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Mentoring in youth work

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There are several theoretical frameworks about human development, but there is one factor in the developmental equation that remains important for the final result - the people we are surrounded with, starting from our primarily caregivers or parents to friends, mentors and our social context.

Family constellations and the social context have a combined influence on us – on our attachment styles in interpersonal relationships, on our resilience levels, on the way we cope with challenges and, in short – on the way we treat both ourselves and the other people around us.

Young people's challenges and risk factors

During the adolescence and transition to adulthood, young people cope with a variety of challenges, such as (negative) peer pressure, generation gap and identity search through resistance towards parental guidelines and values, attention seeking, low self-esteem and self-respect. If not handled accordingly or in a timely manner, these challenges combined with other factors within family constellations can result in negative outcomes, not only for young people, but also consequently for the society, as different interpersonal disorders can lead to violence, food disorders, addictions and various antisocial behaviours.

Besides for the challenges of adolescence, young people may also face diverse risk factors and exclusion, which increases the probability for the risky behaviour to manifest. Some young people experience risk factors in their own family where they're supposed to feel the safest - they may face domestic violence, poor communication, too soft or too strict parental style. Others may experience challenges within the school context due to their low academic motivation, conflicts with teachers, undemocratic teaching style or with risks related to their peer group (antisocial behaviour of their friends, unconstructive use of free time with alcohol, drugs, etc.). And finally, we have to be aware of the risks which are directly related to the traits or predispositions of a child (low ego control, low self-esteem, external locus of control, lack of problem-solving skills), (Scholte, 1992).

The challenges of adolescence and transition and risk factors have led researchers to approach young people through series of dichotomies: problematic vs obedient child, stable and functional person vs irreparable person who needs at least some form of institutional support, healthy vs sick, etc.

They tried to understand what causes those behaviours, how specific disease or non-adaptive behaviour could further develop and how can we prevent the risks?

The answers were mostly based on the recommendation to abstain from everything that can jeopardise us. However, childhood and youth are not necessarily risk free. Those years are often filled with sadness, losses and changes, and it is hard to abstain or to avoid some of the nearly inevitable circumstances.

Could those risks be transformed into some lessons and insights? If risks are *moderate and developmentally appropriate*, could they be important for our resilience? Do unwanted circumstances empower us for more effective coping with life challenges?

During the 1970s, sociologist Aaron Antonovsky, whose work concerned the relationship between stress, health and well-being, proposed a new perspective on life risks. He proposed the salutogenesis theoretical framework as an alternative to above mentioned pathological perspectives, and this raised the following questions: How can we stay healthy and robust despite risks? Which habits should we develop to stay healthy? Instead of risk abstention, could we be risk competent? (Mittelmark et al., 2017).

Salutogenesis model in youth work and in prevention of risky behaviours of children and youth

The salutogenesis theoretical framework influenced other pedagogical perspectives which play a key role in designing youth projects that aim to support healthy development and prevent risky behaviours.

One of the derived perspectives from the salutogenesis model is that the more present and developed protective factors one has (both individual and the ones related to the social context), the impact of risky factors will be lower because a person has had the opportunity to acquire resilience and has effective strategies to prevent manifestation of risky behaviours or they are just better at coping with challenges.

The other derived perspective is related to the life competency model. According to this approach, every behaviour, no matter how dysfunctional, has a purpose and meaning which is important to understand. Every behaviour represents the way in which one person tries to meet his/her needs. That is why it is important to base the interventions on authentic needs of children and young people, and support them in developing their own competencies. This approach has the potential to enable them in achieving their goals in a constructive way.

Salutogenesis theoretical framework helped us to accept that avoiding stress is not only biologically achievable (as positive stimulus can affect the physiological balance as well) but also that avoiding stress does not build resilience. On the contrary, facing stressors in a way that increases feelings of self-confidence and social competency contributes to resilience development.

How does mentoring make us more resilient and stress competent?

One of the factors which contribute to the resilience level is social support. As human beings we are dependent on (social) support since birth. We are not able to survive without it, just as we are not able to thrive without functional and authentic interpersonal relations. Development of stress coping strategies is something we learn and develop while growing up and through social learning – feedback we receive and the perceived level of social support we gain from our surroundings.

There are different forms of social support but in a broader sense, it can be defined as an available help from the people around us and from the social institutions. As life circumstances change and we face new stressors, it is possible that we feel more resilient in one life phase in comparison to another which is why it is important for social support to be diverse and continuous.

Young person or a child derives support from a social network that entails family support or extrafamilial support (relatives, friends, different recreational activities, hobbies, institutions, or in general – the combination of all these resources).

These interactions have meaningful implications on the health and general functionality of one person. Social support as a resource can influence our stress perception, so people with more social support cope with stressors better, in comparison to those with fewer support systems. Still, it is important to remain objective in relation to these correlations because it is also possible that more adapted children and young people have fewer constraints in seeking for social support.

Nevertheless, research shows that children and young who have had a mentor (a person who is interested in developing a caring and supporting relationship with a mentee) are more successful in overcoming challenges and are more resilient. The presence of at least one supportive person, regardless of risks and behaviours, has a positive influence on a healthy development (Bruce and Bridgeland, 2014).

Mentoring is a developmental process in which experienced adults (mentors) transfer their knowledge, experiences and skills on less experienced people (mentees). The important feature of a mentoring relationship is the quality of the time which mentor spends with a mentee. The consequence of that quality is development of special connection, mutual respect, identification and loyalty which makes the transition to adulthood easier.

In a broader sense, besides individual (one-on-one), mentoring can be both peer mentoring and group mentoring which entails a greater number of mentors and children/young people who are included in different formal activities.

Mentoring can develop naturally in non-formal contexts or consensually in formal contexts. Non-formal mentoring relationships entail confidential relationships between a child or a young person and an adult from their close surroundings and from the existing social network (e.g., family member, friend of a friend, teacher, coach, etc). On the other hand, formal mentoring is often organised with the support of a school or non-governmental organisations that organise various structural activities through which mentors intensively spend time with one or more young people.

There are several preconditions for a mentor to establish a qualitative relationship with a mentee and some of them are related to personal values and traits:

- Mentor should have authentic interest and be committed to the process. When working with children or young people at risk or with NEET youth, patience and persistence are very important. Those mentees need an adult who will not give up as soon as things get hard. The mentor-mentee relationship is improved every time when the mentor respects mutual agreements and fulfils the promises. (Bruce and Bridgeland, 2014).
- Prior to being involved in a mentoring relationship, the mentors should reflect on their self-awareness level. Are they aware of their own perceptions, convictions, expectations, and their influence on a relationship with a mentee? This is important as mentees should not be corrected but rather supported in discovering their own potential. Mentors should be open to learn about themselves and about mentees, as this helps them to set healthy boundaries and realistic expectations.

- Mentors' communication skills (active listening, understanding, and effective use of non-verbal communication) are the foundation that the relationship is built on and if they put some effort into making their time together fun, the relationship has bigger chances of success.
- A mentor's role is not to be a professional (psychologist, social worker). Mentors should not behave as a parent, teacher, peer, sponsor, the nanny, guardian or advocate. Mentor's role can contain elements of all these roles, but it also differs from others in a qualitative way, and that gives a special meaning to it (Bruce and Bridgeland, 2014).

Mentor is an important adult who accepts a mentee without judgement or punishment and represents a positive role model and a friend from whom a mentee can learn something, who they share concerns with (in confidence) but also someone they can have fun with. Even though the relationship between mentor and mentee is natural, flexible and non-formal, it still happens in a clearly defined framework (Bruce and Bridgeland, 2014).

The role of mentoring in supporting young people's transition to autonomy and economic independence

Mentoring the next generation of youth is critical to the future health and prosperity of our society. Yet, millions of young people are currently growing up without the parental or adult guidance and support needed to prepare them to become well-adjusted and contributing members of society (Cavell, DuBois, Karcher, Keller & Rhodes, 2009).

Researchers have shown that mentors might have positive influence in the following five domains of young person's life: as role models, encouraging, providing access to resources, relationships, and experiences, advocacy, and conversations about behaviour change (Davis & McQuillin, 2021).

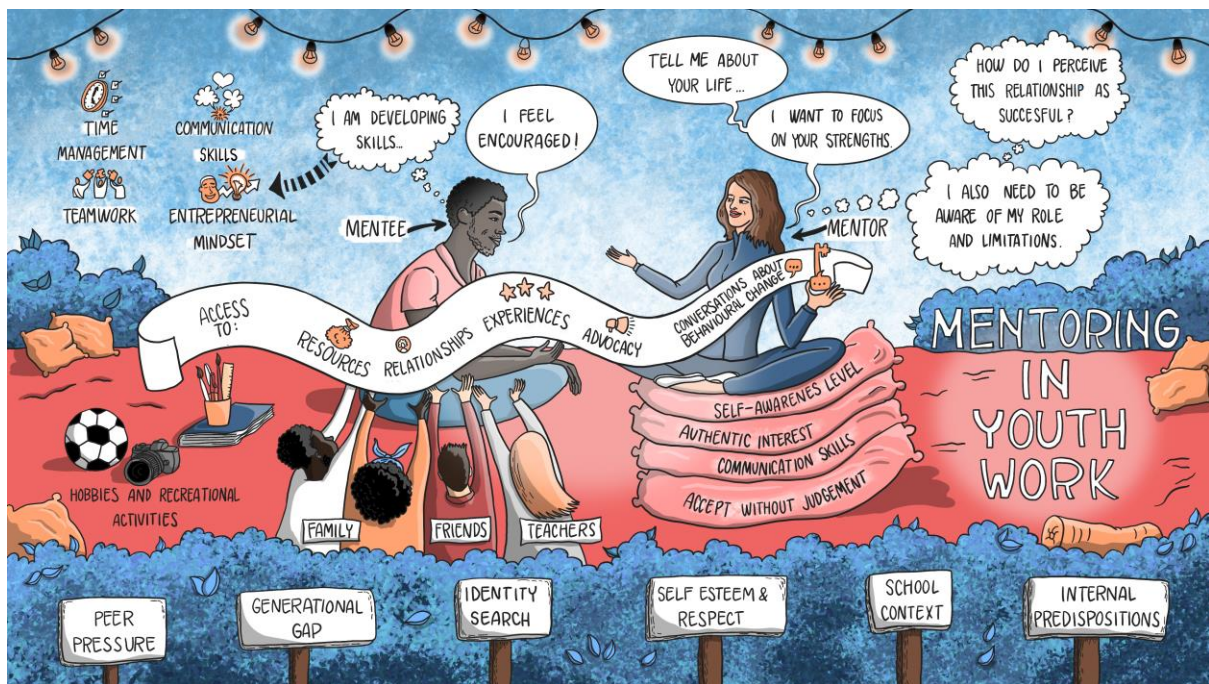
As mentors usually have genuine wish to support other people, their own presence in a mentee's life is a positive example for mentees as it shows them that there are people who want to help them without asking for anything in return. It is also an example of socially responsible behaviours, and it makes mentees to reconsider their own potentials for solidarity.

Mentors are usually more experienced in terms of coping with different life challenges, and their openness and guidance can help mentees to improve their own personal relationships as well as skill levels. Mentoring, and especially the formal mentoring programs for socially excluded youth can play important role in developing their competences and transforming young people's attitudes, values, behaviours and beliefs so that they acquire 'employability' (Colley, 2003). Holistic approach in career guidance combined with unique mentoring connection can help young people to tackle vocational barriers and enter labour market with more confidence and better insight into their skill requirements. If mutual commitment is present, mentees can develop a set of different transferable skills as time management, communication skills, teamwork and entrepreneurial mindset.

Mentors' professional experience and their own social capital can be beneficial for mentees to expand their personal networks, and to use external opportunities related to their life goals.

In conclusion, mentoring can empower mentees in terms of all those skills necessary in a labour market – personal skills, professional skills, as well as leadership development

(mentees learn the meaning of sacrifice, responsibility and accountability, showcasing integrity and developing trust, inspiring others to do good, putting others' needs in front of your own, paving the way so others can succeed, not giving up, and so on).



What are the dos and don'ts in mentoring?

There are several underlying principles of good mentoring. Firstly, a good relationship is the one which cures. No methods, techniques or interventions can substitute the power of authentic and supportive relationships. Growth and recovery take place in relationships with people who are committed, persistent, dedicated and have the needed skills. Mentors cannot change or erase previous negative experiences but they can offer corrective experience of close and supportive relationships and they can enrich mentees' lives by giving them the opportunity to experience the world as a different and a more beautiful place. However, mentees should not be overprotected. Mentor and mentee should agree on clear boundaries and define follow-up steps in case one of them breaks the mutual agreement (Bruce and Bridgeland, 2014). Mentors should keep in mind that the **mentee is the focus of the relationship**. At the beginning, the mentor should make the needs assessment, and define work areas together with the mentee. It is important to respect mentees' individuality, and mentors shouldn't impose their own values.

Secondly, **the mentee's behaviour should always be perceived in the context** of the specific development phase as well as previous experiences and current circumstances, and not analysed as an isolated case. In order to prevent „pathologizing“ of mentee's behaviours and powerless feelings in front of them, formal mentoring programs offer mentors continuous trainings and are learning more on how to understand a mentee, emotions and reasons for specific behaviours, so that they could adjust their expectations from the mentee.

The focus of the relationship should be on the strengths, and not the risks. The children and young people who are given mentors as part of the intervention tools are much more than their difficulties and hard experiences they've lived. It is important to respect the reality and the context which a young person brings but the focus of mentor-mentee relationship should be on the present, recognition, and empowerment of potentials. Mentors see beyond „hard

family story “. They see a person who has needs just like everyone else, a person who wants to be accepted, loved and protected. This approach enables them to grow, learn, have fun and live life to its fullest. The most significant supporting habit in the mentor-mentee relationship is the acceptance of the mentee, with all their insecurities and potentials.

Mentors should be realistic in terms of their expectations from a mentor-mentee relationship. Sometimes the change is not visible or communication issues occur, and usually mentors feel as a failure. The first step in overcoming this feeling as a mentor is asking: „*How do I perceive a successful mentor-mentee relationship?*” Sometimes, the biggest success is not quitting despite the lack of “visible“ changes. This is the moment when true acceptance takes place, and that is the most valuable and needed breakthrough. Paradoxically, this is the moment when some changes occur, as mentee feels safe and confident to step out towards new experiences.

Often, mentors get overwhelmed by their experiences with mentees which can affect their motivation and lead them to quit the project. That’s why mentors should always be reminded to put their focus on the things *they can* do in their relationship with a mentee (and not on the things which others can or should do).

Mentors should always be aware of their role and know the power and limitations of helpers’ relationships. The relationship between mentors and mentees is not equal in terms of identical responsibilities as mentors are expected to be the wise ones and to take an initiative in relationship development with a mentee.

Finally, **mentor is not responsible for the mentee's behaviour and has no control over it.** They are however responsible for communication, time and the content offered to a mentee as well as for his/her own reactions while having the role of a mentor.

Structured mentoring programs should enable mentors to develop their own mentoring skills, to overcome their fears and to learn more about setting the healthy boundaries, while at the same time keeping the empathy and enthusiasm needed for work with children and youth.

Added value of mentoring

Besides for the benefits for the mentee, mentoring also indirectly promotes integration into the community. The mentor-mentee relationship is the relationship that brings a lot of potential, and it can help a young person develop a positive image of themselves and others. Along with that, mentees are given emotional support in coping with daily challenges as well as encouragement with academic tasks. This kind of relationship enables development of practical skills and entails constructive use of leisure time. However, a mentoring relationship is only one of the components of mentoring programs which also offer structural activities and training that help young people to further develop their life skills. When a mentee establishes a safe and reliable relationship with a mentor, he or she is much more prepared to explore their surroundings and to connect with other children and volunteers, thus expanding their social network. This leads to better integration into society.

Mentoring can help children and youth to overcome different developmental and environmental challenges. According to research about the importance of mentoring programs (Cavell, DuBois, Karcher, Keller & Rhodes, 2009), it was shown that long term mentor-mentee connection contributes to social-emotional child development, cognitive development, identity

development and improvement in other social networks. Children at risk who were exposed to long term mentoring support had lower high school drop-out rate, had healthier interpersonal relations and positive life choices and school attitudes, in comparison to children at risk who had no long-term mentoring support. They've also shown improvement in self-respect and self-confidence, have better relationships with parents, teachers and peers, as well as fewer behavioural problems in school and family.

In addition, mentoring relationships have more positive impacts for mentors themselves. Mentoring contributes to higher self-respect, greater sense of achievement, more social networks, insight and better understanding of developmental phases, more patience and improved professional skills.

Developing mentoring support systems

Formal mentoring (prevention oriented) programs should be professional and adjusted to the context, have intersectoral and multidisciplinary approach, be based on healthy interpersonal relationship, encourage development of life skills, promote healthy lifestyles and positive alternatives in free time, be adjusted to youth needs, have regular evaluations and monitoring, as well as long term perspectives and strategies.

These kinds of programs have the potential to help mentees with adverse childhood experiences that label them as dysfunctional. The authentic mentoring relationship can meet mentees' three basic psychological needs. It is the relationship where a mentee feels connected, autonomous and free, as well as competent as a result of constructive feedback. All that makes children and youth strive to be the best versions of themselves and supports their transition towards autonomy and economic independence.

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Melvisa completed her academic journey at the Faculty of Philosophy, University of Sarajevo, where she focused on Psychology as her area of specialization. Her interests include youth work, human resource management, educational psychology, and counselling. Throughout her professional career, Melvisa has primarily been involved in projects and initiatives centered around addiction prevention, particularly among the youth population. Notably, she has taken on the role of project coordinator, working extensively with children from disadvantaged backgrounds. These initiatives aimed to enhance their social and emotional skills, equipping them with the necessary tools to effectively navigate challenges and cultivate resilience.

Currently, Melvisa is Program Manager at Bosnia and Herzegovina Futures Foundation. This organization is devoted to the empowerment and advancement of young individuals. In her capacity as Program Manager, Melvisa assumes the responsibility of developing programs focused on augmenting leadership and professional skills among youth.

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