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EMBRACE
PROJECT

EMPOWERING YOUTH IN FOSTER CARE THROUGH CONNECTION

Findings from the Kidsave
Peer Mentor Pilot Program

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On any given day, there are about 60,000 California children in foster care; nearly 50% of these children reside in Los Angeles County.[1] The transition through adolescence and into adulthood is a particularly vulnerable time for these youth.[2] For older youth with supportive caregivers and not involved with the child welfare system, this period is when they develop the skills needed for adult living. Yet youth in foster care have lower levels of family support and often have inconsistent relationships with other adults due to placement changes. Leaving foster care without connections to supportive adults and access to resources increases youths' risk of homelessness, poverty, and unemployment.[3] In fact, foster youth are less likely than peers to graduate high school and experience high rates of homelessness.[1] Support has the potential to attenuate the negative outcomes associated with maltreatment experiences.

The challenges to adoption of older youth are well known and include fewer prospective families interested or willing to take in an older child, and older youth being less interested in guardianship or adoption, likely due to feelings that this would be a betrayal to their families of origin.[4,5] In addition, feelings of comfort and acceptance may influence a youth's willingness to move towards fostering or adoption. Prior work with foster youth has noted that the race/ethnicity of the mentoring adult may have a significant impact on outcomes. Transracially placed foster youth have been found to experience higher fluctuations in their racial/ethnic identity than adolescents in general.[6] Because of this, understanding and being able to discuss differences is critical.[7]

The goal of the Kidsave Peer Mentor Pilot Program was to pair host families and prospective adoptive families in Kidsave's Weekend Miracles program with a mentor to assist them in providing essential emotional and mental health support to older youth in foster care. The program paired adults with lived experience—such as adoptive parents, and mentors—with host families and prospective adoptive families from the Kidsave Weekend Miracles Program to offer culturally and gender-affirming guidance and support. Rooted in national data on mental health and cultural well-being, including insights from the Kidsave-Gallup study[8], this pilot was designed to create a lasting, positive impact by addressing the unique challenges faced by these youth.

This report measures the first three months of the program; further monitoring should be completed as the relationships progress to see what is most needed for our youth and supporting the families.

Kidsave Peer Mentoring Program

The objective of the Kidsave Peer Mentoring Program is to improve emotional and mental health for older Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer or questioning (LGBTQ+) youth in foster care by providing cultural and identity-affirming training to the peer mentors and support to prospective host and adoptive families. Additionally, all incoming families were required to attend a Culturally Responsive

training. Peer mentors were identified as adult(s) who were previously a host or adoptive parent to a BIPOC or LGBTQ+ youth in foster care through Kidsave.

The goal of the peer mentoring program was for individuals with lived experience to advise and guide new hosts and adoptive families in navigating the host, mentor, or adoptive experience at Kidsave. The mentor's role was to provide all types of support and guidance but was particularly focused on cultural- and gender-affirming domains that can create stress and strain on youth-adult relationships.

The Peer Mentor role was seen as serving as a cultural broker for hosts and adoptive parents, and providing a depth of knowledge, skills, and resources from a lived experience perspective. This was done through serving as cultural guides, community connectors, and support systems. The Peer Mentors were encouraged to use their lived experiences, insights, and perspectives to help host and adoptive families better understand the cultural and identity needs of the youth in their care. Their roles as cultural brokers underscored the importance of community-centered approaches to care and the need to meaningfully connect with all families.

The goal was to improve the experience of the youth with their mentor or adoptive family from an identity perspective through the provision of resources, and the ability for hosts to talk through experiences, including challenges relating to identity and culture. The program was designed to foster a mentor-mentee relationship rooted in trust, openness, and consistency, utilizing each individual's lived experience to establish this relationship. The expected outcome was the provision of support to families that went beyond merely understanding cultural identity but integrating that understanding into how hosts cared for youth. Ultimately, the hope was that the Peer Mentor would be an additional resource to Kidsave hosts, mentors, and potential adoptive parents.

Data Collection Methods

The evaluation team was selected by Kidsave management in February 2025 and was made up of School of Social Work faculty from California State University, Los Angeles and the University of Southern California. The primary task of this group was to support Kidsave in the creation of its data collection materials and to assist in creating a plan for data analysis. This group met twice per month through July 2025 to support the efforts to document the training and mentoring activities.

Description of Training

The Kidsave Peer Mentor Training is a comprehensive 20-hour curriculum designed to equip mentors with the knowledge, skills, and values necessary to support older Black, Latino, and LGBTQ+ youth in foster care. Delivered over four days, this intensive training focuses on trauma-informed practice, cultural humility, and identity-affirming support to help mentors guide hosts and adoptive families through the complexities of the child welfare system. The curriculum addresses critical topics, including the historical context of mentorship in child welfare, disproportionality and disparity affecting BIPOC and LGBTQ+ youth, trauma-informed

approaches, adverse and positive childhood experiences, and the seven core issues of adoption. Participants engage in evidence-based coaching models, motivational interviewing techniques, and solution-focused questioning. Through interactive activities including case scenarios, breakout discussions, role-plays, and real-world problem-solving exercises, mentors develop practical skills to navigate cultural differences, recognize implicit bias, and create safe, loving environments that support youth stability and wellbeing.

Recruitment and Training of Mentors

Mentors were identified and recruited through a combination of Kidsave events and through targeted outreach and conversations that occurred up to a year prior to program implementation. Kidsave leadership intentionally sought mentors who represented diverse lived experiences across race, gender, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic background.

Eligibility criteria required mentors to have between one and three years of experience as a Kidsave host or adoptive parent. In the three months leading up to the program's launch, the Kidsave leadership conducted multiple meetings with prospective mentors to assess qualifications, capacity, and long-term commitment to the initiative.

Mentors participated in a 16-hour structured training series, facilitated by a qualified trainer with professional expertise in coaching, diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI), and child welfare. The trainer also brought personal experience within the foster care system, which informed the practical and empathetic nature of the curriculum. Trainings were held over three consecutive Saturdays and attended by the EMBRACE Project Manager.

Core training modules included:
- One-on-one and group coaching methods
- Trauma-informed practices
- Cultural and identity strategies
- Resource navigation processes

Following the initial training series, two additional informal sessions were held to provide ongoing support and professional development. These sessions focused on collaborative problem-solving and peer feedback, allowing mentors to share challenges and best practices emerging from their experiences with mentees.

Recruitment of Mentees and Matching Process

From May – September 2025, Kidsave matched 18 youth and families, including 31 adults, with seven Peer Mentors. For evaluation purposes, interviews were conducted with five youth, nine families (16 individuals), and six Peer Mentors.

Each match was determined through a series of discovery meetings that considered multiple factors, including the mentee's background and individual needs; the mentor's lived experience,

geographic location, and personality fit; and key cultural identifiers such as race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and identity.

Mentors received confidential background summaries of their assigned mentees from the Kidsave leadership. These summaries included behavioral observations and recommended themes to help guide the early stages of the mentor–mentee relationship.

The program launched with a virtual kickoff session attended by mentors, mentees, Kidsave leadership, and the Weekend Miracles team. The session provided an overview of program goals, introductions, and included an interactive Q&A segment.

Mentoring Activities
Matched mentors and mentees were asked to meet twice a month. The mentors were informed that the goal of these meetings was to provide culturally responsive support for the mentees in engaging with their youth. Meetings were scheduled by the mentor and mentee at mutually convenient times and conducted via zoom.

Qualitative Data
Qualitative data came in two forms; the first was through session notes completed by mentors at the end of each mentor-mentee meeting. The second was through semi-structured interviews conducted by Kidsave leadership with mentors, mentees, and youth to better understand the experience of the training and mentoring experience.

Peer Mentor Weekly Meeting Notes
Content analysis was used to determine the presence of certain words, themes, or concepts within session notes. Using content analysis allowed the team to quantify and analyze the presence, meanings, and relationships of certain words, themes, or concepts.[9] All session notes were read and common terms and themes identified. These were then searched in texts and a count of frequency determined.

Interviews
All interviews were conducted via Zoom and were transcribed using the Zoom transcription feature or Notta app. All interviews were entered into the qualitative software program ATLAS.ti. To enhance validity, all interviews were co-coded. Consensus on coding, coding procedures, and any modifications to codebooks occurred through regular team meetings. Coding occurred using the coding, consensus, co-occurrence, and comparison method.[10] Each coder reviewed a selection of transcripts to create a broad understanding of the concepts as they relate to the specific aims. This is done by reducing the data, a process of selecting, simplifying, and transforming data.[11] A final codebook was created for each of the three types of interviews (mentors, mentees, and youth). Coding was then completed on all interviews. Once this was complete, topics and themes were further refined.

Results

Peer Mentor Training

To assess the effectiveness of the Peer Mentor Training, participants completed a pretest and posttest evaluating their self-reported knowledge across key training topics. Eight individuals participated in the training and rated their knowledge on a four-point scale: *not knowledgeable, slightly knowledgeable, moderately knowledgeable, and very knowledgeable*. Sample items included, "the unique needs of older Black youth in foster care" and "systemic racism, implicit bias, and explicit bias." The average pretest score was 20.4 (SD=1.76), while the average posttest score was 28.5 (SD=1.25). A paired t-test analysis revealed that this improvement was statistically significant (p<0.001), indicating that participants gained meaningful knowledge through the training.
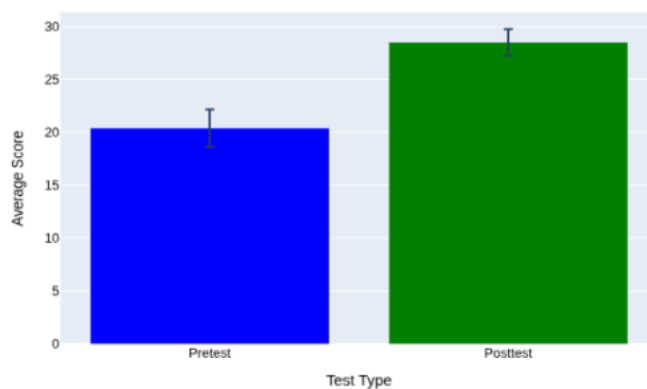
Peer Mentor Training: Pretest vs Posttest Scores

Figure 1*: Average participant scores improved significantly from the pretest (M = 20.4, SD = 1.76) to posttest (M = 28.5, SD = 1.25). A paired t-test confirmed this increase was statistically significant (p < .001), demonstrating that the training effectively enhanced participants' knowledge of cultural and identity-affirming practices.*

Weekly Peer Mentor Meetings

Peer Mentors and hosts/adoptive families met biweekly for 4 months to discuss cultural and identity-based strategies, resources, and obstacles. The peer mentor took session notes and met biweekly with Kidsave leadership to provide culturally congruent service planning and delivery. The top four themes that emerged from session notes analysis were providing guidance, navigating the foster care system, cultural identity, and prevention. Together, these themes reflect how Peer Mentors primarily functioned as parent mentors—offering empathy, support, and practical guidance to help families contextualize and respond to the experiences of the foster youth in their care, with cultural and identity-affirming practices being a priority but other themes emerging also as priorities.

Providing Guidance

Across all coded peer mentor notes, providing guidance emerged as the most prominent category (n=24), indicating that mentors most frequently provided advice, direction, and general support to mentees as they navigated personal or system-level challenges. Mentors drew upon

their own lived experiences to help families navigate uncertainty, address challenges, and strengthen their relationships with youth. This finding reflects the core intent of the Peer Mentor role—to serve as a trusted advisor who offers culturally grounded and identity affirming direction that promotes youth well-being and family cohesion.

Navigating the foster care system

The next most prominent category was system navigation (n=18). Mentors helped guide families trying to understand the processes and timelines of working within the foster care system. This ranged from relationship building with foster parents to how to become a legal guardian or communicate effectively with a youth case worker. The guidance from mentors helped caregivers manage expectations and reduce frustration. Mentors served as a bridge to the gap between families and the larger child welfare system, so families could focus on supporting the youth rather than be overwhelmed by system complexity.

Cultural Identity

Cultural identity (n=10) appeared as a prevalent topic in the weekly mentor meetings. Although not always the primary focus, cultural and identity-related discussions were interwoven throughout the mentoring process. Mentors helped hosts and adoptive parents reflect on how culture, race, and identity shape a youth's worldview and reactions. These conversations helped families approach cultural differences with openness and humility, building greater awareness of how identity influences connection and belonging.

Prevention

The final category frequently addressed was *prevention* (n=10). Mentors promoted proactive approaches to potential challenges, helping families anticipate stressors and seek support early. These preventative conversations aimed to strengthen stability, decrease disruptions, and improve overall relationship dynamics.

Figure 2. Top Categories: Peer Mentor Weekly Meetings

Interviews

At the conclusion of the Kidsave Peer Mentoring Pilot Program, individual interviews were conducted with both peer mentors, mentees (host and adoptive families) and youth to assess their experiences, insights, and perceived impact of the program. The interviews aimed to capture participants' reflections on the mentoring relationship, the usefulness of the training and ongoing support, and how the program influenced their ability to navigate challenges associated with fostering or adopting youth. The qualitative feedback provided a rich understanding of how the mentoring model functioned in practice—highlighting areas of strength, growth, and the relational dynamics that contributed to family learning, confidence, and culturally responsive care.

Interviews with Peer Mentors
Guidance and collaboration emerged as central elements in the mentor interviews, reflecting the relational and supportive foundation of the Peer Mentor Program. Mentors consistently provided guidance to their mentees and collaborated with them to solve difficult parenting questions and problems. Mentors used their lived experience to provide reassurance, contextual insight, and practical advice to mentees navigating new challenges with youth. Together collaboration and guidance formed the cornerstone of effective mentoring, fostering trust and ensuring families felt supported in their efforts to create accepting and supportive environments for foster youth.

The theme of **contextualizing and normalizing** captured how mentors helped host and adoptive families make sense of the complex experiences associated with hosting youth in foster care. Mentors drew from their own experience as host or adoptive families to normalize challenges such as the "honeymoon phase", difficulties bonding, or questioning the match. These were common experiences but not signs of failure (as sometimes perceived by new hosts). By providing context, mentors reframed difficult moments as opportunities for growth and connection, as well as practical coping tools. This process of normalizing and contextualizing helped host families adjust their expectations, stay engaged, and approach their relationships with youth in foster care from a place of understanding and compassion.

The third most prevalent theme was **training and preparation**. Mentors highlighted that the Kidsave training equipped them with foundational knowledge about trauma, cultural responsiveness, and communication which enhanced their confidence in working with host and adoptive parents. Mentors described the training as comprehensive and applicable, noting that while some information was familiar, reframing it in the context of supporting host and adoptive families deepened its relevance. Mentors emphasized that this preparation increased their confidence, offering concrete strategies for how to approach sensitive conversations, anticipate challenges, and adapt their communication style to each family's needs.

Peer Mentor Quotes:

Theme	Quote1	Quote 2
Guidance and Collaboration	One thing I did say was just keep giving reassurance: just keep giving the reassurance, no matter what it is, we're always here, this is why we're here. You know, we're here to help. You've been hurt already, so many times. That's not why I'm here. That's not why we're here. So, just giving that reassurance, and providing the stability of a mentor, you know, just somebody that they can count on, and is there to	Collectively, we can always figure out a way to handle situations that come up. And by having all this information from others, you know, my peers in the program. You know, we've dealt with situations, they've dealt with situations, everybody's different. But again, collectively, you know, we can…say, well, hey, I remember, you know my peer talking about this, this is how they handled it, or maybe they said this is

	help, or someone they can lean on, someone they can ask for advice a lot of time, they don't have that.	something they would have done different. We can try different approaches and different techniques, so that everybody gets,you know, the best outcome.
Contextualizing/Normalizing	So, our lived experiences, interacting with foster youth....we were able to draw upon that and share it with the host. And almost exactly, because they would ask, like, hey, have you ever experienced, for example, the honeymoon phase? Or have you ever experienced not bonding with the child? Have you ever questioned the match? And those three things specifically, we have. We have lived experience with that, and so we were comfortable just sharing what we had been through, and what we did to kind of navigate that.	With our shared experiences, and with the experience that we have, they've taken that… And I've… have applied. You know, some techniques that we have gone through, and…It seems to be working, and they have a very good approach to where they…Explain well to the child.
Training and Preparation	Yeah, I mean, I think the training was really comprehensive. Again, I knew a lot of the information, but hearing it in the context of supporting parents who are mentoring, it's different, right? It's one thing to hear about it in terms of how to support future hosts and being culturally competent and that sort of thing. So I think applying all that information to a new setting was really helpful.	I think the training, well, first, it just kind of gave you a little confidence to go in there with how to approach things. It kind of gave some scenarios that, hey, this may come up, so this is how you approach it. They gave different communication styles and interviewing techniques to help you. You can choose which one you want to go with and not all of them fit every time, but you can use a little bit, some of it, as you're communicating with your mentees.

Interview with Mentees

The theme of *mentoring and modeling* reflected how mentees valued learning from individuals with lived experience in fostering and adoption. Mentees described their mentors as role models whose stories, advice, and examples provided both a practical guide and emotional reassurance. Mentees noted their mentor's validation and encouragement boosted their confidence, affirming they were on the right track in supporting and advocating for youth in their care. Mentors served as guides that reinforced mentees' sense of capability and purpose in the program.

The theme of *normalizing and contextualizing* for mentees captured how mentors provided reassurance and perspective to host families. Mentees described how mentors' validation and shared experiences helped them feel less isolated and more confident in their decisions. Mentors shared with mentees their own experiences as host or adoptive families to normalize the difficulties of the process and to contextualize them within the realities of the child welfare system and the unique cultural identity needs of youth. This guidance allowed mentees to better understand and interpret behaviors and experiences through a culturally informed lens, fostering greater empathy and strengthening their commitment to providing stable care.

The theme of *support* reflected mentees' appreciation for having a trusted, accessible mentor who provided ongoing reassurance and guidance throughout the hosting or adoption process. Mentees emphasized that knowing they could reach out at any time with questions or concerns offered a strong sense of comfort and stability. Mentors were described as "open books," willing to share their knowledge and personal experiences to help families navigate uncertainty and make informed decisions. This availability and responsiveness fostered a sense of partnership

and safety, allowing mentees to feel supported in moments of doubt and more confident in their ability to care for and advocate for the youth in their homes.

Mentee Quotes:

Theme	Quote1	Quote 2
Mentoring and Modeling	I think watching someone who has a deep history of fostering and adoption already... he's had so many experiences with the kids that he's had with his partner. I feel like the stories he tells help a lot. When he was telling me in advance of what he's going through with some of the kids, I felt that they didn't want to abandon their parents. And there was something he said that I took to heart. He said, "You have to understand," - and I see it now.	My biggest thing is just the validation because then it makes me feel more reassured, and I told [Mentor] I was like, you make me feel confident that okay, I am doing the right thing. I am being and I'm leading him in the right path and I am advocating for him. So I feel like I have the right tools, kind of like my little cheerleader on the side.
Contextualizing/Normalizing	My biggest thing is just the validation that [Mentor] gives me because there's been a couple of times where I'm just, - because again, it's our first time -- I've just been like, to me, like there was an example, and I know there's been some concerns in regards to his therapy. He did give me some comments in regard to the therapy he was receiving with the previous placement.	What was helpful is that it's someone that was in similar experience in terms of hosting and being a resource family and then just kind of knowing how is it like, we're not going where we should stick to our timelines and then it should be respected from all parties because at the end of the day we're trying to just provide help and resources to [the child].
Support	You know, he kind of makes himself available to any concerns or questions or anything we might have. And he just,...is like an open book for,anything that we want to know, which has been great.	He makes us feel really supported. Like if we knew we really needed..., hey, we're not sure what to do. I'm sure we could call him. Yeah, just knowing that we could reach out to somebody that's probably been in this situation or worse is really calming.

Interviews with Youth

The theme of ***safety and responsiveness*** reflected how peer mentoring support provides additional support to youth in hosting and prospective adoption matches. Some youth noted they felt more comfortable communicating when they needed to take space for themselves when they needed it and knowing it was okay to say so. Continuing the Peer Mentor program will provide additional longitudinal data to analyze the effect of peer mentoring on permanency in more detail.

Theme	Quote 1	Quote 2
Safety and Responsiveness	(In the past few months) I'm a little more comfortable with speaking out about things that bother me.	I feel like we're definitely getting more comfortable with each other. Sometimes I run out of my social battery, and, I don't want to talk. Back then, I would have just hid it, like, I would've back then, I would have just try to hold it together. But now, like, I tell them, sometimes I'm gonna need my space.

<div align="center">**Implications**</div>

Findings from this work suggest that peer mentors are a valued asset to families building a new relationship with a youth in foster care. They also highlight the importance of training in multiple domains to ensure that mentors have the knowledge and skills needed to provide directive peer support. Findings also will be most effective over a longer period of time to be sustainable, measurable and drive real change. We recommend the ability to measure the Peer Mentor program after one year and ideally at a minimum of three years to measure permanency and youth outcomes.

Program Development Recommendations
Strengthen the "Guidance" Role as the Core Function
Most of the support being provided by peer mentors in the early months of their mentees relationship with their youth months related to general guidance about the process of mentoring, adopting, and parenting a hosted teen. Based on these findings, we recommend:

- Continue positioning peer mentors as trusted guides who provide culturally grounded advice.
- Develop structured but flexible **mentor toolkits** with reflective questions, conversation prompts, and example scenarios to help mentors tailor guidance to families' needs.
- Continue to encourage mentors to share *lived experience narratives*—these enhance authenticity and trust.

Expand System Navigation Support
Based on the findings that Mentors were providing support for understanding and navigating the child welfare system, we recommend:

- Create **visual guides or flowcharts** (e.g., "Who's Who in Foster Care") to help families navigate the child welfare system.
- Partner with local agencies to streamline access to case workers or support services.
- Offer **family workshops** led by mentors and/or system representatives to demystify procedures.

Embed Cultural Identity Work More Explicitly
Based on the findings that most of the mentoring was not specific to a child's identity, if that remains the goal and target of the Mentor program, we recommend:

- Since cultural identity was interwoven but not central, consider integrating **structured cultural reflection sessions** into the mentoring cycle.
- Provide mentors with **cultural humility and identity dialogue training**, helping them facilitate deeper conversations when families are ready.
- Co-create **identity-affirming resources** (e.g., culture kits, community connection guides) that mentors can share with caregivers.

Enhance Preventive Support

Based on the findings that Mentors were providing a fair amount of social-emotional support and using person experiences to normalize what Mentees were experiencing, we recommend:

- Build a **preventive care module** that trains mentors to identify early signs of family stress or potential placement disruption.
- Introduce **"check-in checkpoints"**—moments for mentors to review family dynamics and connect them to supports before crises emerge.
- Pair prevention strategies with **self-care tools** for both caregivers and mentors.

Training & Supervision Recommendations

Based on the work done by Mentors, we recommend active support for Mentors through the provision of one or multiple items below:

- **Mentor Training:** Focus on reflective listening, boundary setting, and cultural responsiveness.
- **Supervision Structure:** Keep meetings with the Kidsave program management, but consider incorporating brief "case reflection summaries" to capture learnings systematically.
- **Peer Learning Circles:** Allow mentors to debrief together monthly to share cultural challenges, successful strategies, and system navigation tips.
- **Flexibility:** Allow for more flexibility in the meetings between mentors and mentees.

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