



UNIVERSITY of
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— Peter Underwood Centre

Relational support in practice: The Supporting Expecting and Parenting Teens program (SEPT)

Final Report

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Prepared for: Brave Foundation



Acknowledgement of Country

We acknowledge the Pakana and Palawa people of lutruwita, the traditional owners of the land upon which we live and work.

We pay respects to Elders past and present as the knowledge holders and sharers. We honour their strong culture and knowledges as vital to the self-determination, wellbeing and resilience of their communities.

We stand for a future that profoundly respects and acknowledges Aboriginal perspectives, culture, language and history.

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1. Executive Summary

"I look back now, and I'm like, 'maybe if I wasn't a part of Brave, I actually probably wouldn't have come this far'" (Mabel).

The Supporting Expecting and Parenting Teens (SEPT) program is a free, personalised mentoring initiative delivered by the Brave Foundation to support expecting and parenting young people up to the age of 25. Through sustained one-to-one mentoring relationships, SEPT aims to strengthen young parents' wellbeing, agency, and engagement with education, health, housing, and employment systems during a critical life-course transition.

This report presents findings from a mixed-methods study exploring the experiences of young parents participating in SEPT in Tasmania, with a particular focus on which aspects of the program mattered most to them and how change occurred over time. Drawing on focus groups, interviews, and a statewide survey, the research centres the voices of young parents while situating their experiences within established mentoring theory and the Tasmanian Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy (2021).

Key findings

Across data sources, participants consistently described the mentoring relationship as the most significant and influential element of the SEPT program. Rather than functioning as an add-on or supplementary service, mentoring operated as a form of relational infrastructure. That is, a sustained, trusted relationship that enabled young parents to navigate complex systems, develop confidence, and imagine viable futures for themselves and their children.

The analysis was guided by three interconnected developmental mechanisms derived from the youth mentoring literature (Raposa et al., 2019):

1. Relational safety, trust, and reliability

Participants emphasised the importance of having a mentor who was consistent, non-judgemental, and dependable over time. Feeling that they were taken seriously and valued created emotional safety, particularly for young parents with prior experiences of stigma, anxiety, or disrupted support. This relational security was often a precondition for engagement with services, willingness to seek help, and openness to change.

2. Cognitive scaffolding and problem-solving

Mentors supported young parents to develop practical and cognitive skills through a "walking alongside" approach. Rather than doing things for participants, mentors scaffolded decision-making, problem-solving, and system navigation, gradually transferring responsibility as confidence grew. Over time, many participants described increased autonomy, self-belief, and

capacity to manage appointments, education pathways, and advocacy independently.

3. Identity development and possible futures

Mentoring relationships supported shifts in how young parents understood themselves, including as parents, learners, and community members. Through encouragement, modelling, and access to realistic opportunities, mentors helped participants reframe deficit-based narratives and develop future-oriented “possible selves.” These identity shifts were closely tied to participation in education, training, community activities, and cultural connections.

Importantly, participants experienced these mechanisms as mutually reinforcing rather than sequential. For example, relational safety enabled cognitive growth, which in turn supported identity development and future orientation.

When support falters

While the majority of experiences were positive, the research also identified points of tension and limitation. In particular, disruptions to continuity, such as changes in mentors or the ending of support, were challenging for some participants, especially when trust and identity shifts had only recently consolidated. Material support, while essential for meeting immediate needs with dignity, could also lead to unintended dependence, especially in contexts of ongoing disadvantage, indicating a broader need for effective systemic supports.

These findings do not detract from the effectiveness of SEPT. Rather, they highlight that the very elements that make the program effective (relational depth, consistency, and duration) are also the elements most vulnerable when support is withdrawn or disrupted.

Implications

Overall, the findings provide strong evidence that SEPT is an effective relational intervention for young parents, particularly when circumstances allow implementation as designed. The program contributes directly to the domains of the Tasmanian Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy, namely being loved, safe and valued; having material basics; learning; participating; and developing a positive sense of culture and identity.

This report extends youth mentoring literature into the context of young parenthood by demonstrating how mentoring functions as a developmental mechanism within complex service environments. The findings show that sustained relational support enables young parents to engage with systems, build agency, and create stable pathways over time.

The results suggest that program effectiveness is maximised when mentoring is sufficiently long-term, relationally consistent, and carefully paced to young parents’ readiness and circumstances.

1. Introduction

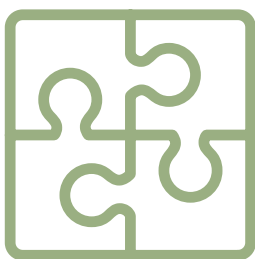
1.1. The SEPT program

The Supporting Expecting and Parenting Teens (SEPT) program is a free, personalised mentoring initiative delivered by the Brave Foundation. The program pairs an expecting or parenting young person up to age 25 with a professional mentor for approximately 12 months, who provides practical assistance, advocacy, and emotional support through an individualised “Pathway Plan”. A mainstay of the program is the sustained, one-to-one mentoring relationship, through which mentors explicitly “walk alongside” young parents in their local communities to build trust, identify goals, and support engagement with health, education, housing, and employment systems.



Within the SEPT program, mentors operate using a reflective and iterative practice framework, in which support strategies and goals are continually reviewed and adapted in response to participants’ changing circumstances, readiness, and engagement, supported by professional supervision and structured reflection. This model aims to respond to and facilitate young parents’ agency, continuity, and relational safety as the conditions through which meaningful engagement can occur.

Evidence from independent evaluations and Brave Foundation reporting indicates that this sustained relational approach is associated with high levels of program engagement over time (Bakhtiar et al., 2020; Brave Foundation, 2024). Through consistent contact and advocacy, mentors support young parents as they navigate intersecting challenges, including social and systemic discrimination, financial insecurity, mental ill-health, family violence, insecure housing, and limited access to transport and services. The mentor’s role extends beyond emotional support to include coordination and navigation within fragmented service systems, enabling young parents to access resources while developing confidence and stability in their personal and family lives.



Although the mentor–participant relationship is the most visible feature of SEPT, the program is best understood as a systems-aware intervention rather than a standalone mentoring model. It is expected that support and growth will occur through the interaction of sustained relational support, structured goal planning, and coordinated engagement with services over time. This framing recognises that outcomes such as improved wellbeing, participation in education or employment, and stable family environments are contingent not only on individual motivation, but on the removal or mitigation of structural and institutional barriers.

SEPT also aligns with broader policy directions that emphasise early, holistic, and relational approaches to family wellbeing. In Tasmania, these principles are

articulated in the Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy, *It Takes a Tasmanian Village* (2021), which highlights the importance of place-based support, trusted relationships, and coordinated systems, particularly during critical developmental periods such as the first 1000 days. The SEPT program offers a practical example of how these principles can be enacted through professional mentoring that is responsive to individual circumstances while operating within a broader wellbeing framework.

1.2. Theoretical and contextual underpinnings

Contemporary research on young parenthood emphasises relational, developmental, and contextual factors as central to understanding outcomes for young parents and their children (Mulgrew et al., 2024). Rather than viewing early parenthood primarily in terms of risk or deficit, this literature positions young parents as individuals navigating a complex life-course transition while simultaneously undertaking significant caregiving responsibilities (Owens, 2022).

An ecological perspective recognises that young parents' wellbeing is shaped through the interaction of individual characteristics, relational supports, and the social and institutional systems with which they engage. This position is well represented by the Tasmanian Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy (2021), which conceptualises wellbeing as emerging across interconnected domains, including family, community, education, health, and service systems. For young parents in Tasmania, these interactions may be affected by geographic isolation, service fragmentation, and limited access to informal and formal supports. Within this context, SEPT can be understood as an intervention through which broader developmental and wellbeing outcomes can emerge (see Figure 1).

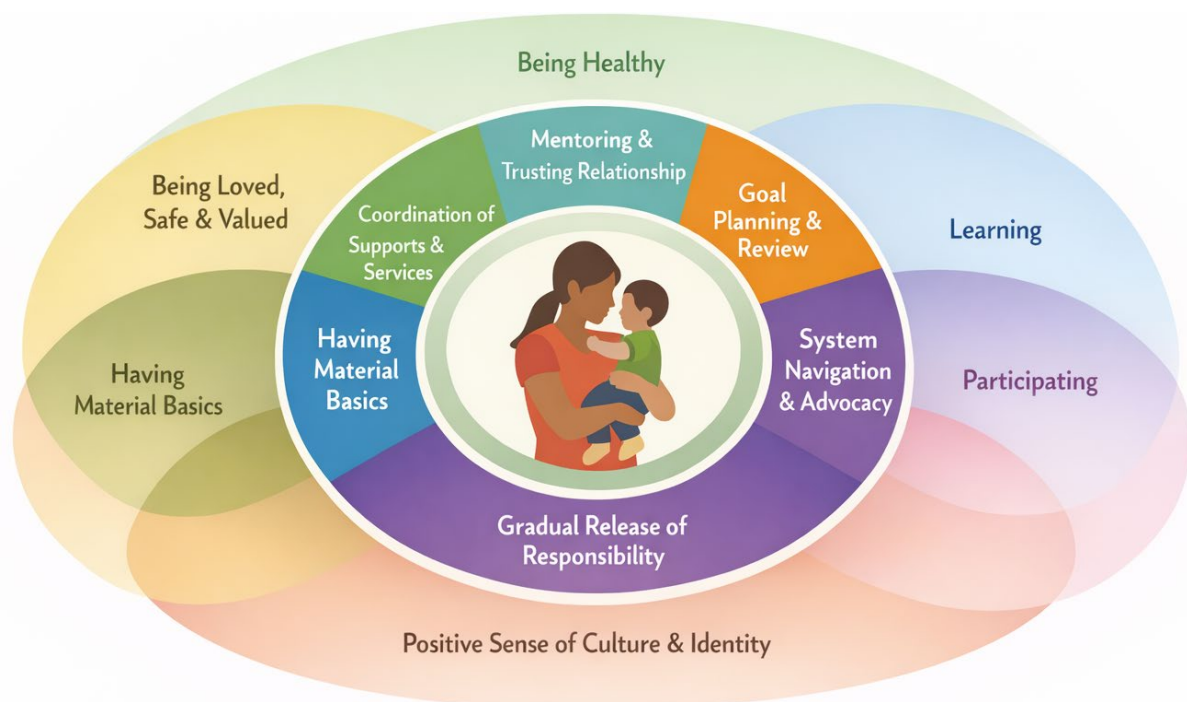


Figure 1. SEPT program in the context of the Tasmanian Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy (2021)

The mentoring literature identifies relationships as a primary mechanism for achieving positive change relevant to individual situations and needs. In a review of research on youth mentoring, Raposa et al. (2019) identified consistent, supportive relationships with trusted people as key drivers of positive outcomes, operating through mechanisms such as emotional security, cognitive reframing, identity development, and increased engagement with opportunities. These mechanisms are particularly salient for young parents experiencing cumulative disadvantage, for whom trust, continuity, and non-judgemental support are prerequisites for sustained engagement.

This report extends youth mentoring literature into the context of young parenthood by examining how mentoring operates within these intersecting demands. To this end, the SEPT program can be understood as a form of relational infrastructure that enables young parents to engage with services, navigate systems, and consolidate emerging identities over time. Such framing shifts attention away from program activities or short-term outcomes, toward the mechanisms through which change is produced. Consistent with mentoring theory, these mechanisms include the establishment of relational safety, the scaffolding of cognitive and problem-solving capacities, and the development of agency and future orientation (Raposa et al., 2019). This relational Infrastructure is reflected in the accounts of young Tasmanian parents themselves, who consistently describe the importance of a trusted, open-minded, and non-judgemental adult relationship in enabling them to engage with services, set goals, and work towards a desired future (Bakhtiar et al., 2020).

1.3. Mentoring as a developmental intervention

Evidence suggests that mentoring produces modest but meaningful effects that accumulate over time, particularly when relationships are consistent and sustained (Raposa et al., 2019). For young parents, these developmental processes often unfold within contexts of heightened stigma, surveillance, and structural constraint, which can undermine emotional security and engagement if unaddressed (Owens, 2022). Further, evidence from Australian research with young mothers indicates that wellbeing, resilience, and distress frequently co-exist, and that social support and self-esteem are central to adaptive functioning over time (Mulgrew et al., 2024). In such contexts, sustained, positive relationships function as a critical protective condition.

Mentoring has been used to support youth with a range of psychological, social and behavioural needs, and has proven to be an effective intervention strategy to improve youth outcomes in many cases (e.g. Grossman & Rhodes, 2002; Raposa et al., 2019; Rhodes, 2005). While there is diversity in how each program designs mentee participation, mentor training and conditions, and proposed outcomes, there is a set of common structural components and activities that are associated with effective approaches. These include effective mentor selection, training, matching, and support that prioritises positive and ongoing mentor-mentee engagement. This relationship then forms the basis for individualised mentee support in developing personal and life skills as well as social networks and community engagement (Conley Wright et al., 2021).

The SEPT program is not specifically designed as a youth mentoring program; however, the substantial body of research in this area offers an opportunity to examine the program through this lens. The value of this perspective lies in developing an understanding of how mentoring contributes to outcomes for young parents whose lives are shaped by cumulative and intersecting pressures. Within the ecological and relational context outlined above, and drawing on Raposa et al.'s (2019) synthesis of the mentoring literature, youth mentoring can be understood as a developmental intervention, operating via sustained interpersonal processes that support change through three interrelated pathways:

- social–emotional development;
- cognitive development;
- identity formation.

These three pathways are useful for understanding the mechanisms and processes associated with positive outcomes for young parents. First, stable, trusting relationships with non-parental adults create conditions of emotional safety and relational security, which are foundational for engagement and learning. Within such relationships, young people are better able to regulate emotions, reflect on experiences, and engage in problem-solving and goal-directed behaviour. Over time, these processes support identity development, including increased self-efficacy, a sense of agency, and the capacity to imagine and work towards desired futures. These processes reinforce one another: for example, emotional security enables cognitive engagement, while developing competence strengthens identity and motivation (Raposa et al., 2019).

Identity formation is particularly salient for young parents navigating a major life transition. The following section examines identity, agency, and future orientation in greater depth as critical mechanisms through which mentoring influences outcomes.

Identity, agency, and possible futures

Young people are likely to experience significant shifts in identities as they transition into adulthood and begin to live, learn, and work independently (Rudling et al., 2023). This process can be especially challenging for young parents, who must integrate the demands of caregiving with broader aspirations for education, work, and social participation. While early parenthood is often framed in public discourse as a risk factor, research highlights that age is no barrier to experiencing parenting as a source of meaning, responsibility, and motivation, even when challenges of stigma and reduced institutional and social expectations exist (Hoffmann et al., 2024).



Mentoring relationships can support this identity work by creating space for young parents to reflect on their experiences, articulate aspirations, and reframe deficit-

oriented narratives. In the case of SEPT, the practical support to approach and achieve tasks and goals further consolidates and develops each family's capabilities and confidence. Through targeted and tailored engagement, mentors support the development of "possible selves" - self-perceptions that connect present circumstances with future-oriented goals (Markus & Nurius, 1986; Raposa et al., 2019). Importantly, these possible selves are shaped not only by imagination, but by access to concrete opportunities and supports that make them attainable.

As identity and future orientation strengthen, young parents are more likely to exercise agency in navigating systems, persisting with education or training, and advocating for their own and their children's needs. In this way, identity development functions as both a personal and relational process, closely tied to participation and engagement within wider social systems (Bakhtiar et al., 2020).

As young parents develop stronger identities and a sense of agency, their capacity and willingness to participate in decision-making processes also expands. This makes participation an important relational and developmental mechanism in its own right.

Participation, voice, and meaningful engagement

From relational and ecological standpoints, participation is conceived as a dynamic process through which young people contribute to and influence the decisions that shape their lives. For young parents, meaningful participation is often constrained by service interactions that emphasise compliance, risk management, or surveillance, limiting opportunities for shared decision-making and trust (Beauchamp, 2020; Lundy, 2007).



Mentoring provides a relational context in which participation can be enacted differently. Through collaborative goal-setting, reflective dialogue, and shared problem-solving, young parents are supported to articulate priorities, negotiate choices, and take an active role in planning. These processes foster engagement not by imposing expectations, but by recognising young parents as possessing agency and the right to contribute to decisions that affect their lives (Raposa et al., 2019; Rhodes, 2005).

Evidence from mentoring research indicates that such relationship-centred and flexible approaches are more likely to support sustained engagement, particularly for young people facing structural disadvantage (Raposa et al., 2019). Participation, in this sense, is a developmental mechanism through which relational support translates into agency, persistence, and wellbeing over time.

1.4. Wellbeing across interconnected domains

Identities, participation, and engagement are influenced by broader systems that shape young parents' opportunities and constraints. In Tasmania, this ecological system is well represented by the Tasmanian Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy (2021), which captures interconnected domains contributing to wellbeing. In the case

of young parents, relationships, material conditions, identity, and participation interact with education, health, and service systems to either support or constrain capacity to thrive (Mulgrew et al., 2024). Fragmentation across these domains can undermine wellbeing by increasing stress, eroding trust, and disrupting continuity of support (Owens, 2022).

The SEPT program aims to identify appropriate services for young parents' goals, reduce duplication and confusion, and support coherent pathways through education and employment (Bakhtiar et al., 2020; Brave Foundation, 2024). In this way, the program positions mentoring as a mechanism for contributing to and linking the domains of wellbeing.



Image: Domains of the Tasmanian Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy, Consultation Report, 2021

1.5. Implications for SEPT

The preceding discussion highlights the relevance of relational, developmental, and systems-aware approaches for supporting young parents, particularly within Tasmania's geographic and service context. Young parents in Tasmania often experience intensified barriers related to transport, service availability, and continuity of support, especially in regional and rural areas. These conditions amplify the importance of consistent relationships that can bridge gaps between individuals and systems.

Previous evaluation of SEPT in Tasmania demonstrated that sustained, relationship-based mentoring supported young parents to engage with services, reduce the impact of stigma, and make progress towards education, employment, and parenting goals (Bakhtiar et al., 2020). These findings are consistent with the developmental mechanisms identified in the mentoring literature and with the wellbeing framework adopted in Tasmania.

1.6. Aims of the research

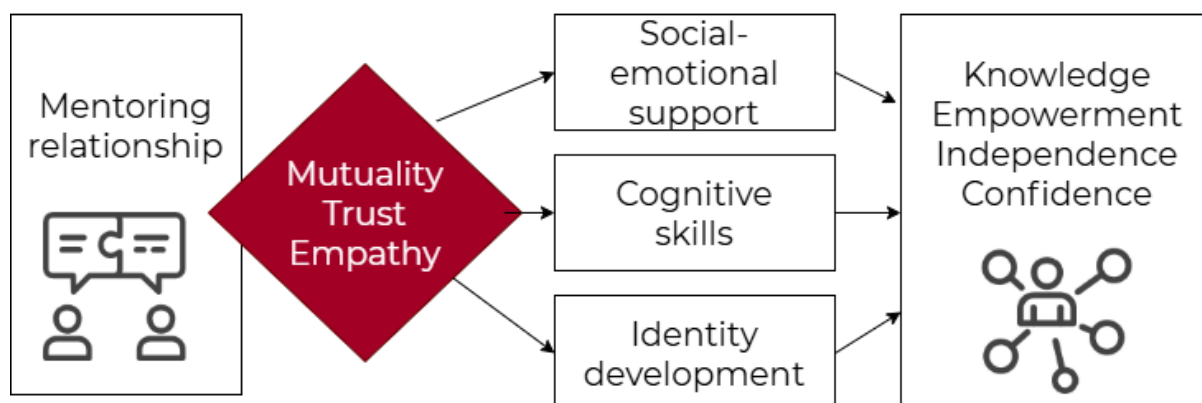
This research investigated the experiences of young parents in the SEPT program in Tasmania, and particularly which outcomes from SEPT were important to them. There was a focus on the mentor-mentee relationship and what aspects of this contributed to a successful experience of the program.

As outlined above, two frameworks were introduced as a means of organising the findings: An evidence-based model developed by Raposa et al. (2019) and the Tasmanian Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy (2021). The former sheds light on the

mechanisms that make mentoring effective, while the second shows how the SEPT program supports wellbeing in the local context of Tasmania.

Evidence-based mentoring model

As noted above, the Raposa et al. (2019) model of youth mentoring identifies three interrelated processes - social support, cognitive development, and identity formation - through which mentoring relationships can promote positive outcomes. Each of these dimensions is reflected in the SEPT design, as highlighted in the findings of an independent evaluation of the program (Bakhtiar, te Riele & Sutton, 2020).



Adapted from DuBois et al. (2011), p.61

Social support: The first process enhances young people's perceptions of supportive adult relationships. Mentoring offers a consistent, safe, and dependable relational environment, which can gently revise expectations shaped by earlier experiences with adults, especially where these may have been unreliable or harmful. Within this stable connection, mentees can experience positive relational possibilities and feel heard, valued, and supported in ways that can generalise to their broader social worlds.

Cognitive skills: The second process focuses on the cognitive growth that emerges through sustained, meaningful dialogue and shared activities with a more experienced adult. Mentors help scaffold skills such as information processing, self-regulation, and problem-solving, not through formal instruction but through ongoing conversation, reflection, and co-thinking. These interactions strengthen core cognitive abilities that underpin learning, planning, and navigating complex situations.

Identity development: The third process centres on identity formation. Mentors act as tangible models of possible futures, offering examples of behaviours, values, and pathways that mentees may wish to emulate. This exposure can be particularly influential when young people have had limited access to adults who embody prosocial or aspirational qualities. Through the mentoring relationship, mentees can begin to imagine new versions of themselves, broaden their sense of what is attainable, and access opportunities, resources, and networks that expand their future possibilities.

It takes a Tasmanian village: Tasmanian Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy

The domains of the Tasmanian Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy (2021) are based on the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth's 'The Nest' with adaptations developed through consultation with Tasmanian young people and relevant organisations. The domains contributing to individual and community wellbeing include: Being loved, safe, and valued; Having material basics; Being healthy; Learning; Participating; Having a positive sense of culture and identity. For more information, see: <https://wellbeing.tas.gov.au/>

2. Research Design

Both Brave and the Peter Underwood Centre are committed to facilitating meaningful participation of children and young people in matters that affect them. For this reason, the research was conducted using a staged approach that allowed feedback from young people to shape the research design as well as multiple opportunities for young people to participate in expressing their views.

2.1. Ethics

Ethics approval for this research was awarded through the University of Tasmania Human Research Ethics Committee and the Department for Education, Children and Young People Research Applications Advisory Committee.

All names of participants in this research have been replaced with pseudonyms and identifying information removed from any quotes used in the text.

The research design included strategies and resources to address any participant disclosures of sensitive information or experiences of distress during data collection.

2.2. Method

The research consisted of focus groups, interviews and a statewide survey. Focus groups were held in three regions of Tasmania, with participation supported through provision of a voucher as well as optional childcare. Insights gained through the focus groups were used to inform survey and interview schedule design and were also included in the final analysis.

SEPT participants may have participated in multiple methods, including focus groups, interviews and/or the survey.

	FOCUS GROUPS (SEPT participants)	27
	INTERVIEWS (SEPT participants)	21
	INTERVIEWS (Community stakeholders)	7
	SURVEY RESPONDENTS (SEPT participants)	32

2.3. Analysis

Analysis followed thematic analysis principles (Braun et al., 2023; Braun & Clarke, 2012, 2021), with consideration of the three-process framework described above (Raposa et al., 2019) and the domains of the Tasmanian Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy (2021).

3. Findings

The following presents findings organised around four dimensions of participants' lived experience with SEPT:

1. Relational safety, trust and reliability
2. Cognitive scaffolding and problem-solving
3. Identity development and possible futures
4. When support falters: limits and tensions

These dimensions reflect how young parents described change occurring over time and in context, while remaining analytically aligned with the social support, cognitive development, and identity formation processes identified in the mentoring literature (Raposa et al., 2019).

Across accounts, participants did not experience these processes as discrete or sequential. Instead, relational safety, cognitive scaffolding, and identity change were described as mutually reinforcing, with moments of progress and vulnerability shaped by the consistency, pacing, and duration of support.

Many of the elements experienced by young parents are contributing factors to wellbeing and capacity to thrive. For this reason, areas of alignment with the Tasmanian Child and Youth Wellbeing Framework (2021) are highlighted to show how the SEPT program operates across multiple domains likely to improve individual and community wellbeing.

3.1. Relational safety, trust, and reliability

This section examines how relational safety, trust, and reliability functioned as foundational mechanisms within the SEPT program. Participants consistently described the mentoring relationship as the condition that made all other forms of support possible, particularly in contexts marked by past experiences of judgement, instability, or unmet promises from services.

A dominant theme across all data sources was the significance of being taken seriously and valued within the mentoring relationship. Survey data indicated that 94 percent of respondents felt that their feelings and opinions were taken seriously by their mentor, and 84 percent reported a sense of connection in their interactions. The importance of feeling valued and connected was evident on many levels, but

particularly in young parents feeling able to ask for help and to trust that support would be available. As one participant commented:

"I didn't think I would hear back from [my mentor] as much as I did. And I didn't think I was going to get the help that I received from her. So, it turned me 360 round. I was like whoa, these people are actually committed to helping people" (Belinda).

The dependability and consistency of a mentor's interactions was essential to building connection, trust and respect. There were multiple ways mentors could show that SEPT participants mattered, such as through regular visits in a local context: "She makes the effort to come out at least once a week" (Samantha), and consistently returning phone calls and messages: "[When she said] 'I'll give you a call as soon as I can'... she always got back to me" (Mabel). It was through this dependable contact that participants felt supported, as explained by Tania: "I knew that I could always trust her and rely on her... she'd be there for me the best that she possibly could".

This consistency in support was transformative for participants who were socially anxious or otherwise had found it difficult to trust adults in the past. Belinda explained that in previous relationships she didn't: "...allow people to help me; [however] I allowed her to help me" (Belinda). Similarly, for Tammy, who had experienced other forms of supportive adult relationships: "... I don't tend to get along with [support workers] very much. Normally, I'm just like, "Meh." I don't really want to see them". However, when she described her relationship with her mentor: "...I was really good with [my mentor] and, yeah, actually wanted to see her and let her help". For Lisa, it was her mental health that had been a barrier in the past: "I had really bad anxiety. So I was a bit scared to open up. But once I got to know her a bit better, I opened up to her a lot".

The ways in which the participants described their mentee relationships were powerful and often used language that surpassed what would normally be expected in a professional relationship. While most mentees said that the relationship was akin to a friend, Cassandra described her mentor as like a: "best friend", "big sister" and "another mother". Christine described her relationship with her mentor as: "a beautiful relationship". Along with other participants, she felt that the relationship did not end when the period of mentorship was over: "Even beyond Brave, if I really needed some support, it wouldn't be hard to contact her at all". Lisa shared similar sentiments, explaining the enduring nature of what she felt: "... still to this day, if I need her, she's just a message away".

In many cases the strength of the relationship was enhanced by a sense of reciprocity, rather than being unidirectional. Comments such as: "we knew a lot about each other. I knew that her son broke his leg" (Cassandra); "we grew really close" (Lisa), and; "we could reach out to one another ... we'd keep each other updated" (Tania), demonstrate that the participants felt the relationship was mutual. That mentors achieved such authentic closeness speaks to the care taken in their selection and training, and their ability to selectively and appropriately share their own experiences of parenthood, and life in general.

Importantly, the strength of this relational bond could create vulnerability when continuity was disrupted. Necessary changes of mentors or perceived lapses in reliability were experienced by some participants as reinforcing earlier experiences of abandonment or unmet promises from services. Although such experiences were uncommon in this research, the potential emotional risk led one worker from a partner organisation to wonder: "...if there is a bit of a blurred line between maybe doing too much or being too involved". This situation, where tension occurred due to deep relational investment underpinning program effectiveness, is explored further in section 3.4.

These accounts highlight that relational safety functioned not simply as a background condition, but as an active mechanism shaping engagement and emotional security, aligning with Raposa et al.'s (2019) emphasis on social support as foundational to mentoring outcomes.

Being loved, safe, and valued

Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy

Amelia, mother to seven-month-old H, joined the Supporting Expecting and Parenting Teens (SEPT) program late in her pregnancy. Before entering the program, Amelia had been experiencing domestic violence from her then-partner. When she discovered she was pregnant, she recognised that she needed to prioritise her safety and her baby's wellbeing.

With guidance from her SEPT mentor, Amelia successfully applied for the Escaping Violence Payment, enabling her to leave the unsafe environment. Amelia also considered applying for a restraining order but worried that doing so might be an overreaction. Through reassurance and consistent encouragement, her mentor supported her to file the restraining order, giving her an added sense of protection and control over her circumstances.

As Amelia rebuilt her life, she reconnected with former friends and developed new, positive support networks. She is now living with a new partner who plays an active and caring role in her daughter's life. Reflecting on her progress, Amelia shares that she now feels "loved and safe," crediting the program for helping her regain confidence, security, and hope for her family's future.

"I would say it was kind of a friendship... somebody that you could talk to about anything... [My mentor] didn't ever really have a time constraint." (Sarah)

"I mean, because [my mentor] was basically there helping me with my family and family drama as well. And she was just someone to talk to. If I needed anything, if my sister was bullying me or anything like that, I just talked to her and she was there." (Carly)

"I suppose it's like having [my mentor] as a backbone. It's good to have someone that supports you in whatever avenue you want to go, even if it might not work out. Because that's what I don't have in my personal life. I am support. I do support a lot of people. I am their backbone, but I don't have a backbone." (Christine)

"She always made me feel like I was worthy and she always told me I was a good mum and everything" (Belinda)

Healthy

Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy

Marcia recently completed the SEPT program. When she first joined, she had just given birth to her daughter, E, and was experiencing postnatal depression, alongside a pre-existing history of mental illness.

From her first meeting with her SEPT mentor, Marcia felt genuinely heard and supported. As a first-time mother, she valued having an experienced parent to turn to - someone who could provide reassurance, emotional support, and a safe space to talk through her worries. Her mentor also encouraged her to work with her GP to develop a mental health care plan.

Throughout the program, Marcia was able to attend regular counselling sessions and, in consultation with her GP, began a new medication that helped stabilise her wellbeing. Now at the end of her SEPT journey, Marcia reports feeling “happy and doing great,” enjoying life with her “cheeky monkey” and feeling confident in her role as a mum.

“I didn't expect to have that much emotional support, and I didn't think I needed that much emotional support either. Because I'm a, “I'm big and strong. I got this,” kind of person. So [my mentor] was quite good at breaking me down to get out of me what was actually wrong.”
(Kate)

“My mentor helped me get my midwife because I didn't actually know - because it was my first baby, I didn't actually know that I have a midwife straight away. And I didn't have a midwife until I was probably 20 weeks' pregnant or something. Yeah. I didn't have one for a while. And then she helped me book an appointment at the hospital. And she took me to a fair few of my appointments there.” (Claire)

“Whenever we had a catch-up, we would go for a walk along the waterfront. She would help me with that because I had no one to go with because I don't really like doing stuff alone, and she would encourage me.”
(Celeste)

3.2. Cognitive scaffolding and problem-solving

This section explores how mentors supported cognitive development through scaffolded problem-solving, gradual transfer of responsibility, and validation of participants' existing capabilities. Rather than providing solutions directly, mentors "walked alongside" participants, enabling shifts in confidence, decision-making, and independent action over time.

SEPT participants described developing new ways of thinking about problems, decisions, and their own capacity to manage complex demands. This development was deliberately scaffolded by mentors. As Sarah commented (above), having a mentor who "didn't ever really have a time constraint" created the conditions for her to re-enter community spaces, navigate legal processes, and rebuild confidence following significant upheaval. This relational consistency underpinned later cognitive and practical gains.

Being able to ask for help was a key part of the mentor-mentee relationship. A large part of this appeared to fall within the paradigm of solution-focused ideas, with a focus on practical steps that often utilised existing capabilities. At times this was as simple as offering opportunities for external support. For example, when Elanor was concerned about how she presented, she asked her mentor what she should do: "And [my mentor] was like, 'oh, you should probably try and see a dietitian'. And I was like, thank you". Mabel also related how her mentor provided help formulating solutions in response to her saying: "Hey, I've got this going on. Is there any chance you can help me? And [my mentor] always seemed to have a plan already in place". Samantha summed up this kind of support perfectly when she recounted her mentor's advice: "She's sort of like, ... this is what you need to do. Now step out there and do it".

Over time in the program, many participants felt a growing sense of autonomy. This was evident in accounts where participants chose to take on tasks themselves, such as Tania, who said: "I was like, no, I need to do this. You're not going to be here forever. I need to understand. That's something I'll have to do on my own eventually". Survey data supported this pattern, with 78 percent of respondents indicating that SEPT 'definitely helped them feel more confident doing things independently'.

This shift to greater autonomy is a primary aim of the SEPT program. Descriptions of mentor-mentee relationships showed that mentors were able to offer highly personalised support, which may consist of solving problems, or simple encouragement to take the 'first step'. Yolanda explained that her mentor would motivate her to get out of the house, saying: "'Come on, where do you want to go?' I go, 'I don't know, just a drive would do'. And we would end up down the street looking at things". One mentor motivated a participant in her education through creating a study group of like-minded parents. Therese, who experienced social anxiety, was encouraged to go to the local parent's coffee group by her mentor, which resulted in participating in a range of social activities that benefited both her and her child. Therese reflected on how much she had come "out of her shell", adding that: "you don't have time to have social anxiety when you have a child".

The development of autonomy and independence was closely related to growth in self-belief and confidence, particularly evident in accounts of participants advocating for themselves or their children. For example, Susanna disclosed her experiences of abuse from her ex-partner, and rather than reporting it herself, her mentor: "encouraged me to go to the courthouse and get the papers, and I did". Similarly, when Tania felt disrespected and disempowered at her antenatal appointment, her mentor said: "you know what, what she said to you and what she did was actually not okay, and you can file a complaint and ask her not to have any further appointments with her and to swap obstetricians' and I ended up doing that". The development of thinking more positively about oneself was beautifully explained by Jessie's description of her relationship with her mentor:

"I think more so than helping with work and stuff, she's just helped me with my confidence. Because she hypes me up. I love it. Because with [my ex], my daughter's biological father, I was stripped down to nothing. I was a shell of myself. And she really helped me realise that I'm not the things he said I was. And I'm amazing. And it was not as much I got help from her with work and finding work and stuff. It was more so building myself up to be a person again" (Jessie).

Countering self-doubt, and encouraging thinking about life not as a failure but as 'normal' are further examples of how the SEPT program facilitated cognitive change for the participants. When Carly was worried about her baby's progression, concerned that: "she was getting slow because I'd seen other parents with their babies walking or crawling", her mentor assured [her] that: "babies are always going to do things at their own pace". Similarly, when Tammy was self-conscious about the messiness of her home, she remembers her mentor saying: "You've got a baby. It's okay to have things hanging on the clothes airer and leave them there for a day or two. It doesn't matter. They're clean. They're drying. You don't have to worry about sorting them out as soon as they're dry". This type of reassurance provided an alternative narrative for young people who often felt that they were being judged by specific people, or by society more broadly, and helped develop resilience. The different perspective was exemplified by Mabel who recalled: "You know what? The little things don't actually matter anymore. Someone's comment just doesn't even bother me, whereas before, I took everything so seriously. ... now I'm like, you know what? I don't even care. If someone doesn't like me, someone doesn't like me".

These findings align with Raposa et al.'s (2019) cognitive development pathway, particularly in relation to information processing, problem-solving, and self-regulation. Notably, participants emphasised that cognitive gains were contingent on relational trust, reinforcing that cognitive scaffolding is most effective when embedded within a secure and responsive relationship.

Material Basics

Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy

Gemma: Gemma's story is one of the strongest examples of how stabilising the basics, such as housing and household goods, can rapidly shift a young parent's life trajectory. After leaving an unsafe relationship and wanting to live closer to town, Gemma's mentor helped her secure temporary housing within weeks of joining SEPT. Gemma recounted that *"I had absolutely no furniture, no fridge, that stuff. [My mentor] took me to City Mission and helped me do that. [Then she] actually came and helped unload it."*

Gemma's mentor also helped her with budgeting, helping her break down income and expenses to make day-to-day life more manageable. At the time of interview, she had gained a new stability, having just signed a five-year lease on an apartment, and commented that:

"I've noticed the difference of how far I've come... I'm really grateful".

"If it wasn't for [my mentor], I wouldn't have had clothes for the kids, or stuff for starting school. She connected me with the Smith family, and all these things I'd never heard of... we sat down and did my budget, and we did meal plans. Life skills I didn't really have before I met her. She's said that people will grow up in different ways. There's a lot of life skills I didn't have before I met [my mentor]." (Focus group participant)

"Through [my mentor], I ended up getting, I think it was five free driving lessons and from that I was able to obtain my licence, which is obviously a huge thing for my family and my kids." (Tania)

"So she helped me get some more clothes for bub and myself. And just the little things. She helped me do my budget to get a new washing machine. Just little tips and tricks." (Mabel)

3.3. New identities and possible futures

This section explores how mentoring relationships supported identity development and the emergence of possible futures for young parents. Participants described shifts in how they saw themselves, for example as parents, learners, and community members, shaped through encouragement, modelling, and access to realistic pathways aligned with their readiness and circumstances.

Becoming a parent is always associated with the development of new identities, such as being a mother or father and a provider, as well as older identities shifting into new contexts, such as being a learner, or a young adult (Rudling et al., 2023). Being pregnant or becoming a parent presented both challenges and opportunities for such identity shifts. Celeste explained how, for her, the change from someone who went out and partied with friends to someone who was taking care of herself and her baby happened organically:

"Obviously being young and everything, yeah, doing dumb stuff like [drinking]. But yeah, since I was pregnant and I had Bub they just - they would message me forgetting that I'm pregnant and be like, 'Oh, do you want to come out?' I was like, 'Nah, I can't. I'm pregnant. I can't drink.' And then they were like, 'Oh, okay.' And then just eventually, the invitations started declining, and then out of nowhere, they just stopped completely" (Celeste).

Mentor support could be pivotal during shifts such as this, especially since isolation was a common outcome of becoming a young parent. As Samantha recalled: "I pretty much lost all of my friends when I left high school". Mentors provided opportunities to create new social groups and, equally powerfully, gave licence to the idea that the participants were making positive new choices in their roles as parents.

Mentors were described as modelling identities that were confident and competent. They advocated for their mentees and explicitly challenged deficit-based assumptions. Tania explained an everyday interaction to illustrate common experiences for young parents: "when I take my daughter to swim lessons... they look at my daughter and they're like, 'Oh, how old is she?' And I'll say how old she is. And then they sort of look at me and they're like, 'And how old are you?' And I'm like, 'Excuse me?'. Therese explained the perception: "we're not very high on the socioeconomic status. And I was struggling to - I didn't think I was going to be a very good mum". Through practical support, reassurance, and validation, mentors helped participants reframe experiences that had previously been sources of shame or self-blame as normal aspects of parenting or life transitions. For example, mentors facilitated interactions with other young parents to create a sense of belonging and the realisation that young parents were not alone. An example was a young parents' play group, about which Elanor commented: "It's actually really nice. I don't feel judged like I do in regular playgroups".

Mentors were able to assist with navigating the education system as a young person with a child. For some, these experiences contributed to a sense of being capable learners and decision-makers, rather than passive recipients of support. Tania had to move from normal enrolment in her year 11 college, to online enrolment and

eventually to the Tasmanian e-School. Similarly, Claire was pursuing a nursing qualification, and her mentor: “showed me where I can go and what to do if I want to do it”. In addition to formal schooling, mentors enabled participants to achieve other goals, including everyday skills such as learning to cook:

"We had every Friday for catch-ups. She would come over to my house and help me cook and teach me to cook and stuff.... Because I still don't really to this day - because I've got dyslexia. And my mum, she used to cook for us all the time, which I'm not saying it's a bad thing either when growing up because I never cooked. I never got taught to cook. It was always given to me and stuff, so I never knew how". (Carly)

However, identity change was not described as linear or uniform. Several accounts highlighted the importance of pacing and readiness. When expectations were perceived as moving too quickly, particularly in educational contexts, participants described feelings of overwhelm and fear rather than empowerment. These accounts suggest that identity formation was most sustainable when mentors calibrated aspirations to participants' cognitive readiness, emotional capacity, and current life demands. This is discussed further in section 3.4 below.

Overall, these findings are consistent with Raposa et al.'s (2019) identity formation pathway, particularly the role of mentors in expanding “possible selves.” At the same time, the data underscore the fragility of identity shifts in contexts of structural disadvantage, where gains can be undermined by insufficient duration or continuity of support.

Having a positive sense of culture and identity

Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy

Mabel: As a mum to her baby boy, Mabel aimed to build a warm, stable, and connected world for him. Parenthood became the catalyst for her to seek out new knowledge and community, especially as she realised how important it was to understand her own Aboriginal heritage so she could pass it on. Through her mentor, she was introduced to Pataway Play, where weekly activities helped her learn more about culture and identity: "learning new things about being Aboriginal" so she could teach her son.

In the Brave SEPT program, Mabel initially felt uncertain, but soon found in her mentor a supportive friend who offered guidance, encouragement, and space to grow as a parent. This support helped her build confidence, develop new skills, and take pride in the life she was creating with her son. For Mabel, being a mum meant creating a life grounded in love, learning, and culture: "If me and my boy are happy, nothing else matters."

"I didn't see my growth, I was on my own, one day I had a breakdown. So [my mentor] pulled out some notes from when I first started seeing her and she showed me how I've changed." (Focus group participant)

"[My mentor] acknowledged [my identity], which I'm grateful for because I come from one of the bigger Tasmanian Aboriginal families here. But we can always agree that our views would be different, but we could always put them aside, which was good. And if we couldn't, I don't think we could have worked together as well as we did." (Kate)

Participating

Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy

Isabelle has always described herself as a fiercely independent person, explaining how her childhood had forced her to grow up at an early age. When first joining the SEPT program, Isabelle was hesitant in knowing that she may butt heads with her mentor, especially if she was going to be told what to do. However, she soon realised how much the program emphasised participant agency and independence. When Isabelle and her mentor were discussing options around health care, her mentor was able to provide suggestions, but Isabelle was able to make the ultimate decisions on her own. Isabelle said that this strengthened her relationship with her mentor, as she was there to stand beside her and offer support and encouragement, whilst allowing Isabelle to gain skills and confidence. When Isabelle needed to, she felt comfortable reaching out to her mentor for further advice and guidance. Isabelle was then able to maintain her independence, but with the support she otherwise would not have received.

"[I met someone who] was a member of the program because she was going through something very similar. It was more like community-based support. It was the information and places and introducing into the community because I was very homebound. Also, she could come with me if we wanted to because we were both with the same ambassador. And it was a bit of a-- it was a socialisation. We could go meet up. We could go look at what could help us in the community..." (Sarah)

"Being able to connect with other parents my age or close to my age was so important because it just felt like I wasn't finding anyone my age that had had kids. They were all younger than me or a lot older. And it was just easy. It was easy. And just being able to connect into different groups as well." (Kate)

Learning

Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy

When Kate joined the SEPT program, one of her main goals was to be able to go back to study. However, she knew that juggling study with a young child, and having access to the right tools would be a challenge. Kate's mentor was able to assist in enrolling Kate into a certificate of community services and to obtain a laptop. When Kate's mentor realised that many young mothers were engaged in study in the same region, she decided to create a weekly study group, where they could all study together and bring their children. Kate now meets up with current or prior SEPT participants once a week for a few hours as dedicated study time.

She was entirely the reason. I had no idea, actually, about Tasmanian eSchool at all. I didn't know that was a thing. So, yeah, definitely we looked at Tasmanian eSchool and then another option that we looked at was doing a course through TasTAFE and we sort of just ended up landing on eSchool. (Tania)

"I work in hospitality, [my mentor] helped me [get] food safety training. And I graduated from that... And then she helped provide the laptop and all this stuff that I needed... and now I've started my apprenticeship. Yeah, she pointed me in the right direction and I've started my apprenticeship and I'm almost finished my first year. She helped point me in the right direction and I've only got two and a half years left. (Focus group participant)

The following matrix demonstrates how SEPT mentoring practices align with mechanisms identified in the Raposa youth mentoring framework (2019), also contributing to the domains of the Tasmanian Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy.

Mentoring Mechanisms, Developmental Processes, and Wellbeing Outcomes

SEPT mentoring practice	Growth mechanism (Raposa et al., 2019)	Observed participant experience (qualitative)	Tasmanian Wellbeing Strategy domains supported
Consistent, non-judgmental mentor relationship over ~12 months	Social (trust, attachment, relational safety)	Young parents describe having “someone who actually sticks around”, reduced isolation, and increased willingness to seek help	Being loved, safe and valued
Mentor advocacy with services (health, housing, education, Centrelink)	Cognitive (problem-solving, navigation of systems)	Participants report improved confidence dealing with services and reduced overwhelm when facing bureaucratic processes	Having material basics; Being healthy
Goal setting through personalised Pathway Plans	Cognitive and Identity (agency, future orientation)	Young parents articulate clearer goals for education, employment, and parenting	Learning; Participating
Practical, in-community support (transport, appointments, paperwork)	Social (instrumental support enabling engagement)	Increased attendance at appointments and re-engagement with education or training	Being healthy; Learning; Participating
Strengths-based mentoring stance that validates parenting identity	Identity (self-concept, role consolidation)	Participants describe feeling “like a good parent”, increased self-worth, and reduced shame	Having a positive sense of culture and identity; Being loved, safe, and valued
Mentor modelling of self-advocacy and help-seeking	Cognitive and Identity (skill transfer, confidence)	Young parents begin initiating contact with services independently over time	Participating; Learning
Longitudinal relationship across crisis and stability	Social and Identity (continuity, identity coherence)	Participants report stability during periods of housing insecurity, mental health challenges, or family breakdown	Being loved, safe, and valued; Being healthy

3.4. When support falters: limits and tensions

This section examines moments where mentoring support was constrained, disrupted, or experienced as less effective. The majority of accounts described highly positive experiences of SEPT. However, participants and stakeholders also identified points of tension and limitation. These accounts are analytically important, as they illuminate the conditions under which relational, cognitive, and identity-based mechanisms were weakened, particularly in relation to timing, continuity, and the withdrawal of support.

Material support emerged as a key area of ambivalence. Participants consistently described practical assistance such as vouchers, equipment, and essential items as crucial to meeting immediate needs with dignity. At the same time, some service providers raised concerns about the temporary and unpredictable nature of this support, particularly in regional contexts where vouchers were difficult to use or when assistance was withdrawn after participants had come to rely on it in the absence of alternative opportunities. These tensions suggest that material support functioned as both an enabler and a potential source of dependency, depending on individual situations and local context.

The time-limited nature of the program was also identified as a potential constraint. For some participants, the development of trust, confidence, and new identities occurred toward the latter stages of the mentoring period, making the transition out of the program particularly challenging. In these cases, the cessation of support risked undermining gains made during the relationship. In addition, some support was poorly timed, likely due to the limited 12-month time-frame, such as facilitating commencement of education or training when a young parent was still fully engaged with a very young child. This support was not misplaced, but would have been more beneficial at a later stage of the young parent's journey.

These findings do not negate the overall effectiveness of the program. In fact, they serve to reinforce the effectiveness of the mechanisms the SEPT program employs. This is clear because the very elements that are identified as important to the success of the program, such as continuity, timing, and strong relational connections, are the elements that are implicated in cases of more limited success.

4. Conclusion

The above findings are evidence that the SEPT program supported young parents through interconnected relational, cognitive, and identity-related processes consistent with the effective mentoring pathways identified by Raposa et al. (2019). Participants' accounts suggest that relational safety functioned as a precondition for cognitive development, which in turn enabled shifts in identity and future orientation. Rather than operating as discrete domains, the developmental processes underpinning SEPT were experienced as dynamic and interdependent, shaped by the quality, duration, and context of mentoring relationships.

The findings from the interviews with participants from the SEPT program are presented here within the framework of the three processes on effective youth mentoring programs proposed by Raposa et al., as described above. Within each section, themes align with the key processes of programs providing consistent and safe interactions, cognitive development and identity formation.

The table below summarises the key developmental mechanisms identified in the findings, illustrating how the SEPT program supports change for young parents, alongside points of vulnerability.

Elements of effective programs		Mechanisms in SEPT
Consistent and safe relational interactions	• Consistent • Reliable • Authentic	• Regular check ins, calls, visits • Always available when needed • Accessible after time with program has finished • Reciprocity in mentor-mentee relationship
When conditions are constrained	Unreliability Non-enduring	• Temporary nature of the SEPT program • Change of mentors
Cognitive development	• Problem solving • Motivation • Confidence • Autonomy	• Scaffolded support • Belief • Presentation of options • Reassurance • Support
When conditions are constrained	Dependence	• Reliance on food vouchers

Identity formation	Feeling more capable and confident as: • Parent and child-raiser • Navigator of services • Learner engaged in education and training pathways • Member of community • Worker and breadwinner	• Material support • Budgeting education • Enrolment in education pathways • Practical skill development • Reassurance and emotional support • Overcoming judgement
When conditions are constrained	Negative self-views reinforced	• Start education program without support to finish

This research set out to understand not only whether the Supporting Expecting and Parenting Teens (SEPT) program was experienced as beneficial by young parents, but how change occurred within the mentoring relationship over time. Drawing on interviews, focus groups, and survey data, the findings demonstrate that SEPT's effectiveness lies less in discrete activities or short-term outcomes, and more in the relational conditions it creates and sustains, which in turn support young people in their ongoing journey, including as parents.

Across participants' accounts, mentoring functioned as a form of relational infrastructure: a consistent, trusted relationship that enabled young parents to engage with services, navigate complex systems, and make sense of their own identities during a significant life transition. This infrastructure was particularly important in contexts characterised by stigma, service fragmentation, and previous experiences of disrupted support.

Importantly, the research also highlights the fragility of these processes when continuity is disrupted. Changes in mentors, time-limited support, or the withdrawal of material assistance could undermine gains that were still consolidating. These tensions do not diminish the value of the program; instead, they underscore the central role of duration, pacing, and reliability in relational interventions. The very

features that made SEPT effective were the same features that required careful protection.

Overall, the findings extend youth mentoring literature into the context of young parenthood by clarifying how mentoring operates as a developmental mechanism within complex service environments. SEPT enabled young parents to build the relational, cognitive, and identity-based capacities needed to engage meaningfully with systems and opportunities over time, also providing a concrete example of how strengths-based, relational approaches can operationalise wellbeing principles in practice.

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