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Closing the Mentorship Gap through Youth-Initiated Mentoring
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Did you know that at this very moment, 15,000 Canadian children and youth are sitting on waitlists, waiting to be matched with a volunteer mentor? The problem has become so widespread, that it's even been given its own name. It's called the mentorship gap and it affects some of the most vulnerable young people in our communities who are going through some really difficult challenges, such as being bullied at school, living with financial instability, or adjusting to a new life as an immigrant or refugee from another country.

While sitting on these waitlists for upwards of 2 to even 4 *years*, our young people are starting to question why someone hasn't volunteered to hang out with them yet? Am I not a good kid? Am I not cool enough? What's wrong with me?

And this is where my Ph.D. research comes in. Working with a Big Brothers Big Sisters organization in my hometown of London, ON, my project is exploring the benefits of a new mentoring model called Youth-Initiated Mentoring. An innovative feature of youth-initiated mentoring is empowering youth to recruit their *own* mentors from their *own* communities. No more sitting on waitlists; and no more questioning their worth. In our study, youth will recruit their own mentors by working with staff and their parents to identify and celebrate the positive relationships that they already have in their own community, such as with the cool coach who is always making them laugh and feel good about themselves or the inspiring teacher who sees their potential and is always nudging them towards bigger and better things. After identifying these adults, youth will then reach out to them and invite them to transform their relationship into a more consistent and organized mentoring relationship.

To date, there has only been a handful of academic studies on youth-initiated mentoring, but the early results are very promising. My study is unique as I am inviting the participants to act as co-researchers. I use that term quite seriously because, as a Ph.D. student, I know the research on mentoring, but the participants in my study have the real-world knowledge and skills that will actually advance our understanding of youth-initiated mentoring. As co-researchers, the participants in my study will be invited to make meaningful decisions about what we collect as our data, how we actually analyze that data, and how we should share our results with others.

So why should you or anyone else care about this research? Well, I can think of two important reasons.

Locally, our study will help young people and their families get themselves off of waitlists by recruiting their own mentors. I hope that this study inspires other young people to realize that they don't have to sit on the bench and wait for someone to mentor them.

More broadly, because of my more inclusive research design, our study will create a roadmap that future mentoring organizations can use to create their *own* youth-initiated mentoring programs in ways that honour and respect the local circumstances, needs, and cultures of the communities that they serve.

Put simply, our study will help close the mentorship gap in Canada. Thank you.