

Me and my befriender: exploring adult/child befriending relationships



www.crfr.ac.uk

Centre for Research on Families and Relationships • Briefing 60 • May 2012

References

Grossman, J B and Rhode, J E (2002) 'The test of time: Predictors and effects of duration in youth mentoring relationships' *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 30 (2): 199-219.

Phillip, K, and Spratt, J (2007) *A synthesis of published research on mentoring and befriending for The Mentoring and Befriending Foundation*. University of Aberdeen: The Rowan Group.

Authors

This briefing was written by Sue Milne and edited by Kirsten Thomlinson, CRFR. It is based on a project funded by the Economic and Social Research Council led by Dr Sue Milne, Research Fellow at the Centre for Research on Families and Relationships (CRFR).

Two further briefing papers will be available from June 2012:

About my befriender: children speak about their adult-child befriending relationships.
More male befrienders wanted for children: why we want more male befrienders for boys, and for girls.



For further information about Befriending Networks go to www.befriending.co.uk

contact crfr

For a full list of Research Briefings visit our website www.crfr.ac.uk

Centre for Research on Families and Relationships
The University of Edinburgh,
23 Buccleuch Place, Edinburgh EH8 9LN

Tel: 0131 651 1832
Fax: 0131 651 1833
E-mail: crfr@ed.ac.uk

A consortium of the Universities of Aberdeen, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Glasgow Caledonian, Highlands and Islands and Stirling.

Me and my befriender: exploring adult/child befriending relationships

Organised befriending provides supportive, reliable relationships through volunteers to people who would otherwise be socially isolated. In the UK, for example, befriending projects provide services to a range of people at risk of social isolation including those with mental ill-health, people with disabilities, older people, refugees, families and children. In children's projects, befrienders generally meet with individual children (occasionally siblings groups) on a weekly basis and engage them in leisure activities.

In the UK befriending projects are generally small charities operating on a year by year basis, with few staff and shoestring budgets. Many projects are affiliated to umbrella organisations such as befriending networks.

The study

The 'Me and My Befriender' study gathered details of the experiences of 26 children attending nine befriending projects in Scotland and England. The study wanted to understand how children viewed the befriending relationship. The 26 children (17 boys and 9 girls), were aged 6-15 years and came from a range of ethnic backgrounds. The children participated in a series of interviews, using activity and face photo-cards to aid discussion. The study was interested in the children views at various stages in the befriending relationships; 17 children were interviewed prior to them knowing who their befriender might be. Some 10 of these children were interviewed a second time, after meeting their befriender. The remaining 9 children had more long-term relationships with their befrienders. In addition, interviews were conducted with 18 lone mothers/female carers and 3 lone fathers and with project managers in each of the befriending projects. All names are pseudonyms.

Information from Befriending Networks indicates that 75% of the children referred to the projects are from lone parent families, mostly from families with a lone mother. Less than 25% of the befrienders are men. There is a concern about this situation because some projects believe that individual boys would benefit from the support of a male befriender, particular given the absence of a father in their household.

Key points

- Befrienders make a very valuable contribution to the lives of children living in difficult circumstances not only through engaging in activities with them but by listening and providing emotional support
- Younger children recognise the benefits of having an adult as a befriender to take them out places they couldn't normally go with friends or peers
- Older children can, and do, form 'natural', friendships with their adult befrienders
- Girls and boys both talk about gender differences but are willing to participate in a range of activities regardless of the gender of their befriender
- It is important for boys and girls to have opportunities for contact with both men and women
- Boys with a strong sense of a conventional male identity want a male befriender
- A rule of no physical contact between a befriender and a child can not be maintained for all the activities a child may wish to undertake
- Having group activities in addition to one-one befriending contacts is beneficial for some children
- Longer matches are more beneficial for children
- Projects should consider whether their aims are to manage adult-child befriending relationships for a particular period of time or to help establish friendships for life

The befriender role

Children see the befriender role in different ways and this may depend on the aims of the individual projects and how the idea of having a befriender is presented to them. These include:

- To give their parent some rest
- To provide them with emotional support if they have problems or worries
- To provide them with social support, boosting their confidence and especially encouraging them to get out of the house
- To help with their learning including increasing their confidence
- To help reduce their stress by taking them out and having fun

It's someone who takes you out...like bowling...so you have lots of fun...I could go to places where my mum doesn't know...they can look after you when you're there and they'll be kind to you. (Heather)

Research findings

The contribution of befrienders to children's lives

The children in this study faced a range of difficult circumstances: domestic abuse; child sexual abuse; parental drug problems and/or prison sentences; learning or behavioural difficulties; a sibling with a disability; or the death of one or both parents. They expressed a range of emotional responses to the benefits of spending time with their befrienders including feeling happier, having their confidence boosted and participating in new experiences:

It's good, yeah, because it's somebody to talk to when you're feeling down, and you can have lots of fun with them... So then it stops me being angry or being bored... it's good for me to have a befriender because it might help me to get on with my life and think more about the good things I had than the bad... I think I feel a lot more happy and more cheerful when I come in the house after being with my befriender. (Angus)

It really has boosted my confidence...I've went out and I've done stuff that I wouldn't have done, like horse riding and stuff like that, I wouldn't have thought of doing that before...my experience and going out and doing stuff, and just learning to talk to people about stuff...I don't know what I would do if I didn't have one. (Eilish)

Befriending as a child-adult relationship

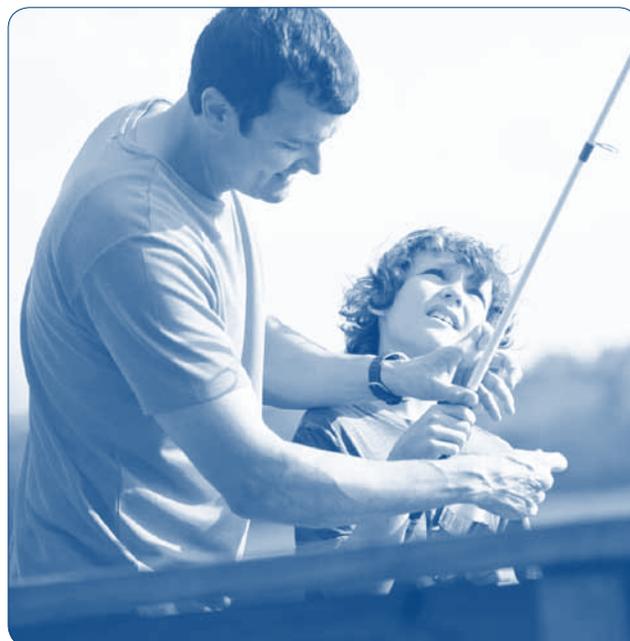
Projects differ in their aims but all are clear that natural friendships are based on choice whereas befriending relationships are created and managed. They were also clear that there is an adult-child boundary:

It's a grown-up and a child... it is different from friendship. When you have an adult and a child there is a guidance element to it. They act as a role model for the children and they recognise always that they are the adult in the relationship.

(Project Q)

The younger children also recognised this boundary and their dependence on adults. They saw this status imbalance as an advantage as adults with money and transport enable them to take part in activities they would otherwise be unable to do. Older children, who had been meeting with their befrienders for over a year, described their befriending relationships in terms of being like a big brother or as a friend rather than one between a child and an adult. Eilish's befriender is in her 40s:

We get on, I treat her like a friend...she texts me, I text her, so, it's not different really...I speak to her in the same way I speak to my friends. (Eilish)



Gender

Most projects seek to match boys with male befriender, despite the greater proportion of female volunteers, and for some boys, such as Andrew this is preferable: No offence to any of the girls that I hang around with but I just like prefer to be with guys. (Andrew)

Andrew emphasised the masculine nature of the interests he shared with his befriender such as horror films, which he did not think that a female befriender would like. He also suggested that he and his male befriender would be more able to help each other if they crashed whilst they were out on go-karts.

Whilst Hamish was happy to have a female befriender he did think that if he had a male it would be different:

No, no, no, it's not better than a man... It would make a difference, like, if a man takes you out somewhere, it would be more often people, more often places. Like, going to play basket ball or going to a football tournament. (Hamish)

Both girls and boys were aware of gender distinctions, and talked about the differences in having a male or female befriender. Most of the children were willing to put gender differences to one side and participate in a range of activities with their befriender, including spending time talking:

She's a good befriender, very good. She's nice. She makes me happy when I'm sad. (Bruce)

Cameron, who lives with his father and brothers and has little female contact, says that it is important to have contact with both men and women: "Well, I'd really like it if I'd got a female...because I feel like I can get more along with a female. I feel like you need to have like both sexes".

However, whilst some boys are happy to be matched with a female befriender, a girl is very unlikely to be matched with a man despite a view that girls from lone mother families might benefit from contact with male befriender. The reasons given were 'societal' disapproval and a lack of male befrienders, however, matching a child with a male/female couple could provide a way forward.

Contact between adult befrienders and children

Projects have a range of rules governing the type of contact that befrienders can have with the children they are matched with. There is great variation with some suggesting that befrienders:

- Do not share personal information with the child or their family
- Do not allow children to visit their home
- Consult the project on the type of activities they want to undertake
- Discourage physical contact with children

However, there are projects where spending time at a befriender's home is seen as an essential normalising aspect of the befriending relationship. Some projects also allow occasional overnight stays:

It is not about the treats...the main focus is on the friendship and the support, but occasionally people do go out, but there's a lot of befrienders where it is to do with going for a walk...or a hobby.

(Project member)

Many of the children were keen to undertake adventurous activities, such as cycling, with their befrienders and many looked forward to the prospect of the adult volunteers participating in the activities with them. Some children also appeared to be seeking physical affection in terms of having a cuddle. Although this is discouraged it is difficult to see how Ailsa would have developed her swimming confidence without her male befriender supporting her in the water: "When I do swimming I try to, you know when you swim forward, I sometimes sink. So I need someone to hold me and he lets go and then I go. I never sink".

Group activities

Some of the projects organise group activities for the befrienders and children and sometimes families, to get together. Others have a project room where the befrienders can bring the children to do activities, often with other befrienders and children present. Hamish emphasised his enjoyment of doing activities at the befriending project and the contacts he made with other children, their befrienders and project staff: 'all of them feels like my family'.

Duration and endings

Previous research suggests that befriending relationships that last a year or more were the most successful (Grossman and

Rhodes 2002). Phillip and Spratt (2007) state that research in the USA suggests the possibility of a negative impact if the relationship is less than 6 months, especially for young people who have many adults in and out of their lives.

Whilst most of the projects in the study aim for matches to last at least a year and to end them at a time appropriate for the children they can be torn between balancing the maintenance of existing relationships and with matching new children.

There were reports from both befrienders and children of wanting to keep in contact and sometimes to continue meeting after the match has officially ended and is no longer within the framework of the project: "The best thing about the match ending is we're not under the rules, so we can do anything".

A different type of project?

In contrast to most of the projects in the study, the Big Buddy programme for boys in New Zealand aims to foster a relationship between a male big buddy and a little buddy, hopefully for life. The volunteer screening processes are intensive and include psychological assessments and telephone references from a female relative and a doctor. Whilst Big Buddy provides ongoing support to the match after an initial period they do not undertake close monitoring. Formulaic boundaries are viewed as impediments to the formation of relationships. The question could be raised as to whether children's befriending projects in the UK would like to help establish friendships for life, but feel that they are influenced by the nature of funding structures.

Practice/policy/research implications

- Befriending should be considered an essential service for children living in particularly difficult circumstances
- Projects should consider the possibility of running group activities in addition to one-to-one matches
- The yearly cycle of funding makes it very difficult for projects to develop long-term befriending strategies
- The recruitment of more men would meet the preferences of more boys and enable consideration to be given to matching girls with male volunteers
- Projects should consider ways of enabling befriending relationships to continue beyond the time-limited period of providing their package of formal support