

Background

As children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) enter adolescence, complex issues emerge related to social development and building the skills necessary for successful transition to adulthood. Studies are beginning to uncover the importance of promoting and fostering self-determination and self-confidence by providing opportunities for adolescents to be engaged as leaders in their peer groups (Carter et al., 2013). Mentoring programs have been shown to be effective in helping youth develop skills, knowledge, and motivation to successfully transition from high school to adult life (Moccia et al., 1989; Rhodes, Grossman, & Resch, 2000).



Program Description

To meet the needs of children and teens with ASD in the city of Boston, the BMC Autism Program created an innovative teen mentoring initiative. **TEAM** (Teens Engaged as Mentors) empowers diverse urban youth ages 9-22 using a unique co-mentorship model, wherein:

- One mentor with ASD and one typically-developing (TD) mentor are paired together in a co-mentoring relationship.
- Each dyad mentors a younger child diagnosed with ASD.
- All of the participants come together for monthly events which take place in the city of Boston and include a community service and/or social component.
- All events are supervised by Autism Program staff and volunteers. Participants are encouraged to connect with each other outside of monthly events, but this is not a program requirement.
- Mentors also participate in two trainings during the year:
 - Fall training: Focused on team-building, creative problem-solving, and learning about what it means to be a mentor
 - Spring Training: Focused on personal goal-setting, planning for the future, and additional team-building

In the 2015-2016 (year 1 of the program), the 24 children and teens participated in 7 events throughout the course of the year.

These included:

- Trail cleanup at the Mass Audubon Society
- Meeting therapy dogs and creating dog toys for a local animal shelter
- Creating holiday cookie jars for a local senior center
- Attending the Autism Awareness Red Sox game at Fenway Park

Program Goals

The primary goals of the TEAM program are:

1. To encourage socialization, self-awareness, self-confidence, and autonomy for all participants including youth with and without ASD
2. To foster positive community engagement and leadership in all participants
3. To facilitate skill acquisition related to transition to adulthood

More broadly, TEAM aims to promote inclusion, acceptance, and awareness of differences as strengths among youth in the city.



Research Questions

1. Describe the impact of the TEAM program on participants and key stakeholders
2. Identify primary themes of the mentor/mentee relationship that contribute to impact

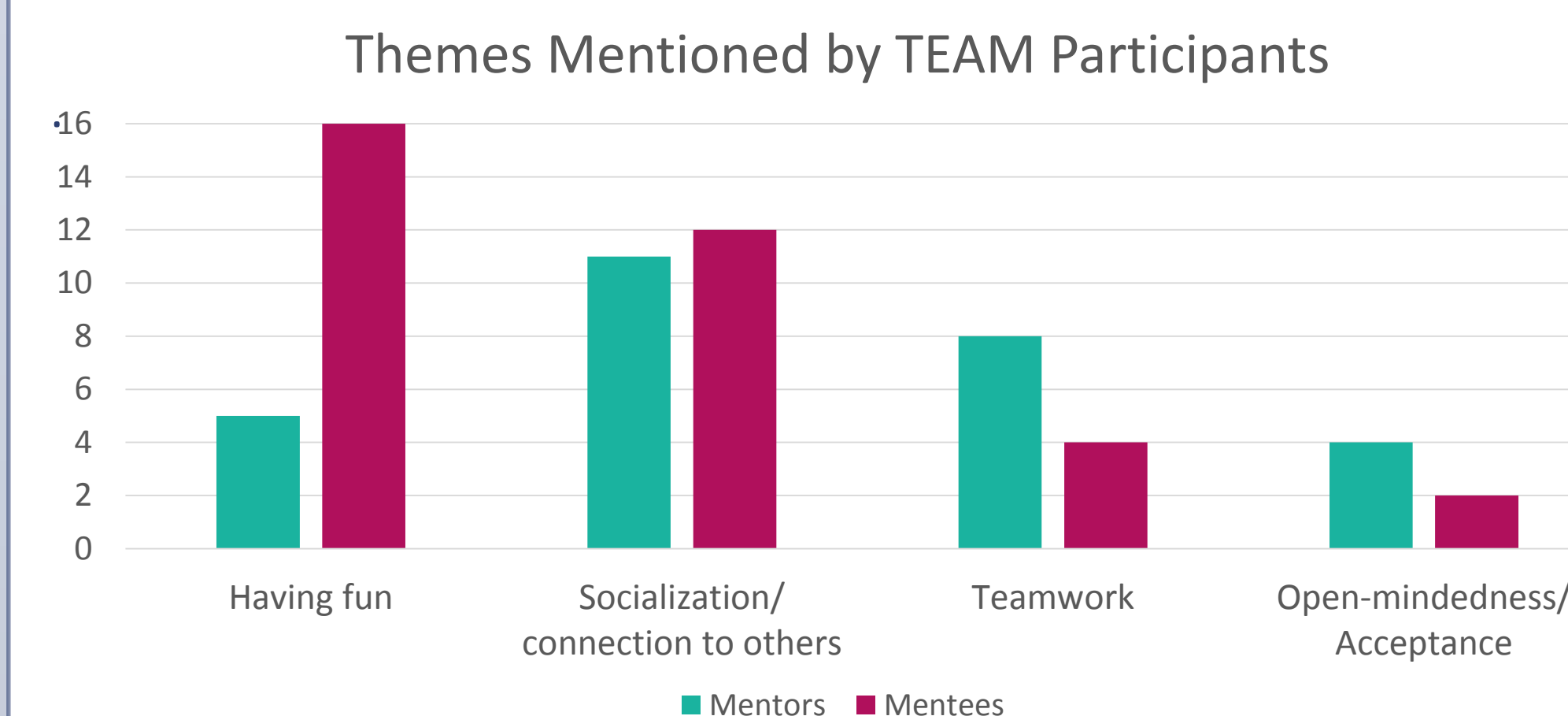
Methods

- TEAM facilitators and staff from the BMC Autism Program developed three separate reflective focus groups with stakeholders of the TEAM program, including a parent group, a mentor group, and a mentee group.
- A convenience sample was used to recruit 8 parents (all were parents of participants with ASD), 7 mentors (4 neurotypical, 3 diagnosed with ASD), and 5 mentees.
- Consents were obtained verbally and focus groups were audiotaped and later transcribed and uploaded to a password protected secure website that is HIPAA compliant.
- Using a grounded theory framework, five researchers independently coded and analyzed the data for thematic patterns. To ensure inter-rater reliability, coding schemes were compared across all three stakeholder interviewers and discrepancies were resolved until a consensus was reached.



Results

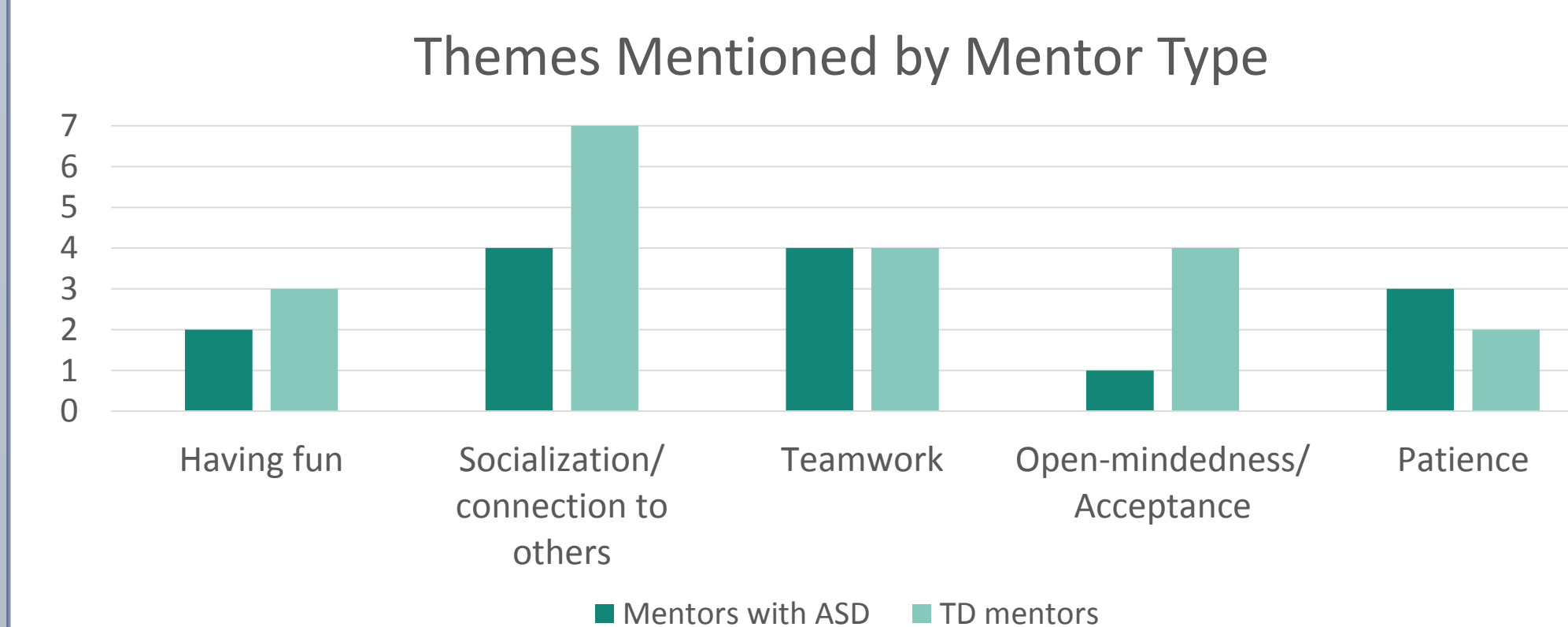
Using comparative analysis, researchers identified variation in themes between stakeholder grouping and diagnosis. Identified themes included (1) Having fun, (2) Socialization/connection to others, (3) Teamwork, (4) Patience, (5) Open-mindedness/acceptance, (6) Community service and engagement, and (7) Confidence.



1. This influential evaluation study illustrates that teen mentoring is having a positive impact on promoting skills such as socialization and teamwork for both youth with ASD and their typically-developing peers. Mentors with and without ASD described how TEAM helped them to develop more patience.

"I learned how to have better patience. Sometimes when you're mentoring it's harder for other people to understand something that you might know how to do so you have to be patient while they figure out...how to do it."

-TD mentor, age 16



2. Mentees specifically mentioned they learned more about community service and engagement, as well as confidence.

"Be yourself. Don't be afraid to...feel like others are going to judge you for who you are. Just...be yourself...what you believe in, you can succeed in that...what you believe in is what you want to believe in. Don't let anyone tell you do not do that."

-Mentee, age 12

3. Parent feedback highlighted the overarching need for programming such as TEAM due to their child's struggles with peer isolation, anxiety, and understanding social norms within groups, as well as experiences of restricted community access.

"I think he feels important because of the community service... [I]ike he said, 'Oh yeah I wanna help!'"

-Parent of a mentee

"[S]he was texting the other girls, and she was so happy... [S]he never does that...but then she said 'I made new friends mama!' That broke my heart."

-Parent of a mentee

"I notice that he's more comfortable in different situations... That's one thing that we notice about him, especially in his face, that when he's in a situation that he's not comfortable we can see the anxiety on his face. And I'm not seeing that as much as before. It's like he's confident with what he is doing. He doesn't look to me [as] much as before."

-Parent of a mentor with ASD

Program Implications

Our focus group findings show that:

1. For both teens with ASD and those who are typically-developing, mentoring programs have the potential to build socialization skills as well as provide connections with peers and interactions with their community while building confidence.
2. For parents and caregivers of children and youth with ASD, group mentoring supports skill development that can benefit participants as they transition to adulthood.
3. Future research should explore the longer term benefits of mentoring on self-esteem and daily living skills for teens with ASD, as well as the psychosocial impact for parents/caregivers of youth with ASD.

Conclusions

TEAM offers an opportunity for families within the city to access an innovative youth mentoring program. This unique model's inclusion of structured social opportunities, built-in leadership development, and community service components may be an effective strategy for helping youth with and without ASD foster critical skills that may positively influence transition to adulthood.

References

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