



Keeping Mentoring Connections in a Socially Distanced World



Findings from a Youth-Engaged Study of Virtually Adapted Mentoring Practices in Response to COVID-19



THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC has undoubtedly impacted youth, for whom school, extracurricular, and social life have been suddenly disrupted. Youth facing difficult situations at home—due to unstable family finances, resource scarcity, health issues, violence, and more—may be especially vulnerable amid changes forced by COVID-19. Pre-pandemic, mentoring relationships were a protective factor for youth in challenging circumstances and have been correlated with positive activities and outcomes. Mentoring relationships have been especially vulnerable to changes related to the pandemic. Considering how crucial mentoring is in helping youth stay healthy and safe, extra attention is needed to maintain mentoring relationships, given the level of complexity that has emerged during the pandemic.

We sought to understand the ways that mentoring programs and mentors adapted in response to the pandemic and social-distancing guidelines, as well as how the compounded realities of virtual mentor engagement and social distancing affected youth. Our study was guided by the following overarching research questions:

- How are youth socially and emotionally affected by social distancing and virtual learning during the COVID-19 pandemic?
- In what ways are mentors helping to support young people socially and emotionally during the pandemic?
- What positive and/or challenging elements have been introduced to mentoring relationships since the start of COVID-19?
- What virtual or socially distanced mentoring approaches do youth find most engaging? Which ones are most challenging? What are the opportunities and limitations of technology in the mentoring context, both virtual and in-person?

Highlights

- Despite the challenges posed by having to conduct mentoring activities virtually, **youth still value and benefit from engaging with mentors.**
- **Social isolation was a major challenge** for both mentors and mentees. As safe spaces for youth to discuss various challenges they are facing, it is crucial that mentoring programs continue to discuss and incorporate mental-health support into their program design.
- **Hybrid mentoring models with both in-person and virtual programming enable greater flexibility** for youth participants to continue engaging in activities even if they are unable to join in person.



Equivolve Consulting is a black-owned, Baltimore-based strategy, research and evaluation firm that uses innovative approaches to help leaders and organizations drive equitable results in the United States and around the world.

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Research Brief by: **Glenn R. Love, Martena Reed, Teja Vemuganti, and Megan Halmo**

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This project—a collaboration between Equivolve Consulting, , MENTOR Maryland | DC, and MENTOR Memphis Grizzlies—brought together youth of color to build an understanding of how COVID-19 has impacted them in the context of their mentoring relationships. The goal of the project was to collect data that would inform improvements and innovation in the mentoring field, both now and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic. Equivolve provided capacity-building for youth to co-develop research questions, inform data-collection instruments, and co-analyze qualitative data collected through interviews and focus groups with mentoring program staff and participating youth, respectively. This research brief describes our methods, including: the process for engaging youth in developing research methodologies; summarizing findings from our interviews and focus groups; offering lessons for mentoring programs facing the challenges of offering mentoring services during the COVID-19 pandemic; and lessons from engaging youth in research activities virtually that can be applied to future research.



Methodology

The study consisted of two components: a component in which young people were hired as research partners to be part of the Youth Research Leadership Team (YRLT) with Equivolve to co-design the study and co-analyze data, and a series of program staff interviews and youth focus groups conducted by Equivolve. The following section details the methods used to carry out this project. For more information regarding recruitment and data-collection materials, see Appendices A and B.



MENTOR MD | DC was engaged to help shape the project's youth-engagement activities. At their suggestion, Equivolve also partnered with MENTOR Memphis Grizzlies to diversify youth recruitment and understand pandemic-related adaptations to mentoring approaches in two different contexts: one in the northeast (Baltimore, Maryland) and one in the southeast

(Memphis, Tennessee). MENTOR MD | DC and MENTOR Memphis Grizzlies are both affiliates of the National Mentoring Partnership. They serve as backbone organizations that facilitate network- and capacity-building for mentoring programs in their respective localities. Both organizations played the critical role of recruiting program staff and youth participants from their affiliate mentoring programs to participate in staff interviews, youth focus groups, and the youth research team. More detailed descriptions of each partner are included in Appendix D.

YOUTH RECRUITMENT

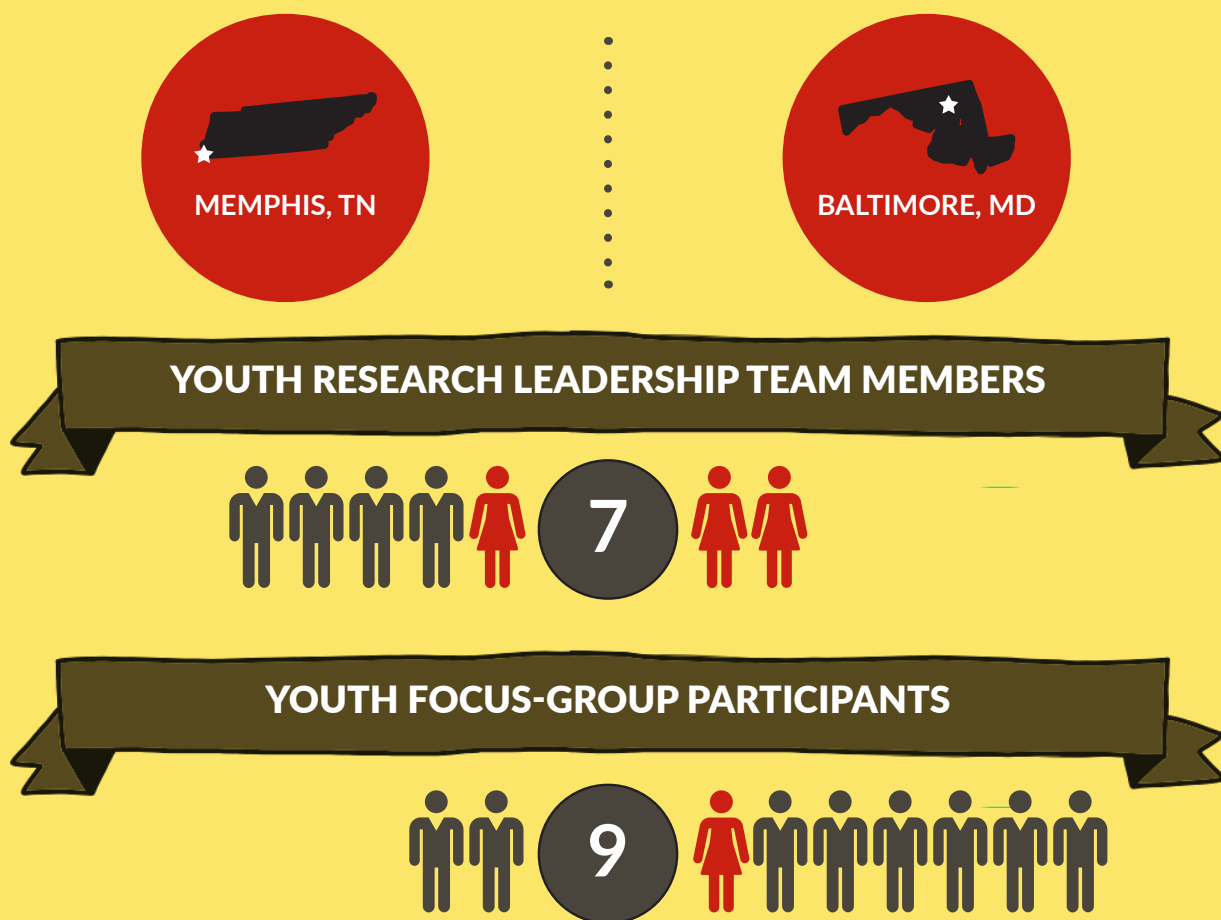
Recruitment and consent for the YRLT and focus-group participants were facilitated through MENTOR MD | DC and MENTOR Memphis Grizzlies. Both partners sent emails (with a template provided by Equivolve and available in Appendix A) to affiliate mentoring programs in their respective service areas; these programs then contacted potential youth participants to invite them to participate on the YRLT. The YRLT Opportunity Description (Appendix A) and recruitment flyer (Appendix A) were shared with potential

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participants. Interested youth identified by affiliate programs then called a toll-free web-based telephone line for their eligibility to be confirmed by the Equivolve team. Selection criteria for the YRLT and focus groups included the following: current engagement in mentoring, preferably as a mentee; between the ages of 14 and 21; and, for the YRLT only, willingness to commit 10 to 15 hours to the project over the course of 3 months. Preference was given to youth of color to promote equitable access to development opportunities, and no prior research experience was required. After confirming eligibility, youths' parents were sent the YRLT Informed Consent document (Appendix A). A parent or guardian was asked to consent to their child's participation via email or text to the Equivolve team.

All participants in the YRLT and focus groups were youth of color¹, either from the Baltimore or Memphis areas, who participated in mentoring programs during the COVID-19 pandemic. The graphic below provides more information about youth participants. Of the seven youth who participated in the YRLT, three were female and four were male; two were from Baltimore and five were from Memphis.



1. Importantly, these demographic data do not reflect youths' self-identification of their race, ethnicity, or gender. Youth were not asked to self-identify. The demographics presented here are limited, as they are based on the research team's assumptions of racial, ethnic, and gender identity.

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YRLT participants ranged in age from 14 to 17, with an average age of 15 years old. Nearly all focus-group participants were boys; two were from Memphis, and seven were from Baltimore. Focus-group participants ranged in age from 13 to 18, with an average age of 15 years old. Youth who were recruited earlier in the project timeline, shared an interest in research, and had the capacity to join more sessions were invited to join the YRLT. Youth who were recruited later in the project timeline or who had limited availability were invited to join focus groups.

YOUTH RESEARCH LEADERSHIP TEAM

A group of seven youth leaders from Baltimore and Memphis were engaged with the research team to design important parts of the project and analyze focus-group data. The YRLT helped to refine research questions and data-collection instruments and identify emerging themes in the qualitative focus-group data. Over the course of three 90-minute virtual sessions during June 2021, Equivolve facilitated research capacity-building workshops for members of the YRLT. The first session included a trial focus group about mentoring experiences to help inform the protocols co-created with the group. This was followed by a capacity-building workshop on developing research questions. The second session focused on developing data-collection instruments that addressed the research questions. The third and final session included an introduction to participatory data analysis, followed by a workshop session in which members of the YRLT co-analyzed excerpts from focus groups that Equivolve conducted with youth from local mentoring programs. Youth were asked to verbally assent to participation at the beginning of their first session. A member of the Equivolve team read the Verbal Consent script (Appendix B) aloud and asked each participant present to provide their assent to participate. Youth were paid a \$275 stipend for their participation.

YOUTH FOCUS GROUPS

Youth from the Baltimore and Memphis metropolitan areas were invited to participate in virtual focus groups to share and discuss their experiences with mentoring during the COVID-19 pandemic. A total of nine youth participated in three separate focus groups conducted by Equivolve staff during June 2021. We used an open-ended focus-group protocol that included questions co-created by the YRLT. Topics included the nature of mentoring relationships pre-pandemic, ways COVID-19 impacted interactions with mentors, what has worked well and what has been challenging for staying connected with mentors, and ways that mentoring programs can be strengthened to better serve youth. Youth were asked to verbally assent to participation at the beginning of the focus group. A member of the Equivolve team read the Verbal Consent script (Appendix B) aloud and asked each participant to provide their assent to participate. Youth were paid a \$25 incentive for their participation.

INTERVIEWS WITH MENTORING PROGRAM STAFF

Program staff from mentoring programs in the Baltimore and Memphis areas were engaged in 30–45-minute interviews so the research team could learn more about their experiences with mentoring during the COVID-19 pandemic.

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and ways the pandemic had affected (either positively or negatively) their approach to mentoring. MENTOR MD | DC and MENTOR Memphis Grizzlies sent emails to affiliate mentoring programs in their respective service areas, then staff members were recommended to participate in interviews by leadership from the affiliate mentoring programs. Recommended staff members included a mix of mentors and program-administration staff members. Five interviews were conducted during August 2021; two were conducted with Memphis program staff, and three were conducted with Baltimore program staff. Program staff interviewed included both mentors and administrative staff from affiliate mentoring programs identified by MENTOR MD | DC and MENTOR Memphis Grizzlies. Adult participants were not compensated for their participation.

Findings

The following are findings from the staff interviews and youth focus groups conducted by Equivolve staff during June 2021. YRLT participants took part in analysis of focus-group data and helped identify initial themes, contributing to the creation of these findings. This analysis and theme identification took place during the final YRLT session. Building on previous theme-identification activities, YRLT participants were shown quotes from the youth focus groups and asked to find common themes and discuss potential interpretations for given quotes.



1 How are youth socially and emotionally affected by social distancing and virtual learning during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Mentees lack sufficient mental-health support and social/emotional skill-building, especially as they navigate social isolation from the pandemic.

Considering the toll that the pandemic has had on young people's mental health, youth shared their desire to see mentoring sessions incorporate more mental-health support and social/emotional skill-building.

“They should learn how to talk to others, and you know, how to not be awkward, necessarily. ’Cause, you know, you gotta learn how to talk to others. ’Cause you gotta speak to people your whole life. And you either have to learn the easy way or the hard way. And I think that will come in handy, so you should definitely teach that.” —MENTEE

Several youth struggled with not seeing friends and some family members, and they needed an outlet for navigating those stressors. Although youth expressed challenges related to isolation from friends and family members, about half of the youth expressed appreciation for the additional time spent with family and the opportunity to strengthen bonds with the members of their household. This family bonding time seemed to help buffer stressors but was not sufficient in and of itself. During interviews, program staff also highlighted the importance of mental-health support for youth and identified this as a gap. While not all programs are currently equipped to provide this, there is an unmet need for these supports.

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2 In what ways are youth's mentors helping to support them socially and emotionally during the pandemic?

Despite the challenges of virtual settings, mentees still find value in engaging with mentors.

While mentoring conditions were not ideal for both mentors and mentees, youth still found value in participating in virtual mentoring sessions. During focus groups, we asked youth to describe ways mentoring had helped them to maintain social relationships (e.g., familial relationships, friendships, etc.) and to cope with the effects of the pandemic. Below is a description of two key benefits of virtual mentoring, as shared by youth.

Mentors help mentees strive for excellence.

Many young people found studying and school to be even more challenging during the pandemic due to virtual school settings and a decrease in academic support. Youth shared that mentors helped fill gaps in support, helping youth stay focused, motivated, and accountable.

“They kinda pushed me more, to do better than I was doing, and I think that helped a lot. Let’s say I’m doing schoolwork and I’m trying and I’m doing it, but the mentor would be there to tell me to keep striving, to do better, and that’s a really good driver for anybody in general.” —MENTEE

Mentors help mentees maintain good mental health and navigate problems.

Declining mental health due to isolation and the pandemic was a theme often identified by youth in focus groups and YRLT sessions. Engaging with mentors helped many participants to cope with changes in their mental health, even if programs did not offer support specifically focused on addressing mental-health issues. Youth also shared how mentors helped them maintain their other relationships, such as with family and friends.

“They helped us with depression during the pandemic, you know, not getting to see your friends.” —MENTEE

Some programs introduced methods for checking in with youth during mentoring sessions. Participants shared how their program incorporated mental-health checkups or other activities to address the increased need for mental-health support. While mostly informal, youth appreciated when mentoring programs built in additional one-on-one time with mentors to discuss personal topics. Having an adult who was not their parent or guardian to offer advice on mental health or relationships with family and peers was an important resource for participants.

Mentors also helped mentees make sense of the pandemic. Youth shared how important it was for them to have a space to discuss current events and fears about the pandemic.

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“We talked about a lot of the COVID news, just having discussions about everything that’s going on. We talked a lot about the fake news about COVID. And basically, he just shared information. Anything I needed. Just checked with me on that.” —MENTEE

Having access to mentors gave mentees the opportunity to talk to someone outside of their family whom they could trust. Youth participants shared the importance of having that extra support during a time when many adults in their lives were also struggling with the pandemic.

“I feel like it gave me a different state of mind than I initially had in the pandemic. And allowed me to see things in a different way than I normally do. Just having more positive influences and more positive outlets kind of showed me that you don’t really have to be negative, or life doesn’t have to be negative, even when bad stuff is happening around you.” —MENTEE

Having a space where youth could talk about their lives and be in a positive environment helped youth maintain their mental health and find positive outlets for everyday stresses.

Virtual sessions allow mentees to engage in mentoring, even if they are not at home or in their normal settings.

Before the pandemic, mentees were unable to attend mentoring sessions if they were out of town for any reason. For programs that meet on weekends or during school holidays, it can be difficult for youth to keep regular attendance due to travel or family obligations. However, when programming moved to virtual settings, mentees were able to join mentoring sessions, no matter where they were geographically located.

“I go to my dad’s all summer. And I couldn’t really do any of the activities because they were always in person. But ever since we had the pandemic, I was always able to just log on, and you know, we can talk. That made it easier. I’m not always lost [in the discussion] . . . I can always enter in a group.” —MENTEE

While the virtual setting sometimes posed some challenges for youth who were seeking in-person connections, youth typically appreciated the flexibility that virtual sessions offered. They felt that the virtual sessions provided more understanding of the daily activities they were managing. Meeting virtually meant that mentors and youth were (virtually) invited into one another’s homes, exposed to family members, background noise, or other happenings taking place in the home at that time.

“[The pandemic] just allowed for everybody to be more understanding and flexible. ‘Cause, like, me right now, I’m at my grandparents’ house, and I’m on Zoom. You know, so, and I’m not always at home. Especially with background noises and stuff . . . it happens often. And, like, I apologize for it, but it’s just normal. And I feel like everybody’s understanding that everybody might not have the privilege to have a quiet space, you know what I mean?” —MENTEE

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Being able to attend sessions even when youth are not in person in their regular environments can also help mentees maintain contact with their mentors and peers and add stability in the midst of changing circumstances during the pandemic.

Classes and mentoring in a virtual environment helped some youth perform better academically and develop their skills and interests.

While most participants shared that remaining engaged in school and activities was more difficult in a virtual environment, some shared that they were able to concentrate more on schoolwork and saw an improvement in their grades. Normal distractions at school, such as friends and peers, were no longer a problem.

“I think I’ve done a lot better when it comes to schoolwork. Like, a lot better. You know, last year in eighth grade, I think my lowest grade I ever had was a C. I’ve been keeping up with all A’s this year. And I think it was because I’m not getting distracted by other people. I’m a really talkative person, and I tend to get distracted by talking to others. I think this year—I mean, I understand it sucks being isolated, but for me, it helped me a lot with my academics.” —MENTEE

Some mentees found that attending school and mentoring in a virtual environment allowed them to have more time to develop other skills and interests that they would not have otherwise been able to explore. The extra time to pursue their passions was a silver lining in having to remain home and isolated from peers during the pandemic.

“This year I found my aspirations—you know, things I want to do. . . I just found things that I deeply enjoy, and yeah, I wouldn’t be able to do that if I didn’t have a little bit of time off.” —MENTEE

While some mentees attributed discovering new interests to boredom and not being able to do their normal activities, many agreed that the increased down time was a positive change. Having down time was often mentioned as a change caused by the pandemic that youth hoped would continue, even after the pandemic ends.



3 What positive and/or challenging elements have been introduced to mentoring relationships since the start of COVID-19?

Communication can become more difficult in a virtual setting.

Focus-group and YRLT participants shared that communicating with their mentors became challenging when they had to conduct sessions virtually, for a number of reasons. Youth shared that there were plenty of distractions at home, including siblings, TV, familial responsibilities, and other activities in which they were involved.

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In addition to unavoidable distractions, building trust and maintaining connections between mentors and mentees was more difficult in virtual settings. Both mentors and mentees shared a preference for face-to-face and one-on-one interactions when possible. Mentees may have a more difficult time communicating their challenges virtually.

“It’s just that things that are happening around me scare me sometimes, and the things like in the news that scare me, and I’ll tell my teachers that. And I would tell my mentor that if he asked, but I would never like to openly tell him, just like, face-to-face. Yes, I’m scared of this . . . because we’re not that level of trust yet, ’cause I haven’t seen him face-to-face as much as I’ve seen other people.” —MENTEE

Even when a previous connection has been established, virtual settings often hindered deeper connections from forming between mentors and mentees. Some participants shared that while they still went to mentoring sessions, the mood or feeling of the meetings that took place during the pandemic changed how they interacted or engaged with mentors.

“We still have a group conversation and stuff like that, but it’s just way better in person. So, it’s just missing that intimacy to be better able to further your relationship with your mentors.” —MENTEE

Mentoring sessions can become repetitive and not as engaging in a virtual setting. Virtual sessions often need more structure and variety.

Youth shared that virtual sessions often lacked structure and were not as engaging as the in-person sessions they would have otherwise had. Programs were not always able to adapt sessions to virtual settings and were unable to keep the same level of energy that mentees expected.

“It’s, like, kind of hard to do events . . . on, like, the computer and stuff like that virtually. Because there wouldn’t be the same type of energy and things like that.” —MENTEE

Based on what mentors and mentees shared, programs that were able to either adapt their programming to a virtual environment or create opportunities for mentors and mentees to meet one-on-one or in person were better able to support mentees and keep them engaged in mentoring sessions. This sentiment was shared by mentees who remained connected with mentors via video calls, texting, and some in-person sessions, as well as mentors who had connected with their mentees in those same ways.



4 What virtual or socially distanced mentoring approaches do youth find most engaging? Which ones are most challenging? What are the opportunities and limitations of technology in the context of both in-person mentoring and e-mentoring?

Research participants shared insights on how to improve support for mentors and mentees when programming cannot be held in person, as well as ideas for how to adapt curriculum to a virtual setting.

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Youth found both one-on-one and group mentoring sessions to be engaging.



Mentees shared needing different settings and environments to speak with mentors. When there were challenging or tough topics that mentees needed to discuss with their mentors, several youth preferred a group setting. Having tough conversations in a group setting may have taken some of the pressure off the young person to deal with the topic alone. Some youth preferred one-on-one time with mentors, appreciating the more intimate setting and the opportunity to have dedicated time during which the two of them could connect. The combination of one-on-one and group settings may be ideal. Youth then have the opportunity to develop stronger individual relationships with their mentor and to also build positive relationships and learn teamwork skills alongside their peers.

“I noticed a lot of people in our group [working alone]. . . I realized that now, why they give us so many teamwork projects . . . because we’re at an all-boys school and everything is like a competition. Every dude is trying to be better than the other, which is understandable. . . I think that’s why they give us so many teamwork games—to show us that it’s better to work together rather than work alone, without anyone.” —MENTEE

Youth felt most engaged when they were participating in interactive recreational activities with their mentors.

Keeping both mentors and mentees engaged in a virtual setting was a notable challenge for many youth and program staff. Based on our interviews with program staff and youth, building virtual, interactive sessions between more lecture- or discussion-based mentoring sessions helped both mentors and mentees stay engaged in the relationship and maintain interest in group activities. Some examples that mentees shared of engaging virtual interactive activities included online scavenger hunts, virtual-reality meetings, and designing video games online using available software.

Youth desired personalized discussion topics and events based on their own interests and needs.

Mentees shared their desire for more personalized mentoring. Asking mentees about their interests and passions when they join a mentoring program and then incorporating their answers into the curriculum or mentoring sessions can help improve engagement, as well as help mentees discover new interests by hearing what their peers or mentors are interested in.

Youth revealed diverse needs. When possible, tailoring supports for mentees based on their life experiences or circumstances can help build relationships between mentors and mentees and improve mentee engagement in programs by showing extra care for their needs and providing additional support where needed.

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“All boys aren’t the same. So, like, a lot of kids have different experiences in life. Where one kid might grow up having a really hard life, living poor, so his need may be different from somebody who’s, like, financially stable or something. So, I believe, like, the mentor program should be more personalized to each kid, so you really know what to give each kid, rather than, like, a generalized program.” —MENTEE

Unreliable internet connections can present challenges for mentor/mentee engagement.

Possibly the most challenging consideration, both mentors and mentees emphasized the importance of a reliable internet connection. Without reliable internet connections during social-distancing or stay-at-home orders, mentors and youth connected only by telephone. When youth were unable to meet with their mentors virtually or participate in any online interactive activities together, youth felt less engaged in the relationship. Systematic barriers such as this may not be readily addressed by individual mentoring programs due to the scale of the problem and resources needed to address them.

Youth appreciate the opportunities to meet with their mentor in person.

Conducting mentoring using a virtual platform can be challenging. According to youth, virtual sessions can be repetitive and lack the same quality of engagement that in-person sessions have. While the usual in-person activities could not be held during the COVID-19 pandemic, adapting regular programming for the outdoors or incorporating other outdoor activities, when possible, helped both mentors and mentees prevent mentoring sessions from feeling monotonous. Outdoor activities gave mentors and mentees opportunities to get out of the house and seemed to improve mentor and mentee relationships and communication that might otherwise be held back by virtual platforms.

Scheduled opportunities for mentors and mentees to interact and communicate provided more structure to mentoring relationships and helped to shape both mentor and mentee expectations.

While it is important that mentees know they can always reach out to their mentor, mentees benefit from having set times to meet, rather than having to schedule with mentors individually. Creating times beforehand rather than relying on youth to reach out to mentors if they needed extra support helped youth to better manage their schedules and to meet with mentors more frequently. The added structure also seemed to benefit mentors by allowing them to plan their schedules ahead of time. While both youth and mentors expressed appreciation for the structured timing of meetings, youth did not necessarily need the meetings to be as clearly planned. For example, one young person shared that some flexibility around what happens during those meetings could promote more bonding with their mentor.

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“Give that little push to like, oh, go to a restaurant with your mentor—oh, go to this with your mentor, or just . . . like, a park, where the mentor could just, like, have a walk with you . . . like, each of their mentors could just, like, have walks, where each of them could have, like, a bonding moment, which just connects them more and will make them less shy to talk to them, or will not make them less comfortable to talk with them.”—MENTEE

Mentors also shared how structured programming allowed for more flexibility in their everyday lives, something that many adults needed during the COVID-19 pandemic to address shifting needs and responsibilities.

Youth connected with their mentors often, usually formally meeting about once every couple weeks and engaging frequently through texting.

Youth engaged with their mentors using multiple virtual mediums: video meeting platforms like Zoom, telephone conversations, email, and texting. Among the various mediums, youth seemed most amenable to texting. Texting allowed them to connect with mentors quickly and share updates or check in to see how the other was doing. Some youth used group texting to communicate with their mentors and other youth who were a part of their mentoring group. According to one mentee, group texts allowed youth to “talk about personal issues that [they] don’t really feel comfortable talking about in a big group.” The youth were also able to share new hobbies and skills they were developing. One mentee used the group chat to learn about new projects their peers were working on and to share her growing interest in crocheting. The group texts seemed to help build community among youth and provide additional opportunities for them to support one another.

While texting was used by some of the mentoring programs that youth participated in used texting as a mode of communication before the pandemic, it became more frequent after mentoring programs adopting virtual settings. Equivolve also found communicating with youth via text helped improve their attendance at both YRLT sessions and focus groups. Youth shared how texting should continue to be used as a method of communication, even after the pandemic ends.

“[I communicate with my mentor] mainly through texting. I have to make sure to check up on him, or he has to make sure to check up on me, and I think that’s one of the hardest parts—is just knowing to check up on them because we’re not in person.”—MENTEE

Parental involvement helps to keep youth engaged in mentor programming.

While mentoring staff in both Baltimore and Memphis shared that it has been difficult to involve parents in virtual mentoring activities, most agreed that young people whose parents are more engaged with mentoring programs and activities are generally more likely to come to and participate in sessions. Engaged parents can have multiple roles in mentoring, based on the specifics of a program. Roles could include advising mentoring programs on topics that could be covered by mentoring curriculum or additional

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resources needed that could help support their child, engaging in outdoor mentoring activities or field trips, and providing extra space for mentees to discuss topics covered during mentoring sessions.

The major challenges for parental involvement in virtual mentoring include parents being unfamiliar with virtual platforms and therefore unable to help students navigate the platforms, and parental expectations for virtual mentoring not aligning with the adapted curriculum used by mentoring programs. One mentor mentioned that parents may view mentoring programs as additional afterschool childcare, and therefore do not view themselves as having a role in programming. Some program staff also mentioned that pandemic circumstances have generally been difficult for many parents, who are not only struggling to adapt but are also unable to provide additional support for their children to engage in mentoring programs.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic continues to create many challenges for mentors, mentees, and mentoring programs. Lessons learned from each of their unique experiences can help programs to better engage participants and address the mentor and mentee needs that developed as a result of the pandemic, social distancing, and virtual engagement.

The pandemic required mentoring programs, mentors, and youth to quickly pivot to a virtual format. Mentoring via virtual platforms requires stable internet access for mentors and mentees. Not only does having reliable internet enable mentors and mentees to continue building their relationships and engaging in mentoring activities, but organizations such as the United Nations have declared **internet access to be a human right**. Without internet access for mentors and mentees, equity gaps in mentoring and education are inevitable, with already-underserved communities continuing to be unable to access necessary information and support. While mentoring programs may be able to address other engagement barriers caused by the pandemic through program changes, structural barriers such as lack of reliable internet connection require a larger investment of time and resources that individual programs do not have.

While a virtual setting presented some implementation challenges for mentoring programs (for example, retaining mentors), it is clear that continuing to make mentoring programs available to youth is critical. According to young people in this study, mentors served as an important source of social and mental-health support. Specifically, mentors provided youth with a space to discuss challenges around the pandemic, virtual schooling, and familial relationships. Regular check-ins between mentees and their mentors also provided a space for youth to discuss issues they may not want to discuss with their parents or other adults. While virtual mentoring mostly helped youth to maintain social relationships and cope with the effects of the pandemic, some mentees struggled and did not feel engaged during virtual interactions with their mentors. Mentors who incorporated interactive virtual activities or some in-person interactions seemed to have the most success with youth.

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To ensure that mentoring programs are prepared to better serve youth as the pandemic endures, this study's findings support three key recommendations:

- During (and even after) the pandemic, offer multiple methods for mentors to connect with mentees: telephone calls, text messages, video conferencing, and in-person interactions. Youth appreciated the flexibility that virtual platforms offered and indicated that it allowed them to remain connected with their mentors despite geographic location.
- Provide mentors with guidance on how to incorporate interactive activities into meetings with their mentees, whether virtual or in person.
- Offer a resource list for mentors or opportunities for mentors to connect with one another for social support. Mentors served as an important source of support for youth facing mental-health challenges during the pandemic, yet they are also coping with the effects of the pandemic. Offering mental-health support to mentors may help to address mentor retention issues and prevent burnout.

Exploring innovative techniques to engage youth in mentoring can help youth-development organizations and programs better prepare for potential future situations in which in-person activities cannot be held. Ultimately, lessons from mentoring during the COVID-19 pandemic have the potential to make mentoring programs stronger, more agile, and more sustainable.

Appendices

Appendix A: Recruitment Materials

Appendix B: Interview and Focus Group Protocols

Appendix C: YRLT Workshop Descriptions and Objections

Appendix D: Mentoring Partners Program Descriptions

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Appendix A: Recruitment Materials

RECRUITMENT EMAIL FOR MENTOR ORGANIZATIONS

Dear [INSERT NAME],

[Maryland MENTOR/MENTOR Memphis] is working with Equivolve Consulting to learn how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted mentoring. The goal of the project is to uncover ideas for how the mentoring field can continue to best serve youth, especially youth of color, both now and after the pandemic.

The exciting thing about this project is youth will be directly involved in a couple ways. We'd love your help identifying youth currently involved in mentoring to join us on this project.

First, we're assembling a Youth Research Leadership Team to work directly with Equivolve on study design, recruitment, and data analysis. This is an awesome leadership and learning opportunity for any youth who has an interest and a little extra time. No prior research experience is required.

Specifically, we're looking for youth, preferably of color, between the ages of 14-21 to take part in a series of virtual facilitated meetings with Equivolve staff. These meetings will include some research training and then collective work to design the study and analyze data. Participation in the Youth Research Leadership Team will require about 10-15 hours of time spread out between March, April, and possibly early May. A stipend of \$275 will be given to each member of the team.

Do you know a couple of youths who might be interested? If so, let me know and we can work together to get them set up and paid for the opportunity.

Second, we're recruiting current mentees to participate in focus groups for this project. We're looking for youth between the ages of 14-18 who are currently engaged in mentoring. Focus group participants will be asked to attend an hour-long virtual session with other participants and Equivolve staff in April or May and will receive \$25 for their contribution.

Attached are flyers for both opportunities so you can easily share with youth who might be interested.

Involvement in this research is completely voluntary. Youth insight is incredibly valuable in getting the full picture of how to support mentors and mentees. We so appreciate your help bringing them in. As an extra thank you we've set aside a small stipend for your organization. I'll follow up with details.

Thank you for your time and help with recruitment! Let me know if you have any questions. Otherwise, I look forward to hearing from you about youth who might be interested, especially in the Youth Research Leadership Team. Please send all responses by [INSERT DATE] Talk soon!

Keeping Mentoring Connections in a Socially Distanced World

YOUTH RESEARCH LEADERSHIP TEAM RECRUITMENT MATERIALS AND CONSENT FORMS

Do you want to change mentoring for the better?? Has COVID-19 affected your mentoring relationships? Bring your voice to the table. Join Equivolve's Youth Research Leadership Team!

The COVID-19 pandemic has undoubtedly impacted mentoring for youth, mentors, and mentorship programs. To better understand that impact, Maryland MENTOR and MENTOR Memphis are working with Equivolve Consulting to learn more, specifically from the youth perspective. We're partnering to conduct youth-engaged research with the goal of learning how mentorship programs can adapt to better serve youth both during and after the pandemic.

We're recruiting youth leaders to be part of this project's Youth Leadership Research Team. With Equivolve's help, Youth Research Leadership Team members will work in a small group to design important parts of the research and analyze focus group and interview data. This is an excellent opportunity for youth who are interested in research, mentoring, or making change in their communities. No prior research experience is required. The Equivolve team will train youth on relevant research principles as part of this opportunity.

Scope of Work:

Youth leaders will participate in 3 virtual meetings of approximately 90 minutes each to learn about research, create a qualitative research plan, and analyze resulting data. Meetings will occur in late March, April, and possibly early May. Youth may also be asked to do some work in preparation for and between meetings. Drawing on their direct experience with mentoring, youth will be instrumental in developing a research approach that's truly responsive to current mentees.

Qualifications:

- Must currently be engaged in mentoring, preferably as a mentee
- Must be between the ages of 14-21
- Must be willing to commit between 10-15 hours over the course of three months - Preference will be given to youth of color
- No prior research experience required

Compensation:

Youth leaders will be paid a \$275 stipend for their engagement and work.

If interested, please contact [FILL IN]. The deadline to show interest is [FILL IN].

Join the Mentoring Youth Research Leadership Team!

Maryland MENTOR and MENTOR Memphis are working with Equivolve Consulting to learn about how the pandemic has affected mentoring. And we want you to help us design and analyze this research!

We're recruiting youth leaders to be part of the project's Youth Research Leadership Team. This small team will work with Equivolve to design the research and analyze data. This is an excellent opportunity if you're interested in research, mentoring, or making change in your community. No research experience is required. The Equivolve team will train you on research principles as part of this opportunity.



Scope of Work:

Youth leaders will participate in 3 virtual meetings of approximately 90 minutes each to learn about research, create a qualitative research plan, and analyze resulting data. Meetings will occur in April, May and possibly early June. Youth may also be asked to do some work in preparation meetings.

Qualifications:

- Must currently be engaged in mentoring, preferably as a mentee
- Must be between the ages of 14-21
- Must be willing to commit between 10-15 hours over the course of three months (April-June)
- Preference will be given to youth of color
- No prior research experience required

Compensation:

Youth leaders will be compensated with a \$275 stipend for their engagement and work.

If interested, please contact **[FILL IN]**. The deadline to show interest is **[FILL IN]**.

This project has been reviewed and approved by Heartland Institutional Review Board. Questions concerning your rights as a participant in this research may be addressed to: Heartland Institutional Review Board – Ph: 866.618. HIRB – director@heartlandirb.org

Keeping Mentoring Connections in a Socially Distanced World

PARENT/GUARDIAN CONSENT FORM - YOUTH RESEARCH LEADERSHIP TEAM

The Equivolve team, along with Maryland MENTOR and MENTOR Memphis, is excited to work with youth to help improve mentoring! Thank you for considering the participation of your child on this project's Youth Research Leadership Team (YRLT). The objective of the project is to understand how the COVID-19 has impacted mentoring from the perspective of youth and mentorship program staff. The best part of the project plan is the opportunity to work directly with a small group of youth to help us design the study, recruit participants, and analyze data. Drawing on their direct experience with mentoring, youth will be instrumental in developing a research approach that's truly responsive to current mentees.

Youth Research Leadership Team members will participate in 3 virtual meetings of approximately 90 minutes each to learn about research, create a qualitative research plan, and analyze resulting data. Meetings will occur in late March, April, and possibly early May. Youth may also be asked to do some work in preparation meetings. Youth will be given a stipend of \$275 for their work on this project.

This is an excellent opportunity for youth who are interested in research, mentoring, or making change in their community. No research experience is required. The Equivolve team will train members of the YRLT on research principles as part of this opportunity.

Before we can work with your child as part of the Youth Research Leadership Team, it is important that we get your consent. Here are a couple of important notes:

- There's no right or wrong on this project. We expect youth will be learning as they go and we'll work with them accordingly. We just want to bring their valuable experience as mentees into the design of this study and understanding of the results.
- We do not anticipate any risks associated with participation in this project. It is possible that sensitive topics will come up related to mentoring in the course of the conversation, but this is likely to be minimal and not present any risk to participants.
- Your child doesn't have to participate if they don't want to. If at any time they wish to end their participation, they can do so.
- We will not attach your child's name to anything that they say during the project or as a member of the YRLT. Their contribution will be confidential and never tied to their identity. Their contribution will not affect their participation in their mentoring program.
- We will record the meetings to make sure we remember the content of each session. We will not be sharing this recording with anyone outside the Equivolve team.

Do you have any questions about this project or your child's participation? If so, please contact teja@equivolve.com. If you consent and agree for your child to participate on the YRLT, please reply (by text or email) to the person who sent you this document with the following message, "I give my consent for [insert your child's name here] to participate in the mentoring focus group."

Thank you!

The Equivolve Team

Keeping Mentoring Connections in a Socially Distanced World

YOUTH RESEARCH LEADERSHIP TEAM VERBAL ASSENT FORM

Thank you for meeting with the Equivolve team today! We are excited to be engaging you in the Youth Research Leadership Team (YRLT). The objective of this project is to talk to youth mentees and adults working in mentorship programs to understand how COVID-19 has impacted mentoring. Youth leaders will participate in three virtual meetings of approximately 90 minutes each to learn about research, create a qualitative research plan, and analyze resulting data. Meetings will occur in April, May, and possibly late June. Youth may also be asked to do some work in preparation meetings.

Before starting our first session, it is important that we get your consent so we can use information we learn from you to help the study. Here are a couple of notes:

- Each session will last approximately 90 minutes. There will be three separate virtual sessions. - There are no right or wrong answers to the questions we'll ask. We are just interested in learning about your personal experience and opinions.
- We do not anticipate any risks associated with participation in this project. It is possible that sensitive topics will come up related to mentoring in the course of the conversation, but this is likely to be minimal and not present any risk to participants.
- You don't have to participate if you don't want to. If at any time you wish to stop you can simply do so.
- We will not attach your name to anything that you say during the project. Your responses will be confidential and never tied to your identity.
- We will record the YRLT sessions to make sure your full responses are in our notes. This recording will only be available to Equivolve team members and will not be shared with anyone outside the Equivolve team.

All reports based on this research and written by the researcher will maintain the confidentiality of individuals in the group. Only group data will be reported, and no names will be used. Since YRLT sessions involves a group process, all members of the group will be privy to the discussions that occur during the session; therefore, absolute confidentiality on the part of the participants, themselves, may be difficult to ensure.

Do you have any questions about this project or your participation I can answer now? You may also contact teja@equivolve.com if you have further questions or would like a copy of this assent form. If you consent, please state your name and agreement to participate.

Researcher Signatur

Participant Name

Date of Signage

Keeping Mentoring Connections in a Socially Distanced World

YOUTH FOCUS GROUP RECRUITMENT MATERIALS AND CONSENT FORMS

Let's Talk About Mentoring and the Pandemic.

Maryland MENTOR and MENTOR Memphis are working with Equivolve Consulting to learn about how the pandemic has affected mentoring. We want to hear directly from youth about your experience and how mentoring can change to better serve you both during and after the pandemic.

To learn more we're inviting youth to join focus group discussions about experiences with mentoring over the past year. There's no right or wrong answers in these focus groups, just honest and confidential conversations about how things are going for you.



Details:

You'll participate in one 60-minute focus group meeting in April with the Equivolve team and other youth participants. You'll receive \$25 for your time.

Qualifications:

- Must currently be engaged in mentoring, preferably as a mentee
- Must be between the ages of 14-18
- Must be willing to commit one hour in April or May
- Preference will be given to youth of color

If interested, please contact **[FILL IN]**. The deadline to show interest is **[FILL IN]**.

This project has been reviewed and approved by Heartland Institutional Review Board. Questions concerning your rights as a participant in this research may be addressed to: Heartland Institutional Review Board – Ph: 866.618. HIRB – director@heartlandirb.org

Keeping Mentoring Connections in a Socially Distanced World

PARENT/GUARDIAN CONSENT FORM - YOUTH FOCUS GROUP ON MENTORING

The Equivolve team, along with Maryland MENTOR and MENTOR Memphis, is excited to hear from youth about their experience with mentoring! Thank you for considering the participation of your child in this evaluation. The objective of this project is to join youth mentees and adults working in mentorship programs to understand how COVID-19 has impacted mentoring. Because your child is a current mentee in a mentoring program, we want to hear about their experience with mentoring during the pandemic. We hope to use this information to inform ideas for how the mentoring field can better serve youth both now and after pandemic restrictions have ended.

If you agree to their participation, your child will participate in one 60-minute virtual focus group in April or early May. Your child will receive \$25 as a thank you for their participation.

Before we can talk with your child, it is important that we get your consent. Here are a couple of important notes:

- There are no right or wrong answers to the questions we'll ask. We are just interested in learning about your child's personal experience and opinions.
- We do not anticipate any risks associated with participation in this project. It is possible that sensitive topics will come up related to mentoring in the course of the conversation, but this is likely to be minimal and not present any risk to participants.
- Your child doesn't have to participate if they don't want to. If at any time they wish to end their participation they can do so.
- We will not attach your child's name to anything that they say during the project. Their responses will be confidential and never tied to their identity. Their comments will not affect their participation in their mentoring program.
- We will record the focus group to make sure we have your child's full responses in our notes. This recording will only be available to Equivolve team members and will not be shared with anyone outside the Equivolve team.

All reports based on this research and written by the researcher will maintain the confidentiality of individuals in the group. Only group data will be reported and no names will be used. Since a focus group involves a group process, all members of the group will be privy to the discussions that occur during the session; therefore, absolute confidentiality on the part of the participants, themselves, may be difficult to ensure.

Do you have any questions about this project or your child's participation? If so, please contact teja@equivolve.com. If you consent and agree for your child to participate, please reply (by text or email) to the person who sent you this document with the following message, "I give my consent for [insert your child's name here] to participate in the mentoring focus group."

This project has been reviewed and approved by the Heartland Institutional Review Board. Questions concerning your rights as a participant in this research may be addressed to: Heartland Institutional Review Board – Ph: 866.618.HIRB – director@heartlandirb.org

Thank you!

The Equivolve Team

Keeping Mentoring Connections in a Socially Distanced World

YOUTH FOCUS GROUP VERBAL ASSENT FORM

Thank you for meeting with the Equivolve team today! The objective of this project is to talk to youth mentees and adults working in mentorship programs to understand how COVID-19 has impacted mentoring. As current mentees in a youth mentoring program, we hope to hear about your personal feelings and thoughts on how pandemic restrictions have affected your mentoring experience. We hope to use this information to come up with ideas for how mentorship programs can better serve youth both now and after the COVID pandemic. We appreciate you taking the time to talk with us and share your experiences.

Before starting, it is important that we get your consent so we can use information we learn from you to help the study. Here are a couple of notes:

- This focus group will last about one hour.
- There are no right or wrong answers to the questions we'll ask. We are just interested in learning about your personal experience and opinions.
- We do not anticipate any risks associated with participation in this project. It is possible that sensitive topics will come up related to mentoring in the course of the conversation, but this is likely to be minimal and not present any risk to participants.
- You don't have to participate if you don't want to. If at any time you wish to stop you can simply do so.
- We will not attach your name to anything that you say during the project. Your responses will be confidential and never tied to your identity.
- We will record the focus group to make sure we have your child's full responses in our notes. This recording will only be available to Equivolve team members and will not be shared with anyone outside the Equivolve team.

All reports based on this research and written by the researcher will maintain the confidentiality of individuals in the group. Only group data will be reported and no names will be used. Since a focus group involves a group process, all members of the group will be privy to the discussions that occur during the session; therefore, absolute confidentiality on the part of the participants, themselves, may be difficult to ensure.

This project has been reviewed and approved by the Heartland Institutional Review Board. Questions concerning your rights as a participant in this research may be addressed to: Heartland Institutional Review Board – Ph: 866.618.HIRB – director@heartlandirb.org

Do you have any questions about this project or your participation I can answer now? You may also contact teja@equivolve.com if you have further questions or would like a copy of this assent form. If you consent, please state your name and agreement to participate.

Researcher Signatur

Participant Name

Date of Signage

Keeping Mentoring Connections in a Socially Distanced World

ADULT KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEW RECRUITMENT EMAIL AND CONSENT FORMS

Adult Key Informant Interview Recruitment Email

Dear _____,

[Maryland MENTOR/MENTOR Memphis] is working with Equivolve Consulting to learn how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted mentoring. The goal of the project is to uncover ideas for how the mentoring field can continue to best serve youth, especially youth of color, both now and after the pandemic.

Equivolve is a Baltimore-based strategy firm that uses innovative research and evaluation approaches to help leaders and organizations drive equitable results in the United States and around the world. We believe that equity is not simply a destination or an outcome; instead, it is a means by which we attain a just society.

As part of the study, we will be conducting interviews with adult staff of mentorship programs. As someone who works in a mentoring program, we hope to hear about your experience with how pandemic restrictions have affected your work and mentoring generally. We hope to use this information to inform improvements and ideas for the mentoring field and how programs can

continue to best serve youth and mentors both now and after the pandemic.

Involvement in this research is completely voluntary. Your insight is incredibly valuable in getting the full picture of how to support mentors and mentees. All interviews will take place in either April or May and will be conducted by Equivolve staff.

Thank you for your time and we hope you will join our study! Let me know if you have any questions. Otherwise, I look forward to hearing from you about your potential interest in being an interview participant. Please send all responses by [INSERT DATE] Talk soon!

Keeping Mentoring Connections in a Socially Distanced World

KEY INFORMANT VERBAL ASSENT FORM

Thank you for meeting with the Equivolve team today! The objective of this project is to join youth mentees and adults working in mentorship programs to understand how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted mentoring. As someone who works in a mentoring program, we hope to hear about your experience with how pandemic restrictions have affected your work and mentoring generally. We hope to use this information to inform improvements and ideas for the mentoring field and how programs can continue to best serve youth and mentors both now and after the pandemic. We appreciate you taking the time to talk with us and share your experiences.

Before starting, it is important that we get your consent to hear about your work and use information we learn to help the evaluation. Here are a couple of notes:

- This interview will take 45 minutes to an hour.
- There are no right or wrong answers to the questions we'll ask. We are just interested in learning about your own experience and opinions.
- We do not anticipate any risks associated with participation in this project. It is possible that sensitive topics will come up related to mentoring in the course of the conversation, but this is likely to be minimal and not present any risk to participants.
- You don't have to participate if you don't want to. If at any time you wish to end your participation you can do so.
- We will not attach your name to anything that you say during the project. Your responses will be confidential and never tied to your identity.
- We will record the focus group to make sure we have your child's full responses in our notes. This recording will only be available to Equivolve team members and will not be shared with anyone outside the Equivolve team.

Do you have any questions about this project or your participation that I can answer now? You may also contact teja@equivolve.com if you have further questions or would like a copy of this assent form. If you consent, please state your name and agreement to participate.

Researcher Signatur

Participant Name

Date of Signage

Appendix B: Interview and Focus Group Protocols

YRLT FIRST MEETING FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL

Equivolve Consulting Mentoring and COVID-19 Research Project

YoUTH RESEARCH TEAM FOCUS GROUP GUIDE FOR FIRST MEETING

A. INTRODUCTION

1. First, we'll start with introductions. Go around and say your name, how old you are, and how long you've been living in [Memphis or Baltimore].
2. Tell us something about yourself. If you were to choose a spirit animal that represents you best, what would it be?

B. RESPONSE TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Before we talk about mentoring, we want to talk a little bit about the last year, especially the pandemic and how things have been going.

1. Can you tell me a little about how things have been going for you, especially since the pandemic began?
 - a) How are things with your family?
 - b) How are things with your friends?
 - c) How are things with school?
 - d) How are things with mentors or other adults in your life?
2. What do you think are some of the biggest challenges youth or young adults like you have been dealing with since the pandemic? Remember you can share your own challenges or challenges you've seen others experience.
 - a) Probes: getting along with family, connecting with friends, finding/keeping a job, virtual school, staying healthy, dealing with racial injustice, other issues?
3. What do you think has gone well for youth or young adults like you since the pandemic?
 - a) Probes: more time with family, more time with friends, virtual school, work, health, others?
4. Have you tried anything new that you wouldn't have tried before the pandemic?
5. Thinking about challenges you or other [youth or young adults] have experienced since the pandemic began, have you or others had someone to help you deal with the challenges?

Keeping Mentoring Connections in a Socially Distanced World

C. MENTORING EXPERIENCES OVERALL & DURING COVID-19

Now, we want to talk about mentoring experiences in [Memphis or Baltimore] for young people who are between the ages of 14 and 24. You can answer using your own experiences or experiences that you know others your age have had.

1. Do all of you have a mentor? Tell me about them.
 - a) How long have they been your mentor?
 - b) How did you meet them?
2. Do you know anyone who wants a mentor but doesn't know where to find one? Where have they looked?
3. What do you like most about your relationship with your mentors? [provide time for responses] Are there any ways you'd like to see your relationship with your mentor improve?
 - a) [If youth met a mentor before pandemic began] Has anything about your relationship changed since the pandemic began?
 - b) Probes: how often you meet, where you meet, the topics you discuss?

D. PARTNERING TO CO-DESIGN RESEARCH

Part of our work together is to design a research project focused on mentoring throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. We want to be able to tell others about how the pandemic has affected mentoring relationships and make recommendations about what can be done to help connect young people with mentors.

1. Can you share any ways that your mentor has done a good job of staying connected with you throughout the pandemic? What about your friend's mentors?
 - a) Is there anything that has been especially helpful?
 - b) Is there anything they could do differently?
2. If you were talking to someone who provides funding to mentoring programs in your city, what would you tell them should be done? What are the most important things they could spend money on to help young people stay connected with mentors?
3. What if you were talking to people who run mentoring programs? What information do they need to know about young people to do a better job of helping them stay connected with mentors?
 - a) Probe: Before the pandemic? After the pandemic?
4. If you were leading a research project on mentoring during the pandemic, what questions would you ask:
 - a) People who fund mentoring programs?
 - b) People run mentoring programs?
 - c) People who mentor youth?
 - d) Youth who participate in mentoring?

E. CLOSING

We're wrapping up here, but before we close, we have one last question for everybody.

1. Think about one person in your life who has had a positive influence on you. Tell us one word to describe that person.

Keeping Mentoring Connections in a Socially Distanced World

YOUTH FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL

Youth Perspectives in Mentoring During COVID-19

INTERNAL: What we want to learn from this focus group

- How the changes brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic have affected youth.
- Specifically, how their mentoring relationships have changed and if/how these changes further affect youth.
- Opinions about what is working and what is not working about their mentoring relationships during this crisis.
- Ideas and innovations about how mentoring can be better – both spurred by things they’ve experienced and learned during COVID-19 and things they might have thought about before.

START HERE: Focus Group Protocol – Intro Script

- Introduce ourselves as individuals, introduce Equivolve and our role
 - Introduce ourselves as individuals.
 - Equivolve is a consulting firm that works with companies, government, charities and philanthropy, and non-profits like Maryland MENTOR and MENTOR Memphis to create and research strategies that improve racial, social, gender, and other kinds of equity.
 - Our role on this project is to talk with youth who have been in mentoring during the COVID pandemic and learn what their experience is like. The goal is to learn things that have been hard but also see if there are any surprisingly positive things that can help mentoring programs serve youth even better. We’re also working with a small group of youth who are helping us design this project and understand what we learn from you all, so we’re really excited to have youth perspective on all sides.
- Provide overview of the purpose of the focus group
 - The purpose of this focus group is, like I just mentioned, to understand what mentoring has been like for you all during the pandemic. We also want to hear from you what you think mentors and mentoring programs should learn from this time and how they can apply it to make mentoring better.
 - This is meant to be a discussion and there are definitely no right or wrong answers. We are interested in hearing any of your personal experience, opinions, feelings, and ideas that you want to share.
 - Your thoughts will inform a better understanding about how mentoring is going during the pandemic and what mentors and mentor programs can do to improve mentoring both for the rest of the pandemic and afterwards.
- Briefly mention compensation and how that’ll be arranged – fill in with details from the program when known.
- Ask to record, stating that it helps us to remember the discussion. We will also take notes. State that individual responses will not be shared – we will compile the themes and patterns from focus groups to help mentoring programs understand how things are going and what can be better.
- Do a check-in before starting. Does anyone have any questions? Is the group ready to begin the discussion?
- Start the recording. State you’re doing so.

Keeping Mentoring Connections in a Socially Distanced World

Focus Group Protocol – Discussion Script

1. To begin, please share your name and age and tell us a little bit about how you're involved in mentoring. For example, are you a mentor or mentee? Both? What program are you part of? How long have you been in mentoring? Did you pick your mentor or were they decided for you?
2. We'd love to start by hearing how mentoring has been for you during the pandemic. How have things changed? How has it affected you and your mentor?
 - a) Is your mentoring relationship better or worse since the pandemic started? Why?
 - b) Do you feel closer to your mentor since the pandemic started or less close?
3. How has your mentor helped you get through the pandemic?
4. What kinds of meetings and activities have you been able to do with your mentor during the pandemic?
 - a) Have you continued to do things in-person, switched to virtual or text, both?
5. Have you done or started anything new since the pandemic started that you think is a good addition to your mentoring relationship and that you'd like to continue afterwards?
 - a) What do you most look forward to getting back to after the pandemic is done?
6. What have been the biggest challenges about maintaining a good relationship with your mentor during the pandemic?
 - a) Probe for things like privacy, safe spaces, communication, control and agency in communication and the relationship overall, ability to bring up ideas for activities, whether they've felt supported during the crisis, etc.
7. Has anything about your mentoring experience gotten better since the pandemic started?
 - a) Probe for things like privacy, safe spaces, communication, control and agency in communication and the relationship overall, ability to bring up ideas for activities, whether they've felt supported during the crisis, etc.
8. If you were to go back in time to when you started with mentoring, what do you wish you, your mentor, or the program would have done to better prepare for making mentoring the best it could be during this pandemic?
9. Hypothetically, if changes like social distancing and less access to public spaces, restaurants, and things like that were going to continue for many more months or years (we don't think this will happen, it's just for the sake of imagining), what would you do now to improve your mentoring experience?
 - a) What would you want your mentor to do?
 - b) What would you want your mentoring program to do?
10. If you were running a mentoring program right now, what would you do to make mentoring better? Speaking both from your experience during COVID but also from your experience with mentoring overall.
11. Before we close, do you have any other ideas, thoughts, or anything else you'd like to share with us based on our conversation today?

Keeping Mentoring Connections in a Socially Distanced World

STAFF KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Youth Perspectives in Mentoring During COVID-19

INTERNAL: What we want to learn from this focus group

- How the changes brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic have affected the mentorship programs and staff.
- Specifically, how mentoring relationships have changed and if/how these changes further affect youth based on PYD and critical mentoring frameworks.
- Opinions about what is working and what is not working about mentorship programming during this crisis.
- Ideas and innovations about how mentoring can be better based on this experience.

START HERE: Focus Group Protocol – Intro Script

- Introduce ourselves as individuals, introduce Equivolve and our role
 - Introduce ourselves as individuals.
 - Equivolve is a consulting firm that works with companies, government, philanthropy, and non-profits like Maryland MENTOR and MENTOR Memphis to create and research strategies that improve racial, social, gender, and other kinds of equity.
 - Our role on this project is to talk with youth who have been in mentoring during the COVID pandemic and learn what their experience is like, as well as staff working in mentoring programs to learn about your experience. The goal is to learn things that have been hard but also see if there are any surprisingly positive things that can help mentoring programs serve youth even better. We're also working with a small group of youth who are helping us design this project and understand what we learn from you all, so we're really excited to have youth perspective on all sides of this project.
- Provide overview of the purpose of the focus group
 - The purpose of this focus group is, like I just mentioned, to understand how mentoring and mentorship programming have changed during the pandemic. We also want to hear from you what you think mentors and mentoring programs should learn from this time and how they can apply it to make mentoring better.
 - This is meant to be a discussion and there are definitely no right or wrong answers. We are interested hearing any of your professional and personal experience, opinions, feelings, and ideas that you want to share.
 - Your thoughts will inform a better understanding about how mentoring is going during the pandemic and what youth, mentors, and mentor programs can do to improve mentoring both for the rest of the pandemic and afterwards.
- Ask to record, stating that it helps us to remember the discussion. We will also take notes. State that individual responses will not be shared – we will compile the themes and patterns from focus groups to help mentoring programs understand how things are going and what can be better.
- Do a check-in before starting. Does anyone have any questions? Is the group ready to begin the discussion?
- Start the recording. State you're doing so.

Keeping Mentoring Connections in a Socially Distanced World

Focus Group Protocol – Discussion Script

1. To start, please share with us a bit more about you, where you work, and your role.
 - a) What type of mentoring program(s) does your organization run? E.g. group mentoring, school-based, one-on-one, other?
 - b) What population of youth do you primarily serve? E.g. location, age range, race/ethnicity, gender, SES, etc.
2. What are some of the ways that your program has had to change since the start of pandemic restrictions?
3. Starting with you and perhaps other staff, how have people been affected by these changes, in your opinion?
 - a) How has this affected youth? Their families?
 - b) How has this affected mentors?
4. In your opinion, how have mentor/mentee relationships changed or evolved to accommodate (or not, perhaps if things aren't going well) the pandemic?
5. Have there been any changes to the program that you think are good additions and that you'd actually like to see continue after the pandemic is over?
 - a) Probe for things that might be positive for staff, youth, mentors, mentoring relationships, mentor recruitment, programming flexibility, etc.
6. What are the things at your program that you think have suffered most during the pandemic?
 - a) If you knew pandemic-like restrictions were going to continue for many more months or even years, how would you fix these things so that mentoring relationships can adjust and stay healthy?
7. If you were to go back in time to when [program/organization] was created, and you knew a pandemic would occur, what would you implement from the beginning to better prepare the program, mentors, and youth and their families for this crisis?
8. Before we close, do you have any other ideas you think mentoring organizations should try out that could make a difference in how mentoring is going under the circumstances of the pandemic?
9. Is there anything else – thoughts, feelings, opinions – you'd like to share?

Appendix C: YRLT Research Capacity-Building Lessons and Approach

LESSONS FOR YOUTH ENGAGEMENT IN RESEARCH DURING COVID-19

This study was a youth-engaged research project. A group of seven youth partnered with the Equivolve research team to refine research questions, design, and refine data-collection instruments, and co-analyze and contextualize qualitative data. Equivolve facilitated three research capacity-building workshops for youth in which the focus was to build their knowledge and skills related to designing and conducting research, and to request and incorporate their feedback on the topics of the study, as well as the emerging themes from qualitative data collected through youth focus groups. Titles and objectives for each workshop can be found in Appendix C. All workshops were facilitated virtually by three members of the Equivolve team. Each workshop began with an icebreaker question and then proceeded with each team member facilitating a section of each workshop. The following lessons are based on youth participant insights and insights from the Equivolve team.

Like virtual mentoring engagement, virtual research engagement can be challenging. Incorporating interactive activities seemed to keep youth engaged in the process.

All seven YRLT members attended all three sessions, though across the different sessions, some youth were more engaged than others. Youth were recruited by MENTOR's affiliate programs, and staff from affiliate programs reached out to those whom they believed would be interested in participating in a research project and learning about the research process. Because youth were recruited in this way, we worked with a group that already had an interest in research, so the content we delivered at least partially matched their interests and motivation for participating. We believe that this, as well as the stipend, contributed to 100% participation by YRLT members across the three workshops.

We also asked, as much as possible or as much as they were comfortable doing so, for youth to be on camera. Presence on camera allowed us to observe physical body language and helped us to gauge whether youth were becoming bored with a topic, distracted by other factors, or if they had a question or wanted to share their input. On average, across the workshops, the majority of youth seemed to remain engaged. They sent questions in the chat, added their input when asked questions by the facilitators, and built on one another's responses—sometimes with a nudge from the facilitator when young people began to check out or tended to remain quiet.

Youth were most engaged during the final workshop, Implementing a Research Project: Participatory Data Analysis. We began the workshop with a role-identification activity during which everyone, including the facilitators, identified three roles we occupy and why those roles are important to us. Then, the facilitators provided a brief description of how our personal roles can impact our role as a researcher, including the themes we identify in qualitative analysis. Facilitators then walked the youth through developing "codes" or topics to guide the thematic analysis of focus-group data. We presented each research question and asked youth what topics they think the research question addressed; and in real time, the facilitators populated our "code book" on the screen. Next, we presented excerpts from youth focus groups for co-analysis with YRLT members, and youth were prompted to answer the following questions: Are there any themes? Are there any common messages? Are any of our topics appearing in the data? We populated slides with the emerging themes in real time, and youth built upon and provided each other with feedback on emerging themes. Throughout the workshop, we continued to highlight how different youth interpreted focus-group excerpts differently, and how our personal roles and perspectives shape our interpretation of data.

Youth co-analysis of data was a significant contribution to our findings, helping to strengthen them in a way that we, the research team, could not have done alone. Oftentimes, youth provided new meaning to terms that other youth had used in focus groups. They read excerpts with emphasis on different parts of mentees' statements and intonation that, at times, created completely different meanings. For example, we provided youth with a fictional sample quote:

Keeping Mentoring Connections in a Socially Distanced World

“Every time I meet with my mentor, I come back feeling like I can do whatever.” We interpreted this to mean that whenever the young person met with their mentor, they left the meeting feeling empowered, like they could do or achieve anything. The youth largely interpreted this to mean that after meeting with their mentor, a young person left the meeting feeling like whatever they did next did not matter. The youth read “can do whatever” with more of a lackluster, unmotivated tone and believed the youth left the meeting feeling less empowered. These kinds of observations by the youth added an extra level of depth to the analysis and led us to revisit audio recordings and, again, encourage youth in focus groups to remain on video.

At the end of the final workshop, the Equivolve team recapped our work together between workshops one and three, and asked youth to share feedback on participating in the three research capacity-building workshops. Youth shared that future similar engagements should involve more mentees, so there would be “more people to be in the conversation.” Youth also suggested that additional workshops and a more drawn-out process for analyzing the data would have been helpful. Below, we provide the titles and objectives for each workshop.

Designing a Research Project: Where Do We Start?

- Have a shared understanding of the definition of research for this project
 - Get an introduction to research process steps
 - Learn about and practice step 1: identifying the research issue
 - Participate in a demonstration of step 4: collecting data (mini focus group)
-

Designing a Research Project: Research Tools & Data Analysis

- Revisit and practice step 1 of the research process: identifying the research issue
 - Learn about a selection of data-collection methods and how each can address your research questions
 - Practice selecting data-collection methods for your research questions
 - Learn about thematic qualitative analysis
-

Implementing a Research Project: Participatory Data Analysis

- Revisit thematic qualitative-analysis approaches
 - Recognize researcher role and personal bias in the qualitative-analysis process
 - Conduct thematic analysis of youth focus-group excerpts
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Appendix D: Mentoring Partners Program Descriptions

DESCRIPTIONS OF MARYLAND MENTOR AND MEMPHIS MENTOR

MENTOR Maryland | DC

MENTOR MD | DC is a regional affiliate of MENTOR with a mission to increase both the quality and quantity of mentoring relationships. MENTOR Maryland | DC works directly with local organizations to increase their capacity and effectiveness through the strategies of customized evidence-based training, technical assistance, and support.

MENTOR Maryland | DC serves as the catalyst and leader for quality mentoring in Maryland and the DC Metro Area, with the big goal of supporting 500,000 new mentor relationships and seeing \$100 million invested in mentoring over the next five years. It is seeking to do this with a focus on advocating for systems change, expanding mentoring programs. And shifting the narrative around mentoring.

MENTOR Memphis Grizzlies

MENTOR Memphis Grizzlies (MMG) unites a broad range of local community organizations, businesses and civic leaders to promote, support, and advocate youth mentoring. With a focus on increasing the number and impact of mentor relationships in Memphis, the partnership provides resources, leadership, and, in some cases, funding to more than 70 local mentoring programs serving over 4,300 young people across Memphis.

MMG serves as a clearinghouse for training, resources, awareness, and advocacy, providing the critical link between MENTOR's national efforts and local organizations and programs that foster and support quality mentoring relationships