

FR1ENDS of the CH1LDREN

The Child Study Overview & Update

Summer 2016

Nine years ago, youth development thought-leaders nationally began to recognize the promise of Friends of the Children's 12-year long professional youth mentoring and advocacy program for improving the long-term success of our country's most vulnerable children. Leaders at the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation (EMCF) encouraged us to focus on developing a gold standard evaluation of the program and provided exploratory funding for a multi-site, longitudinal randomized control trial (RCT). With a strong evaluation design in place, in 2007, the nationally recognized research team of Dr. Mark Eddy and Dr. Charles Martinez from the Oregon Social Learning Center and Dr. Jean Grossman from Public/Private Ventures and Princeton University secured initial funding from the National Institutes of Health to launch such a study (aka The Child Study). Since then, a variety of additional funders have supported the RCT, including EMCF, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the Campbell Foundation, and the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention of the U.S. Department of Justice. Funding for service delivery to study participants has been provided through significant regional philanthropic investment by the Pinkerton Foundation, New York Life Foundation, Meyer Memorial Trust, and many others.

Target Population: To date, The Child Study has investigated the impacts of Friends of the Children during the initial years of the program. Participants ($N = 278$) in the study are elementary school-aged boys and girls in New York City, Seattle, Boston, and Portland, Oregon. The children were first identified during kindergarten or first grade as "high risk" for adjustment problems during adolescence through an intensive school-based selection process. About half of children (53%) are girls; 86% of the children are a racial and/or ethnic minority, with 46% being African American, 18% Latino, 18% multi-racial, and 4% other. Most of the caregivers are women (91%); 52% are single mothers; 42% had not graduated from high school at the start of the study and 8% dropped out of school in middle school. About 40% of parents/caregivers were unemployed and 42% earned less than \$20,000 at the start of the study.

Program Design: Once selected into the study, children were randomized into control and intervention groups. Thereafter, each child in the intervention group began the Friends of the Children program and was assigned a professional, salaried mentor (called a "Friend"). Each Friend is a specially trained, skilled, salaried employee who engages his or her paired children in long-term relationships. Friends are typically paired with eight to twelve children at a time. Friend activities focus on helping children navigate through five developmental milestones: social/emotional development, school success, health, making good choices and planning skills for the future. From that foundation, Friends work with children on developmentally appropriate skills such as goal-setting, regulation of emotions, positive interactions with peers, healthy conflict management, and appropriate behaviors in school.

In the early elementary years, Friends spend time in the classroom, helping the children develop academic skills and lifelong learning habits. In middle and high school, Friends continue to monitor academic performance, advocate for needed services, and provide opportunities to explore career and continuing education options. Throughout the 12.5-year program, Friends offer intensive case management and wraparound support, continuing their role as a consistent adult presence in children’s lives. Friends provide support during crisis situations within the family and connect children and families with basic-need resources, health services and educational and career support.

Results: Given the young age of the participants, the long-term structure of the program, and the early emphasis on relationship-building, no significant differences were found between the control and intervention groups during the initial years of the study. As expected, significant findings are emerging now that the children are older (averaging eleven years old) and have participated in the Friends of the Children program for an average of five years. At the most recent assessment point for parent reports, the children who did not receive the program (i.e. the control group) are exhibiting significantly more externalizing (disruptive, non-compliant) behavior than the Friends of the Children study participants. There is strong precedent in research that childhood externalizing behavior is an early predictor of adolescent drug and alcohol abuse, as well as other risky behaviors, like academic failure, juvenile delinquency, early sexual behavior, and dropping out of school.

The current analyses also found that Friends of the Children participants are significantly more likely to exhibit pro-social behavior as reflected in a “total strength scale”, measuring indices such as family involvement, school functioning, affective strength, and interpersonal skills. These trends support the theory of change for Friends of the Children, that long-term successful outcomes will be achieved through an intervention that builds resiliency by strengthening social and emotional assets.

Parent Report Findings: Condition Effects at Endpoint

Parent Report	<i>p</i> -value Significance	Cohen’s <i>d</i> Effect Size
Externalizing Behavior	.053 ^a	.25
Total Strength Score	.006*	.41
Youth Positive Behavior in School	.017*	.33

Note. Statistical significance: **p*<.05. ^a*p*<.10. Effect size: *d* = .20 “small”. *d* = .40 “medium”.

In regards to academic outcomes, at the end of Year 2, small differences were found favoring the academic performance of Friends of the Children youth, based on scores from the TONI, Peabody, and Woodcock Johnson academic tests; however, none of the differences reached statistical significance. In this latest round of analyses, there was too much missing data from school records and teacher surveys to arrive at valid findings. The data collection challenge is most likely due to the transience of our high risk families to new schools, the difficulty of collecting school data from multiple school districts in four urban areas on the East and West coasts, and the de-centralized nature of school record-keeping in some school districts during the early elementary school years. During the next phase of the study,

additional staff and technical resources will be devoted toward overcoming these data collection challenges.

The Child Study is also examining the impact of program implementation differences on child outcomes, which will be extremely valuable for strategizing programmatic improvements. The current analyses found that total number of direct service hours spent with youth and the total number of professional mentors per youth did not have an impact on outcomes.

The next three years of the study are critical because the children will be completing middle school and entering high school, a time of tremendous developmental growth. The behavioral choices the children make during this challenging time have the potential to affect life-course outcomes. Funding for the study from the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention ended in September 2014. By 2018, all of the study children will be adolescents, which is when we expect new applications to the National Institutes of Health and other similar funders will be most well-received.

The Child Study has the potential for wide-ranging influence. This study is the only one of its kind measuring the long-term implications of a relationship-based, child-focused intervention spanning the K-12 school years for the highest-risk children. Results from the study have the potential not only to expand Friends of the Children services and improve youth development programs nationally, but also to change policy on how our country invests in the success of our highest-needs children.

Eddy, J. M., Martinez, C. R., Jr., Grossman, J. B., Cearley, J. J., Herrera, D., Wheeler, A., Rempel, J., Gau, J., Burraston, B., Harachi, T., Haggerty, K., & Seeley, J. (2016). A Randomized Controlled Trial of a 12 Year Long Professional Mentoring Program for Youth at Risk: Initial Outcomes. Manuscript in preparation.

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