Breaking bad: an attachment perspective on youth mentoring relationship closures

Karen Zilberstein* and Renée Spencer†

*Smith College School for Social Work, Northampton, and †Boston University School of Social Work, Boston, MA, USA

Correspondence:
Karen Zilberstein,
Smith College School for Social
Work,
8 Trumbull Rd #205,
Northampton, MA 01060,
USA
E-mail: ekaren@me.com

ABSTRACT

Endings in youth mentoring relationships have received little attention to date despite the frequency with which they occur. In this paper, we bring an attachment theory perspective to bear on youth mentoring relationship closures and consider how the rich empirical and theoretical literature on attachment can inform mentoring programme practice and possibly help prevent premature and poorly handled mentoring relationship endings. We consider what is known about endings in youth mentoring relationships, articulate an attachment perspective on mentoring relationships and their endings and offer recommendations informed by these literatures for how mentoring programmes can promote positive closure when relationships come to an end.

INTRODUCTION

Youth mentoring has gained increasing popularity as an intervention for at-risk or troubled youth. Considered a significant source of social support (Sterrett *et al.* 2011), research shows that such relationships can promote positive change for youth across social, emotional, behavioural and academic domains (DuBois *et al.* 2011). Unfortunately, studies also suggest that premature endings and ruptures may harm participants (Grossman & Rhodes 2002; Britner & Kraimer-Rickaby 2005; Karcher 2005; Herrera *et al.* 2011). This is particularly concerning because as many as a third to a half of mentoring relationships end before the initial time commitment expires (Grossman & Rhodes 2002; Bernstein *et al.* 2009; Grossman *et al.* 2012; Spencer *et al.* 2014) and simply re-matching youth with a new mentor may not buffer the negative effects of a previous prematurely ended relationship (Grossman *et al.* 2012).

Greater attention to endings in mentoring relationships is needed in order to harness the positive potential of these relationships, especially for higher risk youth who can be more challenging to engage and more vulnerable to relationship ruptures. However, many mentoring programmes offer few guidelines on how to construct and conclude relationships with youth, despite the primacy of this need (Liang *et al.* 2002; Spencer *et al.* 2010). This paper seeks to fill that void by evaluating how attachment theory and research on psychotherapeutic terminations can frame the knowledge, skills and types of activities mentors should utilize so that mentoring relationships do not deteriorate into yet another failed, detrimental experience for vulnerable youth.

Research on both formal and natural mentoring relationships indicates that closer, more enduring relationships more effectively promote positive youth outcomes (Grossman & Rhodes 2002; Liang *et al.* 2002; Parra *et al.* 2002; Hiles *et al.* 2013; Hurd & Sellers 2013). Attachment theory explains the ingredients in and impact of the making and breaking of important relationships (Bowlby 1980, 1982). It thus provides a framework for understanding the connection between strong relationships and positive outcomes and for why such relationships can be difficult to form and sustain, particularly with higher risk youth. In this paper, we bring an attachment theory perspective to bear on youth mentoring relationship closures and consider how the rich empirical and theoretical

literature on attachment can inform mentoring programme. Youth, in this paper, refers to the broad range of ages that are most often served through mentoring programmes – from school-aged children through adolescence. While space does not allow for an in-depth consideration of working with children of different ages, some similarities and differences in attachment needs and responses of youth of various ages will be discussed. This paper will first consider what is known about endings in youth mentoring relationships. It will then articulate an attachment perspective on youth mentoring relationships and terminations. The final section offers recommendations for how mentoring programmes can promote positive closures for youth.

Endings in youth mentoring relationships

Endings receive little attention in the literature on youth mentoring relationships, despite the frequency with which they occur. Both the research and practice literatures direct more consideration towards the early phases of the mentoring process, such as recruitment, screening, matching and training and to the promotion of more enduring relationships, all factors associated with greater benefits for youth participants (DuBois *et al.* 2011). However, research indicates that early terminations of formal youth mentoring relationships may be problematic.

In studies of programmes promising a mentor for a minimum of either a school or calendar year, youth whose mentoring relationships stopped prematurely reported no gains and even decrements in functioning compared with controls who received no mentoring at all (Grossman & Rhodes 2002; Britner & Kraimer-Rickaby 2005; Grossman *et al.* 2012). Studies of children aged 9 through late adolescence further suggest that throughout those age ranges, youth who face precipitous or poorly managed endings report feelings of sadness, disappointment, anger, confusion and rejection and show less willingness to engage in future mentoring opportunities (Hiles *et al.* 2013; Spencer *et al.* 2014). Some programmes have sought to mitigate potential harmful effects by re-matching youth whose relationships end early. The only study to date comparing youth in intact matches with those who received a second match after the first ended early found that only the youth in intact matches demonstrated improvements in academic functioning, despite the overall similar time period in which they received services (Grossman *et al.* 2012). This suggests that, at least within programmes seeking to forge longer-term

relationships, re-matching youth with another mentor may not compensate for the consequences of premature ending. Finally, match length does not appear as the only critical factor. One study (Karcher 2005) found a link between mentor attendance and youth outcomes, with youth whose mentors attended sporadically reporting decrements in perceptions of self-esteem and physical attractiveness. Mentor consistency thus also plays an important role.

Research suggests that underlying strong mentoring bonds lay partnerships built on respect, trust, honesty, reliability, consistency, empathy, authentic engagement and mentors with the ability to form close, emotional relationships (Spencer *et al.* 2004, 2010; Rhodes *et al.* 2009; Diehl *et al.* 2011; Johnson *et al.* 2011; Pryce 2012; Hiles *et al.* 2013). But mentoring does not succeed equally well for everyone. In a study of young adolescents, those youngsters with histories of abuse or attachment problems encountered higher disruption rates in mentoring relationships (Grossman & Rhodes 2002) and derived fewer benefits from them (DuBois *et al.* 2011). The success or failure of the mentoring relationship also depends in part on mentors' own relational experiences and skills. Mentors feeling overwhelmed, burned out or unappreciated account for a significant proportion of early mentoring terminations (Spencer 2007; Herrera *et al.* 2013; Spencer *et al.* 2014).

One recent qualitative study that considered youth age 9 to 15 also indicates that *how* youth mentoring relationships conclude likely matters, but ending relationships well can take considerable support from mentoring programme staff (Spencer *et al.* 2014). Among the relationships in this study, those with stronger emotional connections between the mentor and youth were more likely to have well-planned and well-executed endings. Weaker relationships tended to result in poorly executed endings or to even avoid or bypass the termination process altogether. For youth who previously experienced significant disruptions in their primary caregiving relationships, whether because of parental separation, incarceration or transfer to foster care, closure processes may hold special, potentially reparative significance.

An attachment perspective on youth mentoring relationships

Strong relationships, particularly those associated with secure attachments, confer many benefits (Bowlby 1982; Siegel 1999). From an attachment perspective, development unfolds within the cradle of

interpersonal experiences, which, in childhood, comprise various experiences of parental nurturing, protection, attunements and scaffolding. Attuned, available attachment figures function as 'secure bases' that promote trust, exploration, learning and multiple developmental achievements (Ainsworth *et al.* 1978; Bowlby 1982; Hart 2011). Youth of all ages with secure attachments generally show more advanced abilities than their insecure counterparts. These include higher self-regulatory skills, cognitive ability, compliance, social functioning, school performance and resiliency (Siegel 1999; Hart 2011). Preschool and elementary school-aged children who obtain secure attachments after experiences of maltreatment or adversity also show improvement in numerous developmental areas and a decrease in psychopathology (Steele *et al.* 2003; McGoron *et al.* 2012). This finding extends into adulthood. Adults whose secure attachments form later in life also seem to fare relatively well (Roisman *et al.* 2002). However, research has found that youth who experience disruptions in attachment early in life often exhibit difficulty developing secure attachments later (Shaver & Mikulincer 2009). These youth tend to expect rejection and unpredictability in their relationships.

Mentoring relationships resemble a type of secondary attachment relationship, a framing that could help mentors construct bonds based on attachment principles and promote the kinds of relationships associated with more favourable outcomes. In studies of youth aged 7 to 18, the qualities those youngsters mention wanting and valuing in their mentoring relationships mirror those that occur in secure attachment: safety and security, opportunities for growth, unconditional regard, authentic engagement, active participation, responsiveness and empathy (Spencer *et al.* 2004; Ahrens *et al.* 2008; Munson *et al.* 2010; Hiles *et al.* 2013). The establishment of a strong and secure relationship, with its associated advantages, thus comprises an important goal for mentors and mentees.

A number of mechanisms underlie and shape the establishment of secure attachments. Attachments consolidate early in life through sensorimotor and emotional communications that include voice tone, touch, gestures and vocalizations (Beebe & Lachmann 2003; Peck 2003; Hart 2011). Attuned caregivers respond sensitively and consistently to their children's underlying needs and communication (Oppenheim *et al.* 2004). By doing so, they moderate arousal, providing both lively, engaged stimulation and soothing. They also initiate affective communication through which children learn to conceptualize and express feelings and organize experience (Fonagy & Target 2002). Securely attached children learn to signal needs openly and accurately, with the expectation that caregivers will respond positively to those bids. In adolescence and adulthood, those with secure attachments show an ability to reflect on and communicate about relationships openly, coherently and consistently with little emotional interference (Main 2000). When misattunements arise, effective attachment figures rapidly repair them and return the relationship to a predictable, responsive track, thus diffusing their child's or partner's fear, anger or anxiety (Peck 2003). Parents who show more organized and secure states of mind in their own attachment relationships seem better able to promote those qualities in their children (Dozier & Sepulveda 2004).

When children do not feel safe and secure in the physical and/or emotional availability of their caregivers, they use less direct attachment strategies to get their needs met. Children with emotionally unavailable or intermittently responsive caregivers form insecure attachments. To maintain the relationship, children either minimize (anxious-ambivalent attachment) or amplify (avoidant attachment) cues. By suppressing or exaggerating expressions of feelings and needs, those children limit their ability to understand their own emotions and reactions. Such patterns extend into adolescence and adulthood, although with some differences. Individuals may idealize their early attachment relationships in a superficial way, dismiss their importance or become overly focused on and angry about disappointments in relationships without the ability to reflect upon those experiences coherently or accurately communicate their expectations and needs.

Disorganized attachment derives from the child's experience of the caregiver as frightened or frightening, which conflicts with the need to use that caregiver as a source of comfort and relief (Lyons-Ruth 2003). In infancy and early childhood, these children vacillate between fearing to approach the caregiver and craving proximity. With no organized strategies for receiving emotional care and soothing, they experience frequent states of overarousal and a fragmented sense of themselves and others (Fonagy & Target 2002; Lyons-Ruth 2003). As they age, disorganized children exhibit working models of helplessness or coercive control (Lyons-Ruth 2003; Kerns & Richardson 2005). By age 6, peer problems tend to be evident, which can include a mixture of aggressive, controlling, fearful and helpless behaviour, or

sometimes an odd and contradictory mix. In adolescence and adulthood, disorganized attachment is best demarcated by the unstructured expression of inner distress and by the individual's inability to regulate that distress successfully in attachment and other social relationships (Main 2000).

Through these various attachment experiences, children form schemas, or internal working models, of the self, others and relationships that then influence how they approach future affiliations and circumstances (Bowlby 1980). Internal working models affect memory for attachment-related experiences. Insecure children recall more negative events and rejecting parental responses than securely attached children, even when responding to the same attachment-related cues and scenarios (Rowe & Carnelley 2003; Chae et al. 2009). This means that those individuals will likely perpetuate their perceptions and beliefs systems, unless they are helped to notice and focus on discounted and disregarded information (Zilberstein 2008).

Attachment behaviour varies by age. While young children seek proximity to caregivers when in distress, later relationships depend less and less on physical contact. Typical adolescents still turn to attachment figures when upset, but older school-aged students and teenagers can also cope independently or use peers as a resource (Kerns & Richardson 2005; Allen 2008). Attachment constructs may also become more rigid and less amenable to change over time, although older children and adolescents also encounter growing social worlds that expose them to new and different experiences, which can challenge pre-existing attachment constructs. Earlier experiences both continue to influence attachment relationships by confirming old beliefs and also interact with contemporary relationships, skills and opportunities that allow for change (Rowe & Carnelley 2003; Steele et al. 2003).

While gaining a secure attachment later in life differs from building security from the start, the same attuned, sensitive, consistent behaviours appear crucial to that endeavour (Roisman et al. 2002). Foster parents who react less to the overt, defensive behaviour of their insecure or disorganized children and respond, instead, to underlying needs and feelings, succeed better in procuring secure attachments with young children (Dozier & Sepulveda 2004). Over time, new experiences of availability, empathy, attunement and responsiveness have been shown to lead to new representations and working models of attachment in adopted children, as well. At 1 year after placement, evidence of new working models has been tracked in school-aged children, although changes most probably began earlier and many old models still endured (Hodges et al. 2003; Steele et al. 2003). Mentors who engage in such attachment-based relational strategies can thus modify their protégés working models and form more positive, growth-promoting relationships, although the process takes time.

Attachment, loss and relational endings

Reactions to breaking an attachment include grief, anger, detachment and despair (Bowlby 1980; Stroebe et al. 2005). While individuals turn to attachment figures for soothing and modulation in times of distress, the ending or disruption of a mentoring relationship can kindle strong emotions and attachment behaviour (Bowlby 1980). The type of attachment strategies activated depends upon the youth's pre-existing working models (Stroebe et al. 2005; Zilberstein 2008). While secure individuals possess the coping tools to handle separations and losses, those with insecure or disorganized attachments can find the experience overwhelming and difficult. Individuals with anxious-ambivalent attachments, who tend to amplify feelings regarding attachment, may react to endings by exhibiting great distress and an inability to disengage from either the attachment figure or the associated emotions (Zilberstein 2008). Their rumination on the loss leaves little room for finding adaptive resolutions (Stroebe et al. 2005). Avoidant individuals, who limit closeness and evade emotional material, often dismiss the importance of the relationship, deny the impact of endings and may even abruptly terminate in advance (Holmes 1997). While this tactic decreases felt emotion, those individuals often show somatic symptoms that betray their internal distress (Wayment & Vierthaler 2002). Youth with previous experiences of loss or disorganized attachments may find the ending of mentoring relationships particularly difficult (Stroebe 2002; Many 2009). The loss may feel catastrophic and lead to turmoil. Their struggles with coping and organizing emotional reactions interfere with their ability to regulate their responses or create closure (Zilberstein 2008). Because of those difficulties, youth with histories of trauma, loss and attachment difficulties will need extra help structuring and handling the closing stages of the mentorship.

Research on termination in both psychotherapy and mentoring confirm that unplanned or sloppily conducted conclusions can cause damage. Therapy

cessation that occurs abruptly, unilaterally or with little discussion or preparation tends to produce harm (Knox et al. 2011). Clients react with feelings of abandonment, rejection, anxiety, anger, despair, confusion, fear, helplessness and sadness (Joyce et al. 2007). A history of loss, particularly a traumatic loss or one that occurred during childhood, can intensify feelings among individuals of all ages (Stroebe et al. 2005; Roe et al. 2006; Joyce et al. 2007; Many 2009).

Conversely, positive, planned endings serve a number of purposes. When handled well, endings promote transformation (Knox et al. 2011). Terminations that enable clients to feel valued and helped rather than abandoned, rejected and powerless facilitate the creation and endurance of secure working models. Constructive endings entail learning both to hold on and feel connected to a departing person, while at the same time letting go of the regular, physical contact (Klass et al. 1996). As individuals tend to draw upon the images and memories of important people to solve problems and gain security and comfort, even after the relationship ends, this outcome has far-reaching implications (Stroebe et al. 2005). Beneficial terminations consolidate and generalize the numerous gains achieved through the mentoring partnership and facilitate the acquisition of new skills (Vasquez et al. 2008). Learning to cope with distressing feelings and losses prepares adolescents to face and negotiate future stressful life events (Delgado & Strawn 2012). For youth who have experienced previous losses and trauma, an emotionally supportive termination may also constitute their first experience of a non-traumatic loss (Many 2009). However, when youth or mentors avoid the work of termination, they tend to dismiss the relationship and its importance and defensively invalidate and devalue the accomplishments attained through that alliance.

How attachment principles can inform mentoring programme practices and prevent premature endings

If mentors received more training on how to establish and end effective relationships, especially with protégés who demonstrate relational and attachment vulnerabilities, more benefit and less harm may accrue. Like other social bonds, mentoring relationships crystallize in part through each party's pre-existing working models. When mentors, themselves, contain secure states of mind, they can form more attuned and effective relationships with protégés. Agencies could thus routinely screen for mentors' attachment-related

skills. However, even for mentors with secure states of mind, learning to work with insecurely attached or disorganized youth, who do not signal their needs and expectations well, presents difficulties. If mentors have trouble understanding their protégés' feelings and needs or feel especially triggered in their own responses, they may require additional help reflecting on their biases, attachment styles and expectations and the ways in which those influence the relationship (Dozier & Sepulveda 2004; Spencer 2007). This may reduce incidences of mentors feeling burned out, unappreciated and prematurely quitting (Spencer 2007; Spencer et al. 2014).

As the foundation of relational security and trust remains consistency, reliability, safety and empathic communication, mentors should hone those qualities. Reliability involves more than simply showing up regularly and sticking to agreements, although certainly those are important. From an attachment perspective, true consistency and dependability require that predictable patterns of verbal and non-verbal behaviour and responsiveness exist through which mentees can build organized mental representations (Bowlby 1982; Steele et al. 2003; Hart 2011). Mentors should strive to show positive effect and respond to youth in an attuned manner through their gestures, postures, intonations and verbal expressions, regardless of that mentees attachment patterns (Beebe & Lachmann 2003). Clearly, this is more difficult with protégés with insecure or disorganized styles who tend not to elicit positive responses and may appear dismissing, angry, clingy or controlling.

Mentors should work hard to recognize and reflect back youth's feelings and concerns, especially those that have been defensively split off (Fonagy & Target 2002; Hart 2011). Such defensive manoeuvres often hide the youth's wishes for attachment, which they camouflage as dismissive, uncaring behaviours because of fears of rejection, closeness and vulnerability (Lyons-Ruth 2003; Dozier & Sepulveda 2004). For avoidant youth, confirming that the relationship has value to the mentor, remaining consistent and available in the face of rejection, discouraging the youth from prematurely fleeing and helping the mentee focus on and remember positive aspects of the relationship constitute important strategies. For ambivalent youth, helping those individuals cope with their own reactions, feel confident in their ability to function independently, hold on to an internalized image of the mentor's caring and reflect upon and articulate emotions, rather than act them out, constitute necessary goals. For disorganized youth, providing

structure, reliability and strategies for coping with the various emotions that arise within the relationship will be especially valuable. Unfortunately, more often than not, when mentees show negative behaviours and emotions, instead of being dealt with, they often serve to push mentors away and disrupt the relationship, thus confirming the youth's pre-existing beliefs about the unreliability and unavailability of adult figures (Spencer 2007; Rhodes *et al.* 2009; Hiles *et al.* 2013).

When problems or misattunements inevitably surface, mentors must strive to repair them and recoup, which may involve offering understanding of and apologies for the rift (Peck 2003). In fact, by doing so, mentors will provide valuable new learning and begin to challenge and shift their protégés' internal working models. When difficulties in the mentor–mentee relationship are understood, negotiated and resolved, the youth begin to experience a new kind of attuned relationship in which problems and difficulties are openly faced and handled. These interventions lessen arousal and enhance social and emotional skills. They also strengthen the relationship, which reduces the probability of unplanned and premature termination (Vasquez *et al.* 2008).

Promoting positive endings in youth mentoring

To achieve positive closure in youth mentoring relationships, endings should be *planned*, *growth-promoting*, *process-oriented* and *clear*. Such endings require concerted attention and full participation of all parties involved – mentors, youth, programme staff and in some cases, the youth's parent or guardian. Given that relationship endings can be painful, many mentors and youth may attempt to avoid them altogether. Avoidance, however, can result in youth feeling hurt or abandoned, mentors feeling dissatisfied with their volunteer experience and caregivers feeling angry about the fallout. In the case of mentor-initiated endings, research indicates that in the absence of a formal goodbye, some youth may attribute the ending to some character flaw or failure on their part that drove the mentor away (Spencer *et al.* 2014). Planned endings offer participants a chance to convey clear reasons for the ending, to celebrate the positive aspects of the relationship, mark any milestones or gains made and to experience and process the range of feelings participants may experience.

Endings work best when *planned* in advance and when those plans are fully implemented. Mentors, youth and the youth's caregiver(s) all need to know when the relationship will come to a formal end and have time to prepare. Programme staff can coach all parties on how to authentically and meaningfully engage in the termination process and help participants practice saying goodbye. Planning ahead also gives the mentors and mentees time to consider how they would like to mark the ending of their relationship, such as engaging in favourite activities one last time, doing something they had always intended to do but had not yet gotten around to, saying goodbye to friends and family members or simply getting used to the idea of not continuing the relationship in its present form. Mentors and programme staff may seek input from caregivers about how best to engage youth in the closure process and anticipate particular vulnerabilities the ending may trigger. Planning together a meaningful celebration or graduation ceremony also enhances positive memories and gives the youth some sense of control over the process (Zilberstein, 2008). While mentees without a secure attachment style may react to these interventions according to pre-existing attachment styles – either dismissing their importance, overly focusing on them and wanting more, wanting to take control of the process or finding it difficult to organize themselves and follow through – holding to such guidelines will help each of them, in different ways and for different reasons, successfully navigate this phase.

Growth-promoting endings focus on accomplishments and positive coping and not simply losses (Stroebe 2002; Roe *et al.* 2006). Characterizing the termination as a transition, rather than a loss (although it may, in fact, be both) is often fruitful. Part of that transition entails thinking about the past, present and future of the relationship. This includes recognizing positive aspects of the relationship and its contributions to the participants' lives. In this work, issues of ongoing connection become paramount (Klass *et al.* 1996).

To achieve this, endings should be *process-focused*, providing participants the opportunity to express and work through the range of feelings they experience in response to the closure. In order to work through endings with mentees, mentors must provide the opportunity to review and celebrate the work done together and the associated sentiments. This entails reflecting together on feelings about the relationship and its ending, expressing their feelings about the relationship and what it has meant to them, reviewing goals, gains and joint endeavours and preparing for the future (Knox *et al.* 2011). Mentors should discuss, accept and reflect back the multiple feelings the youth feels about discontinuing the relationship. These may

include conflicting reactions such as sadness about saying goodbye, fear of the impeding loss and pride in accomplishments. Part of this task entails helping youth to verbalize feelings that they lack the knowledge or language to express (Many 2009).

The particular feelings that youth find hard to acknowledge or express depend, in part, on their attachment style. Dismissing individuals may find it hard to express gratitude or acknowledge losses. Ambivalent individuals may overly focus on loss and show difficulty recognizing individual gains. Disorganized youth may have trouble verbalizing any feelings and need much help engaging in the conversation. Mentors should also acknowledge the importance of the relationship to themselves and the ways they will remember it. Leaving youth with concrete and enduring reminders of the work through pictures, narratives or other mementos helps with this endeavour (Zilberstein 2008). In these ways, mentors can lessen and convert youths' feelings of rage and abandonment to pride and connection and help those without secure attachment styles articulate and organize their thoughts, feelings and responses (Roe *et al*. 2006).

Finally, it must be *clear* to all parties when the mentoring relationship has ended. In an effort to avoid confronting the loss of the relationship, mixed messages may be sent. The nature of that post-termination association will vary and should be thoroughly discussed beforehand so that clear and realistic expectations exist (Spencer 2007; Rhodes *et al*. 2009). Mentors and mentees may, at times, stay in touch through letters, email, telephone contact or visits (Siebold 2004; Vasquez *et al*. 2008), but more likely will be joined through internalized memories and representations. Mentors should be discouraged from offering general platitudes about future contact, such as 'we'll keep in touch' or from making promises they later find they either cannot or are not inclined to keep. Clear endings allow participants to appreciate what they had and to move on to build new connections, rather than clinging to what all too often may become broken promises and feelings of disappointment, hurt and rejection.

Preparation for endings begins long before termination occurs. The tools needed to manage that phase, especially for youth with insecure or disorganized attachment patterns, require skill building and rehearsal. Plenty of natural opportunities present themselves for developing and practising those skills during the course of a mentorship: vacations, missed meetings, sickness, ends of meetings, times the mentor

may be emotionally less attuned or distracted, misattunements in the relationship or during the emergence of strong negative feelings such as anger (Zilberstein 2008; Many 2009). Sensitive and repeated handling of those incidents, in which mentors inquire about and show understanding and reflection of feelings, repair ruptures and resolve difficulties, promotes coping and security on which youth can draw during difficult times. It is, in fact, important that such opportunities exist and are utilized because learning to cope with larger losses requires graduated practice and management of smaller ones (Ford 2009; Many 2009).

CONCLUSION

While social supports and mentoring encourage resiliency and growth in vulnerable youth, they do not constitute risk-free endeavours (Grossman & Rhodes 2002; Britner & Kraimer-Rickaby 2005; Karcher 2005; DuBois *et al*. 2011; Herrera *et al*. 2011). When the relationship and its ending proceed poorly, youth experience detrimental feelings of loss, disappointment and rejection, diminished well-being and less willingness to engage in new mentoring opportunities (Hiles *et al*. 2013; Spencer *et al*. 2014). This raises the stakes and necessitates careful selection and training of mentors. Attachment theory provides a crucial foundation on which agencies can better prepare mentors to build strong relationships with protégés and more effectively handle difficult issues that arise around termination and closure.

Providing youth with positive endings not only offers clear closure to the relationship, but offers rich opportunities for learning how to say goodbye well and for repair and re-working of past negative relational experiences. Positive closures that are planned, growth-promoting, process-oriented and clear allow mentors and youth to reflect on and honor their relationship and move forward to develop new connections. Achieving such closures, however, requires considerable support and scaffolding from mentoring programme staff, as both mentors and youth bring their own complex relational histories to the process and may not be inclined or equipped to engage in a positive and productive closure process. Building closure processes into mentoring programme models and ensuring that staff learn needed skills to facilitate positive endings are critical.

Further research in this area is sorely needed. Closures in mentoring relationships have received little empirical attention to date and none to our knowledge

have examined them from an attachment perspective. Future research should test the effectiveness of the practices recommended here. Do planned positive endings help youth solidify or even enhance the benefits of the mentoring relationship, as the attachment literature would suggest? Are youth who experience positive closures more likely to go on and develop future positive connections with new mentors or other important adults? Does a positive closure process mitigate the negative effects of early relationship endings? It would also be important to examine the experiences of youth with different attachment styles and how these may influence the closure process and the benefits youth derive from the mentoring experience.

Although many programmes hope to foster ties that continue indefinitely, even a lifetime, the reality is that many if not most mentoring relationships end, with significant numbers ending before meeting the programme established time commitments (Grossman & Rhodes 2002; Bernstein *et al.* 2009; Grossman *et al.* 2012; Spencer *et al.* 2014). It is imperative to promote stronger, longer-lasting mentorships and to help mentors and youth say goodbye when these relationships must end. Not doing so runs the risk of merely replicating previous negative relationships with adults, particularly for higher risk youth, rather than providing the intended rich and growth-promoting experiences that youth mentoring can otherwise achieve.

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