



# RELATIONS MATTER

## Dilemmas in mentoring youth in foster care

*Presenters: Nathalie Kolbjørn Jensen, Program Assistant and Stine Hamburger, Program Manager in Learn for Life a learning initiative for foster children in Denmark.*

In Denmark there are around 11 000 children, who are placed in foster care due to problems linked to family dynamics and/or to the child's development or health. National studies show that many of these children, despite being moved away from a toxic environment, are in a much greater risk at not succeeding in life because the challenges they have faced during their upbringing has had a negative impact on their personal, social and educational development. This calls for an ongoing attention to evaluate methods used when working with this group of at-risk youth.

In 2013 *Learn for Life*, a six year long learning program with two overall interventions, were initiated. The interventions are Learning Camps and a mentor program. The children in the program 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. Today *Learn for Life* collaborates with 41 Danish municipalities that, through the last four years, have referred nearly four hundred children placed in foster care to the program. Almost as many volunteer mentors has been mobilized.

*Learn for Life's* mentor program is inspired by Jean Rhodes theoretical framework and by acknowledged research in the field that highlights the relationship between mentors and at-risk youth as the key component in successful mentoring. Furthermore it is inspired by the model from the book "*Stand by me*" is a cornerstone in building the right training of the mentors (<https://laerforlivet.dk/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/conceptual-model-of-youth-mentoring.jpg>). Areas from "*Elements Of Effective Practice For Mentoring*" are implemented, especially in the screening process with good success.

By developing a long-term relationship build upon trust and mutual empathy and by acting as a role model, studies shows that mentors can have a positive impact on the emotional wellbeing, the academic achievement and the social behavior of foster children. Therefore, *Learn for Life* puts an emphasis on assisting the mentors in the relational aspects of the mentor role. This is done through training, monitoring and ongoing supervision from psychologist and program staff.

### **Despite this the mentor program is faced by recurring dilemmas:**

- How do we train mentors to be able to build a long-term relation with the foster child, when the child is not, in all cases, enrolled in the program voluntarily?
- How do we train the mentors, with the aim of maintaining the match for at least 18 months and ideally the six years the child is in the program, to navigate in a complex sphere of different stakeholders around the foster child?
- How do we monitor the mentors, so the relations do not end and still respect the fact that they are doing it as volunteers?

### **Timetable in minutes**

- 1-3 Introduction *Learn for Life*
- 3-10 Dilemmas in mentoring foster children
- 10-20 Discussion on training of mentors
- 20-30 Discussion on the complexity of the stakeholders around foster children
- 30-40 Discussion on monitoring mentors during the match
- 40-45 Summery/wrap up

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Read more about *Learn for Life* at [www.laerforlivet.dk](http://www.laerforlivet.dk).

