

# **SUMMARY OF RESEARCH AND EVALUATION OF THE CHILDREN UNITING NATIONS (CUN) ACADEMIC MENTOR TRAINING PROGRAM**

**Victoria Stevens, PhD <sup>1</sup> and Robert Gould, PhD <sup>2</sup>**

1. California Institute of the Arts, Children Uniting Nations. 2 University of California Los Angeles

## **INTRODUCTION**

- ✚ It is now well known in educational and psychological research that self-regulation is a critical component in a student's success in school and upon graduation. Many researchers now say that self-regulation in the early grades is a better predictor of academic success than IQ.**
- ✚ Self-regulation is considered to be an important part of metacognition or the ability to self-reflect and think about one's own thinking. It is also well known that disorders of self-regulation are related to traumatic or disrupted early attachment experiences, such as are a given with foster youth.**
- ✚ The connection between the effects of early disrupted or traumatic attachment, disorders of self-regulation and metacognition, and difficulties with learning and test-taking, as well as behavioral control are beginning to be discussed and researched in a variety of areas, but little has been done with foster youth and even less in educational settings.**
- ✚ An increasing awareness of the effects of early environment and our knowledge about brain plasticity or its capacity to change and grow over time, help us to understand that even with early neglect or abuse, positive attachment relationships at any time in a child's life can help overcome their difficulties in self-concept, trusting others and the use of defensive strategies that helped them to survive, but which have produced negative results as they have grown older.**
- ✚ As many of these vulnerable children enter into classroom environments in school, they often exhibit what can look like or is Attention-Deficit Disorder, Attention-Deficit-Hyperactivity Disorder, Conduct Disorder, Depression or Learning Disorders. A consequence of this is that these students may be misdiagnosed, mistreated in terms of psychiatric medications and given labels that are not only inappropriate, but stigmatizing.**

- ✚ These children then may not get the kinds of help they need in terms of emotional regulation and also may have the negative ideas they may already have about themselves and their ability to learn reinforced. This is especially true given the fact that the kinds of training that would help develop self-regulation and executive function are not taught specifically to teachers and the fact that the arts and structured play (which could help develop these skills if taught consistently) are cut when budgets are tight and when the pressure is on performance on specific standardized tests.
- ✚ Difficulties in sustaining attention, planning, being able to recognize patterns, tolerating frustration and the stimulation of novelty, delaying gratification, and decision –making based upon clear goals and intrinsic motivation all are related to the frontal lobes, particularly the prefrontal cortex. This area of the brain is not only the last to develop (not fully until age 18), but is known to be compromised by early emotional trauma and toxic stress.
- ✚ Whatever the combination may be of genetic, chemical, structural or environmental causes, the facts of the reality of attachment loss and the circumstances that necessitated it remain in the forefront in terms of understanding the thinking and behavior of children in foster care and therefore creating thoughtful and effective interventions.
- ✚ The treatment of attachment disorders has been in area of psychotherapy for some time and still remains in the clinical realm. For those in foster care that are lucky enough to receive treatment, there is a wide variety of behavioral and cognitive interventions utilized in both foster care and outpatient treatment settings, however, there are few that have focused directly upon disorders of attachment and self-regulation, and those that have are clinical therapeutic interventions with no controlled clinical trials to show their efficacy.

As Schore (2001) says,

“...current developmental neurobiological research reveals that growth-inhibiting [and] adverse early rearing experiences “have longstanding and complex effects on a range of neurochemicals relevant to emotion regulation” (Coplan et al., 1998, p. 473). Severely compromised attachment histories are thus associated with brain organizations that are inefficient in regulating affective states and coping with stress (Schore, 1997b)” (p.16).

- ✚ It is important to recognize that stress includes how the brain responds to novelty and therefore directly affects the ability of a child to learn. Emotional self-regulation is critical for the ability to withstand frustration, delay gratification and hold attention long enough to both have information move from short term to long term memory and to be meaningfully connected to previous learning – both of these operations are fundamental for the ability to learn in any area. These cortical “skills” are also involved in decision-making, impulse control, perspective-taking and making choices based upon awareness of consequences and ultimately lead to “higher-order” thinking skills such as empathy, imagination and creative thinking.

## **THE ACADEMIC MENTOR PROGRAM FOR FOSTER YOUTH**

- ✚ Children Uniting Nations (CUN) has developed and piloted an advanced, cutting-edge training developed by Dr. Stevens that teaches mentors techniques designed to improve mentee’s skills in self-regulation, patience, increased attention and memory, and metacognition through individualized instruction and facilitation with the goal of increasing academic achievement and life-long learning skills within an attachment relationship. These techniques include physical/body/emotional awareness, and control, training in rhythm through music, dance, visual art, theatre and poetry, goal setting, conflict resolution, and toleration of frustration, ambiguity and delay of gratification – all in the service of mastering basic and creative thinking skills in a specific academic subject.
- ✚ The mentors are screened, given introductory trainings and matched to a mentee, then more advanced and intensive trainings. The mentors meet privately with their mentee for one hour a week on the school site on a consistent basis for at least one year, with a specific academic objective for each semester developed in concert with a classroom teacher. They have on-going supervision individually and in work-group sessions.
- ✚ The Academic Mentor Program for Foster Youth is then an attachment-based intervention informed by neurobiology that supports the care of parents, teachers, social workers and mental health professionals. Trainings were also created for teachers and foster parents that included the same information in a form appropriate to their relationship to the child.

- ✚ As youth placed in the foster care system have by definition experienced early relational or attachment trauma, the intervention of a mentor is an attachment-based non-familial and non-therapeutic adjunct to the care foster youth may receive from social workers, mental health professionals, teachers or their foster parents or kin caregivers. The findings of this small pilot study show evidence that the effects of having a mentor are positive for youth in foster care and that when the mentor has more advanced training, the results are even more positive.

## **THE PILOT STUDY**

- ✚ In the fall of 2008, 63 foster youth in four middle schools in South Los Angeles (Drew, Bethune, Foshay and John Muir) were matched with 63 volunteer mentors who were screened and given an introductory training as part of the school-based Academic Mentor Program by Children Uniting Nations. Out of the 63 mentors, 29 received advanced training by Dr. Victoria Stevens, thus creating a treatment group of 29 and a control group of 34 mentor/mentee pairs. Dr. Stevens also did introductory trainings and professional development for teachers in the four schools and had sessions with many of the parents of the mentees.
- ✚ All 63 foster youth (mentees) and many of the mentors were given a pre-test that measures Executive Function processes – including emotional self-regulation skills called the BRIEF. All mentees and many of the mentors were also given the same post-test at the end of the academic year. The mentees filled out a self-report and the mentors used the teacher form of the test. The teacher and parent tests were given to as many of the current teachers and foster parents/guardians/kin-caregivers as possible.
- ✚ In addition to the pre and post test measures, the mentees were tracked over the year with regard to their attendance at school, behavioral problems, grades, and standardized test scores. These measures were also looked at in terms of whether their mentors had been in the treatment or control group.
- ✚ The results of the Children Uniting Nations’ year-long pilot study on their Academic Mentor Training program are extraordinarily exciting. On **all** but one of the sixteen measures assessed, the 63 LAUSD foster youth from Drew, John Muir, Bethune and Foshay, who were mentees showed mean improvements.

- ✚ This was true of those mentees whose mentors had the CUN basic training (the control group) and those whose mentors had the advanced training in current developmental neurobiology as it relates to early toxic stress and learning developed for CUN by Dr. Victoria Stevens (the experimental group). The mentees whose mentors were in the experimental group showed even more positive results with statistically significant improvements on 10 out of 11 measures of Executive Function.

The working hypotheses of this study were:

1. Where children have had to be removed from their primary caregivers and placed in foster care at a young age, the traumatic experiences that led to the removal and placement, as well as the separation itself resulted in emotional regulatory issues of varying degrees related to attachment loss and trauma.
2. These problems with emotional self-regulation have effects on the processes known collectively as Executive Function and these processes are critical for success in academic work and for social and emotional competency.
3. Often foster parents, teachers and social workers are unable to give the kind of consistent, reliable individualized care that these children need and therefore the supplement of a trained mentor who forms an attachment relationship with a foster child over an extended period of time will have a positive effect on their self-regulatory and executive function processes.
4. The combination of a trained mentor in concert with teachers and parents who have learned about the effects of trauma on learning will have a positive effect on a foster youth's academic achievement, intrinsic motivation to succeed in school and a career path, increased likelihood of high school graduation, and an increase in self-regulation skills, metacognitive awareness, impulse control, attention, memory and sense of self-efficacy.
5. It is also hypothesized that there would be a lessening of negative behaviors toward the self or others, less likelihood of involvement with substance abuse or violence, and a lessening of the kinds of difficulties that have been seen generally from many foster youth upon being emancipated from the foster care system.

- ✚ The analysis is based on data collected on 63 mentees distributed among four schools. Each worked with a mentor and mentors either received the standard CUN Introductory Academic Mentor Training or standard introductory training and the CUN/Stevens Advanced Academic Mentor Training. Outcome measures are grouped into three categories: disciplinary outcomes, scholastic outcomes, and neuropsychological measures (the BRIEF).**
- ✚ Evidence for the efficacy of the training was found in terms of its having a positive effect on the 11 measures of students' self regulation and executive function skills, as well as 4 additional measures: increased grades, decreased disciplinary actions, and increased CST scores (math and language). The effects regarding self-regulation and executive function were measured by the administration of the Behavior Rating Inventory of Executive Function at the beginning and end of the academic year 2008 – 2009.**
- ✚ Executive function processes include goal setting, planning, organizing, prioritizing, memorizing, initiating, shifting, self-monitoring, impulse control or inhibition of impulses and self-regulation. These processes combine to form metacognitive strategies that help each child to understand HOW they learn, not just to memorize information. These skills are being increasingly understood as critical for success both in school, in the workplace after school and for successful social functioning personally and professionally as part of life-long learning skills.**
- ✚ The fact that these improvements were seen in such a small pilot study undertaken while LAUSD was in such turmoil, and given the difficulties of conducting research in the educational system make these positive findings truly extraordinary. In addition, the mentees, mentors, teachers, Vice-Principals, Principals, and parents who participated in the training were overwhelmingly positive in their responses and wanted to have more training, professional development and support.**
- ✚ As the mentor relationship with a foster youth is a special kind of non-familial and non-therapeutic attachment on a regular basis over an extended period of time, our findings provide a basis for further exploration of the connections between later secure attachment relationships as a positive foundation for the development of self regulation and executive function skills.**

- ✚ If these connections hold true, it can be hypothesized that changes in cognitive, social and emotional skills and behaviors could take place in children with early toxic stress throughout their early and later teens, especially given what we are learning about brain plasticity every day. These connections are speculated about in literature about developmental interpersonal neurobiology, but very difficult to measure.

## **CONCLUSION**

- ✚ In conclusion, the CUN Academic Mentor Program has been refined through the pilot program implemented this past academic year. It has as its goal a comprehensive program that can be replicated in any school district and community, based upon the most current research about early toxic stress, attachment, brain development, self-regulation and executive function. This program includes trainings for mentors, principals, teachers, social workers, psychologists and foster parents/caregivers who work together with the same basic information.
- ✚ The costs of implementation of this program are minimal and it would provide crucial support for any other programs in place such as those focusing on social/emotional skills, character or cognitive-behavioural skills, as well as work done by social workers, psychologists and tutors. In addition it provides critical support for teachers and for foster parents and kin caregivers.
- ✚ The overarching goals for all are: the facilitation of students' academic achievement; high school graduation; regular attendance; minimal behavioral or emotional problems; and the development of social, emotional and cognitive skills that will reduce the likelihood of problems before or after graduation, and increase the probability of the success of youths in foster care academically, professionally, personally and as creative, productive citizens of the world as they move into adulthood.

Contact information:

[www.childrenunitingnations.org](http://www.childrenunitingnations.org)

[vickis@earthlink.net](mailto:vickis@earthlink.net)

[www.drVictoriastevens.com](http://www.drVictoriastevens.com)