

# Adapting the Friends of the Children programme for child welfare system-involved families

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## Funding information

Annie E. Casey Foundation

## Abstract

Research has shown the importance of long-term, caring adults for children in foster care. This paper reviews the Friends of the Children (FOTC) long-term mentoring programme and how it was adapted to serve children and families with child welfare system involvement. This study's two research questions are (1) *How do Friends (FOTC's paid professional mentors) currently work with, and in turn, have an impact on, child welfare-involved families?* and (2) *How can Friends better support child welfare system-involved caregivers and families to promote family stability, permanence, and child well-being?* Data were collected from 21 caregivers (foster and biological), 24 FOTC Friends, five child welfare workers, and five teachers. Qualitative analyses of focus group, interview, and open-ended survey data revealed a wide variety of ways Friends currently support children and families. In addition, several recommendations were made for strengthening programming. These findings provide valuable insights into providing long-term mentoring to child welfare system-involved children and families.

## KEYWORDS

child welfare, focus groups, foster care, intervention adaptation, mentoring, qualitative research

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Research shows that having support from at least one long-term, caring adult can have a positive effect on a foster youth's life trajectory (Howard & Berzin, 2011). This has contributed to the popularity of using mentoring approaches with child welfare system-involved children. A recent review of 73 studies on mentoring youth in foster care (Taussig & Weiler, 2017) found that, although many precautions should be taken when providing mentoring to foster youth (such as training mentors on relationship-building challenges experienced by some youth in care and ensuring mentors have access to clinical expertise), mentoring (both formal and natural) has been found to have positive impacts on foster youth. These include improved behavioural, mental health, placement stability, and educational outcomes, among others (although less or no impact on outcomes such as social skills or reducing risk behaviours). In

particular, having a focus on self-determination was identified as a promising change mechanism for mentoring youth in care.

Meta-analyses on the impacts of formal mentoring programmes have found positive benefits for children, at least in the short term (e.g., DuBois, Holloway, Valentine, & Cooper, 2002; DuBois, Portillo, Rhodes, Silverthorn, & Valentine, 2011), with effect sizes ranging from a Cohen's  $d$  of 0.02 to 0.41, averaging around  $d = 0.20$ . DuBois et al. (2002) found that mentoring programmes serving children in more disadvantaged circumstances had slightly larger effect sizes than those serving less disadvantaged children. They also found slightly larger effect sizes for programmes serving younger children (e.g., late childhood vs. late adolescence); however, most research on foster youth-focused mentoring is on older youth so less is known about its impact on younger children. Mentors with backgrounds in helping professions had greater impacts than those without such backgrounds (effect size of  $d = 0.26$  vs.  $d = 0.09$ ).

Dedicated, long-lasting mentorship can help foster youth establish and maintain healthy relationships, express emotions, and develop healthy self-esteem (Williams, 2011). Short-term volunteer mentoring approaches, however, tend to show small to modest short-term impacts, and limited long-term impacts (DuBois et al., 2002). Unfortunately, roughly half of formal mentoring relationships end within a few months (Wandersman et al., 2006), minimizing the potential for long-term impacts. Maintaining mentoring relationships can be especially challenging for foster youth due to adult attachment disruption and placement changes that make it difficult to maintain connections with adults (Rhodes, Haight, & Briggs, 1999). However, foster youth may stand to benefit the most from dedicated, long-term adult mentors.

Utilizing volunteers often means that mentors receive less formal training and have less experience working with vulnerable youth compared with professional mentors. A 2014 study noted that “serving multiple children full-time enabled [professional mentors] to rapidly build expertise” and that their “credibility and authority granted them ... professional status [and] facilitated their work across multiple key contexts” (Lakind, Eddy, & Zell, 2014, p. 705). A longer term, flexible approach using professional, salaried mentors who also serve as advocates and navigators of community-based resources is more easily sustained through multiple home and school placements and could be an effective means for helping foster children garner the resiliency to achieve their personal goals.

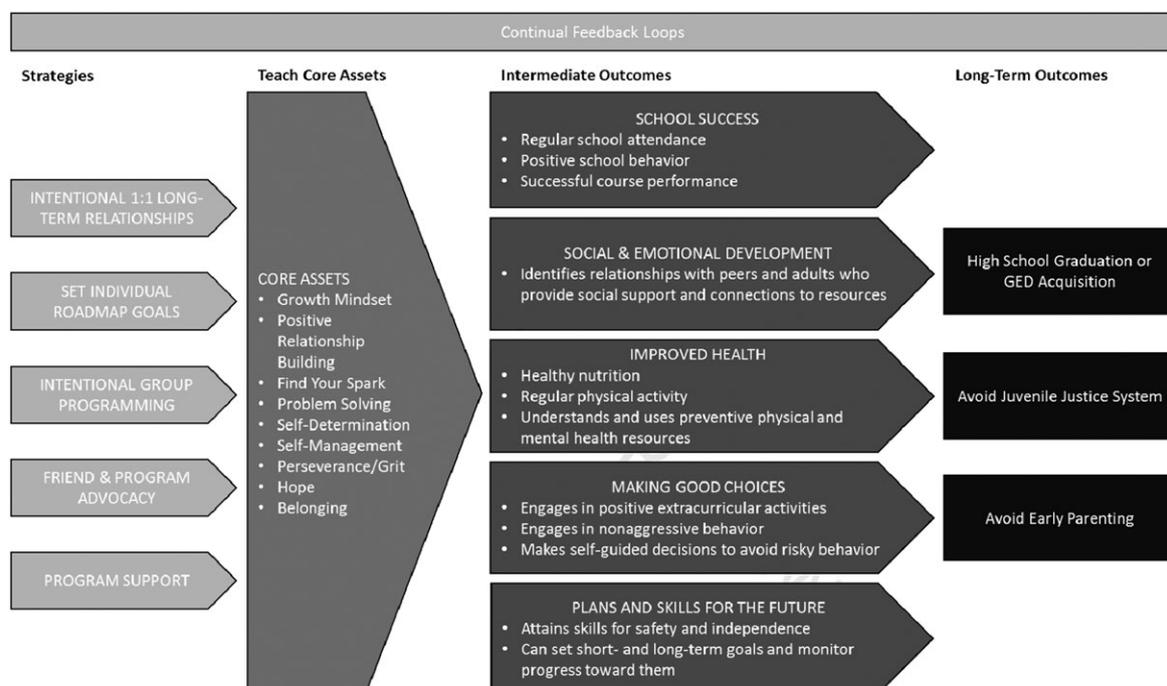
## 1.1 | Friends of the Children professional mentoring programme

Friends of the Children (FOTC) is a mentoring model that provides paid professional mentoring to vulnerable youth from inner-city neighbourhoods starting in first grade. FOTC commits to providing a

mentor (referred to as “Friend”) for 12.5 years, until high school graduation. FOTC hires Friends to work fulltime as trained, salaried, supervised professionals in permanent positions. FOTC sites conduct intensive screenings in kindergarten classrooms of partner public schools located in disadvantaged urban neighbourhoods to identify children at risk for developing serious problem behaviours. The majority of children that FOTC serves, approximately 86%, are children of colour. Friends (a) engage youth in Core Asset building (which includes self-management; relationship building; self-determination; and problem solving; as well as intrinsic motivational skills like growth mindset, perseverance, belonging, and hope; see Figure 1); (b) support social capital building with caregivers and other adults; and (c) advocate for youth within school and other public service systems. FOTC is in 15 communities in the United States and one in Europe. Programmes range in size from 32 to 450 children, and each tends to enrol 16–50 new 4- to 6-year-old children annually. Funding sources vary chapter to chapter; however, approximately three fourths of FOTC’s revenue is from private donations and grants and 25% is from government grants and contracts. The programme costs approximately \$10,000–\$12,000 per year per child (Hamilton et al., 2010). A return-on-investment study concluded that for every \$1 invested in FOTC, \$7 is returned to society over the lifetime of an FOTC graduate (Hamilton et al., 2010).

### 1.1.1 | FOTC intervention model

The primary hypothesized mechanism of change in FOTC is the ongoing relationship between mentor and child (Rhodes, 2005). FOTC engages children early in the developmental process. Over time, the mentoring relationship is hypothesized to provide children with social support and the opportunity to observe, learn, and practice the Core Assets. Second, in their roles as advocates and navigators, Friends



**FIGURE 1** Friends of the Children Programme Model

provide opportunities that a child may not otherwise have, such as access to academic assistance, healthy foods and activities, and the chance to participate in enriching extracurricular experiences that may enhance motivation and the child's ability to envision a positive future. All activities are oriented around an annual roadmap plan, where children practice future orientation by monitoring goals in areas such as school success and healthy habits.

The establishment of a strong interpersonal connection between a Friend and a child and the development of social capital by linking and expanding the child's community of caring adults is expected to lead to positive gains in three interconnected areas: social-emotional development, cognitive development, and identity development. Figure 1 shows the FOTC programme model.

An independent evaluation of FOTC found that 83% of programme graduates earned a high school diploma or GED, 93% avoided the juvenile justice system, and 98% avoided early parenting, suggesting promise for positive long-term outcomes (Kissock & Mackin, 2015). A 5-year follow-up to a randomized controlled study of FOTC during the first 5 years of mentoring found significant effects favouring the FOTC intervention condition in caregiver ratings of positive school behaviour, and less trouble in school, with a trend for higher child behavioural and emotional strengths (Eddy et al., 2017).

## 1.2 | FOTC foster care adaptation

In 2014, FOTC began selecting children directly from foster care. The underlying hypothesis of FOTC's foster care expansion is that, by providing children in care with professional long-term mentoring relationships that (a) intentionally focus outings on the development of youths' social-emotional skills, (b) provide advocacy and navigation support to children and caregivers, and (c) outlast the child's time in foster care, trauma will be mitigated; well-being, school performance, and placement stability will improve; and child welfare system reentry will be prevented.

Three main FOTC components were adapted or added to meet the needs of children and families involved in foster care: (a) the child selection/enrolment process, (b) collaboration with the child welfare system at the micro (caseworker) and macro (system leadership) levels, and (c) Friend training and supervision.

### 1.2.1 | Child selection and enrolment

Although the typical FOTC child selection process is extensive, taking several weeks to assess a child's personal and environmental risk/protective factors, enrolment of children from foster care is less resource intensive and more standardized, relying primarily on child welfare data. The local child welfare office creates an initial list of 4- to 6-year-old children who (a) are placed in a foster/relative placement in FOTC's service area; (b) have kinship connections within the service area; (c) came into care due to abuse or neglect plus at least one additional environmental risk factor (i.e., parent drug and/or alcohol use, domestic violence, incarcerated parent); (d) scored a 1 or 2 on the Child and Adolescent Needs and Strengths Assessment or comparable youth assessment tool; (e) are not in the highest level of residential treatment; (f) do not have a severe developmental disability; and (g) meet any other site-specific criteria (e.g., some sites prioritize working

with youth of colour). Using this list, the child welfare office introduces FOTC staff to the child's caseworkers and school staff and gives FOTC permission to contact the foster/relative caregivers and biological parents (if there are no safety concerns) for consent to provide the child with a Friend.

### 1.2.2 | Collaboration with child welfare system

Effective partnership with child welfare staff is critical to Friends' ability to support children in care. Relationship building with caseworkers begins with the development of a Memorandum of Understanding, specifying (a) the terms of engagement with child welfare staff, including monthly programme reports to caseworkers and quarterly meetings; (b) child selection protocols; and (c) the process for annual data sharing of youths' child welfare outcomes. Friends also collaborate with caseworkers and/or supervisors and build relationships with multiple adults in youths' lives, including caregivers, biological parents, and teachers, to advocate for outcomes in children's best interest.

### 1.2.3 | Friend training and supervision

Because of the near-universal experiences of trauma and disempowerment for child welfare system-involved children and families (Kemp, Marcenko, Hoagwood, & Vesneski, 2009; Salazar, Keller, Gowen, & Courtney, 2013), all Friends participate in Trauma-Informed Family Engagement and Systems Advocacy Training (Brown, 2016) and School Advocacy Training (Brown, 2017). The goal of these trainings is to ensure Friends are equipped with (a) communication and relationship-building skills to build trust with family members who have experienced violence and other forms of trauma, and (b) knowledge regarding how to empower families to navigate the child welfare and school systems as advocates for their children. Ongoing supervision is enhanced with additional support about how to model healthy attachments for children who frequently lose relationships with adults as a result of multiple placement and school transitions. Friends serving these youth also receive enhanced support regarding personal boundaries, self-care, and vicarious trauma. Finally, due to the complex array of needs facing children in care (e.g., providing referrals for basic needs and maintaining connection through placement changes) and demands on the children's time (e.g., therapy and supervised family visits), Friends receive ongoing supervision about how to work with caregivers to ensure children receive the required FOTC direct service hours.

## 1.3 | Current study

The purpose of this study is to help further the adapted FOTC programme model for youth in foster care by collecting feedback from caregivers (both foster and biological), FOTC Friends, child welfare workers, and teachers to answer two research questions:

1. How do Friends currently work with, and have an impact on, child welfare-involved families?
2. How can Friends better support child welfare system-involved caregivers and families to promote family stability, permanence, and child well-being?

Now that FOTC has adapted its model to launch five foster care expansion sites with public funding, the answers to these questions are more relevant than ever. Although these insights and recommendations are FOTC specific, we anticipate their applicability to a wide variety of mentoring programmes that serve or aim to serve child welfare system-involved children and families.

## 2 | METHOD

Data were collected using three modalities, based on the best fit for each participant type. Focus groups were conducted with Friends, foster caregivers, and biological parents. Phone interviews were used with social workers. Finally, online surveys were used with teachers. These three modalities contained very similar questions, and their data were pooled together for analyses; however, the interviews and surveys were shorter due to social workers' and teachers' more limited interaction with FOTC compared with that of caregivers and Friends.

### 2.1 | Participants

Data were collected from multiple participant types in three FOTC sites (Portland, OR; Seattle, WA; Tampa, FL) to get a wide variety of responses to inform the adapted programme model. These are three of the four FOTC sites implementing the foster care programme adaptation; the fourth was quite small and thus not included. Friends who had experience working with youth in foster care (14 in Portland, seven in Seattle, eight in Tampa; 29 total) were invited to participate in focus groups. Of these, 24 (83%; 12 in Portland, six in Seattle, six in Tampa) participated. A convenience sample of teacher, social worker, and caregiver participants was identified by each local FOTC office. Teachers and social workers all had experience working with FOTC youth in care and their Friends. Focus group participants were recruited by local FOTC staff, whereas teachers and social workers

were recruited by the research team. Focus groups were conducted with FOTC Friends ( $N = 24$ ) as well as with biological parents and foster (relative and nonrelative) caregivers ( $N = 21$ ). Five child welfare workers participated in one-on-one interviews, and five teachers participated in online surveys. Participant demographics can be found in Table 1.

## 2.2 | Procedures

### 2.2.1 | Focus groups

Focus groups took place in summer 2017. Seven groups were held: three in Tampa (a Friend group, a caregiver group composed primarily of biological parents, and a caregiver group composed primarily of foster caregivers), two in Portland (a Friend group and a caregiver group composed primarily of biological parents), and two in Seattle (a Friend group and a caregiver group composed primarily of foster caregivers). Each group contained three to 12 participants (Mean = 6.4), and lasted 1.5 to 2 hr. Focus groups were administered following a semistructured protocol developed by the research team in partnership with FOTC staff.

To start, participants were given a brief overview of FOTC and the Core Assets skill-building framework used by Friends in their work so they could reflect on how well these were achieved as part of their feedback. Participants were then asked to reflect on several topics including their experience with FOTC, what has been particularly helpful, and their recommendations for improving services. Table 2 lists the focus group questions.

### 2.2.2 | Social worker interviews

Interviews were conducted with child welfare workers to maximize their ability to participate and to focus in on a subset of questions

**TABLE 1** Participant demographics

	Bio parents, foster/relative caregivers ( $N = 21$ )	Friends ( $N = 24$ )	Child welfare workers ( $N = 5$ )	Teachers ( $N = 5$ )
Location				
% Portland, OR	38%	50%	40%	40%
% Seattle, WA	14%	25%	40%	20%
% Tampa, FL	48%	25%	20%	40%
Gender				
% Female	76%	54%	Not asked	Not asked
% Male	24%	46%		
% Other or unspecified	0%	0%		
Race/Ethnicity <sup>a</sup>				
% Black/African American	23.8%	41.7%	Not asked	Not asked
% American Indian/Alaskan Native	0%	0%		
% Asian/Asian American	0%	4.7%		
% Hispanic/Latino/a	19.0%	8.3%		
% Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	4.8%	4.7%		
% White/Caucasian	47.6%	45.8%		
% Other	4.8%	4.7%		

<sup>a</sup>Participants had the option to select as many race/ethnicity categories as they felt applied, so percentages may add up to more than 100.

**TABLE 2** Selected questions from focus groups, interviews, and surveys

<p>Focus group questions: Friends</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What do you think are the most important things Friends need to know about working with youth who are either in foster care, or who have had a foster care experience?</li> <li>• Tell us a story about how you've made an impact on a child welfare-involved youth.</li> <li>• Tell us a story about how you have interacted with the different adults in your youth's lives.</li> <li>• If you have ever struggled to maintain appropriate boundaries with caregivers, what did that look like?</li> <li>• Give some examples of your engagement with your youth's caregiver(s) as they've navigated either the child welfare or the education systems.</li> <li>• If you've had the experience of a youth leaving the foster care system, were you part of that transition?</li> <li>• Has a caregiver ever asked for support in a specific area?</li> <li>• What do you feel most/least prepared to do as a Friend?</li> <li>• What do you know now that you didn't know when you started working with your youth?</li> <li>• What are your ideas about how Friends might be able to better support child welfare-involved families?</li> </ul> <p>Focus group questions: Parents/caregivers</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How would you describe your relationship with your child's FOTC Friend/mentor?</li> <li>• What types of supports do you think are essential for parents/caregivers as they support their child welfare-involved youth to reach their full potential?</li> <li>• Tell us a story about how Friends of the Children did – or did not – support you as a parent/caregiver?</li> <li>• How much contact would you say you typically have had with your child's "Friend"?</li> <li>• How has your child's Friend been successful in working with your youth?</li> <li>• Are there things FOTC could do differently to empower you to help your child be successful in school?</li> <li>• As part of FOTC, children are encouraged to work on things like managing strong emotions, persevering through hard times, setting goals and working hard to reach them, etc. How is FOTC making a difference for her/him in those areas?</li> <li>• If you were part of a transition with your child, how was your child's Friend involved in that transition?</li> <li>• At any point in your experience with FOTC, have you considered leaving the program?</li> <li>• In the future, how do you hope your child's Friend will support them to reach their full potential?</li> </ul> <p>Child welfare worker interviews</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How do you see the Friends working on Core Assets with children?</li> <li>• What are some of the ways you have (or haven't) seen FOTC Friends be especially helpful to child welfare-involved youth and their caregivers? What's worked well? What hasn't worked well?</li> <li>• How do you see Friends contributing (or not) to supporting children's foster care placement stability?</li> <li>• How have you seen Friends help (or not help) when a youth is transitioning back to their bio family?</li> <li>• How have you seen Friends help (or not help) with the transition to adoptive families?</li> <li>• Do you have recommendations for how we can improve FOTC services for youth in foster care?</li> </ul> <p>Teacher surveys</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• While in your classroom, how effective did you feel the FOTC Friends were at supporting the students they were working with in relation to behavior? Academic performance? Getting along with peers?</li> <li>• Overall, how helpful is it to have Friends in your classroom?</li> <li>• What are some of the ways you have seen FOTC Friends be helpful (or not helpful) to child welfare-involved students and families in supporting educational goals?</li> <li>• How do you think FOTC Friends can strengthen their support to child welfare-involved students and families to improve educational outcomes?</li> <li>• Please describe some of the ways that Friends have been helpful or valuable to you in the classroom.</li> <li>• How can FOTC Friends strengthen their support to teachers of child welfare-involved students to improve educational outcomes?</li> </ul>
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(listed in Table 2). Interviews were conducted via telephone by a trained research assistant and lasted approximately 30 min; they were recorded and transcribed. Participants were emailed a \$10 gift card for participation.

### 2.2.3 | Teacher surveys

Online surveys were used for data collection from teachers, again to maximize their ability to participate and to focus in on a subset of classroom-specific questions (listed in Table 2). Participants were emailed a \$10 gift card for participation.

## 2.3 | Analysis procedure

Data from all three collection modalities were analysed together, and data from all participant types were treated equally in analyses. Focus groups were transcribed using a professional transcription service, whereas child welfare worker interviews were transcribed by a research assistant as they were much briefer. Data were analysed in Dedoose qualitative data analysis software using a conventional

thematic content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) approach. Transcripts and survey responses were coded by two researchers (a PhD-level researcher who is a licensed social worker with experience working with youth in foster care and an undergraduate human development student).

A consensus-based coding and theme-building approach was used, which means researchers coded the transcripts and surveys separately and then came together to compare and work out discrepancies through discussions of each coder's meaning, resulting in one mutually agreed-upon coding solution. The specific coding procedure differed somewhat by research question. For Research Question 1, in the first round of coding, codes were applied to the text for every mention of ways that Friends currently work with and have an impact on child welfare-involved families. The second round of coding involved grouping similar codes into basic themes of types of support received from Friends. The original assumption was that there would be unique basic themes for ways Friends provided support to various recipients (e.g., caregiver, child, and family unit); however, almost all of the basic themes were reflected in Friends' work with all parties; for example, Friends were found to advocate for caregivers as well as

children, as was the case with providing skill building, consistency, emotional support, and other types of support; thus, separating types of Friend support by recipient did not add a meaningful dimension to the findings. In the last analysis steps for Research Question 1, similar basic themes were grouped into organizing, and in turn global, themes in order to “develop a sense of categorical, thematic, conceptual, and/or theoretical organization” (Saldaña, 2013, p. 207) that had emerged among the findings.

For Research Question 2, the first coding round consisted of codes being applied for every recommendation a participant voiced regarding how Friends might better support families to promote family stability, permanence, and child well-being. Similar codes were then grouped into basic themes of recommendation types. These basic themes were then grouped into organizing themes and then global themes, which represented distinct categories of recommendations.

### 3 | RESULTS

#### 3.1 | How do Friends currently work with, and have an impact on, child welfare-involved families?

Four global themes emerged for this question. Their accompanying organizing and basic themes are shown in Table 3.

#### 3.1.1 | Global Theme 1: Advocating and connecting

This theme included ways Friends support families by helping navigate complex systems, connect with needed services and supports, and build connections among providers and stakeholders in families' lives. The *Advocacy and Liaising* organizing theme included descriptions of Friends acting as advocates and liaisons for youth and caregivers as well as helping them navigate complicated systems (e.g., child welfare and school). Child welfare system-involved families often have many providers and points of contact, and Friends can act as a central person to connect those pieces. Friends also assist in meetings and act as advocates on behalf of children and caregivers. One Friend described their experience as “walking the parents step-by-step” through processes such as Individualized Education Plan (IEP) meetings or permanency hearings. Caregivers expressed their appreciation of Friends' knowledge of different systems and how that knowledge benefited them: “They know the [child welfare system] .... If I asked her what this meant, she knew, and she knew exactly their stipulations, their regulations .... It was good. She was a middle person for me and the [child welfare system].”

The *Connecting with Resources* organizing theme involved Friends connecting participants to various resources such as counselling, youth programmes, transportation assistance, and material resources such as food and clothing. Caregivers expressed their gratitude and

**TABLE 3** Research Question 1 themes regarding how Friends currently work with and have an impact on child welfare-involved families

Global theme	Organizing theme	Basic theme
Advocating and connecting	Advocacy and liaising	Advocate Help navigate complicated systems and processes Serve as a liaison among multiple players
	Connecting with resources	Connect with resources Material resources Service-focused resources
Knowledge and skill building	Caregiver and family skill building	[Redacted]
	Caregiver knowledge and understanding	
	Help children build Core Assets, other skills	
Relational support	Be a role model	Continuity Help through transitions Provide flexible support Regular communication Reliable, consistent support
	Consistency and continuity	
	Emotional support and empowerment through relationship with Friends	
	Support relationship building with family, caring others	
General support	Crisis/challenge-related support	[Redacted]
	Educational support	
	Parenting support	
	Logistical support	
	Fun and new experiences	

Note. Shaded cells denotes only two theme levels were needed for the second and fourth Global Theme, so no basic themes are included for these.

described ways Friends had helped, such as “If you need help getting to an appointment, dude, they’ll hook you up. Any time they take my kids and it’s dinnertime, they feed them really well ....” Friends also work with caregivers to build their self-efficacy around connecting with resources. As one Friend explained, “With some I know I can say, ‘Try calling this resource’ and that guardian will follow up and call. For others, they’re asking me because they’re not gonna take any steps ... so I say ... ‘We can do it together.’” Caregivers also shared that the resources Friends help families connect with benefit the entire family, not just the youth enrolled in the programme: “They’ve helped me with summer programs for my kids and resources for me .... It’s a whole array of things. They’re not just there to help for kids. They’re there to help the family unit.”

### 3.1.2 | Global Theme 2: Knowledge and skill building

This theme focused on child and caregiver skill building as well as helping them gain knowledge about different systems and their rights. Many of the child skill-building examples were related to work on the FOTC Core Assets. One Friend described how he prioritized certain Core Assets in his work: “To me the hope and belonging are the ... Core Assets that I really focus with my boys on because I want them to understand .... Someone does care and that there’s hope for them.” Participants also acknowledged that caregivers need skill building as well, and Friends sometimes help with this. One Friend shared: “I’ve been working a lot with [caregivers] to support [youth], because they’re not used to providing the kinds of supports that [youth] really needs to thrive.” Friends also help educate caregivers on their rights in the child welfare system. “... They’ll do research on what the parent or caregivers rights are. What they’re entitled to, and then give that information and talk through it with the parent.”

### 3.1.3 | Global Theme 3: Relational support

This theme captured the variety of relational supports Friends provide to children and families, reflected in four organizing themes: (a) *Being a Role Model*, (b) *Consistency and Continuity*, (c) *Supporting Relationship Building with Family and Caring Others*, and (d) *Emotional Support and Empowerment*. Being a role model emphasized ways Friends modelled positive behaviours and provided mentoring to both youth and caregivers. Caregivers explained that Friends become “somebody that my child looks up to.” Friends described that being a positive role model for children can impact caregivers as well: “They saw a positive role model in their child’s life and was consistent and cared about their child, was not trying to take their child away from them, to where that made them [the caregiver] become a better person.”

Consistency and continuity was one of the most frequently expressed themes and emphasizes the importance of the 12.5-year-long consistent support for both children and caregivers. Participants stressed the need for continuity, flexible support, regular communication, reliability, and help through transitions. One Friend shared, “One of the things that drew me to [FOTC] is that I could be someone who’s with them long term and could be a constant support throughout all those changes that will happen in their lives.”

Friends were also active in helping build and maintain relationships that support children’s well-being, including with caregivers, bio parents, siblings, extended families, community members, and others. Participants shared that Friends often assist with supervised visitations, include family members in activities and outings, and help reconnect youth with their bio families. One child welfare worker explained how Friends can play a key role in supporting a child’s transition back to bio parents: “... developing a relationship with the bio parents before that transition happens is really key. As a social worker, when I look to close out a case, the return-home, one of the things I really like to get going is any ... long-standing protective factors in the family’s life that aren’t reliant on a contract with [the child welfare system] ... [FOTC] is actually one that I think of for our kids as far as being that ongoing presence ....”

Friends also cultivated relationships between themselves and children, caregivers, and other family members that provided emotional support and empowerment. Friends were often described as “part of the family.” One caregiver explained, “I can call her anytime, day or night; she’ll pick up the phone. She lets me know everything that’s going on [with the child].” Another caregiver described her appreciation of getting to spend regular one-on-one time with her child’s Friend: “... [Friend] and I were actually spending an hour together watching her do gymnastics .... It was nice .... Sorry, I get an hour of [Friend]’s time. But I need it, too.”

### 3.1.4 | Global Theme 4: General support

This theme group captured other ways participants discussed Friends being supportive to children and families. Providing emotional and logistical support through crises and challenges was one. One Friend expressed the importance of showing caregivers they are not alone in their struggles: “Just being their supporter, so they feel like they have a friend in the room when they’re trying to problem solve ....” Friends also work to connect families to important resources, as one Friend shared: “I helped families that were facing homelessness get emergency shelter, emergency food, emergency medical.”

Friends were also described as providing various types of education-related support, such as supporting special needs, attending IEP meetings, attending parent-teacher conferences, and supporting teachers in their work with youth. One caregiver described a Friend’s advocacy work: “... she’ll go to the IEP meetings. She’ll go in there and make sure she does get the support she needs.” Regarding time in the classroom, a Friend shared: “I love the fact that I can still be in the classroom and support the youth individually and the teacher as a whole.”

Outings are a core component of the FOTC model, and Friends were described as providing opportunities for new, fun experiences that reinforce the Core Asset of *Finding Your Spark*. Participants shared stories about community outings, new experiences, career exploration, and extracurricular activities. Friends use these experiences to help youth overcome internal struggles, as one caregiver explained: “My daughter struggles from depression, so she likes to stay home and sit in bed. Having her mentor, she’s out. She’s active .... She’s hiking. She’s swimming. She’s everything, instead of just sitting at home.” And although one-on-one time with youth is important, participants explained that Friends also recognize that peer relationships are essential and sometimes use outings to support those. One caregiver

described the importance of "... Keeping [youth] in a consistent activity around her peers, which for her was soccer. She was able to build really close relationships, teammates, and guardians."

Participants also discussed ways Friends provide parenting assistance to caregivers such as collaborating on common goals, supporting caregivers with behavioural challenges, and providing insights into the child. One caregiver expressed how a Friend's historical knowledge of a child due to their extensive presence in the child's life can be beneficial at the start of new placements: "... our child came with a mentor, so he'd been having since kindergarten, which was really valuable to us, because we didn't know our children. [Friend] was able to give some good insight into what he'd experienced, how he was, and how he behaved. It gave us a starting point." Finally, participants shared other types of logistical support from Friends, such as providing rides and scheduling meetings.

### 3.2 | How can Friends better support child welfare system-involved caregivers to promote family stability, permanence, and child well-being?

The emerging recommendations fell into three global themes: (a) direct service provision, (b) Friend training and preparation, and (c) larger programmatic changes. The third theme was not useful for generalizing purposes so was left out of this paper. The other two global themes contain several organizing themes, which are included in Tables 4 and 5. In addition, due to the large number of recommendations emerging from the data, only a subset is included in the tables.

#### 3.2.1 | Global Theme 1: Recommendations for direct service provision

These recommendations focused on ways Friends could improve their direct service work with children and families. Most recommendations dealt with strengthening, expanding, or adding "more" of something a Friend was already doing rather than suggesting new responsibilities. Many recommendations focused on ways Friends could bolster relationship-focused supports, and several of these focused on building child and family support networks, through building relationships among programme participants as well as with other stakeholders in families' lives. One caregiver suggested having "... activities for the parents whose children are in [FOTC]. Because we get to kind of talk to each other, meet each other .... So this way we can kind of support each other." Another caregiver described how Friends may better support relationship building among extended family members through supporting family visits: "The state does the bare minimum because they have limited resources. So, if kiddos have a strong connection with someone who isn't their biological mother or father, but is an important person. But, to the state, they're not obligated to facilitate those visits. We're trying to advocate for [Friends] to do that ...."

Recommendations also reflected the importance of Friends supporting family empowerment, such as through Friends and caregivers working together to support common goals. One caregiver recommended there be a designated time each week when "... [Friend] and I will get together and he will tell me, '... I noticed that [child] did this. What do you think brought that on?' Or I will say, 'Well, [Friend], you know, [child] has been doing this and this, what do you think I should do?'" Several empowerment-related recommendations dealt

**TABLE 4** Overview of recommendations falling under Research Question 2 Global Theme 1: Direct service provision

Organizing theme	Recommendation examples
1. Relationship-focused supports	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bolstering relationship building and support between Friend and caregiver through time spent together, providing comfort/assurance</li> <li>• Emotional support for youth</li> <li>• Building relationships among programme participants (i.e., among caregivers, among youth) through hosted networking activities</li> <li>• Facilitate visits between youth and other important people in their life (e.g., bio family, nonrelative supportive adults)</li> <li>• Involve all kids in the family (and possibly all family members), not just mentees</li> <li>• Help youth identify natural supports in their lives</li> <li>• Set clear boundaries</li> <li>• Teach youth/caregivers about setting, honouring boundaries</li> </ul>
2. Empowerment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Be nonjudgmental and patient with caregivers and youth</li> <li>• Work in tandem with caregiver (e.g., reinforce caregiver goals and share information on child when helpful)</li> <li>• Being strengths based (e.g., focus on hope, be a positive role model, and prepare youth for future success)</li> </ul>
3. Continuity and connectedness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Be reliable, consistent, and around often</li> <li>• Be able to provide historical perspective on youth across transitions</li> <li>• More one-on-one time with youth</li> <li>• Help families navigate complicated systems</li> <li>• Be liaison among all team players in child's life</li> <li>• Maintain communication through transitions</li> <li>• Reinforce teacher's work with youth</li> </ul>
4. Family education and training	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Youth skill building on topics such as Core Assets, navigating adolescence, self-care, responsibility, and learning to say goodbye</li> <li>• Support youth in transitioning out of the programme</li> <li>• Provide caregiver education on youth-related topics such as behaviour management, having realistic expectations</li> <li>• Train caregivers to reinforce work that Friends do with youth</li> </ul>
5. Concrete supports	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• More frequent outings with youth, including cultural activities</li> <li>• More substantial caregiver and teacher orientation to FOTC, including for new caregivers transitioning into child's life</li> <li>• Transportation, child care support</li> </ul>

**TABLE 5** Overview of recommendations falling under Research Question 2 Global Theme 2: Friend training and preparation

Organizing theme	Recommendation examples
1. Increased knowledge and skill building on various topics such as	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The other various systems that child welfare-involved families interact with (e.g., special education, criminal justice, and mental health)</li> <li>• Knowledge of caregiver, family, youth rights</li> <li>• How to work with the entire family</li> <li>• Motivational interviewing</li> <li>• Trauma-informed care</li> <li>• Taking a strengths-based approach</li> </ul>
2. Being flexible, adapting based on needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Being okay with slow progress</li> <li>• Preparing for unexpected changes</li> <li>• Being prepared for time-intensive relationship development</li> </ul>
3. Networking/liasing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Connect with all applicable community resources</li> <li>• Get to know all key players in child's life</li> </ul>
4. Self-care	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• More interactions among mentors</li> <li>• Opportunities for mentors to learn from each other</li> <li>• Actions to prevent burnout</li> </ul>

with Friends being nonjudgmental and strengths based. One Friend explained how they had learned over time how important it is to empower caregivers to be proactive: "And that was a really huge shift because I think for a while I felt like it was always ... [bio mom] relying [on me], but I realized later on in the game it made more sense for [bio mom] to be that contact and ... to empower her to do that. So she was proactive in now calling [nonprofit] ... not being afraid to call."

Just as continuity and connectedness were identified as crucial aspects of Friends' roles, recommendations also emerged for ways to strengthen these. For example, spending more time connecting with youth and doing additional liaising among stakeholders were recommended. Teachers also mentioned the potential benefit of Friends and themselves working more closely together on common academic goals and Friends bolstering their reinforcement of teachers' work with youth. Several recommendations were also shared regarding ways Friends could help educate families about key topics such as child development/behaviour and setting reasonable expectations, while also working with youth on building knowledge and skills around things like navigating adolescence and preparing for the transition into adulthood. Recommendations also emerged regarding concrete supports that Friends could provide for families, such as more transportation support, child care, and outings.

### 3.2.2 | Global Theme 2. Recommendations for friend training and preparation

These recommendations included additional training/preparation Friends may receive to strengthen their work with children and families. Again, many are things Friends already receive training on, but may benefit from additional skill development. Some recommendations focused on Friends receiving additional training to develop key knowledge and skills, such as trauma-informed care, motivational interviewing, and in-depth information on the various systems with which families commonly interact. Additional recommendations dealt with Friends needing to be flexible and adaptable. This can be particularly challenging when working with youth in care, as it may be difficult for Friends to deal with constantly changing circumstances. In addition, relationship building with youth and caregivers may take

longer than with families not involved with the child welfare system. One Friend described "... how patient you have to be with how long it can take for a youth who's experienced a lot of trauma to open up to you. One of the things that's beautiful about this place is that we get to play that long game .... If we can create that relationship and build a structure that allows them to find their own voice, and find their own power, for me it's definitely hard to do that, because I was definitely seeing some glaring holes that I just wanted to go fill, but I feel like that's playing the short game. The idea is that you want to get them to the point where they are advocating for themselves and finding their strengths. Sometimes that takes a while."

The importance of Friends being navigators and liaisons was reflected in recommendations for improvement, in that Friends could benefit from being familiar with all potentially useful community resources and key stakeholders in a family's life. Finally, participants recommended that Friends learn more about self-care in order to prevent burnout and maintain a high level of engagement. For some, this had to do with setting and maintaining boundaries.

## 4 | DISCUSSION

Findings from this study support the important role paid mentors can play in providing crucial long-term relationships not only for children in foster care but for caregivers as well, as reflected in FOTC's theory of change. In sum, many caregivers voiced the desire for even more Friend time not only with their youth but also with the caregivers and teachers as well. Participants identified the consistency and continuity of the Friend relationship as a critical aspect of the FOTC model. This is particularly important for child welfare system-involved families who often experience multiple transitions and often lack trust in service providers. The findings support research identifying that trusting and long-term relationships yield the strongest mentoring outcomes (DuBois et al., 2011; Williams, 2011). These relationships have the potential to empower families to expand their positive social connections and, for youth, to build Core Assets needed for positive development. The review of foster youth mentoring studies by Taussig and Weiler (2017) highlighted the importance of programmes being highly intentional in planning programming for foster children, taking into

account the potential challenges these children may face in building relationships with adults, having clinical expertise with this population, and partnering closely with the child welfare system. In addition, a meta-analysis of associations between therapeutic relationship variables and treatment outcomes in youth and family therapy (Karver, Handelsman, Fields, & Bickman, 2006) found therapist interpersonal skills and direct influence skills (e.g., structuring and providing rationale for activities), as well parent willingness to participate, to have moderate effects on youth treatment outcomes, whereas having a therapeutic alliance/relationship with both youth and parents was found to have a small effect size on youth treatment outcomes. The findings from this study are in line with these previous findings and also provide specific suggestions and guidance for how Friends as well as other professionals and paraprofessionals may go about doing some of these tasks. Comments from participants highlight the importance of helping build support networks for children, caregivers, and Friends; supporting children and families through placement transitions; familiarizing new caregivers with FOTC; and providing opportunities to help youth and caregivers build knowledge and skills, among others. Most foster care mentoring research to date has focused on older youth (Taussig & Weiler, 2017); this study also offers insights into programmatic strategies that may work for younger children in formal mentoring programmes.

Overall, the findings from this study will help inform the future development of the FOTC model related to serving youth in foster care. Research supports that the quality and background of mentors increases impact (DuBois et al., 2011). Not surprisingly, the findings support the need for professional, trained mentors and suggest even more specialized training for Friends on how to provide support to caregivers, navigate the child welfare system (particularly during times of transition), and continue to build on the trauma-informed approach that FOTC already takes to their mentorship of foster youth. Networking was also an important theme that emerged: networking among caregivers (to support one another), among Friends (for support, resource sharing, and preventing burnout), among youth (for peer relationship development), and between youth and caring others (for support network building). Although youth have opportunities to get to know each other through shared activities or outings, caregivers do not currently have a formal mechanism through which to connect and support one another. Furthermore, for children in foster care, having limited and fractured social support networks is a common challenge that can prevent them from achieving a variety of positive outcomes (Perry, 2006). Having Friends take an even more active role in supporting relationship building between children and bio family members, foster caregivers, siblings, and other caring adults, potentially through developing clearer expectations and procedures for Friends interacting with and providing networking opportunities for all involved parties, could be a particularly fruitful strategy for helping bolster youth outcomes. Supporting the development of social networks has been found to be particularly helpful in promoting achievement for youth of colour from low socioeconomic status families, especially boys (Dufur, Parcel, Hoffmann, & Braudt, 2016). This is meaningful for the FOTC context given that all FOTC children live in poverty and 86% are children of colour.

## 4.1 | Implications and next steps

Many similar themes emerged in response to both research questions—for example, findings regarding ways Friends both excel at and could improve upon providing consistency and continuity to families. These seemingly contradictory findings likely arose due to feedback from caregivers who had varying experiences with their children's Friends. A valuable next step for FOTC could thus be to explore how to bring more consistency to the work that Friends are doing with these high-needs families, potentially through more structured expectations about their interactions.

Although this study focuses on FOTC and how it can be improved to better serve child welfare system-involved children and families, the findings contain many valuable insights that could be helpful for other mentoring programmes or therapeutic settings interested in serving this population. The recommendations collected in this study and reported in Tables 4 and 5 offer several clear possibilities for next steps for both FOTC and for other foster youth-serving programmes. These recommendations could be particularly helpful for programmes aiming to provide more holistic family support within the mentoring context. Of course, although feedback from caregivers and Friends underscores the strong potential of long-term mentoring for highly vulnerable youth in foster care, a critical next step remains subjecting this model to rigorous evaluation.

## 4.2 | Limitations

One possible limitation of this study is that the caregivers who chose to participate may be different than those who did not, which could have skewed our findings. Furthermore, only a small number of case-workers and teachers were included. Future studies may also take into account the perspectives of child and youth FOTC participants to give additional insight into potential improvements; however, children currently in the programme were too young to participate at this time.

## 5 | CONCLUSION

The FOTC professional mentoring model offers a long-term, consistent relationship for children in foster care. The Friend relationship provides an avenue for promoting family stability, permanence, and child well-being by providing more holistic support to child welfare system-involved caregivers and families in addition to the children themselves. Both FOTC and other mentoring programmes serving child welfare system-involved families may benefit from the recommendations that emerged in this study.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This work was supported by the Annie E. Casey Foundation. The content of this paper is solely the responsibility of the authors and does not necessarily represent the official views of the funding agency.

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**How to cite this article:** Salazar AM, Haggerty KP, Walsh S, Noell B, Kelley-Siel E. Adapting the Friends of the Children programme for child welfare system-involved families. *Child & Family Social Work*. 2019;1–11. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12622>