers and there's a variety then of staff within CAMHS that would refer you know. It could be a doctor or a nurse or it could be a key worker, either you know... it can be challenging, sometimes I guess to speak to the person who referred the young person because they mightn't be working with them anymore. We mightn't have a link sometimes then as time goes on for a young person, or I guess by the time a young person is referred to us and they get started maybe they're no longer involved with that young person

– BBBS Staff 3

I suppose services like CAMHS and other services they probably see Big Brothers Big Sisters as something to dip into as and when they feel it might be appropriate. It might not necessarily be the first organisation that comes to mind for them; that's my sense of it. So I suppose yeah there's probably a piece of work there where that relationship could be strengthened on a more formal basis maybe. Yeah I think the relationship is very much down to the workers on the ground

– BBBS Staff 4

Similarly, while some CAMHS staff felt they had a good relationship with the BBBS programme workers, and felt the programme staff were approachable, others felt that the level of communication from BBBS workers could be improved. In particular, these participants noted that after referring a young person to the BBBS programme, some CAMHS staff did not receive further updates about the referral. A number of CAMHS staff indicated that they were disappointed by the lack of communication, as this left them unaware of whether the young person had agreed to participate in the programme and/or had made a successful match.

I suppose from my perspective I feel personally I have good communication with those services. I've never had any issues you know; I don't know if that's widespread. I suppose I'd be a bit more proactive maybe in ringing people up and asking them. Maybe there's others that don't think of them or don't pick up the phone to ring them, contact them
– CAMHS Staff 4

Communication: it's probably an area that I've been a little bit disappointed with but I'd also take responsibility for that. I'd put in a referral and send it off – I can't say how many referrals I've put in over the years... I haven't heard huge much back from the Big Brother Big Sister coordinators. Now of course it could be argued, have you gone chasing them; I haven't
– CAMHS Staff 3

Just a bit of formal communication so we know what's happening with the families would be good too because I did get from our team meeting that people, they made a referral and then they never heard any more, so it was like the abyss, and I was kind of saying well no, that's not my experience. But it wasn't everybody's experience. So if you can kind of standardise that I think it would be good
– CAMHS Staff 1

Several staff suggested that the partnership between BBBS and CAMHS could be strengthened by adopting a more formal, streamlined approach to the communication process, although staff from both services appeared keen to avoid unnecessary communication practices.

I think that might be something that it would be nice to work on; once referrers are seeing there might be a call, some kind of communication saying yes we received that, there's approximately a 6 month or 9 month waiting list, we'll be in contact as soon as we can get that match. I think that might be a nice kind of, if there was a standardisation of that kind of communication process between referral and the agency
– CAMHS Staff 1

I suppose when you know one staff member longer than the other, you're more likely maybe to pop them the email ... I suppose it could be better than that, there could be more communication I suppose; increased communication or more regular check-ins but sometimes the fear is that you know you're going to them talking about the programme but you really want to be going to them with a list of volunteers for potential matches
– BBBS Staff 3

Once there is somebody lined up if they wanted to sort of contact me, contact the key worker just to see where are they at and how much communication they want is helpful
– CAMHS Staff 3

Crucially, both CAMHS and BBBS staff appeared to believe that more frequent, streamlined communication between the two services could have further benefits for young people, with a number of staff reflecting on cases where the communication between CAMHS and BBBS had significant benefits for the youth referral.

Earlier this year we had a young person who was, had been involved in CAMHS you know and I was able to go back to [the referrer], she's the consultant from CAMHS and she was able to give me a lot of information on how the volunteer can best engage with that young person; just really good advice... around the language the volunteer could be using with the young person to help motivate the young person; around you know, just the type of activities. She was kind of saying if the activities are active you know rather than too much cognitive load for the young person that would actually help the young person with their mental health. That kind of stuff you know. So CAMHS have been good that way. It has been a working relationship in the past

– BBBS Staff 4

3.3.3 Impact of the Covid pandemic

The Covid-19 pandemic appeared to have significant implications on participants' involvement with, and perceptions of, the BBBS programme. First, it was apparent from participant interviews that during the height of the Covid-19 social distancing restrictions, most of the youth–mentor interactions were taking place online. Participants noted that although most matches maintained contact during this period, they were not able to meet face to face, which in turn restricted the type of activities they could engage in.

It was just what sort of changed was it limited the activities we could do

– Youth 1

We Facetime most of the time during Covid to do online baking

– Youth 6

We've only really been able to do online; we've only met once in person. You know the peak and it went down; it's gone right back up again now so I don't know how that's going to go. But we've only been able to meet once outside on a walk

– Youth 5

Most matches appeared to find the initial move to online mentoring difficult, with participants noting that it was less enjoyable engaging online and that technological difficulties sometimes impeded the connection.

It was harder to connect through online calls and stuff compared to being in person because you can kind of like express yourself more in person than you can over the phone

– Youth 7

When Covid did hit it went online which was ok you know? It was a bit patchy because internet signals weren't very good, both the Big Sister's and ours, so that was a bit difficult for them to chat normally because either one's internet would break down

– Parent A

We went into lockdown for twelve weeks, I wasn't even allowed see her... that was a real shame, like we kept in touch over the phone but even at that stage she didn't have her own phone because she was only twelve ... and then once we opened up we were only allowed meet socially distanced

– Mentor 9

Many young people, parents and mentors felt that the mentoring experience was generally better in person and believed that young people benefitted more from face-to-face meetings:

I think it would be definitely better in person but it's still really good

– Youth 5

I don't know what my match would say but like for me I think it's just more enjoyable like in person and it's just easier to find things to talk about and obviously when you're not in lockdown there's more things going on

– Mentor 4

Certainly I think meeting up and meeting other people is hugely important for him

– Mentor 5

[Youth]'s not a huge technology person ... I think she actually likes the physical one to one and she likes walks, getting out in nature and stuff like that... I think the face to face really benefits [youth]

– Parent G

I definitely think meeting face to face is definitely one of the better options for kids because it does help them. I suppose it's kind of like you know; like you don't know what people are like on a Zoom call; it's very hard to get a perception of the personalities or how awkward or something they could be. No, definitely a meet up is very important I think for kids

– Parent H

Likewise, several BBBS and CAMHS staff believed that young people benefitted more from in-person mentoring, noting that some young people appeared to disengage from the mentoring experience during Covid, due to the online nature of the interactions, while BBBS staff also felt that it was more difficult to recruit new mentors during this period.

... because Covid happened and she wasn't a young person that liked engaging on the phone. They'd have the odd phone call and the odd text message but it wasn't until they were able to start meeting up again that it went back to weekly meetings for her and weekly contact

– BBBS Staff 1

A lot of the volunteers did at some level try and maintain connection with the young person even if it was video calling. To be honest a lot of the young people didn't like the video calling, they preferred telephone calls. So Zoom wasn't the answer to Big Brothers Big Sisters in my opinion

– BBBS Staff 4

Volunteers weren't as eager during that time or available or making themselves available; they were waiting maybe or just had questions about: they preferred to be matched at the meeting face to face; they were holding off or they were not following through with their applications

– BBBS Staff 2

What could they do you know? Meet people online? Maybe. Really? I think maybe some young people maybe could have but I think you're grasping for straws ... like every second week, you know, I think it's like oh, I meet them online and then I meet them you know. Get rid of all that, stop meeting people online ... I think it's now that people are allowed to have a life again and to really just take advantage of that and get the mentors out there

– CAMHS Staff 3

However, a couple of participants felt that the move to online mentoring had few adverse effects on the youth–mentor relationship dynamics, with some participants feeling that the mentoring process was easier online.

To be honest I don't really think it's made much of a difference considering everything is online at this point; it's just normal now. So I don't think so. I'm sure if I was meeting all the time I'd feel the exact same way about the whole thing

– Youth 5

At the beginning it was bit of a relief for me to be honest that I didn't have to get into my car and drive into town every week

– Mentor 2

[Mentor] was fantastic; they made an appointment every week around the same time you know because [mentor] was working from home and they would meet either by Zoom or they'd do a bit of online gaming but he always checked in with him every week

– Parent C

I think the needs of the kids were still the same. I think then they were talking about having some stuff online which I thought was useful as well

– CAMHS Staff 1

Crucially, participants believed that having the opportunity to meet and get to know one another before the Covid-19 restrictions were implemented helped some matches adjust more easily to the online mentoring process.

I think having those few years before Covid like it helped us to gain a proper relationship. ... And then when we were getting into Covid of course we were doing our video calls so we could just talk for ages and ages and we always had something to talk about

– Youth 9

The one good thing that we did have though is we had possibly a year, a year and a half together before it so we knew each other's moods ... Whereas I think for people who were matched maybe either just before it or during it, it would have been a lot more difficult for them because at least we had things that we could refer back to you know

– Mentor 5

I'm really glad she got an opportunity to meet mentor in person before the restrictions. I don't think she would have got from it what she has if it had been online

– Parent I

I suppose the bond that they had with their match before the pandemic really was a tell-tale sign on whether they would make the effort to engage in maybe online activities; matches that weren't matched for too long before the pandemic maybe didn't do as well as matches that were matched for a longer period pre pandemic because some of them were only really still in some cases at the get to know you stage. Those matches who weren't matched for as long before the pandemic is a little bit more difficult for the volunteer to keep the engagement going, keep the young person interested and motivated

– BBBS Staff 2

Additionally, although participants voiced a preference for face-to-face mentoring, most participants nonetheless believed that young people benefitted from being able to stay in contact with their mentors during the Covid-19 period, with some CAMHS staff believing that there was a bigger need for mentoring programmes like BBBS post Covid.

Lockdown was very, the first lockdown was very, like all over the place like; not being able to meet anyone, do anything. I just thought having a friend over that was very helpful

– Youth 3

It absolutely helped yeah. It was great especially when I was doing sort of like the whole online classes thing. I did not enjoy that at all ... that was quite difficult, because of course teachers were struggling as well as the students. So it's nice to sort of like; whenever we did get to have a video call I would sort of talk to her about that
– Youth 9

It was a real lifeline for [youth] actually during lockdown you know. It was something he looked forward to, that he'd have an hour of chatting or gaming with [mentor]
– Parent C

It was great for [youth] because [youth] actually; I think it got her through Covid because she looks forward to it, she had something to look forward to, to talk to her Big Sister you know
– Parent D

I think definitely for some of them they still needed the support from kind of a mental health perspective whereas others, for others it was just lovely to still have their volunteer to connect with from you know a different face, a different voice; have the chats mainly about Netflix because nothing was happening in their lives as such you know. But I do think yeah, the support was definitely needed and probably like I said more so for certain young people. But overall they all benefitted from still being able to connect with their volunteer
– BBBS Staff 1

3.3.4 Overall perceptions of the BBBS programme

Almost every participant in this study believed that young people who are referred to BBBS through CAMHS benefit to some degree from their involvement with the mentoring programme. First, from the perspective of BBBS and CAMHS staff – who have been involved with the BBBS programme for several years – mentoring can be a valuable resource for young people who attend CAMHS.

From experience I know that Big Brother Big Sister has proved very well and you know those kids with similar problems have benefitted so I continue to refer for those reasons because the feedback is usually very positive
– CAMHS Staff 1

I wouldn't be here 16 years if I didn't feel that it was working. You need to see it to... if you see it you believe it and I think that's the motivation for keeping working in the role
– BBBS Staff 2

You do see the benefits for the young people referred from CAMHS
– BBBS Staff 3

In particular, several CAMHS staff indicated that they frequently received positive feedback about the BBBS programme from young people/families and believed that mentoring can be a positive experience for young people. While most CAMHS staff recounted individual cases where youth referrals appeared to have benefitted from their mentoring experiences, some staff felt that they may not be in the best position to comment on the overall effectiveness of the programme.

It has been really positive. I have never had, in the 21 years, a negative experience of any referral I have made to Big Brother Big Sister
– CAMHS Staff 1

We would have a lot of teenagers you know and it would have always been very positive ... I was always very happy with it. I think it's great
– CAMHS Staff 5

I haven't really deconstructed and figuring out how successful it is as such you know. It's not really my priority but yeah I do kind of have a sense; so it's definitely a case where it was absolutely key. There are other cases where no, I don't think it has had much of an impact and then I'd say there's just about everything in between

– CAMHS Staff 4

Similarly, reflecting on their experiences, all BBBS staff believed that the mentoring programme was beneficial for CAMHS referrals and highlighted numerous examples of the positive feedback they had received from the young people/families involved in the programme. However, one staff member noted that sometimes the feedback received from parents was different from the feedback received from the young people.

... she's one example of who it worked really well for and I suppose her parents would have felt the same about it ... Then with others you know a parent will say that it has helped and that it has improved certain aspects in the life of the young person but you know that young person may never name that; say yeah, it was fine, yeah I enjoyed it you know and that's kind of that. But I think overall yeah it certainly does benefit

– BBBS Staff 1

When recounting their mentoring experiences, each young person proclaimed that they had benefitted in some way from their mentoring experience and believed that taking part in BBBS was a special experience.

It's one of the best experiences that I've had ... One of the best experiences of my life!

– Youth 4

It's been very helpful like to me over the years. It is something fun to do like. There have been some great memories over the years

– Youth 3

It's been a very positive experience for me and I'm very, very glad that I decided to do it. So just thank you I guess for the programme. Helping a bunch of awkward teens like myself!

– Youth 1

Young people frequently noted that the programme had helped them in various ways and that, as a result of knowing their mentors, their lives had changed for the better. Crucially, some young people emphasised that these changes may not have occurred without the help of BBBS mentors and staff.

I definitely have changed in the two years since I've been with [my mentor]. Me and [my mentor] were talking about this the last time we met up, I have changed a lot. And I do think [mentor] has kind of brought that out in me

– Youth 6

It's helped me out a lot ... Like I've learned a lot through it and I've gotten a lot of help through it that I wouldn't if I hadn't have done it. So I definitely think it is a good thing to be involved in

– Youth 7

Parents expressed a similar belief that the BBBS programme had been beneficial for both their child and their family. Some parents believed that the programme offered a unique form of support that could supplement young people's professional mental health care, and indicated that participating in the BBBS programme had been a life-changing experience.

To be honest I didn't know what to expect so I can honestly say it's more than what I expected, because I have a lovely, confident daughter who is just thriving

– Parent 1

It's made such a massive difference to us. I don't know what would have happened to us, I really don't. I don't know with [youth] what road he'd have gone down if [mentor] hadn't come into his life you know. It could have been a very different story, very different. But it really has made a massive difference; he could have been dead by now, I don't know. Really, he was in that bad a place you know. It definitely has changed things for him hugely you know

– Parent C

It was a good referral yeah; I think it was very good, yeah. I think out of all [youth]'s referrals that's probably been the best... because [youth], she went from Pieta House to CAMHS you see. Now that she went to the programme Big Sister it's actually one of the best for her. Now don't get me wrong I'm not saying that they weren't supportive but this has been the best for her

– Parent D

Mentors appeared to believe that the BBBS programme was a supportive resource for young people, with some suggesting that mentoring has both immediate and longer-term benefits for young people. Notably, some mentors felt that mentoring programmes like BBBS, were needed now more than ever, as they felt that young people today are under more strain and pressure.

Even if it's not 100% benefit it definitely goes a long way to being a platform to later on in life as well

– Mentor 10

I think any forum that can give people access to people to talk to is huge because ultimately if you're not talking you're internalising and internalising catastrophises things I think a little bit ... So I think if people have access to talk [to] people irrespective of what age group they are then it's only good for them

– Mentor 5

I think that there's a big need for it out there. It's a really difficult time. It always has been; teenagers have always had it really hard but I think particularly now it's very difficult. They're under huge pressure academically and every other way and I think that they're lost; a lot of them are lost

– Mentor 2

Overall, the majority of young people, parents and mentors suggested that they would recommend the programme and believed that mentoring could be particularly beneficial for other young people who might be struggling with personal, emotional or social difficulties.

I would definitely recommend it to people. I would recommend it to everybody honestly but if I had to recommend it to certain people, people with social anxiety or like trust issues or having trouble with friends and stuff like that I would definitely recommend it more to them

– Youth 2

If there were any children out there that are isolated or on a journey you know? That have come through therapy etc. then I think it is a great programme. Obviously therapy is not involved in it, it's just about friendship and knowing that you can grow in confidence and somebody does want to be with you and go out with you and you know? All the things that would boost you from that. So yes, I would definitely think others could benefit as well

– Parent A

Yeah for people struggling, I think it would get them out of their shell or it would break that barrier of nervousness and it would help the child build the confidence, social skills, be able to talk to their Big Brothers Big Sisters if they needed to. All that kind of stuff, yeah

– Parent B

Similarly, both CAMHS and BBBS staff felt that there was a 'good fit' between the two services, with several noting that they would like the partnership to continue as they believed that CAMHS referrals benefit from participation in the BBBS programme.

We see the benefits really quickly with young people like that. If the young people choose to participate when you meet them after referral and they're interested; that's one thing I would find about CAMHS referrals, our programme fits very well in with what their needs tend to present as

– BBBS Staff 3

I've used the service so often and it's fantastic. So whatever we can do to help this going forward because we will always have people to refer and it's lovely to have, to be able to work collaboratively with another service that's doing great work and getting out to families you know where we can't get to; working with the other bits while we're dealing with the major mental health issues or mental illness. So that's good.

– CAMHS Staff 1

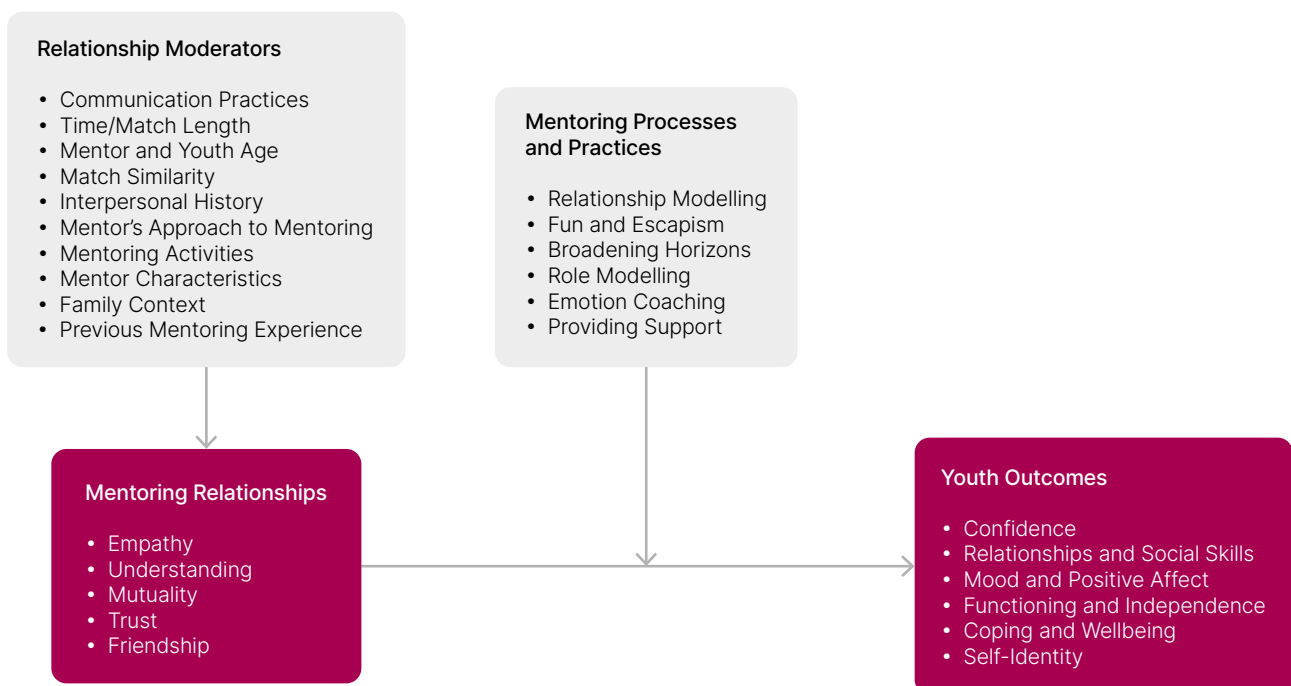
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Discussion

4. Discussion

Findings from the current research indicated that young people who are referred to the Big Brother Big Sister programme due to their association with the Child & Adolescent Mental Health Services typically form high-quality relationships with their mentors and show signs of positive development, across an array of outcome areas. The current research also identified several mentoring practices that appear to aid young people's positive development, and provided further insight into the factors that may strengthen (or weaken) the quality of the youth–mentor relationship. A visual overview of the mentoring framework observed in the current research is provided in Figure 6 below. Overall, the current study found support for the BBBS–CAMHS partnership, with evidence suggesting that the BBBS programme is associated with positive outcomes for young people and families. However, the findings of this research also identified some challenges/issues that may affect staff and service users. These findings have important implications for research and practice as they provide insight into the perceived utility of the BBBS programme and its working relationship with CAMHS from a multi-stakeholder perspective.

Figure 6. Illustration of the outcomes associated with high-quality BBBS mentoring relationships, the processes that help produce these outcomes, and the factors that moderate relationship quality.



4.1 The youth–mentor relationship

From the perspective of young people, mentors, parents and staff who participated in the current research, the majority of young people who are referred from CAMHS to the BBBS programme form authentic, high-quality relationships with their mentors, relationships which were characterised by mutual, empathetic, understanding, trusted friendships. Previous research has indicated that the strength and quality of the relationship that develops between young people and mentors is critical for the success of formal mentoring programmes and is a key mechanism through which youth experience positive development (Rhodes, 2005; Pryce et al., 2021; DeWit et al., 2019; Raposa et al., 2019). The findings from the current research lend support to this perspective and provide further evidence to suggest that high-quality mentoring relationships are associated with positive youth outcomes. Nonetheless, the friendship that was typically formed between young people and mentors in the BBBS programme should also be regarded as an important outcome in its own right. Recent conceptualisations of mentoring propose that quality mentoring relationships can serve as both a means for achieving a targeted end and as a valued end in itself (Cavell et al., 2021). In the current research, young people referred to the BBBS programme were frequently described as being socially withdrawn, disconnected or isolated, with participants often noting that these young people had difficulties connecting with or trusting others. However, despite their previous interpersonal difficulties, young people were able to form meaningful, trusted connections with their mentors, which for some appeared to be their main form of social interaction outside of the family context. Hence, the positive youth–mentor friendships observed within the current research can be regarded as both an outcome and a process for promoting change.

The findings from this research provide other novel and formative insights into the moderators of relationship quality (see Appendix B). Given the importance of establishing quality mentoring relationships, these findings have important implications for research and practice as they extend our understanding of the factors that can help (or impede) the youth–mentor relationship-building process. In the current research, participants provided evidence to suggest that factors such as Time/Match Length, Youth's Family Context, Interpersonal History and Previous Mentoring Experience, Mentor and Youth Age, Match Similarity, Mentor Characteristics, Mentor's Approach to Mentoring, Communication Practices and Mentoring Activities may moderate the strength of the youth–mentor relationship. Notably, these findings are consistent with those reported in previous mentoring research. For example, Deutsch and Spencer (2009) contended that match duration, frequency and consistency of contact, and mentor's approach to mentoring are key moderators of high-quality mentoring relationships. Similarly, other researchers have indicated that youth age, mentor age, previous relational history, match similarity, mentor characteristics, programme practices (including how youth and mentors spend their time) and parental support for the mentoring relationship can facilitate or hinder the development and maintenance of the mentoring relationship (Goldner & Ben-Eliyahu, 2021; Kern et al., 2019; Keller & DuBois, 2021; Noam et al., 2013; Raposa et al., 2019; Spencer et al., 2020). Thus, the current research adds to this growing literature base and provides further evidence to suggest that these factors play an important role in the youth–mentor relationship-building process. Given the implications for the mentoring context, it is important that practitioners of formal mentoring programmes, such as BBBS, are aware of this accumulating evidence base.

However, it is important to note that while the moderators identified in the current research were frequently discussed by parents, mentors, young people and BBBS staff, these factors were rarely identified or discussed by CAMHS staff. Only a few CAMHS participants discussed moderators, and these participants only identified match similarity, youth age and communication practices as potential moderators of the mentoring relationship. This may be due to CAMHS staff being more removed from the relationship-building process. Additionally, although parents, mentors, young people and BBBS staff believed that these moderators impacted young people's relationships with their mentors, participants frequently expressed diverging opinions as to whether these factors hindered or promoted quality mentoring relationships. For instance, while some

participants believed that it is easier for young people to bond with younger mentors, others believed that young people form better, lasting relationships with older mentors. Moreover, while some participants believed that engaging in activities facilitated youth-mentor bonding, others felt that stronger relationships could be formed without the distraction of activities. This is an important finding as it implies that factors which promote quality relationships for some matches hinder the development of quality relationships for others. It is also possible that some moderators may exert a greater effect on relationship quality than others. For example, in their study examining the predictors of mentoring relationship quality, De Wit et al. (2019) found that perceived match similarity was one of the strongest determinants of relationship quality, superseding the effects of parental support for the relationship. Due to the qualitative nature of this research, it is not possible to make inferences about how, or how strongly, these factors impact relationship quality. Further research is needed in order to gain clarity on whether these moderators help or hinder relationship quality, identify which factors exert the strongest impact on relationship quality, and determine whether the nature of this relationship varies depending on other unique characteristics of the match.

4.2 Outcomes associated with BBBS participation

A notable finding from the current research is that young people who participate in the BBBS programme – following a referral or recommendation from CAMHS – show evidence of positive youth development. Specifically, from the perspective of young people, parents, mentors, BBBS staff and CAMHS staff involved in the BBBS-CAMHS partnership, young people who participated in the BBBS programme showed signs of positive socio-emotional, cognitive and identity development. According to the Rhodes (2005) Model of Mentoring young people who form quality mentoring relationships – characterised by mutuality, trust and empathy – experience positive socio-emotional, cognitive and identity development (Pryce et al., 2021). While this research cannot make causal inferences about the impact of mentoring on youth development, the current findings lend support for this theoretical model of mentoring (Rhodes, 2005) and provide evidence to suggest that mentoring can be a valuable resource for youth who are experiencing social, emotional, cognitive and/or behavioural difficulties (Cavell et al., 2021; DuBois et al., 2018; Meyerson, 2013; Munson & Railey, 2016). The current research also extends our understanding of the impact of mentoring programmes by providing evidence to suggest that mentoring approaches can provide additional benefits for the mentors and families involved (Claro & Perelmiter, 2021; Cavell et al., 2021).

In addition to providing support for the utility of the BBBS programme the current research gives valuable insight into the specific outcomes that appear to be impacted by young people's participation in the BBBS programme, and the specific mentoring processes/practices that help promote these outcomes. First, the area where participants appeared to observe the most change was in relation to young people's social-emotional development. Stakeholders across each group believed that after joining the BBBS programme young people seemed to become more confident, outgoing and independent; showed improved social skills and social functioning; and appeared happier, more resilient and better able to cope. These findings are similar to those reported in other international research, which similarly suggests that participation in the formal mentoring programmes promotes positive social-emotional development (Du Bois et al., 2011; Claro & Perelmiter, 2021; Poon et al., 2021). Although participants in the current research also observed positive changes in young people's cognitive and identity development after joining BBBS, these outcomes were noted by fewer participants. These participants believed that the BBBS programme had helped young people explore their self-identities and adopt instrumental goals, such as becoming more engaged in school or more aware of vocational/educational opportunities. Other research has indicated that mentored young people show positive improvements on a variety of cognitive, health, identity and behavioural outcomes (Matz, 2014; Raposa et al., 2019), hence the lack of outcomes observed by participants outside of the social-emotional domain was surprising. However, it should be noted that the current research was directed at evaluating the utility of mentoring with a specialised population (young

people associated with CAMHS), and at the time of being referred to the BBBS programme these young people were experiencing significant social–emotional difficulties, such as poor social skills/functioning, difficulties with peers, and/or low mood. If young people were experiencing social–emotional difficulties at the time of joining the BBBS programme, changes in these outcomes may have been more noticeable for participants, or participants may have been more cognisant of these changes/perceived outcomes at the time of the interview, which may help explain why fewer identity or cognitive development outcomes were attributed to young people’s BBBS participation. Nonetheless, the findings from the current research are important as they suggest that the areas where young people appear to be struggling when presenting to CAMHS are the areas where participants noticed the most improvements after joining BBBS.

The processes and practices that mentors engage in when interacting with the young people may also play a role in shaping the type of youth outcomes observed. Within the current research participants suggested that the mentors in the BBBS programme promoted youth development by engaging in activities and discussions that helped broaden young people’s horizons, facilitated social capital, provided young people with an outlet for fun and escapism, and/or helped young people learn how to regulate or make sense of their emotions. Additionally, participants noted that mentors often provided support and advice to young people and were frequently regarded as role/relational models. Arguably, many of these practices centred more on facilitating socio-emotional development than other outcomes. It is possible that if young people presented as having social–emotional difficulties, these were the areas where mentors provided the most support or behavioural activation, with other research suggesting that mentors often direct activities around the individual wants and needs of the young person (Raposa et al., 2019; Christensen et al., 2021). The current research is helpful as it provides insight into the types of practices and processes mentors engage in to help support young people and promote positive development, but further research is needed to understand whether mentors tailor these practices/processes depending on the characteristics and needs of the young person with whom they are matched.

Given the international evidence that has accrued to suggest that the Covid-19 pandemic exerted significant adverse effects on young people’s mental health and social wellbeing (Barendse et al., 2021; Chadi et al., 2022), the finding that youth who participated in the BBBS programme appeared to demonstrate positive social–emotional, cognitive and identity developments during this time is a notable finding. Although participants across all stakeholder groups noted that the Covid-19 pandemic, and the associated pivot to online mentoring, had a negative impact on the frequency and quality of youth–mentor communication, the majority of matches were found to maintain some level of contact during this period and many participants believed that these relationships were a pivotal support for young people during this time. The current findings add to a small body of evidence which suggest that mentoring relationships were a valuable resource for young people during the Covid-19 pandemic, providing them with social interaction and support during a time of isolation and fear (Kaufman et al., 2021; Gkika et al., 2021). However, while online mentoring approaches were viewed as a useful tool for helping matches maintain contact during the ‘lockdown’ periods (MacDonald et al., 2020), findings from the current research suggest that in-person mentoring is the preferred approach, with several participants indicating that online mentoring has restricted benefits for young people. This finding has implications for future research and practice given the rising interest in online mentoring approaches.

4.3 The BBBS–CAMHS partnership

The findings from this research provide support for the BBBS–CAMHS partnership, with results suggesting that participation in the BBBS programme can be beneficial for young people who experience moderate social, emotional, cognitive or behavioural issues. Moreover, participants in the current study suggested that there are unique characteristics associated with the BBBS programme that distinguish it from other formal support programmes and enhance its appeal as a supportive resource for young people attending CAMHS. Specifically, from the perspective of the CAMHS and BBBS staff, young people, parents and mentors who participated in this research, a key advantage of BBBS is that it is a non-clinical, community-based programme that offers support and friendship to young people from a voluntary, non-familial adult. Participants contended that young people may be more likely to engage with mentoring programmes, as opposed to other professional services or group programmes, due to the informal, one-on-one nature of the support offered, and believed that young people benefitted from adult friendships outside of the family context. Other research has similarly found evidence to suggest that young people and their families may be more open to mentoring supports (Hagler et al., 2019; Vazquez & Villodas, 2019) and that positive, non-hierarchical relationships with extra-familial adults can help promote resiliency among vulnerable youth (Claro & Perelmiter, 2021; Coller & Kuo, 2014; Goldner & Ben-Eliyahu, 2014; Meyerson, 2013). Participants pointed to the pairing of young people with locally based mentors as another highlight of the BBBS programme, noting that due to their local nature, mentors might be better positioned to engage young people who may traditionally have difficulties connecting with services or youth programmes (Cavell et al., 2021; Rhodes, 2020). However, it is important to note that CAMHS staff suggested that the BBBS programme may not be appropriate for young people who are experiencing severe mental health difficulties or impairments. Other research evaluating the utility of mentoring for young people with mental health concerns has also indicated that mentoring may be a more appropriate intervention for young people experiencing mild to moderate difficulties (Munson & Railey, 2016). Nonetheless, this research provides important evidence to suggest that mentoring can be a useful intervention and prevention tool for young people who experience mild–moderate social, emotional, cognitive and/or behavioural difficulties, due to the reach, flexibility and acceptability of the programme.

Although these participants highlighted several features of the BBBS programme which help make it an appropriate and effective resource for young people involved with CAMHS, participants similarly identified a number of areas where they believed the operation of the programme, or its partnership with CAMHS, could be improved. The main operational issues identified by participants concerned the lack of available mentors, delays between the submission of a referral and the matching of the young person with a mentor, the lack of programme funding/resources, and the communication processes between CAMHS and BBBS staff. It was suggested that a quicker matching process for referrals and a more standardised form of communication between BBBS and CAMHS staff would enhance the appeal of the BBBS programme. However, it was also acknowledged that a lack of funding/resources and difficulties recruiting volunteers have contributed to these issues. Issues relating to the lack of secure funding and difficulties recruiting suitable adult volunteers are commonly observed in evaluations of non-profit mentoring programmes (Cavell et al., 2021; Rhodes, 2020). Participants provided suggestions for how these issues could be addressed, such as facilitating cross-gender matches in order to reduce wait times for youth referrals and extending the recruitment drive for mentors. Additionally, some participants suggested that the mentoring programme could be enhanced through the provision of ‘refresher’ training courses for mentors, more group interaction for young people and mentors, and facilitating greater communication between mentors and young people in between their weekly meetings. It is important for practitioners to be aware of potential barriers or issues affecting service implementation, in order to identify effective, targeted solutions that can address service users/referrers’ concerns and/or improve service provision.

4.4 Limitations of the current research

It is important to note that due to the qualitative nature of this study, it is not appropriate to make causal inferences about the direction of effects or the utility of the BBBS programme. While a strength of the current research is that it extends our understanding of the perspectives of young people, parents, mentors, CAMHS and BBBS staff of the BBBS programme and its utility as a supportive resource for young people who experience mental health concerns, causality cannot be inferred. Further experimental research is needed in order to elaborate further on any cause-and-effect type relationships. Additionally, it is important to acknowledge the potential biases that have been introduced to the study through the sampling methodology. As the current research used a purposive sampling approach, with BBBS staff acting as gatekeepers for the recruitment of youth, mentors, parents and CAMHS staff, it is possible that only those participants who had a positive experience of the BBBS programme were identified and/or volunteered for this research. Future research should aim to seek the perspectives of youth, mentors or parents who terminated their matches or discontinued the programme.

4.5 Conclusion

Overall, this research found support for the effectiveness of the BBBS–CAMHS partnership. Findings suggested that mentoring can be a beneficial resource for young people who are experiencing mental health concerns, as young people who formed trusted, caring friendships with their mentors showed signs of positive social–emotional, cognitive and identity development. The findings indicated that the practices, discussions and activities that mentors engage in with the young people can also impact the strength or type of outcomes observed, while other external factors can influence how quickly, or how strongly, young people and mentors bond. Findings suggested that the BBBS mentoring programme has distinct characteristics which make it an attractive and helpful resource for young people attending CAMHS, but that the appeal and utility of this programme for different stakeholders could be enhanced further if certain changes were made.

5

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6

Appendices

Appendix A

Description of the themes and codes developed a priori, based on the Rhodes Model of Mentoring.

Mentoring Quality

Any reference to the quality of the relationship between young people and mentors, or features of the mentoring dynamics.

Codes	Definition	Description
Empathy	Matches characterised by close, caring, authentic relationships	Mentors and/or young people show concern or care for one another. Mentors/Young people consider things from the other's perspective. Mentors/Young people are attuned and responsive to the other's needs and respect each other.
Mutuality	Mentors and young people show an interest in meeting up and/or maintaining the match	Mentors/Young people show interest in the match, developing the relationship, getting to know one another, engaging in activities with one another, meeting up/talking with one another.
Trust	Matches are characterised by trusting relationships	Mentors/young people are shown to trust one another. Trust the other to be there when needed. Trust the other to understand their situation. Feel they can confide in one another.

Moderator

Any reference to factors that strengthen or weaken the quality of youth-mentor relationships.

Codes	Definition	Description
Interpersonal History	Youth and Mentor relational history	Nature of youth's relationship with non-parental adults, peers or others before joining the BBBS programme.
Social Competencies	Personal qualities/competencies of the mentor or young person	Personality and individual characteristics of the mentor and/or young person.
Time	Duration of the relationship and transition over time	Overall length of the match and changes in the nature of the relationship over time.
Developmental Stage	Age and/or youth developmental level of youth or mentor	Age or developmental level of youth/mentor when joining BBBS or throughout the match.
Programme Practices	BBBS or Foróige practices	Any support provided by Foróige or BBBS case workers. Structure or rules relating to the BBBS programme.
Family Context	Nature of family dynamics	Any family characteristics, family dynamics, family structure or family functioning.
Community Context	Community Connection	Characteristics of the community in which youth/mentor lives or level of community connection.

Processes

Practices or processes that impact youth outcomes.

Codes	Definition	Description
Fun and Escapism	Opportunities for fun and/or escape from daily stresses	Mentoring provides youth with opportunities to engage in enjoyable experiences and/or respite from daily stresses or difficult circumstances
Relationship Modelling	Positive or corrective relationship experiences	Mentoring provides youth with positive experiences in social relationships. Mentors challenge negative views youth hold of themselves/relationships. Mentors show positive relationships are possible.
Emotion Coaching	Assistance or help with regulating or understanding emotions	Mentors engage with youth in ways that help them develop their capacity for emotion regulation. Teach/model strategies for managing feelings or discuss ways of dealing with negative emotions. Validate or label feelings. Mentors model positive emotions.
Broadening Horizon's	Broadening of youth horizon's	Mentor/Programme introduces experiences that broaden the youth's horizon. Mentors foster the development of knowledge/skill.
Role Models and Advocates	Positive Youth Role Model	Youth observe mentors and/or compare them to others. Mentors help shift youth's conceptions of their current or future self. Mentoring provides youth with new ideas about who they might become.
Facilitating Social Capital	Help with building social or cultural capital	Mentors help youth to build social and cultural capital by facilitating use of community resources. Mentors help to open doors to educational or occupational opportunities.

Outcomes

Any social, emotional, health, or behavioural changes.

Codes	Definition	Description
Social-Emotional Development	Improved Social-Emotional Development Outcomes	Relationships with others are strengthened or modified. Greater capacity to relate to others. Improved peer/parent relations and/or support. Changes in social skills/competencies. Improved emotional well-being – such as positive affect.
Cognitive Development	Improved Cognitive Development Outcomes	Improved knowledge or skills. Changes in school attitudes, school values, school engagement, school motivation, academic performance, attendance or behaviour. Changes in problem solving, task motivation or attention.
Identity Development	Identity Development Outcomes	Youth perceptions of the future or future goals. Youth perceptions of themselves (e.g. self-worth) or future selves.

Appendix B

Moderators:

What Influences the Quality of the Mentoring Relationship?

When discussing their experiences within the BBBS programme and/or their perceptions of the BBBS matches, participants highlighted several external factors that appeared to influence their experiences or impact the youth-mentor relationship in some respect. These moderating influences were found to group into separate sub-themes, which are highlighted below.

1. Interpersonal History and Previous Mentoring Experience

Within the current research, the interpersonal history of both the mentor and the young person appeared to be an important contextual factor, which may have impacted the youth-mentor relational dynamics. First, it was noted that several of the young people participating in the BBBS programme had previously experienced significant interpersonal issues, such as having been bullied, or appeared to have difficulties connecting with others or making friends in general.

I have a lot of trust issues so I don't open to the person straight away but ... [my mentor] was able to show me that I can actually trust people because you know I didn't really trust people back then

– Youth 2

I have trouble talking to people in general

– Youth 1

It's not so easy for her to strike up friendships like other sort of typical kids might do, that haven't had the history that she has had so the Big Sister thing is a real gift

– Parent A

She was struggling with her peers and I don't think she was able to be herself because she had no confidence at all

– Parent H

She kind of had a tough situation in school, kind of like bullying and things like that

– Mentor 4

She's a little bit shy and sometimes she has issues among her friends and stuff like that... ... she's shy to people where her guard would be up when she doesn't know them

– Mentor 1

Additionally, it was evident from the participant interviews that some of these young people had been part of previous mentoring matches which had ended early. While some young people felt that the termination of their previous match had not overly affected them, for one youth the termination of his previous mentoring relationship appeared to make him more guarded when getting to know his current mentor.

I was kind of like disappointed, but I was ok with it as well; we were still able to text the odd time... It was good because like I was able to get back; I was able to get to know a new person. I could meet a new person but like then again there was kind of, thinking back, I was kind of still a bit iffy about it at the start because like I was still getting over when my last one left

– Youth 4

Some mentors also appeared to feel that the young people had been negatively affected by the termination of their previous matches. However, parents expressed mixed views. While one parent felt that their child was not adversely affected by the ending of their previous match, another felt their child was 'devastated' by the termination.

She was matched with somebody before me and that person came from a foreign country as well, but she left after a month to go back to the country she was from. So she had obviously a negative experience with someone leaving straight away

– Mentor 6

She obviously needed a lot of support and she had been very disappointed that the other lady couldn't continue

– Mentor 2

They were really close like and he talked to [his previous mentor] really every day. He was devastated when he left

– Parent B

I think from [youth]'s point of view she was fine with it you know and she might have mentioned her once or twice, never after and then it was like, that's in the past you know. She gets over those things very quickly

– Parent G

Similarly, some of the mentors who participated in this research noted that they had previous experience mentoring as part of the BBBS programme. While these mentors may have gained motivation and skill from their previous mentoring relationships, first-time mentors noted being 'nervous' and unsure of how to negotiate boundaries when first getting to know their Little. These mentors felt that they were learning as they went and suggested that being able to engage with other more experienced mentors might be beneficial.

At the very start I wasn't really sure how to deal with some things... It's kind of like once again not knowing what to say, what to talk about. I knew she got bullied but I wasn't sure I should ask her if that's like triggering you know

– Mentor 4

I struggled a bit with him; I still do struggle a bit with my Little alright. I think I'd like to have made more of an impact. I wouldn't say that's all, that's not all his fault really you know. I guess for me it was my first match and I'm still kind of learning

– Mentor 8

Maybe to hear back from someone who had done it before, you know? I think that kind of you know? It's always good to hear a real-life example, so I don't know if someone who has done it wanted to do a video or an explanation or a kind of you know?

– Mentor 9

2. Mentor Characteristics

Participants across all groups believed that the mentor's personal qualities and characteristics impacted the type of relationships they formed with the young people. Youth participants highlighted the characteristics that helped them warm to their mentors and/or pinpointed certain qualities which they thought were important for mentors to have, such as being 'nice', 'kind', 'easy to talk to', 'respectful', 'positive', 'open-minded' and 'relatable'.

I just saw how nice she was and stuff... Just being nice and like respectful

– Youth 2

He seemed kind of nice... Just the tone of his voice I think, I don't know

– Youth 8

Personally, I think someone who is kind of easy to talk to, very chatty. Like even if you don't feel like chatting it's kind of nice to have someone who will. Very happy, very positive; yeah, that's all really
– Youth 7

Well it sounds pretty basic but I guess it's so repeated because it's true, just really kind
– Youth 1

I suppose she's a very open minded individual... ..they have to be a good listener; they have to be very understanding and open-minded
– Youth 9

Parents appeared to feel that the kindness, honesty, perceptiveness, warmth, and patience exuded by the mentors helped the young people and mentors form strong, affiliative bonds.

He's got a great sense of humour that would be the first thing you know. Very perceptive you know; just takes [youth name] as he finds him. Some days it can be tricky but [mentor] seems to be able to cope with whatever comes up in the net really with [youth name] you know. He's so kind, really, really kind; very thoughtful
– Parent C

She's just such a lovely person you know. She's just such a nice person... she's just such a lovely and warm, kind of person
– Parent I

Mentors also highlighted qualities such as being 'open', 'chatty', 'reliable', 'patient' and 'interested' which they thought were important for developing strong relationships with young people and/or were qualities that they showed to their Little's.

It's all about being affirming and being available. I suppose that's what I was as well, I was available, I was affirming
– Mentor 10

I do think it's really important to be reliable and to genuinely have the best interests of your mentee at heart... Non-judgement is important I think and I try to even stay away from guessing because I know I could guess it wrong
– Mentor 9

For BBBS staff, having strong, open-minded, caring, resilient, patient volunteers that could cope with any issues/difficulties young people may experience and be a friend to the young people was important.

Generally speaking, a strong volunteer... I suppose definitely with the CAMHS referral I would be looking for someone that has strong personality, that has good self-awareness about themselves and that has good coping skills if something were to happen
– BBBS Staff 1

I suppose a volunteer who is really patient; good motivational character as well...if you're a volunteer that's willing to work with a young person and has that bit more patience and understanding and willingness to help those particular types of young people that can be a really good match
– BBBS Staff 2

When you ask a young person what kind of volunteer do you want they always say oh, someone kind and someone nice and funny... funny is a big one you know; no pressure on the volunteers! You know anyone that's going to volunteer for something like this is, they're all going to be nice and caring I suppose or they wouldn't be here in the first place...Really you just want somebody that's open and like that, nice and friendly and trustworthy and consistent and maybe can empathise
– BBBS Staff 5

3. Approach to Mentoring

Generally, participants believed that the approach mentors took to the mentoring relationship influenced the youth-mentor dynamics. In particular, the majority of participants placed significance on way in which mentors listened and talked to their Littles. One of the features that young people seemed to like most about their mentors was that they really 'listened' to them; with some noting that it was nice to have someone that would talk to them, even when they were not feeling chatty, or would listen no matter what the topic or issue was.

You need to be able to talk to the person you're mentoring like a human being, not talking at them, talking to them which is good. I can't stand when people come in talking at you; I just, I don't listen

– Youth 5

I guess hanging out with [mentor] and listening to her advice... it's really nice to talk to her

– Youth 6

Like even if you don't feel like chatting it's kind of nice to have someone who will

– Youth 7

I could be waffling on about anything and she would be willing to listen to me...No matter what it was she would always have something to say about it...I suppose, yeah she's always there to kind of listen to me really

– Youth 9

Similarly, mentors highlighted the importance of listening to the young people, suggesting that by listening mentors can learn more about their Little and show the young person that they care. Notably, a number of mentors thought that this was key to gaining their trust.

I think for me, I think listening was the key to getting to know her because once I listened I could remember all the different things and then like, check in next week and see how a certain thing was going or if she's finished that film; that kind of thing. I think listening is how she knew that she could trust me and it showed that I cared about what was going on in her life

– Mentor 1

...And then just listen to him more so than anything you know. If he had a tough day at school or anything like that just be there and listen to him. I think over time he got to trust me

– Mentor 5

Several mentors discussed the importance of taking a 'step-by-step' approach to the relationship and believed that following the young person's lead; taking the relationship and the conversation at the young person's pace, was critical for helping them to trust and feel comfortable with them.

I don't lead the discussion really at all. I always let her lead the discussion and what she wants to talk about you know something that's going on at home I let her... Sometimes it's more important just to listen and let them lead than to actually give an opinion on things

– Mentor 1

But the main way, I mean literally you have to take her lead. I had to take her lead and build her trust. You know that's a huge thing!

– Mentor 2

Say like if I joined a call and he was in a particular frump or bad mood or whatever you could talk to him about it and you'd know when not to talk to him about it more importantly because well, he might not want to talk about it

– Mentor 5

It's like seeking out their interests and then showing them well look, I know you like this; it's just really a whole getting to know them process. Putting no pressure on them either, just making it natural, developing a relationship

– Mentor 10

BBBS staff commented on the importance of taking the relationship at the young person's pace, and picking up on their cues, and highlighted the importance of ensuring that young people felt that their voices were heard throughout their involvement in the BBBS programme.

Ultimately as an organisation that's when we kind of have to ensure that young people are first, front and centre I suppose

– BBBS Staff 4

The volunteer and her just talk and she supports her and encourages her and kind of knows her so well now; knows what to say when she's having a difficult time and takes her; some weeks she mightn't, the young people mightn't be in the form; that's the thing like, they mightn't be in the form to go for a walk so if she says can we just sit and have a chat in the car and that's ok. So I guess there's no pressure for the young people and just take them as they present on a week

– BBBS Staff 3

Some mentors and BBBS staff also noted the importance of avoiding hierarchies in the mentoring relationship, noting that youth disengage when mentors attempt to 'preach' to the young people. The importance of equality was echoed by parents, with one parent noting that the way the mentor treated the young person as an equal, was a crucial moderator of the mentor-youth relationship.

He treated [youth] as an equal you know; didn't make him feel like I'm the adult and you're the child, you know that kind of way? It was very much approached on we're equal here. I'm going to be your friend and you're going to be my friend rather than there being any kind of hierarchy you know. That was the impression I had anyway you know. [Youth] just warmed to him immediately

– Parent C

You're very careful how you give advice and say look through my experience; you don't tell them what to do. The minute you start telling them what to do they kind of pull back because everyone tells them what to do every day you know, do that, do this, don't do this, don't do that. If you say look, this is what I've experienced and what I've seen in my life you know

– Mentor 7

So [youth] would spot it a mile away, like she does spot it but as soon as I start preaching at her. I have to stop because she spots that a mile away and so like I don't see it as a mentor really. I do see it as new experiences together and making sense of it and figuring it out as we go

– Mentor 9

4. Match Similarity

The perceived similarity between matched youth and mentors was another factor that appeared to play an important role in shaping the development of the mentoring relationship. In this research, the majority of youth participants appeared to feel that they had been matched with a person who was similar to them, or with whom they shared common interests. Crucially, having a mentor who shared the same interests as them appeared to be important to these young people, with some young people noting that having this common ground with their mentors helped their relationships to flourish.

The two of us are very similar ...We both had a lot of the same interests and we got along really well ...It was nice just to have something like an instant; just be able to talk about anything

– Youth 6

I find it quite easy to get along with her because we have a similar personality
– Youth 10

I'm not the most extroverted person so if we didn't have common interests I would seriously struggle
– Youth 5

We definitely have very similar interests, like we both really like art and we have very similar taste in music. We just kind of bonded quickly over that. And we started to learn what each other likes and then we kind of used to talk about that even more then
– Youth 7

I remember when we were talking, like the first time we were in the cafe, it just all went perfectly. We were talking about all things that we both really liked, like art and things like that. And from there it was just a great friendship pretty much
– Youth 9

Likewise, most mentors appeared to believe that sharing similarities or common interests helped the matches to 'break the ice' and get to know one another better. Some parents also felt that it was important to pair young people with mentors who had similar interests and/or personalities.

The biggest thing really is just... I don't know if other matches have said this to you, it's just finding something that you've a mutual interest in and then you can build on that
– Mentor 7

She's from a foreign country herself as well so she kind of felt disconnected with Irish people in a way because she didn't really fit in in her mind. So for me coming from a different country that really helped her to open up to me faster. In that way I do think it was a really, really good match... we were really well matched in kind of life goals in a weird way. We kind of had the same goals
– Mentor 6

I think number one they have to have at least one or two common interests...There needs to be common experience, common ground that they could build on
– Parent G

I think they would definitely have to have similar personalities and one or two things in common you know, Play Station or going to the gym. You'd have to have some common ground because otherwise they'd never be able to have a conversation... No, they definitely have to have some similar interests together before that would work
– Parent H

Notably, although two young people and three mentors noted that they had different personalities or interests than the person they were matched with, most matches appeared to find some common ground despite their different interests.

He likes more movie kind of stuff and I like more sports stuff
– Youth 4

[Youth] and I are a bit different but what we found we've a mutual interest in is X Box; he's into X Box and so am I, so what we do is we would just play online against each other
– Mentor 7

I think we get on well together. His main interest is computing; I come from a computing background but also come from a sporting background; I did try to introduce him to a bit of sport but he's not very keen it to be honest
– Mentor 5

One youth participant shared that she preferred having a mentor with different interests as this allowed them both to learn new things, while another parent believed that their child also benefitted from being matched with someone with different interests.

You don't need to have much in common to get along. We both have different interests but I guess it's kind of thing of we just, the fact that we have different interests, we can talk to each other about, or like each other's interests, we can learn more about the other you know? It's not like, oh I know everything about this already kind of thing. So it's really interesting

– Youth 1

[Mentor] was big into the sports himself you know but [youth] had no interest. So I think [mentor] kind of taught him that friendship is more than just the same interests, having to have the coolest thing or; you know he really taught him the meaning of what a real friend is

– Parent C

Conversely, for one match both the parent and mentor felt that the lack of similarity between the mentor and the young person had impeded the youth-mentor relationship.

Like I get the logic about putting me with him, pairing us up because of the different interests... but I think also it has impeded a small bit because all he wants to talk about is soccer and sport. And that's fine, that's his interest; I've interests that I'd like to sit and talk about all day as well but... it's just all he talks about which makes it again quite hard to kind of you know talk about anything else. So I think just a difference of interests has an impact as well

– Mentor 8

It's still a good relationship; like they do get on well. It's just that barrier of different activities I suppose, different, I can't think of the word... different, like [youth] loves soccer and [mentor] doesn't, I can't think of the word but different things like that they both like, I just think that's hard, I think [youth] would be better matched with someone with his own interests

– Parent B

A small number of BBBS and CAMHS staff indicated that similarity between the young person and mentor was an important criteria; one which can help young people bond with their mentors

I always make sure that they have one or two things in common so that from the word go they will have a topic that they can hone in on to kind of get it going. And that's kind of it like

– BBBS Staff 1

I've a girl, she was an adolescent and had overcome psychosis and she was on the road to recovery so the timing of the matching; she was into nails and hair and makeup and the Big Sister was also into that and she just loved it; she'd come in with the nails done and different makeup tips and all that. Hugely beneficial but again the matching there was really significant for her; she felt she'd so much in common and she was learning things and looked up to her, it really was like a big sister relationship which was nice

– CAMHS Staff 1

5. Age of Young People and Mentors

Several youth and parent participants appeared to believe that the age of the mentor was an important moderator of the mentoring relationship, however, participants differed considerably in relation to their age preferences. For instance, some young people reported that they preferred hanging around with older adults, some noted they enjoyed having a mentor that was closer to their own age, and others believed that the age of their mentor did not matter.

One thing I did really like which I'd never have thought could have happened; with my friends now we would joke around and kind of have a laugh and kind of make fun of each other but in a really friendly way and a funny way and I didn't think I could ever have that with [my mentor]. I thought it would have been just awkward because there's an age gap between us. But I ended up having that with [my mentor]. It's nice because it was as if I was talking to someone my own age
– Youth 6

She's very close to my age so it's definitely quite easy to kind of communicate with her because she kind of knows what I'm going through... She can give me proper advice compared to someone who would kind of be like a bit older than me
– Youth 7

I think it was good for me just because I tend to connect with older people a lot better. I don't really like hanging around people my own age as much. I prefer being around older people
– Youth 9

Similarly mixed views in relation to the importance of the mentors' age were expressed by parents. Some parents believed that pairing young people with younger mentors was more beneficial, as it helped young people relate more to their mentors. Others suggested that pairing young people with older mentors was more beneficial, as these mentors may be more reliable or have a greater level of life experience.

There wasn't a massive age difference. [Mentor] could relate... she wasn't that long out of college and things so she was able to offer really good advice... That's just my opinion. I suppose if [youth] had someone older they would have had a lot more life experience but with [mentor] she was just young enough to talk to her about all her college things and things like that
– Parent I

I suppose her Big Sister; she's kind of quite young so I think that helped an awful lot as well. Well it did help her big time you know, that it wasn't an older person, it was kind of a young person you know
– Parent D

So [Mentor] is kind of in his 30s you know; I'll just say he's lived a life and he has a lot of experience. Not that a younger person wouldn't do as good a job but it just might be different I guess you know. They're just coming from a different stage of your life
– Parent C

One BBBS staff member expressed mixed feelings in relation to the importance of mentor age:

I think before I would have focused more on maybe a volunteer that was a little bit older and had maybe a little bit more life experience but then I kind of went a completely different way... like there is only like 5 years between them in age but I knew when I met [Mentor]; you know she's just a really lovely person and has her head really screwed on for someone who is quite young and I suppose then when I met [Youth] and I saw what [Youth] needed in her life and what she needed from Big Brother Big Sister it was so apparent to me immediately, oh my God, [Mentor] will be perfect for [Youth]. And generally speaking I would have been like oh my God, they're too close in age but I just felt that it would work really well. So that kind of turned my prior way of working on its head that time; maybe that was just that particular match you know
– BBBS Staff 1

Some mentors, parents and staff also commented on the age of the young person, with most of these participants believing that the age of youth when they are matched is important, and implying that the BBBS programme may work better for younger children or adolescents.

The earlier you get them into these type of programmes, I think the better

– Parent G

I wouldn't say that he doesn't have interest in him; I just think because they're so different; [youth] is 15 now as well so his age is kind of in-between so like he's a bit, I'll do it later, you know that kind of thing

– Parent B

I was very fortunate basically... when we met she was eleven and she was just turning twelve... like I'd say if she met me now she'd be like, no interest, boring! ... She always has time for me and always makes time for me and is very open to you know, conversations and doesn't, isn't dismissive of me you know what I mean? And I think that's only because we were friends before, do you know what I mean? Otherwise I'd say she'd probably you know, It would be definitely harder to build the relationship we have built, or the trust or the friendship if she came in at this stage I think, yes

– Mentor 9

I find as well if they're older; if you get them referred in quite young, at twelve, thirteen, fourteen you've a better chance of matching them because if they're sixteen, seventeen and they're already in that kind of, you know, that internalised space then it's harder to get them to come out

– BBBS Staff 5

Now the older the child was the more resistance you'd get. With the younger child it was easier to come round and they thought oh yeah, this sounds like fun. But the older kids may be a bit more suspicious. So I'd leave it with them and then the next time I'd review them we'd talk through it and if they were open to it then I would complete the referral form and at that meeting I'd look more around their hobbies and their interests so that then it might be easier for the Big Brother Big Sister to match

– CAMHS Staff 1

However, one mentor noted that she preferred having been paired with an older adolescent, while another believed that being close in age to her Little was beneficial.

I think it's really nice having someone that's also a bit older for me personally just because I'm like, oh God I wouldn't know how to deal with someone probably much younger

– Mentor 4

6. Time

Time also appeared to be linked to the mentoring relational dynamics. Most young people reported feeling 'awkward', 'shy' or 'nervous' upon first joining the BBBS programme, but for some, these fears were allayed when they first met their mentor, as a number of young people appeared to form instant connections with their mentors.

I have to say it was a little bit awkward at the start because I get shy around people... after we had a talk and stuff like that and talked about things we were interested in and where should we meet up next it really all clicked and it was really fine after that

– Youth 2

It was really nice because as soon as she walked in the door the two of us just really clicked straight away

– Youth 6

[At the first meeting] you know [youth] was making up his mind at that stage whether he was going to like [mentor] or not. And then the two of them went off and they were chatting and within two minutes it was like they'd known each other forever; it was actually a beautiful thing to see

– Parent C

Nonetheless, regardless of the strength of their initial connection, the relationship between young people and mentors was one which appeared to evolve and become stronger over time for almost all matches. Most youth and mentors believed that the friendship between them blossomed more over time, with both mentors and young people becoming more comfortable with each other as time went on.

It was kind of strange at the start but then like as I got into it more it was easier and easier. I'm just used to it now

– Youth 4

We can really talk about a lot of things that we wouldn't have talked about the first time that we met each other... I was kind of unsure at the start of it because you know I just started in it but now that I'm in it for that long I really, really like it

– Youth 2

Initially obviously when I started on the programme I was nervous, I wasn't sure you know if I would gel with my Little etc. But no, it really has worked out well so far... We found out different things that we had in common. And then they kind of overlapped and then every week we would build on those different areas

– Mentor 1

It's just a really nice friendship that grew over time

– Mentor 6

It took him a couple of weeks or a couple of months maybe to get to be comfortable with me but when he got comfortable he opened up and I think he finds me very easy to talk to

– Mentor 3

Parents noted that the young people had become closer to their mentors and more interested in the match over time.

Yeah [youth] was awkward about it at the start; didn't know what to say you know, the awkward pauses on the phone, even meeting up you could tell he was a bit anxious. But definitely as they've spoken more over the last twelve months I don't have to remind him of the calls; it's like he takes responsibility for it. He'll say no, I'm going up to have a Zoom call with [mentor] in half an hour. So it's always on his mind. He sticks with it. So no I definitely think they've probably got a better bond I suppose is the word

– Parent H

I mean you know initially depending on where they were going to meet [youth name] would always want me to go with her and stay with her until; even if they were going to meet in a coffee shop [youth name] would want me to sort of accompany her. But over time she got more confident and sort of overcame that fear I guess of meeting somebody by herself

– Parent E

Similarly, a number of BBBS staff appeared to believe that the youth-mentor relationship typically evolves and becomes stronger over time.

The young person is maybe a little bit quieter in the match in CAMHS maybe in the beginning and then as they build confidence up with the mentor they're more open and they feel safer in the match to share their real situation sometimes, they might talk about friends and opportunities, social opportunities at the beginning of the match but as time moves on that information mightn't be as accurate. They mightn't have told the full story; they mightn't have any friends or they actually do nothing at the weekends. It hasn't all been fun and games like they said in the first few weeks

– BBBS Staff 2

7. Mentoring Activities

Young people frequently shared stories about the variety of activities they engaged in with their mentors and believed that these experiences had helped them to connect more with their mentors, forming part of their favourite memories within the BBBS programme.

We went to a museum once in town and that was really fun because on that day when we were walking to the museum this girl called us in and asked did we want to do a bunch of games. We got to do games and I got to pie her in the face; it was really fun. I think that kind of made the match more comfortable with each other. Because it was kind of funny to pie [her] in the face but after that it was like we could really have a laugh and joke around with each other which was very nice

– Youth 6

We used to play video games together; that was fun. That was really fun, but like that can be worked as a good segue for talking you know? You're playing a game; if I'm sitting there talking I become awkward, I become aware I'm just sitting there so games are good

– Youth 5

Mentors too commented on the type of activities they engaged in with their matches, with most believing that the young people enjoyed taking part in activities and being able to try different types of activities with their mentors. Some mentors believed that these activities helped break the ice with the young people and were a way in which the two could bond.

It probably flourished more when you can get the opportunity to do more things and have more ideas

– Mentor 10

We just played the X Box against each other and he liked that. So if we hadn't that it might have been a bit trickier

– Mentor 7

If you talk to anybody on a regular basis you're going to run out of conversation topics anyway. I think that happened quite quickly... you know if you're out and you're going to the cinema or you're bowling, having a bite to eat you're kind of just naturally chatting away while doing something else

– Mentor 8

On the other hand, a few mentors felt that the activities were not necessary and that strong mentoring relationships could be built without the distraction of activities, while one BBBS staff member suggested that taking part in activities becomes less important for matches over time.

[Youth] loves to walk, he loves to talk... I let him talk whether it be about music or sport or reading or fishing or whatever. That may not always have been available if we were meeting in a games room or in a coffee shop – or a more controlled environment. He may not open up as much but because; it's a more or less one-to-one in an open space he's more free to; he loves nature, he loves being out in the open and that gives him more of a relaxed atmosphere to let loose

– Mentor 3

I find over time young people, in Big Brother Big Sister in general it's more about the chats rather than the activities; not really bothered about what we do it's more so how we spend our time, chatting and catching up, just carrying on the conversation from the previous week; that's from my experience anyway. That's what I would find in CAMHS as well, it's about the bonds and the chats and the conversation; basically that friendship that's built. It's less about the shiny things and the activities and maybe what my mentor is going to bring me to do today; less about that as time goes on

– BBBS Staff 2

We met initially every week ... we would sit down and chat; really organic. It was probably the best way to start off with a match because we really got to know each other. There was no distractions in activities

– Mentor 1

While some parents praised the variety of activities or suggestions for activities provided by Foróige, one or two parents noted that they would prefer to see matches engaging in more diverse activities during their meetings. Furthermore, a number of participants believed that the BBBS group activities, where young people and mentors can meet other matches are beneficial, but some parents and mentors felt that more group-based activities were needed. These participants acknowledged that these activities may have been curtailed due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Being able to offer the opportunity to meet others in groups, in person is great as well for the young people from CAMHS and all of the young people really

– BBBS Staff 3

All the activities that [caseworker] has put on have been fantastic; there's six weeks of rowing and we've got bowling and they've done all sorts of things with a group of people. So that's been really useful for [youth] to bring him out of himself you know and meet other young people who would be very like him

– Parent C

I thought perhaps walking on the beach et cetera is a bit boring but actually that's me. I think [youth] really does quite like it... Personally, I just think that maybe some of the visits could be a little bit more targeted so that they are, you know, more of an activity

– Parent A

This is probably as a result of COVID and they did actually try to bring all different matches together but I do think interacting with other matches would be good... I think even the Littles would benefit from interaction with each other. Obviously mentor to mentor I could share my experiences with other people etc. But I think for the Littles to meet other matches and see how other people are doing and chat amongst themselves would be really good

– Mentor 1

8. Consistency of Communication

The level or frequency of communication between mentors and young people appeared to play a key role in shaping match dynamics. In fact, from the perspective of some BBBS and CAMHS staff, consistency of communication between matches was not only important for helping matches to bond, but was key to ensuring the young people benefitted from their mentoring experience.

The matches that work best are those matches that are meeting every week ...it has to be because it's really important that young person, that they see you every week regardless...Whether it works or not comes down to the volunteer, they are 100% committed. It's not just something they do when they have a bit of time you know... It's something that you have to almost build your life around

– BBBS Staff 4

That's another benefit of the Big Brother Big Sister by the way where if they do have the Big Brother Big Sister person that's a consistent person that they can have; one bit of consistency on a weekly basis or fortnightly basis or whatever it is that they do. And it's nice to have some sense of consistency when otherwise there might be a lot of chaos in their environment

– CAMHS Staff 2

Within the current research, most matches indicated that they met up or had a zoom call once a week, while those in longer matches appeared to meet every one or two weeks.

It's every two weeks and every week where you'd WhatsApp calls or Zoom calls

– Youth 4

We like call every week and it's fine; we talk

– Youth 5

We meet up nearly like maybe every two weeks, every one or two weeks

– Youth 7

However, there were noticeable differences in the level of communication that occurred in between these meetings. In particular, for some matches there appeared to be no communication between the young people and mentors outside of their weekly meetings. Although, some participants noted that mentors sometimes contacted the young people indirectly via their parent/guardian.

We'd meet up once a week. He isn't on WhatsApp; he is on WhatsApp but texts very little. He communicates very little other than our face to face once a week meetings

– Mentor 3

I'm pretty sure my Mom and [mentor] just text and then my Mom will tell me oh you're meeting up at this time and it's just really how it goes

– Youth 2

In contrast, other young people appeared to be in frequent contact with their mentors, communicating via text, WhatsApp or phone calls. Some mentors and parents appeared to believe that consistent, frequent communication from the mentor was important in a establishing a strong relational foundation.

We try to text as often as we can and if we can't meet we sometimes do a call

– Youth 9

I just kind of stayed consistent with texting her; like it sounds maybe strange but I had an alarm on my phone that I would text her every 2 to 3 days just so the contact was there because she wasn't always responding at the start. Once I was consistent enough she started responding more and wanted to hang out more and that's when it took off basically

– Mentor 6

Although some young people commented that they would like to have more contact with their mentors, others noted that it was sometimes difficult to find the time to meet/speak with their mentors due to other competing life demands, such as school work, or that the method of communication (e.g. instant messenger) caused problems.

I would like to be able to have [my mentor's] contact because sometimes like let's say your Mom doesn't know a schedule that's coming up for you but you do and then your Mom like says this with [your mentor] and then you're double booked for something... ... And honestly I would want... a little bit more time because you know you only get an hour and like sometimes you might want two hours or an extra bit of hour

– Youth 2

I enjoyed doing it and then sometimes it would be very difficult especially; I remember doing it during my Junior Cert and my mocks; it was quite difficult to try and meet up with [mentor] during that time as well

– Youth 6

It's just that I'm doing it over instant messaging, you know? Just like usual and it eats up a lot of my credit so sometimes I might be in the middle of talking and then I can't respond, like oh I got to go and get more... I guess maybe just I don't know, like even if it was over WhatsApp, which is just the same thing but it's free I guess

– Youth 1

Mentors too commented on how it was sometimes difficult to find the time to connect with their Little due to other life demands.

I would say the trickiest thing is just if you're busy it's hard to manage that into your routine; I think that was the hardest thing...The only thing that caught me out was just scheduling it in and not disappointing the Little and having to cancel

– Mentor 7

You know managing time now and stuff like that did end up being tricky

– Mentor 8

9. Family Context

Most BBBS staff and some CAMHS staff felt that the young person's family context can have an impact on the type of relationship they form with their mentor. BBBS staff felt that parental support was crucial for the mentoring process, noting that parents often play a key role in supporting matches to meet and helping youth feel comfortable with the process.

Ultimately they will be maybe opening the door when the volunteer comes to collect the young person...Parental support could be a factor as well especially for activities

– BBBS Staff 2

A lot of the time parents have their own difficulties and experiencing their own mental health difficulties so you know these young people are often in a household where there's one, two, three people all experiencing mental health difficulties. It can be quite a: the household, the environment, the atmosphere in the house, the home can be negative. There's a lack of motivation there and it becomes almost cyclical you know

– BBBS Staff 4

Appendix C

Practices and Processes that Influence BBBS Outcomes

In their interviews, participants identified several practices and processes that were adopted by mentors that appeared to help young people develop further. Specifically, the current research found that mentors appeared to promote positive developmental outcomes for young people by broadening their horizons and facilitating social capital; providing young people with an outlet for fun and escapism; helping young people regulate or make sense of their emotions; acting as a role model for the young person; modelling healthy relationships; and being an additional source of support for them.

1. Broadening Horizons and Facilitating Social Capital

A number of participants contended that mentors help broaden young people's horizons by exposing them to new opportunities or ideas and helping them connect more with their local communities. Several mentors noted that they often encourage their Little to try new hobbies or interests, help them explore new situations, or engage in novel activities with them.

I gave a photography and video course or class with him once in the Big Brothers Big Sisters programme and he really enjoyed it. He got a camera that Christmas and you know we started doing a few projects

– Mentor 8

He may not have a very big wide network then of friends if that's ok to say. So it's trying to just get him out of that bubble of being isolated and being on his own and try to get him to do new things like the rowing for example. Get him into a scenario where there's 5 or 6 other kids the same age as him. He enjoys it when he does it, but I think he finds it hard to maybe initiate or trigger those conversations initially

– Mentor 5

She did one time ask me if I could help her see if Foróige could help her get a placement with transition year... and I did think up suggestions and she said no, I wouldn't be into that, no I don't want to do that... but actually, the one thing that she didn't want to do, is what she actually likes now... she thought that she wouldn't be able for that. So it's actually nice to hear her talk about that

– Mentor 10

A few mentors recounted times when they had helped their Little expand their social capital by encouraging them to connect with other young people.

I think what's helped him in Big Brother is the social interaction. As I say he may not have had a very big friends base in primary school; he may not have a very big friends base in secondary school; but certainly with the Big Brothers Big Sisters that social circle has increased and he's been in social circumstances whereby; it's not that he has to talk, he doesn't have to do anything but he always liked to try it you know and if it works for him great; if it doesn't work for him he's not lost anything. And I think he realises that as well

– Mentor 5

Recently a new girl started in her school and she said like she seems like a really nice girl and she doesn't really have any friends and she said her own friend group can be a bit up and down at time and I kind of encouraged her; I said well why don't you go up to the new girl and just say hello, introduce yourself and get to know her you know, she obviously is looking to make friends too

– Mentor 1

Young people similarly indicated that their mentors often encouraged them to try new activities; provided them with opportunities to gain new experiences; supported them in building ties with their community; or helped them get to know other young people.

She's [mentor] kind of inspired me to go further and get out of my comfort zone and do things that I have mentioned but I never would have seen myself trying. So she did bring me out of my comfort zone a lot

– Youth 6

I get to meet new people and get to experience new stuff that I haven't experienced before

– Youth 4

Well the main thing that we do is we go into the town because my school is near there and I want to get to know town if I'm going to go there and hang out with my friends

– Youth 2

One parent felt that building links within the local community was particularly important for her child, noting that her child's interaction with her mentor was one of the few ties she had with her local community.

I'm just glad of it because [youth] doesn't have any school friends or local friends that call to the house or anything like that. Her school is quite a long way from here... and if we do have youth groups we have to go to town to go to those youth groups, whereas [mentor] lives local in our village, so that's really, nice. She can meet [youth] more easily and it's like in our own village and it's not like removing yourself from your community and going to town. Do you know what I mean? Like it's just about the only thing that she does do which involves the community

– Parent A

Some parents also believed that by participating in the BBBS programme, young people were able to try new things and consult different perspectives.

Especially now with [mentor]; for [youth] it's been, it's kind of been a way for her to access the world of; another way for her to access the world of young women in the world

– Parent F

I mean it gives her something to do. It's a change from being with me all the time and gives her someone new to speak to outside of you know? Class teachers or parent or you know? It's another independent person I suppose, a friend

– Parent A

BBBS staff observed that mentors often help young people access additional resources or open their eyes to new interests or vocational pursuits, while some CAMHS staff believed that mentors help young people explore interests that they may not be able to explore at home.

The volunteers are a great resource as well for even opening up their eyes to even like getting into the library, sign them up; something as small as that to get things going. A parent might feel, oh I could have done that but the young person is 14 and you know the volunteer just chose to bring them down one day and came back with a form for the parent to sign. You know it can just take somebody else outside the family home to start something and kick-start a new interest or be a resource to different opportunities that are local to the young person that they mightn't be aware of

– BBBS Staff 2

I think they would benefit from the opportunity to get out and maybe do an activity or shared activity that maybe no one in their family is interested in or nobody in their family is able to facilitate. That would boost their self-esteem, boost their confidence; it would also introduce them to other people. So if they were going to a sporting event or a shared hobby that they would also meet other people within that interest that they may form friendships with, you know, that sense of achievement, a sense of being able to do something, of feeling part of the community

– CAMHS Staff 4

2. Emotion Coaching

While only a small number of young people, mentors, and BBBS staff discussed the concept of emotion coaching, the way that mentors were perceived to help young people regulate their emotions, nonetheless, emerged as an important facilitator of change in the current research. In general, these participants believed that mentors play an integral role in boosting young people's spirits and helping them learn how to regulate their emotions.

She just puts me in a good mood I guess

– Youth 1

He says something nice to cheer me up or something like that if I needed it like; comforted me

– Youth 3

I can kind of focus her on more positive things in her life... ..we discuss like serious things that are going on or any worries that she's having in the moment. Then we nearly always end with laughter or kind of I'll spin the situation back to more of a positive; try and end any heavy or tough conversation with a bit of humour or bring it back to something positive

– Mentor 1

When you build that trust with them they have someone else they can relate to and kind of de-stress essentially

– Mentor 7

One BBBS staff member provided an example from a current match where the mentor helped the young person to regulate and understand her emotions:

I've one at the moment and the young person, she talks a mile a minute and she doesn't take a breath you know and so the volunteer is, she's being doing kind of; they've been doing some yoga together you know and the young person is really enjoying it where they're just kind of helping her to understand that it's ok to just be in that silence you know and you don't have to keep talking and you don't have to keep; you'd meet her for five minutes and she'd have asked you twenty questions you know. And it's just that kind of learning that she can have that calm and that silence; it's ok to be there and walking along and not talking

– BBBS Staff 5

Crucially, several young people disclosed that they suffered from negative emotions or mental health issues, such as anxiety or depression, and that while they had previously tended to keep 'everything inside', their mentors helped them express and understand their emotions better.

I was probably just shy because I was like keeping everything inside but then when I got my Big Brother they would talk about stuff and then I was getting less shy. And then when I got {Mentor Name} I was able to talk to him more and then that probably was; that really helped

– Youth 4

I used to always keep it to myself but [mentor] kind of brought that out in me. So I used to talk to her about how I was feeling as well which was really nice

– Youth 6

I suffer with like very bad anxiety so it's definitely nice because I do have quite a few panic attacks or I just have like very iffy days where I just; I don't feel like going out or I feel like I can't. So it's definitely nice to kind of have like someone there to kind of encourage me and remind me that it's ok to feel that way and I will come out of it

– Youth 7

3. Fun and Escapism

Within the current research, some of the youth, mentors and staff were found to believe that the BBBS programme provided young people with much needed opportunities for fun and escapism. Several youth participants indicated that they not only enjoyed engaging in new activities with their mentors, but that these meetings and activities helped them to de-stress and gave them something to look forward to each week.

We do fun things...It's good to get away for an hour and do something

– Youth 8

It was really something fun to look forward to on my weekend as well

– Youth 6

If you're feeling down a bit it's not someone you should rely on for like your wellbeing, but like just having time, just having a break and being able to just forget about things for a moment

– Youth 1

Some mentors also felt that the youth-mentor meetings provided young people with a way of escaping from their everyday troubles and suggested that mentors help distract these young people from the negative events or issues they may be experiencing.

I feel like she is going through quite a tough time at home within her extended family. She really needs the time away from the family home to kind of forget about what's going on there and see things that make her happy in life because sometimes she kind of misses or she finds it hard in difficult moments to think of what is good in her life and what is positive... I know her Mum has said that it helps her; she herself has said that she really enjoys it and it helps her and gives her a break

– Mentor 1

Some BBBS and CAMHS staff appeared to share these mentors' sentiments, implying that young people may benefit from having an opportunity to focus on something other than their 'difficulties' and that the BBBS can provide a fun, positive distraction for these young people.

I do think it's very beneficial because it's not – I suppose for a lot of young people they find that engagement in direct work, you know, like psychology or one-to-one, work. I think this takes away the emphasis of that kind of talking about their difficulties, what they've to do, you know what I mean? It's not intense

– CAMHS Staff 5

Like every match is a little bit different. I'm thinking of a few in particular at the minute that I have, they love it and you ask them about it and their eyes light up, you know, they're like yeah, I still really love doing it even though they've told me loads of different things that are not going good for them but then this is going good you know. So we just keep that momentum of the positive experience with them so that they have that one positive thing in the week I suppose

– BBBS Staff 3

4. Role Model and Advocate

A number of participants contended that young people benefit from having access to a role model; someone whom they can look up too and can inspire them about their future role or potential self.

Role models are key to a child's development I think, that they're able to look at someone and go, wow I'd like to be like that you know

– Parent G

A couple of mentors appeared to feel that a mentor's purpose was to act as a role model for their Littles and highlighted the perceived benefits of this for young people.

Basically everybody needs a good role model or just somebody to talk to or just support you know. It all falls under role model I guess. And I think it's very important and I think there are people out there who don't have it. Then I think you can affect them in some ways

– Mentor 8

It would just be massive for younger people from more disadvantaged backgrounds to have someone that can kind of show them like you know a little bit of work pays off and there's more to life and you can achieve a lot more. And that's one side of the programme which I think is important

– Mentor 7

Several BBBS staff supported this idea that mentors often act as role models to young people and indicated that in their experience young people benefit from having access to adults outside of their families whom they can look up to.

I have visibly seen the change in that young person as he has grown up and I have seen the benefit that having that male role model had been for him because in that circumstance his Dad isn't present; his Dad has never been present; he has never known him so it's been very; it's been crucial for him really to have that support all through his teenage years

– BBBS Staff 1

I always find that... young people who maybe come from CAMHS just haven't found their tribe yet; they just haven't found the likeminded people. Like you'd have young people maybe that are on the autism spectrum that would have specific interests; they might have different ways of communicating, more loud or they might be I suppose very intense personalities sometimes and maybe their peers feel that's a bit too much; or an interest in Manga or Anime, you know something in particular that they really, really love, retro computers but if they try and find out or the mentor helps them find kind of places where other people might hang out, maybe some techie computer club house where young people are similar to that; they go along and they follow the passion that they have and hopefully the people that they meet while they engage in that interest might be similar personalities to them and then they'll find their tribe through that and they'll feel more confident and connected. It's all about the connection with people. I suppose the volunteers are great resources for signposting them and trying to find where could their tribe be

– BBBS Staff 2

What we're kind of hoping there is volunteers can talk to the; just show an interest, an active interest in the young person and maybe show the young person they can actually lead a healthy, happy life. Show them an alternative to maybe what they're seeing at home. Just painting a brighter picture for that young person

– BBBS Staff 4

Notably, several youth participants indicated that they viewed their mentor as a form of role model and seemed to enjoy having a friend whom they could see themselves in or whom could give them ideas about their futures.

It gives me an insight of like what might be up ahead for me; he keeps talking about the Leaving Cert and how you need to do this because he went through it so he knows

– Youth 5

It's like looking in your bigger self and you get to talk to them about all these things that they like as well so it's not like they're bored or anything like that

– Youth 2

Me and [my mentor] got along very well so I guess she kind of, without saying it, just taught me that there is other people out there that... can have the same interest as me

– Youth 6

A few parents provided examples of how they thought young people learned from observing their mentors and benefitted from having these role models in their lives.

It does give an insight into you know not all adults react this way; That can pay forward in 40 years' time when they're sitting down at a table with their own kids and rather than react in a way their parents might have done which might be aggression or something else like that, or not being there at all, in the case a parent dies or something like that, they get to see an example of a way someone should act, someone should be. It gives a very positive role model and that's a huge thing

– Parent G

How [mentor] interacts with [youth], you know, the respect he shows [youth]; the respect he shows [Caseworker] and me, and when they go on group activities and that kind of thing you know... he's just really respectful of everybody. He's a fantastic role model, he really is. You know, the way he talks about his family or the way he talks about his wife, all of those things you know. He kind of demonstrates without making a big deal of it; he just shows him what it's like to be a good person you know

– Parent C

5. Provision of Support

In addition to this, participants identified mentors as important sources of social, emotional and practical support for young people. Crucially, each young person in this study appeared to regard their mentor as a source of support, with many providing examples of times when their mentor had supported or guided them, such as advising them about schoolwork or supporting them to conquer their fears.

I do remember whenever I was at my very low points that I could always like tell her what was going on and she would always give me advice. Like if I was struggling with school or anything like that I could tell her about it. We sort of work through it together. It was great; I sort of found someone who is outside the family who I was able to talk to

– Youth 9

She's in college so like she can give me like secondary school advice which is definitely very handy... for example like, she did art for her Leaving Cert and I'll be doing art so she kind of has ideas of what's going to be going on and how that's going to work out and stuff

– Youth 7

Parents also viewed mentors as valuable sources of support, with a number of parents suggesting that the mentors provided these young people with both practical help and social or emotional support. Knowing youth had access to an additional source of support, who might advise or guide them in similar ways, provided reassurance to parents.

There was a bit of a bullying incident... [Youth] was quite upset by it but [mentor] kind of talked him through it as well... He kind of reinforced everything that all the other adults in his life had been saying to him you know. So he's that extra backup and whatever [mentor] said; he listens to [mentor] you know

– Parent C

I suppose that's one of the biggest benefits I see; that it's somebody who you know is going to be responsible and guide him in the way you know you probably would yourself

– Parent H

Mentors indicated that they attempted to support their Little by providing them with advice or guidance when needed and ensuring that their Little knew they can talk to them about any issues or problems they were experiencing. Mentors felt that they were an important source of support for these young people, with some noting that their Little may have limited other sources of support.

I just keep the line of communication open so if anything does come up she is comfortable to reach out to me

– Mentor 6

Sometimes she felt like she had nobody just to say stuff to, I'm that one person she possibly relied on

– Mentor 1

I don't think there's any aunties or uncles on the scenario. There doesn't seem to be huge family support

– Mentor 2

Several young people indicated that they valued their mentor's advice and were aware that they could rely on their mentors for support if, or when, they needed it.

She can give me good advice and sometimes if I can't talk to my Mam about certain things I can talk to her instead. It's still getting good advice and help and everything... It's just really nice to have a helping hand during tough times as well

– Youth 7

Yeah he does support me if I need it; he talks to me like when I need it... He was just really; he was there for me when I needed it

– Youth 3

Probably that if I needed; Again if I needed to talk to anyone about anything well then I could just text him or ring him and then he'll always try and help me

– Youth 4

Like if I ever am in trouble I feel I could talk to him

– Youth 8

From their experiences with the programme, most BBBS and CAMHS staff believed that the BBBS programme was a supportive resource for young people, with many staff recounting times when youth on the programme had benefited from their mentor's support.

There are stories where young people have taken overdoses and the volunteer... has been the shoulder to cry on you know when their life is falling down around them; where there's been family breakdowns and again the young person has felt the relationship is such a safe place to maybe talk about those things and share those experiences with somebody outside of the family

– BBBS Staff 4³

There was one... she was an only child... she was quite isolated in school all the way up... Anyway we matched her and the match was perfect. She really took to that and it was like her only friend the way she saw it, a big sister and that match extended for 2 years... And in the middle of all that the parents separated so it was support through all that trauma as well... it was really, really brilliant support for her through all the different traumas and things that she had to deal with

– CAMHS Staff 1

³ Foróige's BBBS programme prioritises the safety, welfare and protection of young people. Big Brother/Sister volunteers are trained and supported in their role and in how to respond in these types of situations based on Foróige's Safeguarding and Protection of Children and Young People policies and procedures. If a young person shares information with their Big Brother/Sister that leads BBBS Staff to believe that they are, or have been, engaging in risk behaviours, information will be shared appropriately with the parent/guardian or the relevant authority under their Safeguarding and Child Protection Policies and Procedures.

6. Relationship Modelling

Similar to, but distinct from, the level of support provided by mentors, a couple of participants proposed that mentors play an important role in modelling social relationships for young people, which they felt helps provide young people with a template of what 'real friendship' looks like.

They understand people being there for them, yeah, learn about respect and value friendships, relationships; having opportunities, creating opportunities

– Mentor 10

You know he'd be very particular I guess about who he is friends with you know; he doesn't kind of rush in whereas before he was mad to be friends with everybody. But I think he sees the value in what a good friend is, he can recognise that, and I think [mentor] has really been instrumental in showing him what a good friend is

– Parent C

Say for example now over the years there's been like a few times where that volunteer would have brought along one of her own friends so that the young person would observe, this is how a friendship goes, this is how you interact; this is how you do this and you know it has definitely benefited her

– BBBS Staff



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