

# MENTORING AT-RISK YOUTH – EFFECTS ON AGGRESSION

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**Abstract:** Current study examines mentoring program on at-risk children. Children deprived of parental care living across Bulgarian residential homes (aged 12-17) participated in a mentoring program for 12 months (n=35). Another children from same age risk group remained non intervention (n=15). Both groups completed Buss-Durkee Aggression Questionnaire and repeated measures ANOVA assessed changes from pre intervention to post intervention and indicated significant reduce of physical aggression and hostility.

**Key words:** children at risk, mentoring, children deprived of parental care, child protection, children grown outside family, aggression, attachment.

The term “at risk” applies to describe children and youth with a variety of different indicators, including having experienced abuse or trauma, having a disability or illness, having exhibited behavior problems, threatened by harm for its physical, psychological, moral, intellectual and social development; school dropouts, children deprived of parental care, victims exploitation [10], [19], [16], [17]. Definition of “at risk” appears from risk factors identified – family, community and child itself and refers to long-term shortages, such as school failure, economic dependency, death, or incarceration [7]. Children grown outside their families are one of most vulnerable at-risk group suffering from shortage of parental role model and significant person to trust in.

Attachment theory (John Bowlby) is recognized to unravel characteristics of children deprived of parental care. Attachment theoretical concepts are done on grounds of the peculiarities of the examined at-risk children whose relation with the parent is broken. Ambivalent and unreliable attachment evolving from this theory are typical of children who have experienced separation from their mothers. These children develop high aggression behavior patterns as a result of the separation leading to problems with adaptation, communication and socialization [22]. Aggression emerges from *anger* and *fear* as leading emotions in attachment theory context where a child is suffering separated of significant person. Therefore, aggressive behavior is expected to become a serious problem among at-risk youth grown outside their family that affects their social skills and level of their social functioning. Aggression and aggressive behavior concepts cannot be interpreted unipolar, since, according to various theories, aggression can be manifested in a context to be destructive and constructive. The very notion of aggression comes from the Latin *agressio*, which means attack, step forward. Current study views aggression rather in a destructive way,

and associated with aggressive behavior defined as intentional violence from one person to another, from one group of people to another group accompanied by pain, tears, and humiliation of human dignity [21].

Mentoring is an informal transmission of knowledge, social capital, and psychosocial support within informal communication, usually face-to-face and during a sustained period of time. It is a process of directing, instructing, advising individuals to develop certain skills and knowledge in terms of improving their personal progress [1].

Individual mentoring approach has been originally invented in the United States since 1970 basically in training context<sup>1</sup> and youth mentoring programs for at-risk youth has developed at a rapid pace emphasizing the relationship between disadvantaged child and caring adult spending quality time together and providing emotional support and guidance in order to help child better meet life difficulties [6]. A wide range of surveys show that mentoring is able to support troubled youth and improve their social functioning. American scholars researched and approbated mentoring programs for at-risk youth and reported significant results in behavior and social functioning improvement establishing one of the leading risk factors for youth behavior patterns as lack of positive role model to follow [9], [4], [11], [14]. Mentors can be identified as a positive role model with appropriate behavior [13] and may provide resilient youth with such relationships [12].

Numerous of surveys research possible impact of mentoring approach focused on different types of at-risk youth – delinquents, mentally ill, school dropouts, children in dysfunctional families, drug addicted, neglected, school dropouts, and children with behavior problems. All studies evidenced significant changes in at-risk youth reducing behavior problems at school, decreasing destructive patterns, improving academic performance, developing positive behaviors and better decision making skills, self esteem, school records of grades, attendance, family relationship, social skills and overall improvements in youth functioning [14], [12], [6], [5].

Mentoring at-risk youth programs are not well-known in Bulgarian social and child protection practices. Vulnerable youth are supported by formal social work programs and qualified specialist hardly achieving emotional connection with children in order of formal communication framework between them. At some point, it is important social worker and care giver to support trustful relationship giving a child-friendly space for sharing so that the specialist can become a role model [2]. Social competences can be enhanced by mentoring

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<sup>1</sup> Parsloe, E.; Wray, M. J. *Coaching and mentoring: practical methods to improve learning*. Kogan Page.(2000)

relationship by initiating emotional support fulfilling the missing gap of informal communication.

The purpose of this study was to examine and evaluate the use of a mentoring program for at-risk youth grown outside their family and evaluate impact upon aggression in personal and behavioral aspect.

### **Methodology**

At-risk youth deprived of parental care and living across Bulgarian residential homes were matched with a mentor for 12 months (November 2014 – February 2016) comprised intervention (experimental) group (n=35). At-risk youth from same age and institutions remained in a waiting list remained enveloped nonintervention (n=15). Participants were divided into age groups: aged 12-13 (n=15), aged 14-15 (n=13) and aged 16-17 (n=9) (M=13, SD= 3,05). 57% were female and 43% were male. The intervention at-risk group youth were encouraged to participate in a mentoring program where certain child had the possibility to spend intense quality time with a mentor – volunteer from local University. First data was collected from both intervention and nonintervention groups and all youth completed Buss-Durkee Aggression Questionnaire [15]. Second data selection was completed in 12 months where nonintervention participants were still in waiting list and intervention participants were matched with mentors and have already held weekly individual meetings.

Independent variables defined to be age, gender, institution and participation in mentoring program. Both intervention and nonintervention groups were contrasted by using dependent variable aggression measured by standardized Buss-Durkee Aggression Questionnaire to assess aggression behaviours via 75 item self reported questionnaire measuring 8 indicators: Physical Aggression, Verbal Aggression, Anger, Hostility, Indirect Aggression, Irritability, Suspicion, Guilt and additional Lie indicator to measure honesty in answers [15].

Intervention participants have been subjected to 12 month surveillance by their mentors. Surveillance was conducted within 15 item structured scientific observation measuring following set criteria: *aggression* within 5 aggression indicators including Physical Aggression, Verbal aggression, Indirect Aggression, Irritability and Hostility. All surveillance variables were measured by certain observed behavior reactions showing decrease of aggressive indicators.

## Results

Outliers were assigned by Student **t-distribution** for hypothesis test and re-test to assess differences between intervention and nonintervention before the mentoring start and after finishing it. No significant difference was found between intervention and nonintervention groups at preintervention stage on the variables of aggression assigned by Student t-distribution ( $t_{emp}(33) = -0.998$ ;  $t_{critical} = 1.995$ ;  $P = 95\%$ ,  $\alpha = 0,05$ ). **F-test** of Fisher compared that variances of both samples could be assessed as equal for aggression ( $F_{emp}(34,14) = 1.399$  и  $p = 0.427$ ). Post intervention stage did not report significant difference between experimental and control group on the general **aggression** variable ( $t(33) = 1.179$ ;  $p = 0.274$ ) and ( $t(13) = 1.827$ ;  $p = 0.681$ ). In-depth analysis of various aggression indicators reported significant patterns in Physical Aggression ( $F(1;33) = 6.693$ ;  $p = 0.042$ ) and Hostility ( $F(33;13) = 4.363$ ;  $p = 0.022$ ) that partially confirmed the hypothesis of the study and recorded the effects (Table1). All other variables did not show effect from mentoring program. ANOVA analysis reported significant effect in gender variance as well as age variance for physical aggression repeating better results of boys ( $F = 2.5641$ ;  $p = 0,02130$ ) and 16-17 years old ( $F = 3.4089$ ;  $p = 0.02793$ ) decreasing their physical aggression attitude. The interaction between age and gender was significant ( $F = 3.1373$ ,  $p = 0.05261$ ), denoting S- Method ( $F_{cr} = 0.993$ ).

*Table 1 Means and standard deviations for Intervention and Nonintervention groups at preintervention and postintervention stage for aggression for only significant variables*

Measure		Descriptive Statistics Preintervention		Descriptive Statistics Postintervention	
		Mean	Std. Dev.	Mean	Std. Dev.
<b>Aggression (Buss Durkee Questionnaire)</b>	Intervention	55.850	8.719	52.850	7.974
	Nonintervention	57.250	7.772	53.550	8.295
Physical aggression	Intervention	68.750	29.421	61.250	25.294
	Nonintervention	64.800	27.583	66.850	23.275
Hostility	Intervention	58.425	21.740	50.825	22.570
	Nonintervention	60.450	19.120	59.450	20.210
		61.000			

A similar pattern emerged for Hostility reported that intervention group members significantly decreased their hostility while nonintervention group members did not. The Gender X Age interaction was significant ( $F = 3.1433$ ,  $p = 0.03105$ ) recording decreased hostility for 16 – 17 years old girls ( $F = 3.6514$ ,  $p = 0.01203$ ) and 12-13 and 14-15 years old boys ( $F = 6.0849$ ,  $p = 0.03394$ ).

Different pattern was reported for behavior variables of aggression conducted in surveillance on intervention group. Observation scale reported high internal consistency, positive correlation and high value of reliability measured by Cronbach's alpha and Spearman Brown coefficient ( $\alpha = 0.734$ ;  $r_{sb}=0.685$ ). Item difficulties have acceptable limits and report reliable scale (average item correlation 0.368).

ANOVA analysis of variance reported significant effect in participation variable ( $F=7, 96$ ;  $p=0,000$ ) and the longer child is attending individual meetings with a mentor, the fewer aggressive behavior are recorded. All aggression indicators tested by Student t-distribution of Physical Aggression, Verbal aggression, Indirect Aggression, Irritability and Anger reported significant effect of mentoring program ( $p=0,0000$ ).

Physical aggression decrease has higher mean values in comparison with other variables. Observation scale was constructed in a reverse way – raising aggression variances means less aggressive behavior which can lead to an assumption that the more individual attention a child is gaining, the less destructive behavior it has. The Gender X Participation interaction for Hostility variable was not significant ( $F=1, 7386$ ;  $p=0, 08627$ ), and it is recorded better results for girls ( $F=6,4624$ ;  $p=0,0000$ ) in higher level of participation. ANOVA analysis of variances reported significant result for Age variable ( $F=3, 0549$ ;  $p=0, 0027$ ) keeping up the age-increasing trend reducing experiment effects so that younger participants (12-13 years old) has better results.

Interaction between separate indicators was measured by values of Pierson and was reported very good correlation between participation and aggression ( $r=0, 73572$ ;  $p = 0, 00000$ ). All five measured aggression indicators reported good correlation ( $r>0, 5$ ;  $p=0,000$ ). Higher correlation is measured between participation and verbal aggression ( $r = 0, 7475$ ;  $p = 0, 00000$ ), physical aggression ( $r = 0, 5519$ ;  $p = 0, 00000$ ); irritability ( $r = 0, 5442$ ;  $p = 0, 00000$ ); hostility ( $r = 0, 6031$ ;  $p = 0, 00000$ ) and indirect aggression ( $r = 0, 6354$ ;  $p = 0, 00000$ ) assuming that continuous mentoring intervention has stronger impact in reducing rude language among children.

### **Discussion**

Results of this study allow assumption of intense mentoring interaction decreasing destructive behavior patterns of at-risk youth grown outside their family. Self-reports indicated that physical aggression and hostility can be easily reduced within boys than girls and in younger children. 12-13 aged boys are more likely to register significant change in their behavior while the effect on girls is more situational. Boys register higher results of aggression upon self-reported questionnaire while surveillance data show greater significant

effect among girls leading to the conclusion that girls need more external stimulus giving them a positive emotional experience. In regards to John Bowlby theory unreliable attachment of children can be partially compensated by external stimulus comprised by individual mentor in a person to trust role. Survey results imply mentoring interaction as an individual attention that affects at-risk youth behavior, personality and compensates emotional struggling. Consistently individual attention and positive attitude helps child to overcome compensatory safeguards from negative emotional experience and child makes easily emotional connection, reducing aggressive patterns. Comparison between self reported questionnaires of aggression and surveillance applies an interesting assumption: reducing destructive and aggressive behavior is directly dependent on the effects of prolonged purposeful individual attention, because child behaves better when external stimulus of positive emotions (mentor) is available. The need of external stimulus of children completed by positive emotional experience can be satisfied only in immediate impact i.e. child is less aggressive when achieves mentoring attention in order to “please” the mentor and to receive positive emotional feedback.

Bowlby believes that there is no stronger emotion than anger appearing from parental separation. Accumulated anger becomes a fundamental feature of child’s personality expressed by discontent and displeasure interaction with others denying them as an external stimulus of self-determination. However, the child needs to identify with the others as a compensatory of satisfying its dependence on other’s assessment. But this process is interfered by accumulated anger and negative emotional experience and the need of external identification for the child appears as a discontent with the outside world as a self protection against potential possible negative experiences that child is afraid of subconsciously.

The relation between individual attention and aggression can be explained in attachment theory context, as individual attention has an effect on creating a trustful relationship between the child and a mentor to compensate the existing unreliable basic trust and inability to connect emotionally. Individual respectful attention protects the child from gaining negative emotional experience and develops its abilities to connect with others emotionally without destructive aggressive patterns. Children with unreliable or ambivalent basic trust are highly aggressive due to their parental loss and consequently develop a sense of insecurity and fear of losing other significant people. In this particular case, the intervention group compensate this fear by suppressing their destructive aggressive behavior when they are with mentors who already have become a significant person for children. The outcomes from this study lead to assumption that individual mentor in fact has become a significant role

model due to emotional connection with the child. Current model shall influence the aggression of the examined group of children and create a positive inner incentive for self-identification appearing from significant person to trust in (mentor). Overall, applied methodology helps children reducing destructive behavior, developing their self control, respect to others as well as raising conscience and building up values among children.

Analysis of correlation between aggression variables as a behavior leads to assumption that ability of emotional connection is related to communication skills and adequacy reactions in different situations developed by children. These findings can lead for the following tendency: shortages of attention not only among at-risk youth but within all children can have negative consequences in their behavior. The more consistent individual attention the child receives from significant person, the more positive emotional experience child accumulates and decreases aggression. Therefore, child also enhances its competences to adequate interaction with others and communication skills. Various aggression patterns are observed within communication process, and the aggression influences negative impact on communication skills [21]. The findings of this study are considering behavioral point of view for communication without taking into account linguistic aspect. In addition, the intervention group of at-risk youth grown outside their family consists also children with bilingual background. Communication competences of bilinguals are related also to socio-demographic generatives “birthplace” and “education” [20]. Therefore, it can be assumed that reducing aggression and developing communication skills of children is influenced by numerous factors: culture, social background, birthplace, language, ethnicity, family, education, role models, significant people, etc. Current study outlines trends that can assign follow-up interdisciplinary research into effectiveness of mentoring program bringing change in youth and develop their social functioning.

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