

Title: *Relations Matter – Dilemmas in Mentoring Youth in Foster Care*

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Number of participants: 9

Starting questions:

In Denmark there are around 11.000 children, who are placed in foster care. National studies show that many of these children, despite being moved away from a toxic environment, have a very high risk to not succeed in life. Studies show that long-term mentoring can have a positive impact on the emotional wellbeing, the academic achievements and the social behaviour of foster children.

How do we train mentors to be able to build a long-term relationship with the foster child, for at least 18 months and ideally six years? How do we monitor the mentors, so the relations do not end and still respect the fact that they are acting as volunteers?

Sequence of content:

The speakers introduced the programme “Learn for Life”, which consists of Learning Camps and a mentoring programme: The children in the programme are between 8 and 13 years old when they are enrolled. Learn for Life has an overall aim to strengthen foster children’s learning and improve their life skills. The programme collaborates with 41 Danish municipalities and has supported nearly four hundred children in foster care. Dilemmas were presented as questions and discussed with the group.

Three main arguments presented by the facilitator:

- 1) Foster children feel ashamed about their private situation, it is important to increase their self-esteem by showing them: “We are all the same”.
- 2) As many foster children might not have strong boundaries, building up relationships is especially important. It works by making a long-term commitment for a minimum of 18 months.
- 3) Mentor and mentee should work together as equals. It is important that the mentor doesn’t consider the mentee as a victim.

Three main points of discussion:

- 1) Healthy boundaries are very important in the mentoring relationship, but it is a question of how much information and coaching should be provided in the training of the mentor because he/she has to be himself/herself.
- 2) Positively tested possibilities to monitor mentors are perspectives and feedback of third persons, focus groups, interviews and rules which are signed by the mentor.
- 3) On the one hand, mentors have to be aware of the importance of long-term mentoring and regular commitment. On the other hand, they have to be aware of the expectations a child might have when they commit intensively – when you celebrate Christmas one time with your mentee he or she might expect it to happen every year.

Main statements highlighting the results of the discussion:

“It is hard for a mentor to evaluate himself.”

“We have to take the children seriously in terms of their perspective.”

“With the help of the mentor, mentees should be able to fully use their potential and talents.”

One thing that was laughed about:

“What could we conclude about mentoring? I think we could conclude, there is no easy way.”