



# INSIGHTS & EVIDENCE

## POSITIONING MENTORS AS SOCIAL CAPITAL BUILDERS

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**Funding.** This project was supported by Award No. 15PNIJ-22-GG-01424-MENT, awarded by the National Institute of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice. The opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department of Justice.

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**Suggested Citation:** Boat, A. A., Van Steenis, E., & Poparad, H. (2024). Positioning Mentors as Social Capital Builders [Insights & Evidence Series]. Search Institute.



# INTRODUCTION

When young people are surrounded by a web of supportive relationships that provide access to opportunities and resources they are better supported to reach their education, career, and life goals. This web of support is known as *social capital*. Search Institute defines social capital as the resources that arise from a web of developmental relationships, which youth can access and use to pursue their goals (Scales et al., 2020).

Youth mentoring programs have the potential to support youth social capital by providing access to caring, adult mentors. Mentors are well-positioned to support and empower youth to strengthen their social capital by helping youth recognize their sparks or deep interests and passions, providing guidance and skill development, and opening doors to new possibilities and connections.

To better understand how mentors can support youth social capital development, the Positioning Mentors as Social Capital Builder's project launched in January 2023. With support from the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention and in partnership with Big Brothers Big Sisters of America, the purpose of this study is to (1) unpack the ways mentors and youth build strong relationships with each other especially across lines of racial-ethnic identity differences, (2) gain insight into the ways mentors support youth's social capital development, and (3) create and test the effectiveness of a mentor-focused toolkit, known as the SoCAP Builder's Toolkit, to further strengthen and support mentors efforts to support youth social capital.

As an applied research organization, we are committed to sharing insights as they emerge from our research. Through this brief report we showcase key findings that transpired from the first phase of the Positioning Mentors as Social Capital Builders project. This brief is organized to provide a descriptive snapshot of youth's and mentor's experiences of social capital within our three Big Brothers Big Sisters agency partner sites.





# METHODOLOGY

Data come from Littles (i.e., mentees) and Bigs (i.e., mentors) from three Big Brothers Big Sisters (BBBS) agency partners: BBBS Los Angeles, BBBS South Texas, and BBBS Twin Cities. In the first phase of the Positioning Mentors as Social Capital Builder's Project, both youth and mentors were invited to participate in separate 60-minute focus groups or 1:1 interviews across all partner sites. Youth and mentors were also invited to take a voluntary and anonymous 10-15-minute survey between March 2023 - December 2023. Findings from both focus groups/interviews and surveys were merged and used to produce a more complete understanding of how mentoring relationships support youth social capital.

# PARTICIPANTS

Survey data include perspectives from 123 youth and 129 mentors across the three BBBS agency partners. Eleven mentors and 16 youth participated in focus groups or 1:1 interviews.

Youth ranged from 13-18 years (average age - 16.5). Over half of youth are female (57%), 40% male, and 3% non-binary. Over a third of youth are Black/African American (37%), 26% Hispanic or Latino/a/x, 24% Multiracial, 12% White, and 1% Native American/American Indian. On average, mentors reported being matched with a Little (youth) for 1-2 years. The majority of mentors also reported meeting or talking with their Little several times a month (72%). Over half of mentors are female (63%), 35% male, and 2% non-binary. Most mentors are White (64%), 13% Black/African American, 11% Hispanic or Latino/a/x, 7% Multiracial, 4% Asian, and 1% identified as another race/ethnicity.

## TERMINOLOGY

Our Big Brothers Big Sisters agency partners refer to youth in the program as Littles and adult mentors as Bigs. This report most often refers to these program participants as youth and mentors.





# **Strong *Developmental* Mentoring Relationships**

High-quality relationships are foundational to youth social capital. Therefore, one way mentors can support a young person's social capital is forming a strong and meaningful relationship also known as a developmental relationship. Developmental relationships are close connections through which youth discover who they are, develop new skills, and learn how to contribute to the world around them.

Mentors can engage in actions and practices that align with five critical elements that make up this transformational relationship: Express Care (show youth they matter), Challenge Growth (challenge youth to be their best), Provide Support (help youth accomplish goals and tasks), Share Power (listen to youth and take their ideas seriously), and Expand Possibilities (connect youth with new experiences and opportunities).

# YOUTH AND MENTORS BOTH EXPERIENCE STRONG DEVELOPMENTAL RELATIONSHIPS, BUT SOMETIMES SEE THE RELATIONSHIP DIFFERENTLY

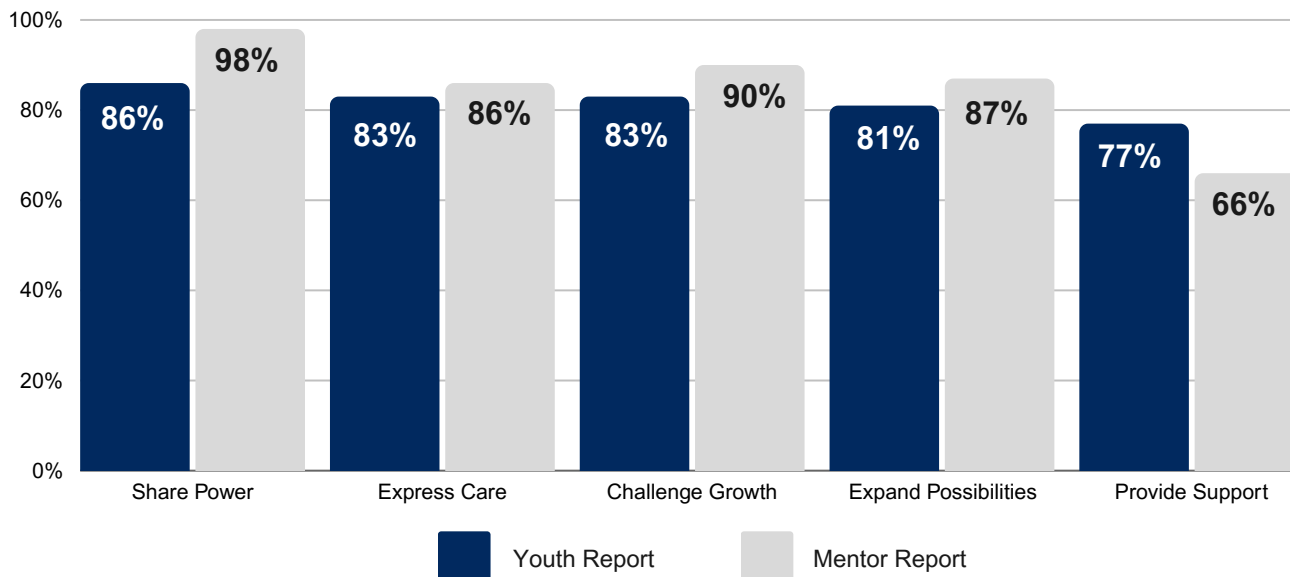


The chart below shows youth report on whether they receive the five elements from their mentors and mentor report on whether they provide each element to their Little. A high percentage of youth (77% - 86%) report that they *often* or *almost always* experience each of the five elements of a developmental relationship with their mentor. A slightly higher percentage of mentors (87% - 98%) report that they *often/almost always* provide each of these elements to youth. The only exception is providing support, where a smaller percentage of mentors (66%) report *often/almost always* on this element relative to 77% of youth who report they *often/almost always* receive this element from their mentor.

**Interviewer:** "How would you describe your relationship with your Big?"

**Youth:** "I would describe it as like a tour guide, showing new places, new opportunities, while also having a bit of fun on the way."

- Little of BBBS LA







## WHAT STRONG MENTORING RELATIONSHIPS LOOK LIKE IN PRACTICE

To learn about the qualities of a strong developmental mentoring relationship, we asked Bigs and Littles at each of the three BBBS partner sites to share what a positive mentoring relationship looks like. In addition to the five elements of a developmental relationship, these conversations revealed four actions that both Bigs and Littles take to form strong relationships with each other:

### **Holding Each Other in High Esteem**

Some Bigs speak very highly of and share positive stories about their Little with other important people in their lives. Littles shared that this made them feel good about themselves. A Little of BBBS of LA explained, *“I know it’s going well with how we think about each other. Because she tells me she talks about me to her coworkers and her family. And she talks really good about me, which I’m like, ‘Wait, I didn’t see myself like that before.’”* When Bigs share positive stories about their Little, they demonstrate that their Little matters to them even when they’re not spending time together.

### **Providing Comfort and Safety**

A sense of comfort and safety reassures Littles that they have a caring adult who can support them. A Little of BBBS of LA shared, *“I feel really comfortable talking to my mentor, which normally I don’t feel comfortable talking to people just like that... I feel like I can really open up to her about the struggles that I’m going through.”* Bigs valued being a safe person for their Little, as that sense of safety allowed for open communication in the relationship.

***“I think the biggest thing for me is keeping the trust with him. Because the more I can build that trust with him, the more open he is to sharing things that are going on in his life.”***

**– Shared by Big of BBBS South Texas**



## Being Accepting and Non-Judgmental

A key way that Bigs provide comfort and safety to their Little is by accepting them for who they are. Bigs emphasized their appreciation for the personal conversations they have with their Littles, and showed that approaching these conversations with acceptance and non-judgment nurtures a sense of intimacy that allows Littles to open up about the challenges in their lives. A Big of BBBS Twin Cities explains, *“it’s helpful to have that other person who is going to make space for that conversation... lets them actually talk about it, and not be judged for it, but still be told, ‘From my perspective, this is maybe where you really misstepped here.’”* In this way, Bigs can balance being a caring person, while maintaining high expectations and lovingly challenging their Little’s growth.

## Sharing Personal Lives

Bigs and Littles frequently described how they connected by keeping each other updated about what was going on in their lives. Through these conversations, Bigs learn about their Little’s sparks and goals, which informs their decisions about how to expand their Little’s possibilities by introducing them to valuable resources and opportunities. In fact, making these connections is one way that Bigs can show Littles that they pay attention and want to support their Little.

***“When I tell her like, ‘Oh yeah, I’m thinking about applying here or applying there for colleges,’ she looks into them herself and looks at resources and things that they have and I’m like, ‘Whoa, she cares. Thank you.’”***

**– Shared by Little of BBBS LA**

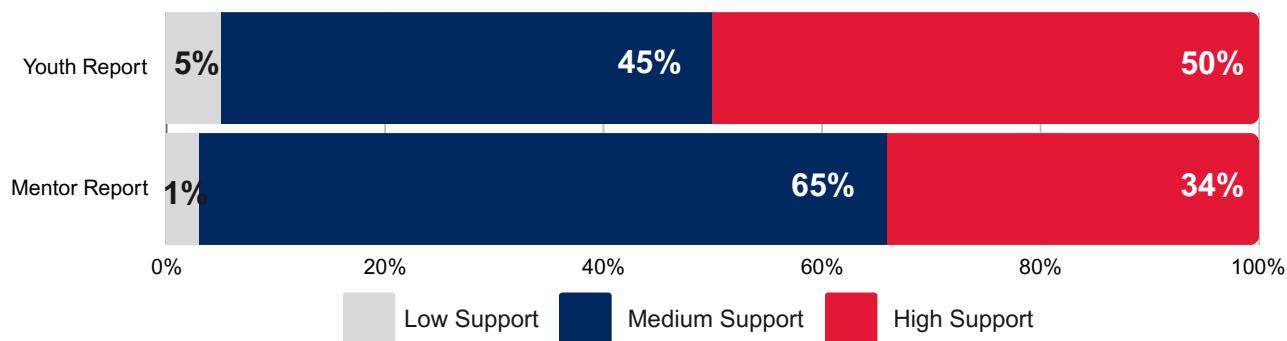


# BUILDING STRONG MENTORING RELATIONSHIPS ACROSS LINES OF RACIAL-ETHNIC DIFFERENCES



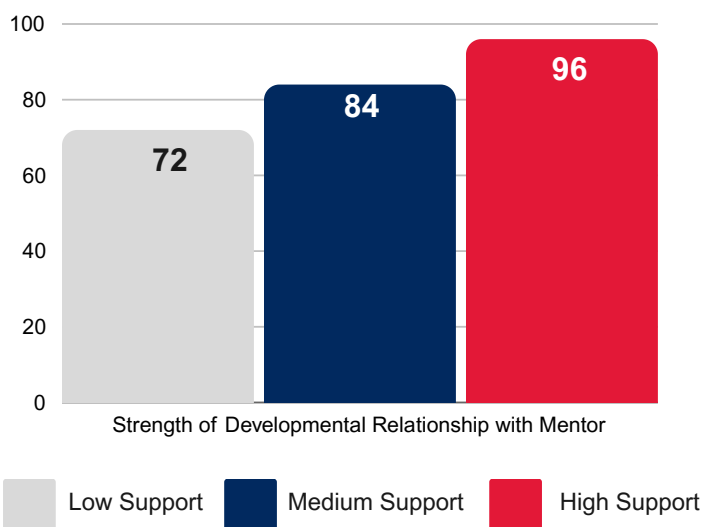
Relationship building among youth and their mentors might look different or have unique considerations across lines of difference including when they come from different cultural or racial-ethnic backgrounds. Past research has suggested that pairing youth and mentors based on shared racial-ethnic and cultural identity can support high-quality mentoring connections from forming (Raposa et al., 2019; Sánchez & Colón, 2005). Matches that include youth and mentors of the same cultural and racial-ethnic backgrounds can be difficult to assign within formal mentoring programs, as the majority of volunteer mentors identify as White adults (Raposa et al., 2017), which may not align with the racial-ethnic and cultural identity of their mentee.

Mentors can play an important role in supporting youth racial-ethnic and cultural identity development, however, which can promote a developmentally strong relationship across lines of racial-ethnic and cultural differences.



Mentor support for youth racial-ethnic and cultural identity was broken down into three categories: low (not at all or a little like my mentor/me), medium (sometimes or mostly like my mentor/me), and high (extremely like my mentor/me). Findings show that a greater percentage of youth report receiving high levels of support for their racial-ethnic and cultural identity development than mentors report providing to youth.

## MENTORS PROVIDING HIGH LEVELS OF SUPPORT FOR YOUTH RACIAL-ETHNIC IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT MATTERS



Findings show that youth who report receiving higher levels of support from their mentors for their racial-ethnic and cultural identity tend to also report significantly stronger developmental relationships with their mentor (on a scale of 0 - 100) relative to youth who report receiving low or medium levels of support.

Moreover, youth who report this higher level of support from their mentors also report a stronger sense of cultural and racial-ethnic identity relative to youth reporting lower levels of support from their mentors.

***"I don't think [our racial difference has] been a barrier. I think it's more been a cultural opportunity for both of us, but it's always something where I have to remind myself that our backgrounds are different."***

**- Shared by Big of BBBS Twin Cities**



# HOW MENTORS CAN SUPPORT YOUTH RACIAL-ETHNIC IDENTITY



To better understand how matches connect across lines of racial-ethnic differences, we asked Bigs and Littles to describe how their racial-ethnic identities show up and impact their relationship. In cases where Bigs and Littles were matched with someone of a different racial-ethnic background, we asked whether their differences add value to the relationship. From these conversations, four ways that mentors build strong relationships across lines of racial-ethnic and cultural differences emerged:

## Helping Littles Explore and Celebrate their Identity

Ways that Bigs supported Littles in exploring and celebrating their identities ranged from small actions—such as encouraging their Little to give a compliment to a stranger whose hair she admired and resembled her own—to big actions, like helping their Little apply for a position to teach English in her mom’s birth country. When Bigs engage in these actions, they build their Little’s self-esteem and affirm their identity by endorsing that their culture is a valuable part of who they are.

***“I get to practice my Spanish with my mentor, which I think it’s really cool. It’s really comforting to be able to speak with my mentor in Spanish sometimes because we practice with each other, because she’s trying to learn it, and I’m trying to get the language back. I think that that’s really cool.”***

**- Shared by Little of BBBS LA**

## Practicing Cultural Awareness and Sensitivity

Having an awareness of their Little’s racial-ethnic identity can help Bigs better understand their Little’s lived experiences. A Little of BBBS of LA, whose bilingualism is an important element of her multi-cultural identity, shared that it can be challenging to connect with her Big who is not familiar with her home language: *“Now I have to make [more of an effort] to really explain myself completely, I guess.”* In contrast, a Big of BBBS of LA shared how her cultural awareness and sensitivity strengthens her connection to her Little: *“I’m half Mexican and... I grew up on critical race theory and all that stuff... Sometimes that knowledge is not as intuitive to other mentors or just to older White women, period. So that’s why I felt like I had a better relationship with [my Little] because we were able to relate more.”*



### **Finding Similarities in Differences**

Although matches frequently shared that their Big/Little is of a different racial-ethnic background, Bigs and Littles often emphasized their similarities over their differences, and described how their similarities bring them closer. A Big of BBBS of LA who identified as Mexican-American shared that she has one Little who is Guatemalan and one Little whose parents are from Ecuador and Laos, but expressed that they all connect over their Latin heritage. A Big of BBBS of South Texas, who is a European immigrant, described bonding over her Little's exposure to European culture since her Little has a European step-mom. Matches also described bonding over other characteristics that impact their identities, such as having immigrant parents or growing up in the same neighborhood. A Little of BBBS of Twin Cities who had a "different-but-similar" religious background to her Big explained, *"It was like I was able to relate, which was good because she was able to give me some advice... it just made me feel like I wasn't alone, like I wasn't the only person who's been through something similar to that situation."*

### **Staying Curious and Open-Minded**

When racial-ethnic differences became apparent, Bigs commonly shared that they ask questions to learn more about their Little's background. This strategy for developing cultural awareness not only helped Bigs understand their Little more deeply, but also broadened their understanding of how to support their Little's development. When a Big of BBBS of Twin Cities discovered that their Little does not celebrate Thanksgiving, they reflected:

***"I just asked him, 'Do you know why?' It is just good conversations for us to think about holistically... It's just his view is just different because I think he sees different people as those role models and figures. While they're different, it's more just positioning [myself] from a listening perspective... I think it's more of a cultural opportunity for both of us."***

**- Shared by Big of BBBS Twin Cities**

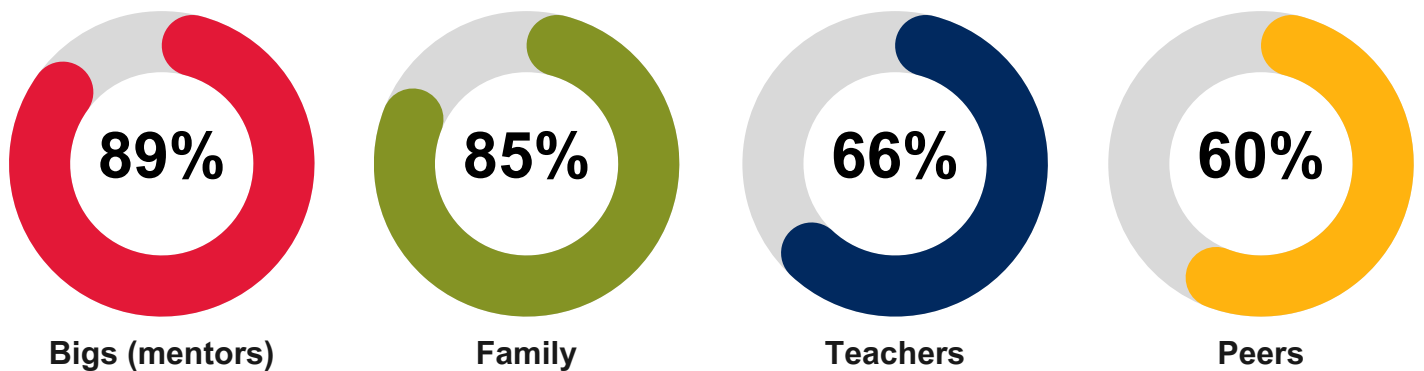


# CULTIVATING A WEB OF DEVELOPMENTAL RELATIONSHIPS



While having a high-quality relationship with a caring, adult mentor can be transformative to the wellbeing of young people, youth thrive when they are surrounded by a web of high-quality relationships. This can include many types of relationships including family members, peers, teachers, mentors, and many more. Mentors can also play an important role in nurturing and supporting youth to strengthen the connections they have within their web of support.

## Youth tend to report experiencing the strongest developmental relationship with their mentors

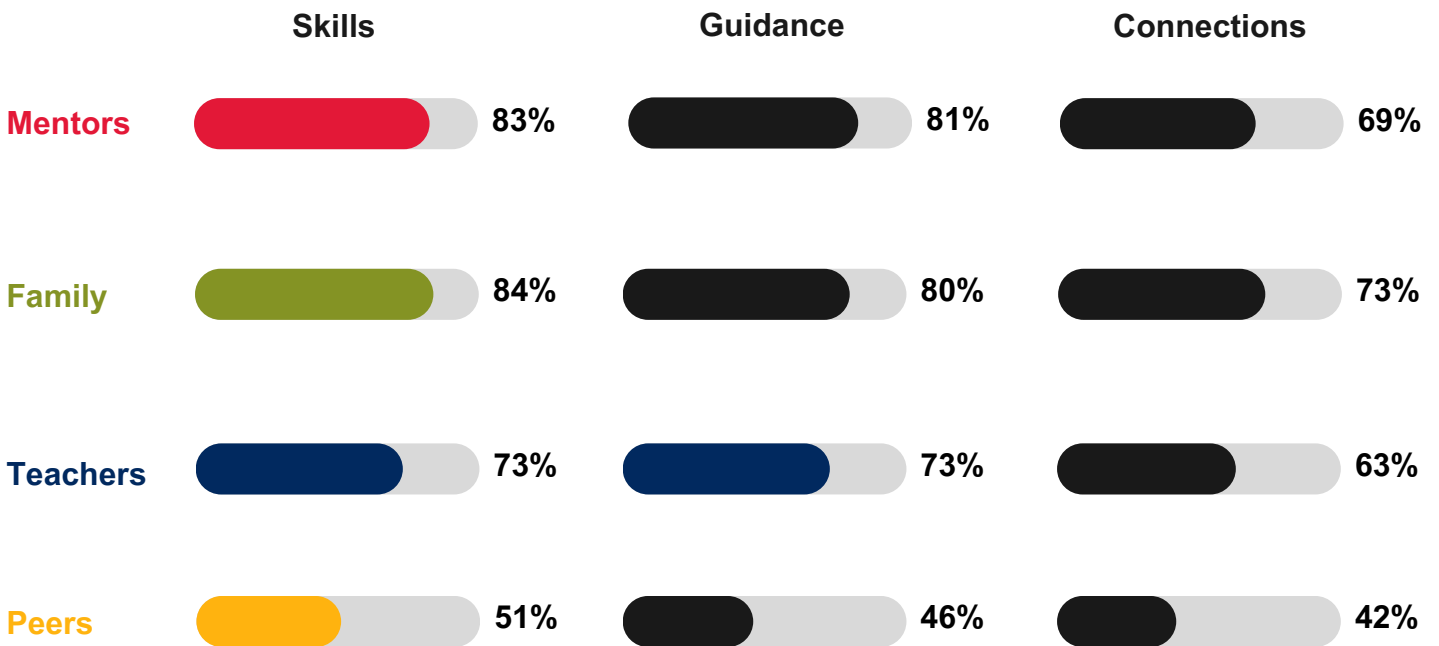


These charts show the percentage of youth who reported experiencing a strong developmental relationships with mentors, family, teachers and peers. Youth reported experiencing the strongest developmental relationships with their mentors followed by family members, teachers, and peers.

# A STRONG WEB OF SUPPORT CAN PROVIDE YOUTH WITH VALUABLE SUPPORTS AND RESOURCES

In addition to having a web of supportive relationships, youth also acquire valuable supports and resources through this web. Resources can include many things such as material or financial help, guidance and advice, opportunities to practice and build skills, and introductions to new people, places, and experiences. We asked youth about three specific types of resources that can help them pursue education and career goals: skill-building opportunities, useful guidance and information, and access to new connections.

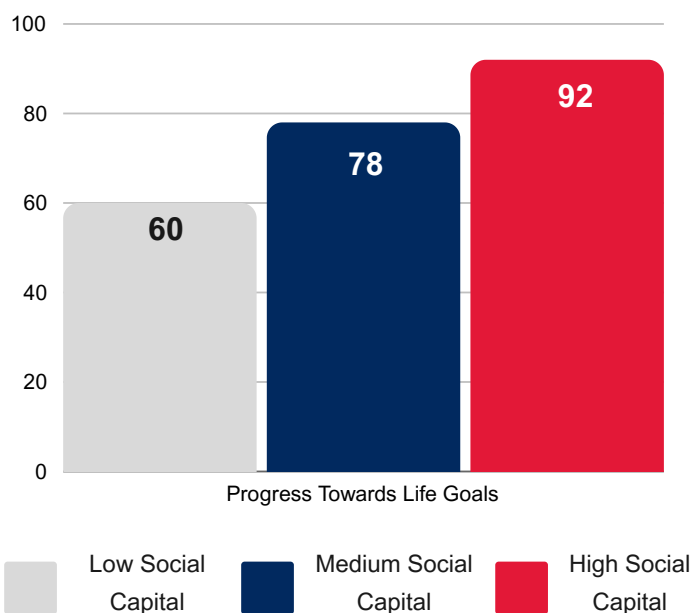
**Youth reported that people within their web of support tended to provide skill-building opportunities the most**



The chart shows the percentage of youth who report *often* or *almost always* receiving each of these resources from each relational target. Overall findings show that a higher percentage of youth report receiving these types of resources from their mentors and families followed by teachers and peers.



## SOCIAL CAPITAL CAN SUPPORT YOUTH PROGRESS TOWARDS LIFE GOALS



Social capital includes both the strength of youth's overall web of support (across all relational targets) and the resources and support acquired through this web.

This chart shows that youth with higher levels of social capital tend to report significantly greater progress towards their education and career goals (on a scale of 0 - 100) relative to youth who report low or medium levels of social capital.

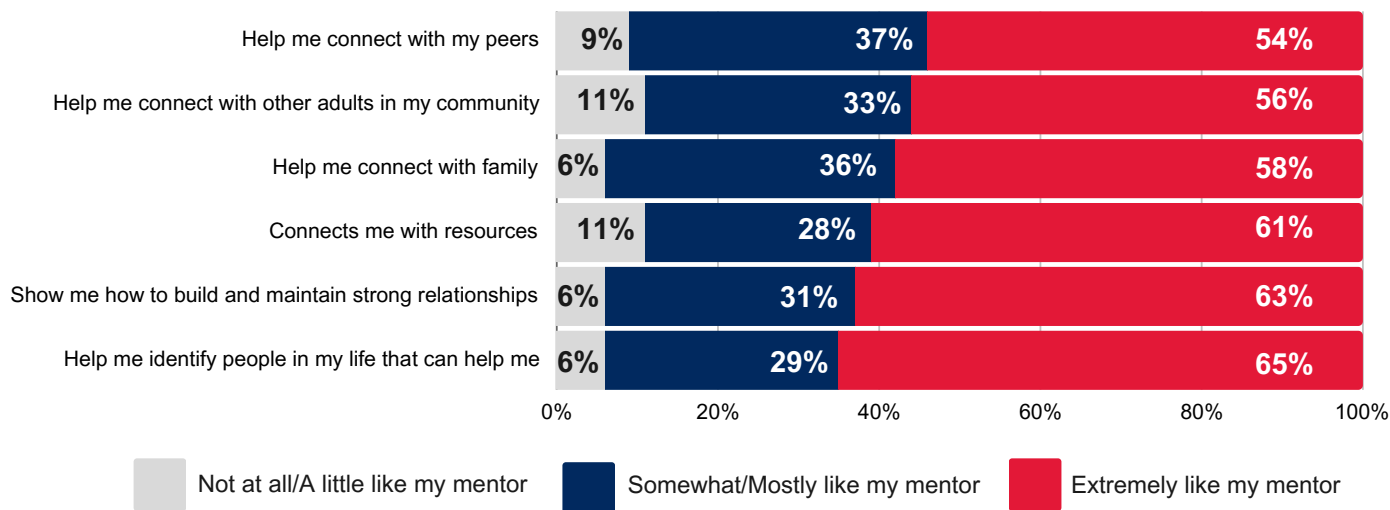
***“So that’s another thing I wanna do is take her, her mom, and maybe her uncle out to dinner. You know her dad, too, because like I said, it’s a village, you know. It’s not one person taking care of a child. It’s a lot of people that are involved.”***

**- Shared by Big of BBBS LA**



# HOW MENTORS CAN SUPPORT YOUTH SOCIAL CAPITAL DEVELOPMENT

Mentors can play a special role in the lives of youth by forging strong, developmental relationships, supporting young people’s racial/ethnic identity development, and by empowering youth to strengthen their connections within their web of support. Mentors can support young people’s social capital development by intentionally helping youth to connect with family members, peers, and other adults within their community.



This chart shows that youth tend to report that their mentors engage in practices that help support their social capital development. Youth reported that their mentors are most likely to help them identify people in their life that can help them and least likely to help them connect with their peers.





## HOW MENTORS CAN SUPPORT YOUTH SOCIAL CAPITAL DEVELOPMENT

To better understand the role mentors play in supporting youth social capital, we asked Bigs and Littles at each of the three BBBS partner sites to share how mentors support youth as they work towards specific goals. We asked about the forms of support, types of resources, and connections that mentors provided. Through these conversations, four core ways mentors support youth social capital development were identified: (1) building youth confidence; (2) providing opportunities to practice relational skills; (3) nurturing a web of support; and (4) championing connections and opportunities.

### **Building Youth Confidence**

Both Bigs and Littles alike discussed how youth gained confidence in themselves and in their abilities to pursue their goals. One Big discussed how it was important to instill this confidence in their Littles:

***“I think that I want them to feel, although they’re young that they have a voice, and they have a presence, and I want them, and especially being girls, you know, you want them to use their voice. So I try to instill in them that you have presence, you have confidence, what you have to say is worth something.”***

**– Shared by Big of BBBS LA**

Other mentors shared how they encouraged youth and at times pushed them out of their comfort zone to help them build greater confidence in themselves. For example, another Big from BBBS South Texas shared: *“We’re both introverts. So sometimes when we go to events and activities... It’s almost like she wants to use me as a shield, but just encouraging her... if we’re sitting at a table with another Little for example, [I] just kind of start conversations that I know that the two of them can carry on without my involvement... So I think for me it’s been more just encouraging her, but she can definitely do more than she thinks that she can do.”*

## Providing Opportunities to Practice Relational Skills

Bigs shared how they intentionally gave their Littles opportunities to practice their social and relational skills. One Big, for example, noticed that their Little was shy and had a challenging time communicating with people they did not know. This mentor went on to share:

***“... so even little things, like at a restaurant, [I told her to] ‘go ask them for a takeout container.’ And she responded, ‘I can’t do it on my own...’ ‘All right. I’ll go with you, but next time you can do it on your own.’ So just having that confidence to have a conversation with someone she doesn’t know. I think it’s nice to see her lighting up and realizing she can do it.”***

**– Shared by Big of BBBS Twin Cities**

The combination of greater confidence and opportunities to practice relational skills also contributed to youth feeling more comfortable asking for help from others within their webs of support. A Big from BBBS South Texas shared how this resulted in their Little feeling confident enough to reach out to their coach for help: *“She knows it’s okay to ask for help... one thing that I found a little bit surprising, pleasantly so, was that she had been texting the coach... asking him some questions... she didn’t ask her mom or me like, ‘hey, should I reach out?’ She just did it and that’s something that I don’t think she would have done two years ago.”*

## Nurturing the Web of Support

Bigs also supported their Littles to strengthen and nurture their relationships with the people already in the young person’s web of support including family members. Bigs shared how they coach and support their Littles when they experience conflicts with family and friends at school. A Big from BBBS of Twin Cities, for example, shared: *“We’ve definitely had conversations about how she can improve a relationship with her mom... when there’s different fights or when she’s getting grounded for misbehavior and things like that. So very much not taking sides, not taking her side or mom’s side, but just having a conversation about it and seeing like, ‘Oh, can you understand why she was upset about that? Tell me what you think.”*

Littles also shared how their Bigs have taken time to get to know their families and other people in their lives, which has supported positive relationship building. A little from BBBS LA shared how her mentor’s close relationship with her mom made her trust her more: *“I really like how my mom and her [referring to Big] have formed a sense of trust, so that makes me like my mentor more, because if my mom trusts her, then of course I have more faith in her...”*





## Championing New Connections and Opportunities

Bigs also supported youth social capital by teaching Littles about the importance of relationships and helping to facilitate new relationships and opportunities that can support youth as they work towards their goals. For example, one Big from BBBS of LA described it to their Little this way: *“I told her to not think of people as connections and more so as relationships, because I think some people think of networking and things like that as very transactional, and like, ‘here’s a business card, call me for a job,’ and it doesn’t need to be that way. Your community and relationships are the things that drive you in all aspects of life and when you are putting effort in and the other person is reciprocating that effort, that’s when you build a strong connection and that connection will end up helping you in the end, whether its’ a friend, as a mentor, as a potential job opportunity...”*

Bigs also helped connect their Littles to opportunities aligned with their goals and interests. One Big shared how they want to connect their Little with future opportunities aligned with their interest in cooking:

***“One thing that she’s really big on again is cooking... if you complete high school here you do have two years of public college that you can take for free and they do have a really good culinary school here. So getting her more aware, I think, of the options once she graduates from high school.”***

**- Shared by Big of BBBS South Texas**

Littles also shared how their Bigs would try to connect them with people and opportunities. A Little from BBBS of LA shared: *“I told her about what happens in my school, what I have coming up, any events or competitions I do. And so with that she helps me connect like, “if you’re really interested in this, I’ll help you meet with this person and that person.”*



## A MENTOR- FOCUSED SOCIAL CAPITAL TOOLKIT COMING SOON

Emerging findings from the Positioning Mentors as Social Capital Builder’s project reinforce and confirm that mentors can play a valuable role in supporting youth social capital development. Findings suggest that mentors who are able to form high-quality relationships that are characterized by the five elements of a developmental relationship and who are supportive of their mentee’s racial-ethnic and cultural identity development as well as young people’s ability to connect with others in their web of support are best positioned to support youth in strengthening their social capital. In turn, youth are able to leverage their social capital as they pursue their education, career, and life goals.

Informed by these learnings, we are co-designing a mentor-focused toolkit, known as the SoCAP Builder Toolkit alongside our BBBS agency partners. The goal of this toolkit will be to support mentors in intentionally and collaboratively working with youth to foster a positive mentoring relationship across lines of racial-ethnic differences and to promote youth social capital. The Toolkit will include a suite of activities and strategies for mentors to use as they build strong mentoring relationships with youth.

The toolkit will be pilot tested to better understand its value-add and impact on the lives of youth and will be further refined prior to disseminating more broadly.





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