

# THE PEER PROJECT

YOUTH ASSISTING YOUTH



## Somebody to Lean On:

A Preliminary Program  
Evaluation of  
*The Peer Project*  
– Youth Assisting Youth's  
Peer Mentoring Program



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*Funding Support:*

This project was made possible via the financial support of:



Ontario Centre of Excellence  
for Child and Youth  
Mental Health

*Bringing People and Knowledge Together to Strengthen Care.*

January 2013

ISBN: 978-0-9918288-0-7



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## Acknowledgments

This project was conducted by *The Peer Project – Youth Assisting Youth (YAY)*, a non-profit organization, in collaboration with *Resiliency Initiatives*, an independent consulting firm providing contextualized community based intervention, prevention and evaluation services, based on strength-based principles of practice. Full funding was provided by the *Ontario Centre of Excellence for Child and Youth Mental Health (CHEO)*, an Ottawa based Centre assisting organizations as they seek the knowledge to better promote the mental health and well being for the children and youth they serve.

Without the ongoing assistance provided by Marie-Josée Émard from *CHEO*, this project would still be in its infancy phase. The research team's commitment, contributions and support, were equally essential to the success of this report: thank you, Ed Carlson, Sara Farrell and John van Rhee. Many thanks to our *Research Advisory Committee* members for their thoughtful guidance throughout all the stages of this research: Monica Anne Brennan, *Toronto Region Immigrant Employment Council*; Elida Farelli, *Toronto Catholic District School Board*; Rajat Bhardwaj, committed mentor; Jason Lumley, previous mentee; and Shazia Aquila, parent.



We would also like to extend our appreciation to the mentees and mentors participating in the program, who took the time out of their busy schedules to complete the *Child/Youth Resiliency: Assessing Developmental Strengths* tool. We also need to thank the dedicated and highly skilled staff at *Youth Assisting Youth* for their help and commitment to this evaluation process. This pilot could not have happened without you. We hope that the findings outlined in this report will improve future experiences within the program.



## Executive Summary

### The Peer Mentoring Program

*The Peer Project – Youth Assisting Youth (YAY)* is a non-profit organization providing a peer mentoring service to improve the life prospects of at-risk children.

The program has served more than 30,000 young people since 1976, helping them develop the needed skills to overcome their life challenges.

**Findings** from this pilot evaluation suggest that many Mentees benefited from the program, particularly in relation to their capability to overcome significant life adversities: 73% of program participants developed resilient profiles.

Although results suggest positive trends, they can only be validated with a pre-test/post-test comparative evaluation, and the use of a control group. This program evaluation step is currently underway, to be completed in 2013.

### What Youth Said:

*“Like having a brother I never had”*

*“Now I know what it means to have a positive influence”*

*“He helps me get through the tough things”*

*“I liked going to the library and getting my own library card and then finding books together”*

This pilot study employed a post test evaluation design and aimed to:

- » Explore *The Peer Project's* ability to foster resiliency within youth
- » Determine mentees' degree of resiliency
- » Create a knowledge base of preliminary results to inform the future development of the program

- » 53% of participants reported a very resilient profile
- » 20% reported a somewhat resilient profile
- » 26.7% reported a vulnerable profile
- » No mentees reported very vulnerable profiles

## Introduction

YAY is a non-profit charitable organization that provides peer mentoring services to improve the life prospects of at-risk children. The program is anchored in a twofold conceptualization: *risk* and *resiliency* within a prevention framework. It draws upon a strength-based approach to enhance young people's resilient abilities, as an alternative way to the traditional intervention models, mainly focused on managing the negative and risk taking behaviour. Through their participation in the program, youth have the opportunity to focus on their individual areas of strength and thereby experience enhanced growth and development, as well as greater life coping skills.



Drawing upon a strength-based prevention framework, this pilot evaluation used a post test methodological design to explore if the program fosters youth resiliency, to assess its potential impact on young people's psychological well-being, and to further examine the program's ability to enhance positive competencies in youth, as they particularly relate to the solidification of their developmental strengths and subsequent coping mechanisms in the face of adversity.

The purpose of this project was **threefold**:

- » Explore the YAY's ability to foster resiliency within youth
- » Determine Mentees' degrees of resiliency
- » Create a knowledge base of preliminary results to inform the future development of the program

Although *YAY's Peer Mentoring* program has grown tremendously over the last years, with its waitlist inherently expanding, no prior research efforts have been used to evaluate the program and to elicit feedback from participating youth. Anecdotally, YAY staff, Mentees, Mentors and parents know first-hand that peer mentoring made a huge and positive difference in both Mentees and Mentors lives. However, the ability to clearly demonstrate and articulate these powerful outcomes was needed. The proposed evaluation aims to make use of evidence informed practice to further guide its future development.

## YAY's Peer Mentoring Program Description

YAY aims to improve the life prospects of at-risk children:

- » It currently services an average of 1500 children and youth per month
- » It matches fully screened and trained youth volunteers, ages 16 to 29, with at-risk children, ages 6 to 15, who are experiencing emotional, behavioural, social and/or cultural adjustment issues
- » Every referred child/youth has been clinically diagnosed as suffering from at least one mental health related issue
- » Referrals are made through a variety of channels, including child welfare agencies, schools and settlement agencies
- » A Home Assessment is completed by a staff Social Worker for each Mentor and Mentee in the program
- » Volunteer Mentors are recruited from high schools, colleges, universities and workplaces

*The program has served more than 30,000 young people since 1976*

### *The MATCH:*

Matches (Mentor & Mentee) are based on common interests, participants' identified special needs, and geographical location

The duration of the mentoring relationship is initially set for a minimum of one year, however many matches go well beyond the program's specified time frame

Participants spend together an average of 3 hours per week in a variety of shared interest activities

Social Workers and Parent and Volunteer Support Coordinators provide ongoing support and supervision throughout the duration of the relationship

Mandatory Mentor Orientation and Training sessions are conducted before the matching process. Examples of such workshops and sessions include: Strength-Based Mentoring, Child Abuse Awareness, Cultural Diversity, Child Engagement & Management Skills, Bullying & Effective Communication. The orientation additionally covers various aspects of the mentoring relationship, such as participants' roles and responsibilities, or issues related to cross-cultural communication.

## Context: Peer Mentoring within a Resiliency Framework

Most risk reduction programs are traditionally focused on the development of effective coping strategies for youth (Osgood, Jonhston, O'Malley, & Bachman, 1988) despite the fact that new areas in research have proposed the inclusion of protective factors alongside the risk reducing preventative interventions (Pollard, Hawkins, & Arthur, 1999; Resnick, 2000). In contrast, resiliency enhancing programs have been representing a significant shift in conceptualizing mental health promotion (Wyn, Cahill, Holdsworth, Rowling & Carson, 2000), starting from the premise that protective factors counterbalance risk factors and create emotionally resilient children (Alperstein & Raman, 2003). With an emphasis on strengths, resources, and assets, as a theory-guide solution-oriented approach (Alvord & Grados, 2005; Benson, Leffert, Scales, & Blyth, 1998) the *Peer Project's* development has been theoretically anchored in a twofold conceptualization: *risk* and *resiliency* within a prevention framework.

### THE RESILIENCY FRAMEWORK:

Is an ecological (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) and comprehensive approach to risk (Alperstein & Raman, 2003)

It posits that multi-layered interactions exist between the individual and his/her surrounding environment, comprised of risk factors and additionally of shielding factors (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005), the so-called protective components enhancing one's healthy development (Henley, 2010) and individual well being (Resiliency Initiatives, 2012; Steinebach & Steinebach, 2009; Saewyc, Skay, & Pettingell, 2006)

*It focuses on individuals' ability to:*

- » Successfully navigate through significant threats (Hall, Vine & Gardner, 2010)
- » Overcome adversity
- » Develop the necessary skills to adapt (Goldstein & Brooks, 2005) to difficulties via a combination of external supports (family, peers, school, community) and internal strengths (personality characteristics, empowerment, self-control)
- » Mobilize protective resources to counterbalance risks (Rew & Horner, 2003) and deal with stress effectively (Alperstein & Raman, 2003)

Youth with high resiliency factors are less likely to be involved in risk taking activities, such as substance use and school misbehaviour, more likely to further develop interpersonal skills, self control, problem solving and cognitive competencies (Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczack, & Hawkins, 2004) and more likely to engage in constructive behaviours (Resiliency Initiatives, 2012).



Resiliency based paradigms seek to identify protective, nurturing factors in the lives of those who otherwise would be expected to be at risk for a variety of adverse outcomes (Coie, Watt, West, Hawkins, Asarnow, Markman, Ramey, Shure & Long, 1993). Strategies operating from a resiliency perspective have the potential to promote emotional well being (Alperstein & Raman, 2003) as a key component to mental health promotion for young people (Wyn, Cahill, Holdsworth, Rowling & Carson, 2000). Moreover, the resiliency strengths based framework has been adopted as a viable evaluation model for understanding the major components contributing to the resiliency development and well-being of children and youth in our communities (Donnon & Hammond, 2007a).

Bringing forward the dynamic multi-dimensional concept of resiliency, as a trajectory of adaptation (Henley, 2010) to life challenges (Resiliency Initiatives, 2003), this research seeks to explore how young people influence their environment in order to cope with daily adversities, or bluntly said, how youth make the most out of whatever is available to them (Ungar, 2008). It is within this theoretical context that the strengths based peer mentoring intervention developed by YAY is designed: to engage at-risk youth in a participatory manner in order to develop their resilient and protective factors.



## Methodology

A research advisory committee (*RAC*) of front line service providers, program participants and experts within the youth programming and the mentoring field, was created to guide this project's development. The *RAC* provided advice and directed the research team throughout the evaluation activities. It further reviewed the project's internal ethics protocol and granted its approval.

**Evaluation Questions** included both process and outcome queries. The process evaluation aimed to shed light on the mentoring relationship. The outcome questions explored youth resiliency profiles as they particularly relate to their behavioural and social functioning.

The current evaluation elicited feedback from both Mentors and Mentees, although within the context of this report, Mentees' opinions are the ones primarily accounted for.

Participants were asked to complete the *Child/Youth Resiliency: Assessing Developmental Strengths (C/YR: ADS)* tool at post test, after they had been involved in the program for a year. They were recruited from a convenience sample, limited to youth, ages 6 to 15, participating in the YAY's peer mentoring program. Collected data was analyzed using *Resiliency Initiative's* statistical software. Informal focus group discussions were conducted with both, Mentees and Mentors, following the administration of the tool.



The *C/YR:ADS* tool has been previously tested for reliability and validity (Donnon & Hammond, 2007b). Questionnaire items inquired about participants' external developmental strengths (family supports, peer relationships, commitment to learning, school culture, community cohesiveness), internal developmental strengths (cultural sensitivity, self-control, empowerment, self-concept, social sensitivity) and personal core character competencies (strengths-based aptitude, emotional competence, social connectedness, moral directness, adaptability, managing ambiguity, agency and responsibility). Participants' demographic information (age, culture, and sex) was also collected. Moreover, several progress questions developed by YAY were incorporated within the tool and aimed to specifically assess the overall mentoring relationship.

Questionnaires were collected between June and August 2012.

# Preliminary Results

## Summary of Participants

As seen in *Table 1*, the majority of Mentees were young males, with an average age of 13 years, ranging between 10 to 16 years old.

**Table 1.** Mentees' Demographic Profile (n=15)

Gender	Number	Percent
Male	10	67%
Female	5	33%

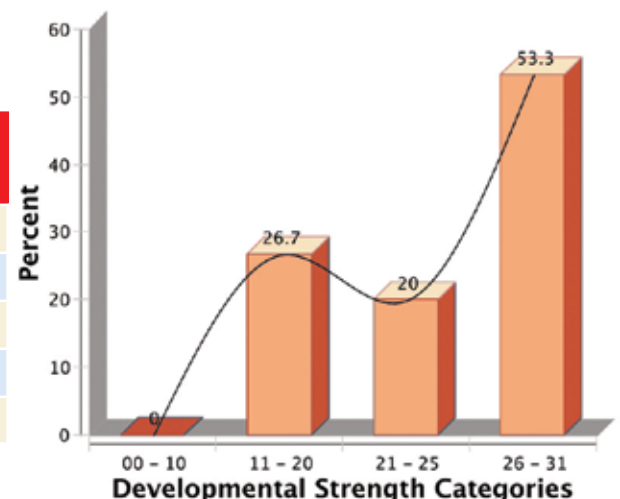
Age	Number	Percent
10	2	13%
11	3	20%
12	1	7%
13	1	7%
14	2	13%
15	2	13%
16	4	27%

### *Improved Resiliency as Related to Youth Social and Behavioural Functioning*

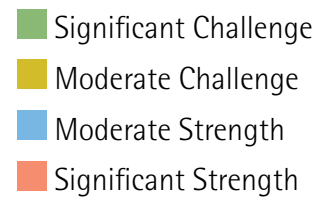
Findings from this pilot evaluation suggest that participation in the YAY's mentoring program was beneficial for the youth, particularly in relation to their behavioural and social functioning. *Figure 1* visually represents Mentees' varying degrees of resiliency. Cumulatively, 73% of Mentees developed resilient profiles: over a half of participants (53%) reported a very resilient profile and a further 20% reported a somewhat resilient profile. Only about a quarter of participants fitted under a vulnerable profile (26.7%). No Mentees fell into the very vulnerable category.

**Figure 1.** Mentees' Aggregated Resiliency Scores (n=15)

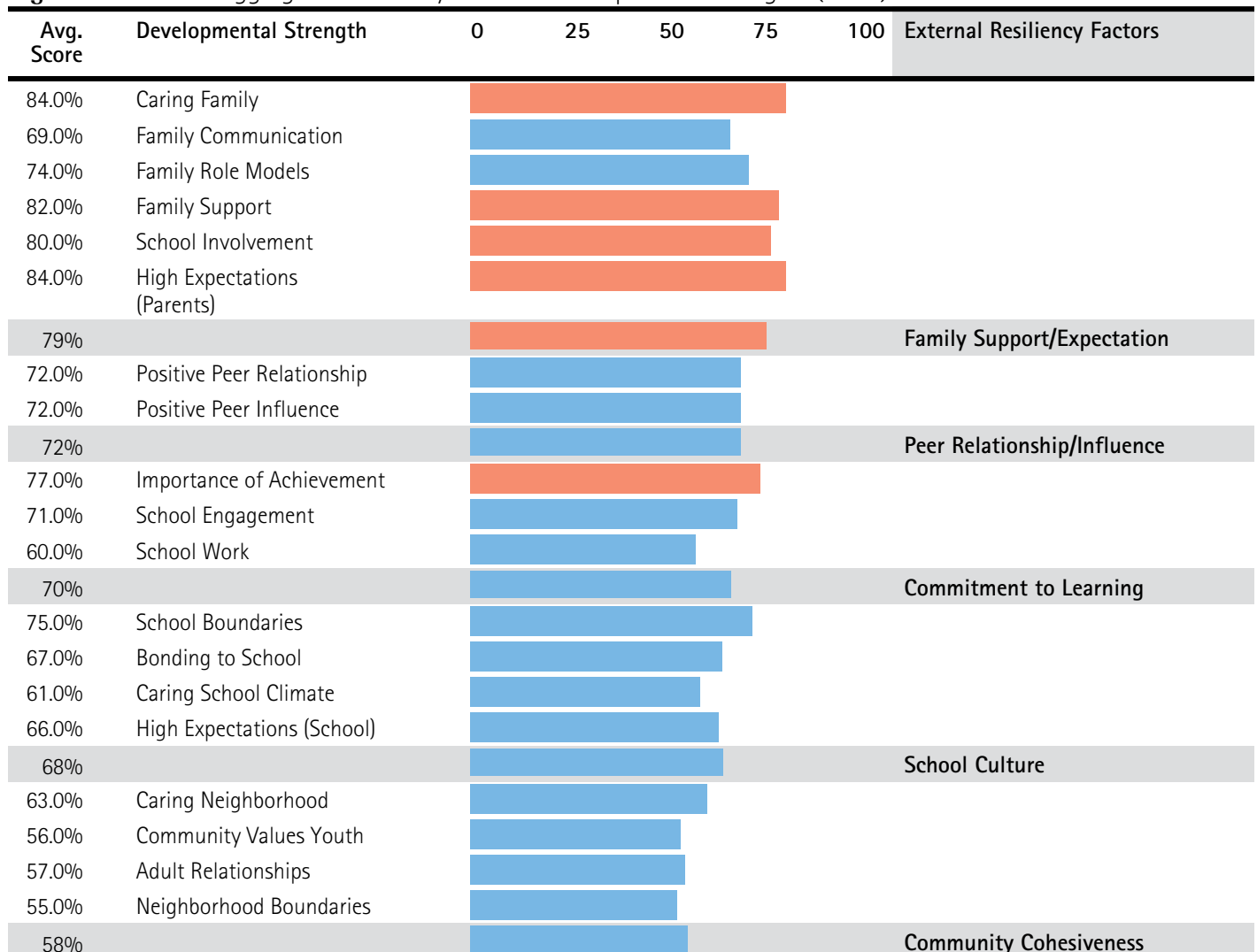
Number of Developmental Strengths	Number	Percent %
Very Vulnerable 00 – 10	0	0.0
Vulnerable 11 – 20	4	26.7
Somewhat Resilient 21 – 25	3	20.0
Very Resilient 26 – 31	8	53.3
<b>Total</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>100.0</b>



Research has shown that all of these factors, and their combined additive effects, are essential components in the development of resiliency in youth (Resiliency Initiatives, 2012). As it relates to the external factors, *family support*, as particularly defined by a caring, communicative family, with parents as role models, actively involved in school matters and having high academic expectations of their children, seemed to have the most significant developmental role in building Mentees' resiliency, with an aggregated score of 79%. It was followed by the positive influence of *peer relationships* (78%), a *commitment to learning* (70%), as defined by school engagement and academic achievements, and a positive *school culture* (68%) characterized by a strong bond with a caring school climate and high academic expectations. Lower aggregated scores were observed for the *community cohesiveness* component (58%), as particularly defined by neighbourhood characteristics, such as: community values, adult relationships within the community, neighbourhood boundaries and the overall characteristic of a caring neighbourhood.

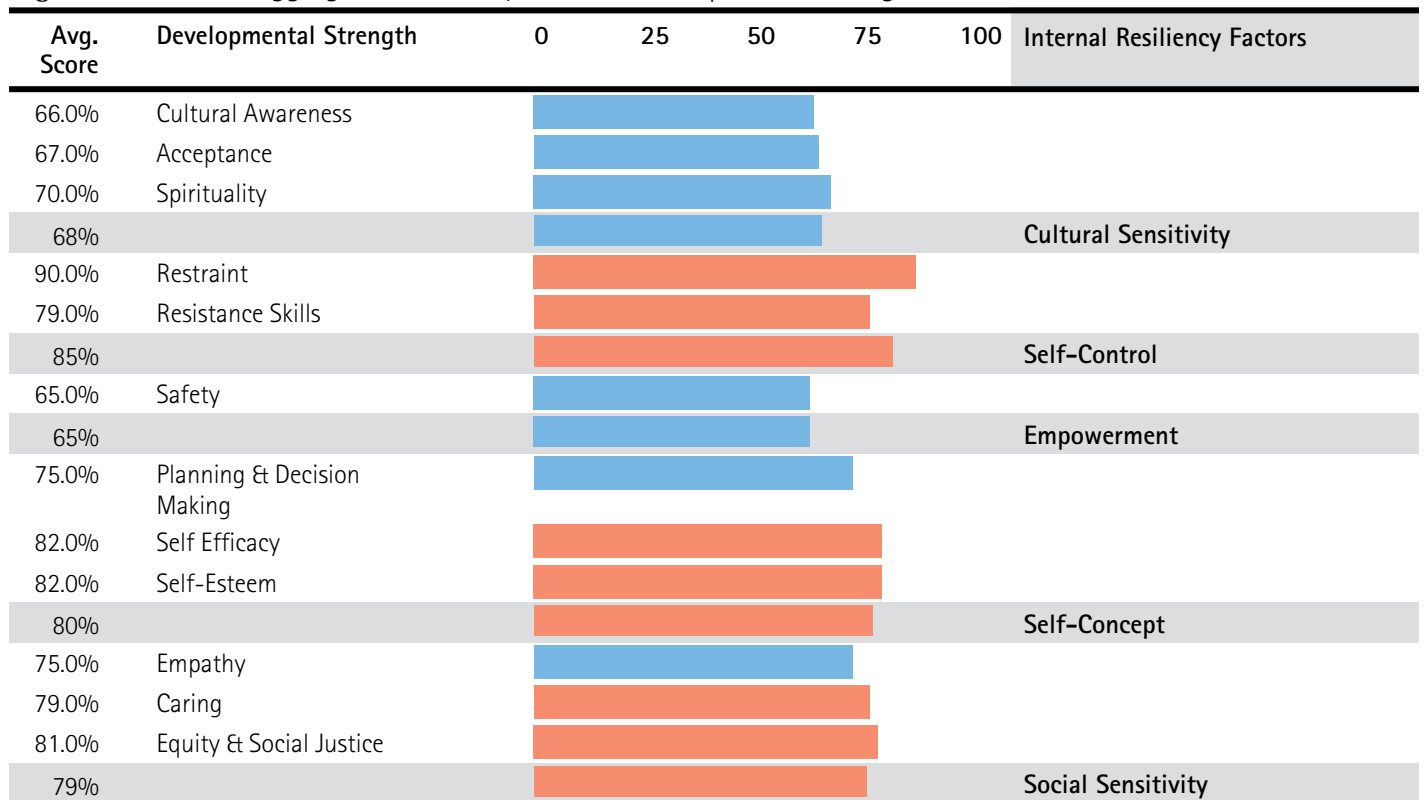


**Figure 2.** Mentees' Aggregated Scores by External Developmental Strengths (n=15)



As seen below, the developmental strength of *self control*, reflective of youth restraint and their inherent resistance skills, was the most significant internal factor, reported by an overwhelming number of Mentees (85%). The *self concept* developmental strength, particularly referring to youth's traits of self efficacy, self-esteem and their planning and decision making capacity, was the one to follow, as reported by 80% of the Mentees. *Social sensitivity*, including the internal developmental strengths of empathy, caring, equality and social justice, was equally important, as about 79% of Mentees reported it as such. On the lower side were the internal factor of *cultural sensitivity*, which, defined by the notions of cultural awareness, spirituality and acceptance, was reported by 68% of Mentees, and the internal factor of *empowerment*, as reported by 65% of them.

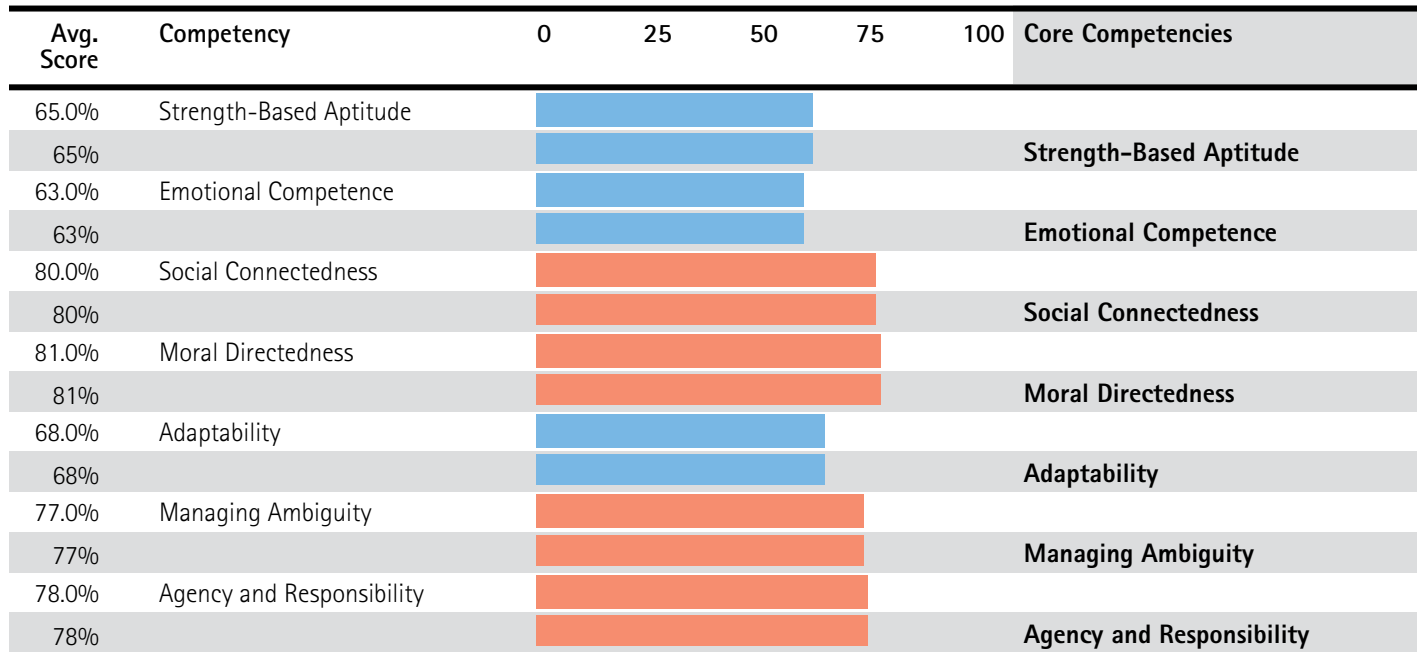
**Figure 3.** Mentees' Aggregated Scores by Internal Developmental Strengths (n=15)



In relation to core character competencies (see figure 4), the strengths most often reported by the Mentees were *moral directedness* (81%) and *social connectedness* (80%). Additionally, over three quarters of Mentees have reported *agency and responsibility* (78%) and *managing ambiguity* (77%) as important core competencies. However, the most challenging factors seemed to be Mentees' *strength based aptitude* (65%) and their *emotional competence* (63%).

- Significant Challenge
- Moderate Challenge
- Moderate Strength
- Significant Strength

**Figure 4.** Mentees' Aggregated Scores by Core Competencies Strengths (n=15)



Similar profiles have been reported by the Mentors. High scores among akin internal and external strengths or core competencies were indicative of YAYs peer mentoring service as facilitating the development of resiliency specific characteristics for the Mentors as well.

- Significant Challenge
- Moderate Challenge
- Moderate Strength
- Significant Strength

**The Overall Mentoring Relationship**

The Mentor-Mentee relation is often a predictor of positives outcomes for mentoring programs. As seen in *Table 2*, findings indicate that all Mentees perceived their Mentors as being fully involved, caring and respectful, and felt they were well matched with their Mentors. Additionally, 93% of participants stated they would like to continue their relationship with their Mentors in the near future.

As seen below, Mentees were asked to identify certain benefits of the mentoring relationship, based on their experience in the program. Some of the key positives themes included: feeling heard and respected, getting along with their Mentors, meaningfully talking about relevant concerns, having the Mentors take interest in their issues, focusing on their strengths rather than on challenges, being a positive influence in their life, and helping them achieve successful goals.

**Table 2.** Mentees' Perception of the Mentoring Relationship' (n=15)

Relationship with Mentors	Percent
Mentors' likeness	100%
Mentors' consideration	100%
Good Match	100%
Desired Future relationship	93%

Relationship Attributes	Percent
Validate Feelings	100%
Positive Influence	100%
Help with achieving goals	100%
Getting along	93%
Talking about Mentees' concerns	93%
Interest in Mentees' issues	93%
Strengths focused approach	86%

Mentees' qualitative comments were descriptive and indicative of the positive impact of their relationship with the Mentors:

*“Like having a brother I never had”*

*“Now I know what it means to have a positive influence”*

*“He helps me get through the tough things”*

*“I liked going to the library and getting my own library card and then finding books together”*

When we asked the Mentors about their participation in the program, they have positively commented about their overall mentoring experience:

*“Developing this interesting relationship, you become a brother and sister”*

*“It's a good experience. Helps a lot- to be sensitive, choose your words, learn how to make someone else happy...it's a gratifying feeling”*

## Conclusions

Findings from this pilot evaluation suggest the *YAY's Peer Mentoring* program facilitates the enhancement of resiliency factors among youth and further assists them in successfully coping with their life challenges. Results indicate that many Mentees benefited from the program, as approximately 73% have developed resilient profiles. However, caution is needed when interpreting such results as, although reflective of positive trends, they can only be validated and confirmed with a pre-test/ post-test comparative evaluation. Moreover, the number of participants was fairly low, which makes it difficult to generalize on the experiences of only 15 Mentees and Mentors.

Overall, the resiliency questionnaires provided a portrait of youth protective factors and inherent internal and external developmental strengths, indicative of resilient youth's ability to cope with adversity more effectively than those experiencing fewer developmental strengths. *Family support* was by far, the external development strength that contributed the most to Mentees' resiliency. Even among those with lower resiliency scores, family support was still the external category most often reported. In turn, *community cohesiveness* was the least reported external strength for all Mentees and, as a systemic issue, this is a factor less likely to be addressed by future developments within the program. However, *YAY* intends to explore the possibility of introducing new ways of building community cohesiveness, perhaps by developing and engaging youth in many more community and neighbourhood based activities and events. As it relates to the internal strengths, the lowest scores were those on the *cultural sensitivity* and *empowerment* factors, and these are the particular areas that *YAY* aims to further improve in the future.

Working from a strength-based model of perceiving child and youth development, allowed us to preliminarily explore if the peer mentoring program facilitates Mentees' developmental, extrinsic and intrinsic competencies. Although no Mentees fell into the very vulnerable category, more work is indeed needed to fully cater and adapt the program to fit the needs of all participants, in particular to assist youth in strengthening the internal components of *cultural sensitivity* and *empowerment* and the external component of *community cohesiveness*.



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