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The Contribution of Mentoring through Empathy and Caring for the Perception of Competence and Developing a Positive Future Thinking among Religious Girls at Risk who Participate in the SELA Program on Behalf of Yedidim.

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Abstract

The present research examines the impact on at-risk teenage girls participating in the Sela Hemed program run by the Yedidim NGO. Sela-Hemed-Yedidim is a prevention program designed to identify girls on the verge of the risk continuum before deteriorating into serious behaviors that require treatment. Its activities include a combination of personal mentoring and group meetings with girls in a similar situation, to provide an informal educational response offering support for the complex challenges they must cope with.

The purpose of the research was to examine the effectiveness of the Sela-Hemed program in light of its stated goals. The Sela program is based on a holistic work model offering an informal educational response. It combines the provision of knowledge, counseling, guidance, support, and training, while showing sensitivity to inter-cultural differences and the specific needs of each and every girl in the program. The research allowed us to examine the program's success by means of objective goals and indices; it also enabled an examination of the program's weaknesses and strengths, such as adaptive difficulties in adapting the mentor to the mentee, and the effects of a successful or unsuccessful match on the mentoring as a whole, and changing the program dynamically according to the test of efficiency.

The study population comprised teenage girls (aged 13-16) referred to the Sela-Hemed program. They are referred by professionals at the school, usually following the school counselor's recommendation. The study subjects consisted of 102 girls located on the risk continuum and characterized by a range of behaviors that place them and those around them at risk, such as difficulties in adapting to dysfunction in the existing frameworks.

The research tools used were mix method: questionnaires analyzed using quantitative methodology, and semi-structured interviews, analyzed by qualitative methodology. The quantitative questionnaire was composed of several sub-questionnaires: personal information, concern and empathy, self-esteem, self-capacity, attachment, planning for the future, and coherence. The qualitative interview consisted of ten questions and each interview lasted about 40 minutes on average. The interviews were conducted to complete any information missing from the questionnaires and to obtain a broader picture of the interviewees' emotions.

We hypothesized that there a link would be found between attachment and the research indices: that is, the stronger the attachment, the greater and more positive empathy and concern would be, while in contrast, the other resources - self-esteem, sense of coherence, self-capacity – would be lower. In addition we hypothesized that a connection would be found between the empathy and concern shown by mentors – so that the stronger the empathy and concern shown, self-esteem, the higher the sense of coherence and future planning would be.

The research results showed that in the majority of indices the research hypothesis was validated. First, the characteristics of the girls that were found to be significant were the indices of attachment, anxiety, and avoidance. The findings elicited positive correlations, so that the stronger the girl's reluctance to develop relationships with those around her and/or the higher the girl's anxiety, the greater the empathy and concern that the mentor gave. It was also found that the greater the girl's avoidance of developing ties with her environment, the lower her self-esteem and coherence level, and the higher her anxiety. In addition, the lower a girl's avoidance of creating social ties, the higher her self-esteem and self-capacity. The interviews elicited that the majority of the girls had complex relationships with their parents, and the girls described difficult feelings of not belonging to the family. Since some of the girls were from families of recent immigrants to Israel, they described the divides and the difficulties of their family experienced in integrating into employment, culture, and tradition. We also found that personal characteristics of the mentors contributed to strengthening the mentor-mentee connection, to the extent that the mentor became a significant other. Moreover, the support group, composed of girls of their age participating in the program that met once a week in tandem with mentoring, had a positive influence and offered the girls a place to express themselves and for open discussions, without criticism. The interviews revealed that the personality characteristic of self-esteem increased considerably, and influenced their perceived self-capacity and their desire to plan their future.

As noted, the findings indicate that a significant process took place in the girls participating in the program. During that process, they developed a sense of coherence and the desire to succeed in the future despite their risky past. A review of the study's findings indicates that the program fulfilled its goals of supporting these girls and removing them from the circle of risk in which they were previously located.