

**Mentoring Homeless Children:
The Madison Experience**

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The Need

In school settings, children's failed relationships can be formidable barriers to educational success. For the increasing numbers of children facing the terror of homelessness, social relationships pose both risk and protective factors

Research indicates that the social isolation of homeless children is often pervasive as well as that this isolation is a barrier to educational success. Without these research findings as background, one might question the focus on social relationships for children who are tired, hungry, and/or hopelessly behind in basic academic skills. From a more optimistic perspective, researchers have noted that quality relationships can provide children with resilience in facing adversity (Rutter, 1990). For example, resilient children -- those who seem to thrive through tough times -- often report an adult who took a special interest in them. The primary message is that educators can and should devote considerable efforts to helping homeless children build positive relationships in school settings. Stressed and strained relationships likely contribute to other documented problems of homeless children. In fact, this was confirmed in extensive structured interviews that were part of research conducted in both Boise, Idaho, and Hartford, Connecticut; relationship problems were tied to many of the negative effects associated with homelessness for children (Anooshian, 1999, 2000). Other researchers have reported developmental delays and numerous emotional, health, and educational problems (e.g., Bassuk & Gallagher, 1990; Bassuk & Rubin, 1987; Dail, 1990). Since social isolation appears to be a contributing factor, one viable approach to addressing these problems is to build positive relationships.

In addressing relationship problems, it is important to recognize that "isolation" is **not** synonymous with **physical** distance or separation from others; the concern is with the scarcity of social attachments and high-quality social interactions experienced by homeless children. For example, consider a homeless child in an emergency shelter who becomes aggressive in response to crowding and lack of privacy. In addition to being deprived of meaningful social interaction, such social crowding creates further perils associated with lack of both privacy and "personal places." As Berck (1992) noted:

Most families end up disconnected by distance and circumstance from everything familiar--friends, neighbors, schools. It is as if they become lost in the middle of their own city. (p. 30)

When mothers and families become disconnected from meaningful relationships, children necessarily experience isolation as well. During our interviews in Boise and Hartford, mothers often commented that friendships disappeared the day they became homeless (e.g., entered the shelter).

Social isolation and distrust often emerge from past histories of victimization and personal trauma, histories more prevalent for homeless than other poor women. In this context, Dail (1990) points out much of homeless women's distrust is strongly based in reality; these mothers "have learned distrust as a means of survival in their social circumstances. Suspicion and apprehensiveness are what they find they need most" (p. 300). Extreme isolation of homeless mothers is important to understanding the pervasiveness of the social isolation experienced by their children. As noted earlier, social isolation of the mother necessarily means isolation of the family unit and, hence, further isolation of the children. In addition, supportive social networks for mothers are associated with more positive parenting (see Hashima & Amato, 1994). In contrast, both poverty and social isolation are associated with problematic patterns of parenting and child abuse; the combination of poverty and lack of social support yields an "especially dangerous situation for children" (Hashima & Amato, 1994, p. 400). Also, social isolation of the mother increases vulnerability to depression. We know that depression is frequent among homeless mothers and that maternal depression and poor mother-child relationships are clearly linked (Dail, 1990). By understanding how social isolation -- including problematic parent-child relationships -- contributes to the perils of homelessness, we gain useful frameworks for educational practice.

For homeless children, the very factors that interfere with effective relationships within the family also decrease the likelihood of other sources of social support. For example, Johnson (1992) noted that 95% of homeless elementary school children reported that they missed friends more than anything else. In a similar vein, Tower (1992) argued that the inconsistencies in the lives of homeless children lead to confusion and the inability to trust or commit to any social relationship; the conditions of homelessness lead to distrust of **any** adult. As Hausman and Hammen (1993) concluded, "virtually all the high risk conditions that have been studied for their negative impact on mothers and children come together in the situation of homelessness" (p. 365).

For some, schools can provide a source of healthy social interactions away from the stresses imposed on family life. In this regard, it is well recognized that peer groups and schools are especially important for children undergoing stress (Hetherington & Martin, 1986). Consistent with this perspective, Horowitz, Springer, and Rose (1988) found that homeless children had more positive attitudes about school than poor homed children, perhaps reflecting that schools provided avenues for adapting or escaping from stressful family situations. Schools provide a ray of hope for quality relationships for homeless children.

Sound educational practice should include building positive relationships for children with histories of homelessness. For these children, proximity to other human beings may have come to evoke anxiety and distrust. Various authors have noted the distrust, insecurity, and sense of danger experienced by homeless individuals, particularly homeless children: "the ability to feel safe and secure eludes many victims of homelessness" (Johnson, 1992, p. 159). Also, poor self-esteem is likely to emerge from social isolation. Problematic parent-

child relationships are associated with poor self-esteem for the child; loneliness and self-esteem are closely connected (e.g., Jones & Carver, 1991). In turn, poor self-esteem can perpetuate the cycle of difficult relationships for children who have been homeless. In addition to negative views about the self, social isolation leads to negative views about others. For example, social rejection leads to negative beliefs about peers that, in turn, contribute to further difficulties with peer relations. These observations are particularly sobering in the context of the extensive research literature in child development pointing to clear relations between poor peer relationships and widespread negative outcomes including avoidance of school, poor school performance, school drop-out, and mental health and adjustment difficulties (e.g., Coie & Cillessen, 1993; Jones & Carver, 1991). Developmental psychologists have long recognized that peer rejection has clear negative consequences for children.

In addressing the need for mentoring programs, it is important to understand that social and emotional functioning in childhood is predictive of a variety of outcomes, including poor academic functioning (e.g., Ollendick, Weist, Borden, & Greene, 1992) and school drop-out (Cairns, Cairns, & Neckerman, 1989). Timberlake (1994) has also confirmed close links between psychosocial adjustment and academic functioning for homeless students. Specifically, homeless children with academic problems were significantly worse in psychosocial functioning in classrooms than homeless children who were academically successful. Positive relationships are not “extra fluff,” but rather are essential to the educational success of homeless children.



Children living without homes often experience loneliness as well as stressed relationships with others.

One Solution – School Mentoring

The mentoring program at Madison Elementary School was based on the idea (as summarized in the preceding section) that quality social relationships are critical in addressing the needs of homeless children. It is likely that other educational efforts (e.g., tutoring, special education programs) will have a greater impact if relationship difficulties are also addressed.

There is no one intervention strategy which alone can resolve all of the problems homeless children face, but there is one that appears particularly important: providing a nurturing mentoring relationship. As summarized in the first section, there is extensive evidence that (a) successful child development requires supportive social relationships, and (b) social isolation and poor relationships characterize the lives of most homeless children.

Mentoring is commonly defined as a one-to-one relationship between a caring adult and a child who needs support to overcome adversity. The consensus of research over the past decade indicates that one positive, mentoring relationship with a caring adult can make a difference in the life of an at-risk child (Benard, 1991; Brooks, 1994; Garmezy, 1991; Grossman & Tierney, 1998; Werner, 1989; McPartland & Murray Nettles, 1991). Norman Garmezy and researchers at the University of Minnesota found that one significant, non-familial adult played a prime role in helping children handle the stresses associated with war. Garmezy notes that “such adults provide for the children representation of their efficacy and the demonstrable ability to exert control in the midst of upheaval” (Garmezy, 1991).

In his book, Tough Change, Bernard Lefkowitz summarizes interviews with approximately five hundred at-risk children. He concludes that resilient children who broke the cycle of poverty and related stresses experienced supportive mentoring relationships. He writes, “Again and again, I found that the same pattern was repeated: The kid who managed to climb out of the morass of poverty and social pathology was the kid who found somebody, usually in school, sometimes outside, who helped them invent a promising future” (Lefkowitz, 1986).

Emmy E. Werner’s thirty-year longitudinal study adds substantial findings to advocate mentoring relationships for at-risk children. Werner’s study sampled five hundred children living on a sugar plantation on the Hawaiian island of Kauai whose environments were characterized by poverty, and high incidence of alcoholism and mental illness among parents. Those children who overcame this adversity shared a common characteristic: they were able to draw on support from neighborhood mentors. Werner concludes that with “the help of these support networks, the resilient children developed a sense of meaning in their lives and a belief that they could control their fate” (Werner, 1989). Of course, for homeless children, potential neighborhood mentors disappear with the loss of home.

Bonnie Benard's current research focuses on fostering resiliency in children. Benard identifies four personal traits commonly associated with children who overcome risks in their lives: social competence, resourcefulness, autonomy, and sense of purpose. These traits which make up a child's resilient nature "are fostered or reinforced by caring relationships that are trusting, compassionate, and respectful..." (Benard, 1991). As little as one positive, mentoring relationship can make the difference for a child living in a traumatic situation.

Grossman and Tierney (1998) document the diversity of positive changes associated with mentoring through Big Brothers Big Sisters agencies; after 18 months, children with mentors were less likely to have started using illegal drugs or alcohol, hit someone, or skipped school than children randomly assigned to waiting lists for mentors. Children with mentors also received higher grades, were more confident about school, and had more positive social relationships with peers and family members than children without mentors. A well-designed, well-managed mentoring program for homeless children represents a low-cost, practical and effective means of intervention. Intervention based on mentoring addresses the needs of homeless children by providing them with "protective factors" through a mentoring relationship designed to help break the cycle of trauma in their lives. Mentors will serve as role models to provide these children with loving encouragement, growth opportunities, and consistency. Further, the development of mentoring programs for homeless children should awaken community sensitivity involving the often "invisible" homeless families.

In contrast to the diverse positive outcomes that might be achieved, there are also risks and obstacles to effective mentoring. As noted by Freedman (1993), the current popularity of mentoring is associated with increasing failures of mentoring programs--usually programs without a sufficient supportive infrastructure. Freedman's historical analyses of the successes and failures of mentoring programs point to important guidelines for establishing mentoring relationships for homeless children. First, an organization with a strong infrastructure must be involved (e.g., BBBS); failed programs are another source of failed relationships for homeless children. Second, although most mentoring programs have focused on the teenage years, mentoring programs for homeless children should focus on younger children. As noted by Freedman (1993), a number of mentoring programs, in addressing their failures, have recognized that adolescence may be too late to intervene for many at-risk children.



For many children, the school is the only place with hope of escaping the stresses and terror of living in extreme poverty.

The First Three Years

With the proper infrastructure support and by targeting the elementary years, mentoring programs offer promise in providing protective factors for homeless children whose lives are otherwise full of risk factors. Nevertheless, an important question remained. ***Have homeless children already experienced so much social isolation and rejection that they are unable to establish healthy relationships with adult mentors?*** Happily, a negative answer has emerged from clear evidence of the effectiveness of a specific school-buddy program at Madison Elementary School.

This mentoring program was implemented by Big Brothers Big Sisters of Southwest Idaho working in partnership with the Applied Cognition Research Institute at Boise State University, the State Coordinator for Homeless Education, and the teachers and staff at Madison Elementary School. This was a school-based program for homeless and immanently homeless children (substandard housing, low income level threatening stable housing). Bigs met with their matched Littles for about 1 hour per week, typically at lunch time. Quotes from little buddies quickly revealed just how well the program was working:

“Have you seen my Big Brother today? Could you tell him that I really need to see him right away? I want to tell him I miss him.”

“Did you see this necklace that I have? My Big Sister has one, too. I have one half of the heart and she wears the other half. This means we’re like real sisters now.”

Descriptive accounts from the social worker at Madison Elementary School told a similar story.

“Pamela started in Madison’s preschool for the developmentally delayed. Her mother had attended special education and has been a laundry attendant for over a decade. Pamela has always lived in subsidized housing. By first grade, Pamela lied and stole books. She smelled of urine and wore dirty, ill-fitting clothes. Lice was a problem. In second grade, Pamela met Candice, a warm, quiet Big Sis. They matched perfectly, both smiling and glowing, one light passing to another. Together they illuminated the cafeteria. Soon everyone wanted to sit next to them, to share in their friendship. Eventually Pamela picked Christine, a meticulous, intelligent, well-mannered classmate, to befriend. Their friendship has blossomed, too, and Pamela’s world has opened up.”

“The first words out of Carl’s mouth this year were, ‘When is Steve coming?’ This was repeated every day until he finally said, ‘Steve is here. Steve is here!’ Carl screams this every week as he hurls himself at his Big Brother. No matter how many times Steve comes (well over 50 at this point), he always receives a hero’s welcome.”

“Imitation is usually where change begins. Tawny brought Sheila, a first grader, a brown bag lunch every week. The cool thing was that Tawny

packed herself an identical lunch: same sandwich, cookies, the works! Soon Sheila had her hair fixed like Tawny's. The year ended with Tawny and Sheila organizing weekly kickball games. Tawny moved away, but her strength and impact remain. Sheila is now in third grade and she is a responsible, top-achiever. Pretty good for a girl whose mother has a history of drug problems."

(NOTE: The names have been changed in the above accounts to protect confidentiality.)

Some quantitative assessments were also available for the 82 children who went through the Big Brothers Big Sisters program in its first three years at Madison Elementary School. "*Before match*" and "*After match*" questionnaires, developed and used by Big Brothers Big Sisters for several of their programs, were given to parents, teachers, volunteers, counselors, and the school social worker. Unfortunately, for various reasons, matching "*before*" and "*after*" questionnaires – filled out by the same person – were obtained for only 35 of those children. To determine where the program had its greatest effects, we looked at the improvement apparent for the matching *before* and *after* questionnaires for each of these 35 children. (In most cases, the matching questionnaires came from teachers, but about 1/3 came from others; for some children with more than one pair of matching *before* and *after* questionnaires, the improvement measure was an average score).

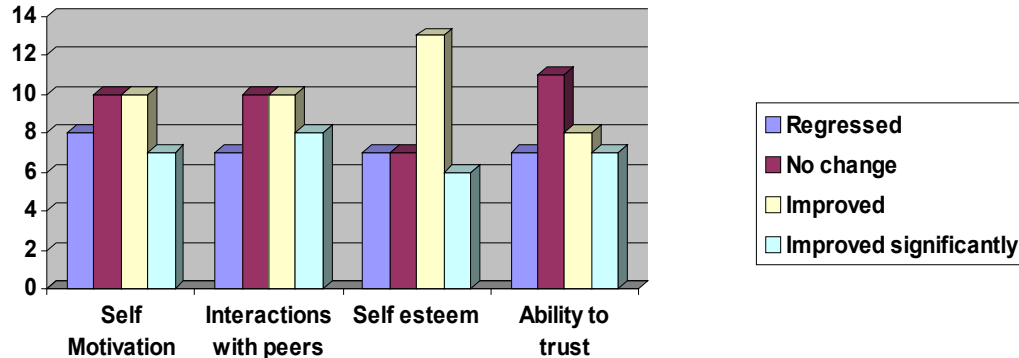
The greatest improvement was apparent for ratings for these items:

- Self motivation
- Appropriate interactions with peers
- Level of self esteem
- Ability to trust others

For both *before* and *after* questionnaires, children were rated in one of the following ways:

- practically none (1)
- way below average (2)
- below average (3)
- average (4)
- above average (5)
- well above average (6)
- nearly perfect (7)

Improvement scores were obtained by subtracting the *after* rating from the *before* rating. For example, a change from a "below average" (3) to "average" (4) was given a score of +1. The results for the four items are charted below:



A clear minority of the children, shown with the blue (left) bars, showed the pattern often expected for at-risk children, the pattern of progressively worse problems over the course of the school year. Most impressive are the numbers of children who improved significantly, as shown by the green (right) bars. Significant improvement was defined as ratings that increased by two or more levels – for example, from “below average” to “above average” or from “way below average” to “average.” For each of the four areas charted above, 6-8 of the 35 children showed this dramatic level of improvement.

A total of 28 of these children filled out brief questionnaires themselves. The Littles described their areas of improvement in ways quite consistent with adult ratings. Of six possible areas of improvement, the Littles gave their highest ratings to ***“How I feel about others”*** and ***“How I get along with others.”***

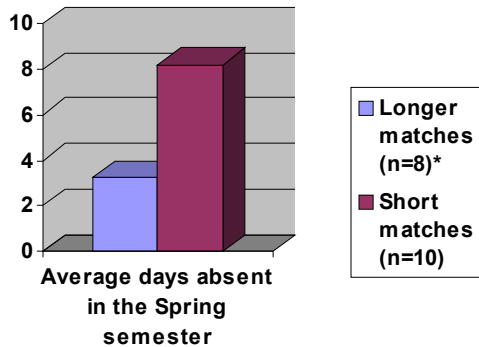
The 1999-2000 School Year

A total of 23 children at Madison were matched with Big Sisters or Big Brothers over the course of the 1999-2000 school year. 13 of those children were matched during the Fall semester (with the last matches initiated on November 8, 1999); the remaining 10 matches were initiated between January and March of 2000. For assessment purposes, these two groups (short matches and longer matches) were compared for measures obtained during the Spring semester (when “short matches” were just getting started).

Attendance

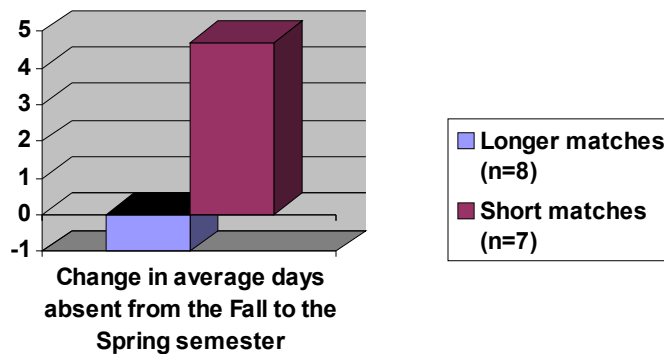
Children who had been matched in the Fall semester (longer matches) showed a much smaller rate of absenteeism in the Spring semester than did children who were matched later.

0



*With high rates of transience, not all measures could be obtained for each of the Fall and Spring semesters for all children.

Not surprisingly, children with short matches actually showed an increase in absences from the Fall to the Spring semester. As indicated earlier, for at-risk children included in this program, we would expect patterns of increased difficulties across the school year (without intervention). In this context, the slight decline in absences from the Fall to the Spring semester, for children with longer matches, was particularly striking.



The patterns observed for absenteeism were consistent with many of the comments made by teachers (in interviews or on report cards) as well as by the school social worker (in interviews). As summarized in the following table, specific comments relating to academic improvement were found for 13 of the 23 children (8 of the 13 children had longer rather than short matches):

Summary of comments (each row represents a different child)	Source
Improved in all areas of academics	Teacher
Improvement in grades	Teacher
Shows more interest in schoolwork	Teacher
Matured a lot in many ways - socially, emotionally, and intellectually, developed excellent problem solving strategies, increased ability to express ideas clearly in writing and orally, improvement in listening attentively	Teacher

Improvement in language, spelling and math; more interest in schoolwork and desire to do her best	Teacher and social worker
Enthusiasm for learning	Teacher
Values education and takes responsibility for her part of it	Teacher
Continues to improve at school, progress in many areas, especially reading	Teacher
Improvement in language, science, and social studies	Teacher
Great progress academically	Teacher
More academically involved, greater enjoyment of reading	Teacher
Improvement in writing and language skills, improvement in areas of using time wisely, completing work on time, and accepting responsibility for actions	Teacher
Intelligent, energetic, and learns quickly	Teacher

Other Areas of Improvement -- Teacher Ratings and Interviews

At the start of the match, as well as when the match ended, teachers completed a series of ratings designed to tap different areas where we hoped to see improvement. Twelve items were designed as assessments of self-esteem taken from the Self-Esteem Rating Scale for Children (Chiu, 1987). Nine additional items were used to obtain measures of school motivation, self-regulated learning, and classroom behavior (Wentzel & Asher, 1995). Finally, five items tapped social characteristics associated with school success: aggression, popularity, and withdrawal (Hymel, Bowker, & Woody, 1993).

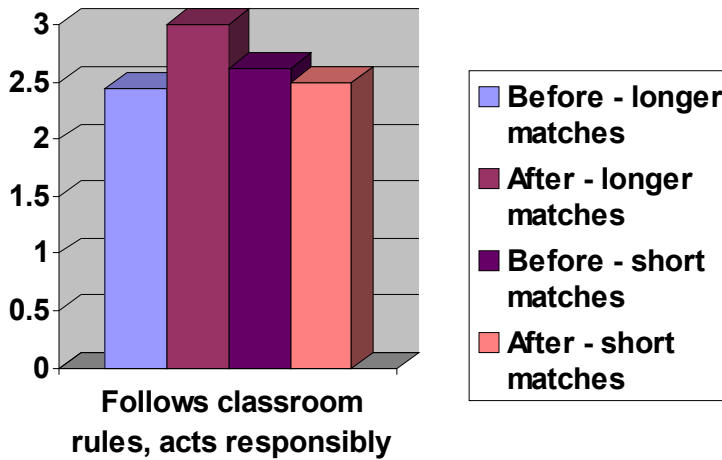
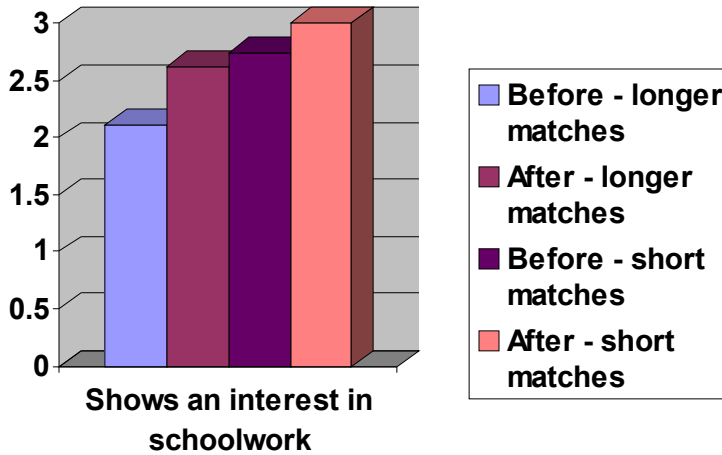
There was little apparent improvement in the total score for self esteem. This was somewhat puzzling in light of findings from the first three years where esteem emerged as an area associated with some of the greatest improvement. In a national study conducted by Big Brother Big Sisters, there was also little evidence of changes in self esteem, in contrast to striking changes in other areas (Grossman & Tierney, 1998). This is an area that we will continue to explore in further assessments of the Madison program.

For other measures, differences between ratings *before* and *after* matches consistently showed greater improvement for longer than for short matches. For short matches, the *after* measures were obtained just 1-3 months after the *before*-match measures. The following charts show those areas for which the children with longer matches showed substantially more improvement than did children with the short matches. In reviewing these charts, note that the frequency of each of the described behaviors was rated as one of the following:

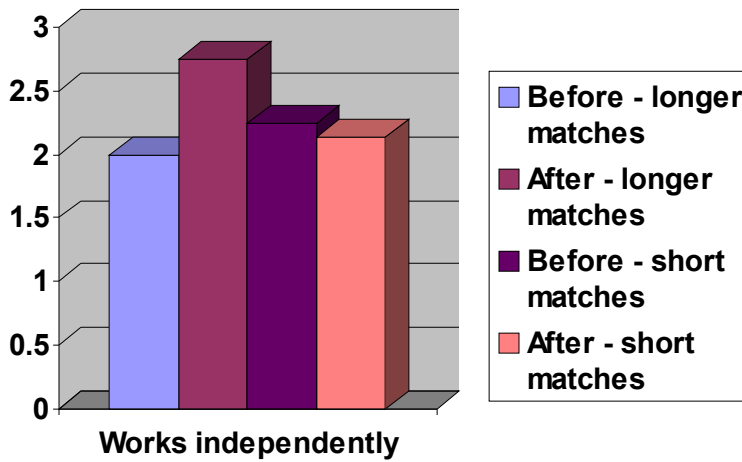
- “Never” (0)
- “Seldom” (1)
- “Sometimes” (2)
- “Frequently” (3)
- “Always” (4)

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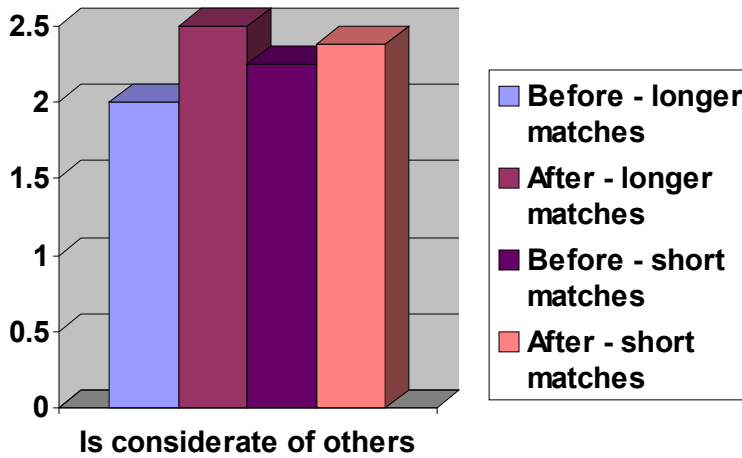
The increase from the first to the second bar reflects the improvement for children who had longer matches. This increase is consistently larger than that observed for the two right-most bars (*before* and *after* for short matches).



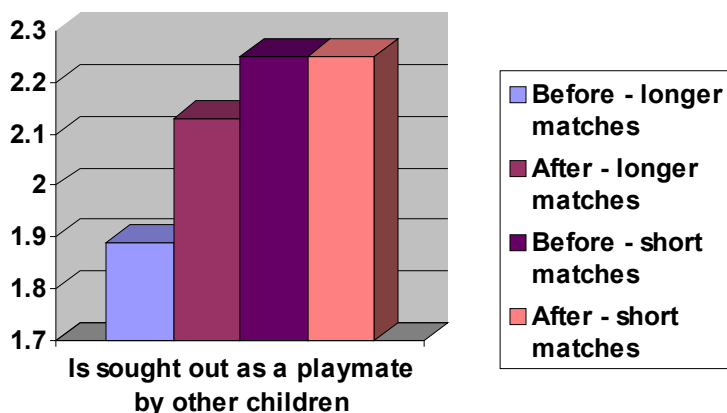
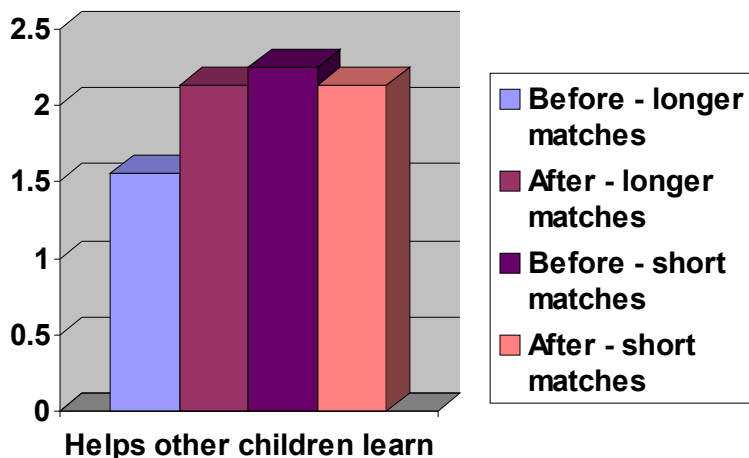
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Positive changes in interest in schoolwork, in following classroom rules and acting responsibly, and in working independently are quite consistent with the academic improvement summarized earlier. Other positive changes from teachers' ratings and from comments from both teachers and the school social worker were observed for **social relationships with others**. Positive quantitative changes are summarized in the following charts:



4



Consistent with the quantitative information summarized in these charts, comments from both teachers and the social worker referred to increased trust and/or improved relationships for 13 of the 23 children (9 of the 13 children included in the table had longer matches):

Summary of comments (each row represents a different child)	Source
More trusting and loving toward adults	Social worker
Big provided consistency and increased trust in adults	Teacher and social worker
Big provided male role model and someone who could be trusted to be there through the tough times	Social worker
Big was the only consistency, Big stuck by her through tough times, increased self-assertiveness to report abusive situation voluntarily	Social worker
Having someone stick by him helped him to be more trusting of adults	Social worker
Positive role model	Social worker
Consistency of having a positive role model improved relationships overall	Social worker
Big stood by through tough times	Teacher
Improving with peers	Teacher

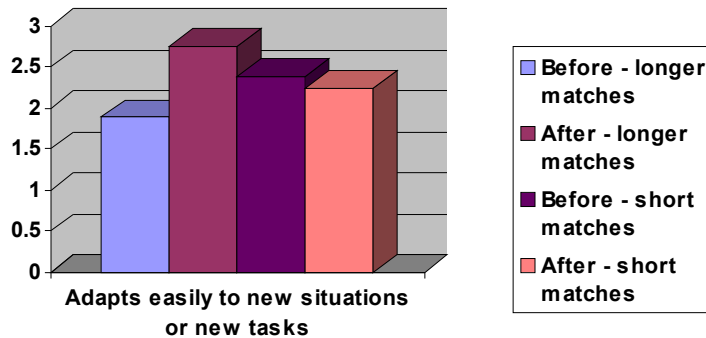
Big helped to bring out of shell and improve social skills	Teacher and social worker
Better communication and less physical violence with friends	Teacher
Improvement in social skills and peer interaction	Teacher and social worker
Big provided positive role model and healthy adult relationship - increased trust	Social worker

The social worker and a teacher provided these more detailed descriptions of two of the children included in this table:

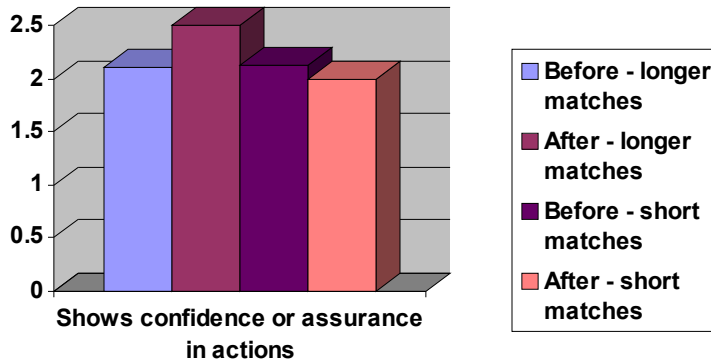
“He’s going from being picked on and targeted by teachers and kids to being happy and liked ... he asks for help now, whereas before he was laying on the floor, like my life is over ... This year he has turned into a loving children. He is more loving to adults. He used to hate adults ... he was suspicious and would do things to provoke your anger.”

“ ... has made unbelievable progress through the year ... needed help with behavior and appropriate interaction with others, and _____ (the Big) really helped to curb the rough play and language ... he really needed that positive role model.”

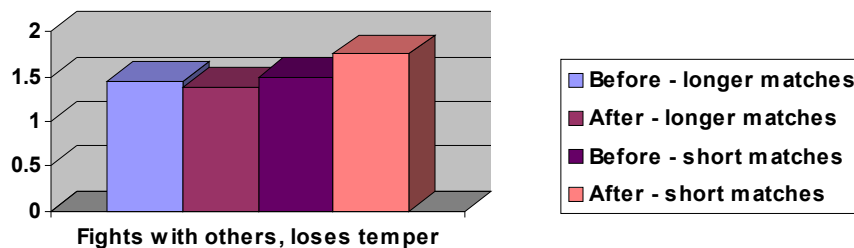
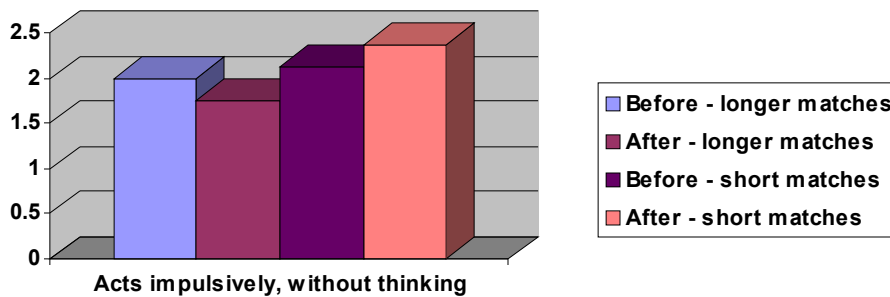
We have summarized positive changes in schoolwork as well as in the quality of children’s relationships with others. Not surprisingly, some positive behavior changes were observed as well:



6



For the following two items, the described behaviors are negative. Hence, a decline, as observed for longer matches, reflects improvement. This improvement contrasts with increases in negative behaviors for children with short matches.



Consistent with these quantitative improvements, comments from teachers and the school social worker again reinforced similar themes. For 14 of the 23 children, comments included references to improvement in behaviors and attitudes (9 of the 14 children had longer rather than short matches):

Summary of comments (each row represents a different child)	Source
Improved classroom manners; less whining, happier and more trusting, seeks attention through appropriate behavior	Teacher and social worker
Decreased anger and brashness	Teacher and social worker
Chose to accept counseling and medication on his own	Social worker
Higher level of functioning ... not as clingy and depressed	Social worker

Has come a long way in controlling temper and having positive attitude (teacher); more apt to participate, increased social skills	Teacher and social worker
Making better decisions to do the right thing, seeks attention through positive behavior	Teacher and social worker
Increased positive, respectful and responsible attitude, cooperative, increased social skills and decrease in aggressive behavior; preventative of future misconduct and deviant behavior	Teacher and social worker
Big provided modeling of appropriate morals and values, become very responsible and independent, great desire to be the best, decrease in delinquent behavior	Social worker
Shows respect for her classmates	Teacher
Remarkable progress in behavior, less bad language and aggressive behavior through modeling of Big	Teacher and social worker
Understands responsibility to be accountable for behavior, improvement in taking turns and being considerate of others	Teacher
More energy, motivation, and a stronger sense of personal responsibility	Teacher
Improvement in accepting responsibility for actions and being cooperative and respectful, improvement in attitude, decrease in anger	Teacher
More accepting and considerate of others	Teacher

More detailed descriptions from the social worker provide a better picture of the influence of the mentoring relationship:

“The Big brought her up to a much higher level of functioning ... started out clingy, depressed, crying, not good with peers at all, always wanting an adult, and always sick ... Her Big was there for her while she went through some really hard stuff at home (too much responsibility, subsidized housing, bad relationship with her father). Her Big was her one and only consistency.”

“ ... was at the point of being in a gang, and BBBS was used to intervene and create a positive role model for him. It proved to be successful. In this case, the match proved to be preventative of misbehaving in the future.”

Children in the program often commented on the high value they placed on having Bigs. The following description from the social worker illustrates the popularity that became associated with having Bigs:

“ _____ recruited himself to the program because he saw how much the others who were in the program loved it. He wanted that kind of close personal relationship.”

Overall, the assessments summarized here have removed any doubt about whether homeless children can benefit from healthy mentoring relationships. Improvements were observed across a wide array of measures of attitudes, behaviors, and performances relevant to school success.

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