DAC Mentor Parent Program Evaluation

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BACKGROUND AND THE PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

Substance use is a complex issue that comes to the forefront in numerous child welfare cases. According to the Children's Bureau, in 2021, 35% of children in foster care were removed partially due to their parent's substance use. Although substance use alone is not considered child abuse, it can make the situation more complicated. Children are often put in risky situations due to their parent's substance use and it also affects the parent's ability to engage in reunification services once their child has been removed from their care. Placement in foster care is intended to be a temporary support for children who have been removed from their parents due to abuse and/or neglect. Yet, recent data indicates that only 48% of children exiting the child welfare system reunify with their families. This number is down from 57%, twenty years ago (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2022). Even with families that reunify, issues connected to the initial maltreatment may not have been fully addressed, and recidivism can result, leading to subsequent intervention. Furthermore, social workers often find it difficult to engage with clients who are addicted to substances.

Various approaches to promote family reunification have been implemented, and peer-supported mentorship was viewed as one of the promising approaches. Peer-to-peer support [1] has increasingly been recognized as a critical support to increase successful outcomes for parents involved in child welfare (Capacity Building Center for States, 2016; Chambers et al., 2019). Families that participate in the mentor parent programs have higher rates of service engagement, participation in juvenile dependency court hearings, reunification, and lower rates of recidivism when compared to families that opted out of this resource (Berrick et al., 2011; Casey Family Programs, 2021; Leake et al., 2012; Rockhill et al., 2015; Soffer-Elnekave et al., 2020; Trescher & Summers, 2020). While existing studies have highlighted the effectiveness of various mentor parent programs, the majority of these studies included parents who were involved with the child welfare system (CWS) for various reasons and there is limited empirical research on the effectiveness of mentor parent programs with clients who have been involved with CWS specifically due to substance abuse.

The Purpose of the Present Study: The Santa Clara County Dependency Advocacy Center (DAC) provides legal assistance to parents who are involved in the child welfare system. The DAC aims to help parents successfully reunite with their children. Along with public defenders who represent parents in the juvenile court system, the DAC also offers various support programs to assist parents with reunification and ultimately closing their child welfare case. One of these programs is the mentor parent program (MPP), which is designed to support parents who struggle with substance use disorder. The MPP program pairs parents who have overcome substance use disorder and successfully reunited with their children with those who are currently going through the same process. These mentor parents offer support and guidance to encourage progress in recovery and ultimately help reunite parents with their children. This service is provided through the voluntary Dependency Wellness Court (DWC) system, which focuses on providing support to parents dealing with substance use disorder.

This study evaluates the impact and effectiveness of the MPP by using two theories—empowerment and cognitive social learning theories. The empowerment theory aims to create self-awareness and provide

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[1] In the realm of peer-to-peer support, there are a variety of terms like parent partners, peer mentors, mentor parents, peer parents, and peer partners. In this report, we have chosen to exclusively use the term mentor parents.

tools to overcome challenges (Holcomb-McCoy & Bryan, 2010; Kim et al., 2018), and the cognitive social learning theory focuses on developing self-belief in one's abilities to self-motivate and complete tasks (Bandura, 1977, 2004; Stajkovic & Luthans, 2002). By utilizing a mixed-method approach, the current project explored the impact of the program by addressing the following four research questions (RQs):

RQ1. To what extent does the MPP help clients enhance their self-sufficiency?

RQ2. To what extent do the clients who received services from the MPP feel satisfied with the program (MPP itself) and engaged with the DWC?

RQ3. How do clients involved with the MPP perceive their experiences?

RQ4. What aspects were most (or least) helpful, and what recommendations do the former clients of the MPP have for the MPP?

METHODS

Approach and Sample

This is a mixed methods study that utilizes both quantitative and qualitative research components.

- **For the quantitative component,** we utilized the non-probability purposive sampling method. For the secondary de-identified administrative data on self-sufficiency, the DAC provided the pre-test data (at the beginning of the MPPS program) and post-test data (upon completion of the MPP program). The original self-sufficiency data included 81 participants, but only 66 participants had both pre and post data which were included for data analysis. For the satisfaction survey, the DAC provided the list of participants who completed the MPP program along with their contact information. Each researcher reached out to the prospective participants and 13 former clients participated in the survey.

- **For the qualitative component**, we used a focus group and narrative responses to open-ended questions. Two former clients joined the focus group to share their experience with MPP, and participants also provided narrative responses regarding the helpfulness and areas of improvement of the program as part of the satisfaction survey.

The information presented in Table 1 summarizes the research questions, the type of data collected, and the analysis used to answer each question. For more detailed information, please refer to the Findings section.

Table 1. Research questions, data type and analysis of the current study

Research questions	Data type	Data analysis
RQ1. To what degree does the MPP help clients enhance their self-sufficiency?	Self-sufficiency matrix	Pre-Post Paired Samples T-Test
RQ2. To what degree do the clients who received services from the MPP feel satisfied with the program (MPP itself) and engaged with DWC?	Satisfaction survey	Descriptive analysis
RQ3. How do clients involved with the MPP perceive their experience?	A focus group interview & satisfaction survey narrative responses	Thematic analysis
RQ4. What aspects were most (or least) helpful, and what recommendations do the former clients of MPP have for the MPP?	A focus group interview & satisfaction survey narrative responses	Thematic analysis

Measures and Instruments

The Self Sufficiency Matrix (SSM) is a tool used by DAC staff, in collaboration with clients, to measure clients' progress in various areas at the beginning and end of the program. The data collected is de-identified and shared with the research team. The SSM measures aspects of housing, employment, transportation, life skills, family and social relationships, community involvement, parenting skills, legal issues, and substance use on a 5-point Likert scale. The scale ranges from "in crisis" at one to "thriving/empowered" at five.

The Client Satisfaction Survey (CSS) was conducted by the CWPART research team over the phone. Participants were asked to rate their experience with their mentors on a 5-point Likert scale where 1 indicated that they strongly disagreed and 5 indicated that they strongly agreed. The CSS covered three areas: general satisfaction with the MPP program (20 questions), satisfaction with the DWC (5 questions), and satisfaction with the recovery process (5 questions). For example, some of the statements included were "My mentor parent understands me," and "My mentor parent helped me with my decision to enter the DWC."

A qualitative study was conducted through a ***focus group***. Two participants from the MPP were involved in the group discussion, in which a semi-structured interview questionnaire was utilized to ask specific questions. Sample questions included "Can you share any specific support and resources you received from your mentor parents?" "Were there any services and resources that you desired but were not provided? If so, what were they?" "Did you feel that your mentor parent was a suitable match for you? If yes or no, what made you feel that way?" and "What are two or three things that could be improved about the DAC MPP?"

During the satisfaction survey conducted over the phone, participants were asked ***open-ended questions*** in order to collect narrative responses: (1) List three things that your mentor parent did that were helpful for you, and (2) Please list 2 or 3 things that could be improved about the Mentor Parent Program.

Human Subjects Consideration: Each member of the team completed the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI[2]). In addition, the current project obtained SJSU IRB approval (#F16140). The research team strictly adhered to the guidelines for responsible conduct of research and ethics as outlined by the CITI and the SJSU IRB throughout the research.

FINDINGS

Self-Sufficiency Results: In response to the first research question, we conducted a series of paired-sample t-tests. The results in Table 2 reveal statistically significant improvement in all nine areas of self-sufficiency. In particular, substance use improved from an average score of 1.75 (in crisis-vulnerable) to an average score of 4.02 (building capacity). On average, scores improved from 2.36 to 3.81, thereby representing a significant overall improvement.

Table 2. Results of the paired-sample t-tests of the self-sufficiency matrix* (N=66)

Self Sufficiency Domains	Before MPP	After MPP	P-value
	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	
Housing	2.18 (1.11)	3.70 (1.31)	<.001
Employment	1.95 (0.83)	3.44 (1.41)	<.001
Mobility	2.18 (0.82)	3.67 (1.26)	<.001

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[2] This online training program provides guidelines for responsible conduct of research and ethics.

Self Sufficiency Domains	Before MPP	After MPP	P-value
	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	
Life Skills	2.42 (0.88)	3.74 (1.15)	<.001
Family/Social Relationships	2.44 (0.93)	3.68 (1.19)	<.001
Community Involvement	2.22 (0.82)	3.69 (1.17)	<.001
Parenting Skills	2.55 (0.98)	3.86 (1.16)	<.001
Legal	3.58 (1.59)	4.44 (1.13)	<.001
Substance Abuse	1.75 (0.85)	4.02 (1.27)	<.001
Sum Score	2.36 (0.71)	3.81 (1.07)	<.001
Reliability (Cronbach's Alpha)**	0.87	0.97	

[*Likert-scale: 1= in crisis, 2= vulnerable, 3= safe, 4= building capacity, 5= thriving/empowered; ** Cronbach's alpha coefficient is a statistical measure used to determine the internal consistency of items. It helps to ascertain if a group of items is consistently measuring the same construct. The coefficient uses a standardized 0 to 1 scale, where a higher score indicates greater reliability. As a rule of thumb, a score higher than .7 is considered reliable.]

Satisfaction Survey Results: A descriptive analysis was conducted to determine how satisfied the clients who received services from the MPP were with the program and how engaged they were with the DWC. The results, presented in Table 3, indicate that the clients were highly satisfied with the MPP, DWC, and recovery support. In fact, among the 29 questions asked, 27 had an average score of between 4 and 5, thereby indicating that clients were either satisfied or highly satisfied. Overall, participants ranked their satisfaction with the mentor program as 4.69, on average.

Table 3. Descriptive results of satisfaction survey (N=13)

Satisfaction Survey Items	Mean	Range *
1. My mentor parent understands me.	4.77	4 - 5
2. My mentor parent understands what my family is going Through.	4.77	4-5
3. My mentor parent helps me navigate the system by advocating for me or giving me information.	4.77	4-5
4. My mentor parent helps me understand the expectations and roles of different staff and professionals	4.69	4-5
5. My mentor parent helps me improve communication with my attorney.	4.62	4-5
6. My mentor parent helps me improve communication with the court system.	4.69	4-5
7. My mentor parent helps me find services that fit my needs and the needs of my family.	4.38	1-5
8. My mentor parent encourages me to make positive changes in my life.	4.77	4-5
9. My mentor parent helps me and others focus on my strengths and those of my family	4.62	4-5
10. My mentor parent gives me hope.	4.77	4-5
11. My mentor parent gives me encouragement and support.	4.62	3-5

Satisfaction Survey Items	Mean	Range *
12. My mentor parent helps me prevent relapse.	4.54	3-5
13. My mentor parent is a role model who reminds me that I can succeed.	4.69	3-5
14. My mentor parent holds me responsible for making progress in my DWC phases.	4.77	4-5
15. My mentor parent helped me connect quickly to recovery Services.	4.69	4-5
16. My mentor parent helps me follow my case plan.	4.69	3-5
17. My mentor parent is respectful of my own lifestyle and environment.	4.77	3-5
18. My mentor parent respects my family's values, beliefs, and cultural traditions.	4.77	1-5
19. My mentor parent responds to me in a timely fashion.	4.69	3-5
Average satisfaction score related to the mentor parent	4.46	3.7-4.7
Reliability (Cronbach's Alpha)	.94	
20. Overall, I am satisfied with the services I have received from my mentor parent.	**4.69**	**3-5**
Connecting to Dependency Wellness Court (DWC)		
21. My mentor parent helped me with my decision to enter DWC.	4.33	1-5
22. Without my mentor parent, I would not have been involved in DWC.	3.92	1-5
23. My mentor parent helped me understand the benefits of DWC.	4.69	4-5
24. My mentor parent helped me stay involved with DWC.	4.69	4-5
Average satisfaction score related to DWC (21-24 items)	4.44	3-5
Reliability (Cronbach's Alpha)	.54	
25. IF YOU WERE INCARCERATED: My mentor parent helped me to re-engage in DWC and other services when I was released. (n=5)	4.00	3-5
Connecting with recovery support		
26. My mentor parent helped me connect with voluntary self-help groups for recovery (such as AA, NA, Secular Organization for Sobriety, or Women for Sobriety).	4.31	1-5
27. My mentor parent supported me in my efforts to find a 12-step sponsor who supports my recovery.	3.85	1-5
28. My mentor parent encouraged me to connect with family and/or friends who are supportive of my recovery.	4.54	3-5
29. My mentor parent has helped me feel confident that I can face difficulties without relying on drugs/alcohol.	4.69	3-5
Average satisfaction score related to recovery support	4.35	2.5-5
*Reliability (Cronbach's Alpha**)*	.81	

[*Likert scale where 1 = strongly disagree, 3= neutral, and 5= strongly agree ** Please see the information provided in Table 2]

Further, we conducted a qualitative study to investigate **how clients of the MPP perceive their experience (RQ 3) and to obtain recommendations from former clients (RQ 4).** The study utilized focus groups and analyzed narrative responses from satisfaction surveys. Table 4 displays the themes identified from a focus group with two MPP clients. The focus group revealed several key findings, including themes such as connection to resources, connection to mentors, support with systems, and areas for improvement.

Table 4. Themes, subthemes, and supporting quotations from participants (N = 2)

Theme	Subtheme	Example Direct Quotes[3]
Connection to Resources	Housing	• "[My mentor] told me about grants, housing grants." • "She [my mentor] guided me through the [housing grants application] process …Yeah, I still use the housing that they got me into. After I was done with my extensions, they talked to the coordinator at Solis, and she helped me with renting a room. That's one of the resources where I'm staying at currently. And thanks to that, I'm not homeless."
	Employment	• "[My mentor] is helping me to get a job. She is trying to get me into a job."
	Sponsor/ meeting slips	• "I received meeting slips, resources, names of the resources. She got me my first sponsor… The top things [helped me] are sponsors."
	In general resources	• "There are a lot of resources and sometimes the courts won't tell you where to go or whom to call, so I'm really thankful for my mentor and for DWC." • "[Mentors] are on top of the housing, food, clothes, the pop-ups and stuff, and I mean all of them are awesome. I am really thankful and I'm glad I got into DWC. [Without DAC & mentors] I wouldn't have things that I have now."
Connection to Mentor	Motivation and encouragement	• "Honestly, I couldn't have asked for a better mentor and she's an awesome person. She's currently my sponsor as well. She makes you feel like you can confide in her, and she's very open, and that's what makes me feel open with her…She is the mother figure, and like the best friend, and I mean I couldn't have asked for a better mentor parent." • "[My mentor] is like every time *Tell me what's going on with you, If you need anything, let me know.* She [my mentor] is always there and motivates me saying *You're doing awesome job*, *Just keep doing what you're doing.* She also reminds me of growth, so it's like *you can't disregard this.* She's very helpful. She's on top of it, and she's like a friend."

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[3] Please note that to make the text easier to read, we removed filler words like "uh," "ah," and "like," and added words in square brackets to clarify meaning. We also used ellipses to shorten long quotes by removing some words.

Theme	Subtheme	Example Direct Quotes[3]
	Similar background	• "The same things that you have gone through... We don't have [same] culture, but it's pretty similar regarding how she got through her case and with her son and stuff." • "[My mentor] said that like she's seen herself in me... she said *because I've been through what you've been through, and I know it's not easy. So just let me know what you need.*"
Support with Systems	Support with social worker	• "She was just on top of everything, like in every way. Telling me what questions I need to ask my social worker, how to get a hold of certain people, and if I couldn't, then she would [help me]. She was just a great support."
	Support with Court	• "She is on top of stuff, especially with court, like she reminds me, *you have court these days.*""
	Support getting out of jail	• "Since I got out from jail, she [my mentor parent] got me everything that I asked her"
Areas of Needs/ Improvement	Transportation	• "[If I could change anything] I will offer them a car. Cars will make our life a little bit easier." • "If there were other resources. It'll be really helpful if I could get a car. Used cars. If we can do payments on it [car payment]… that's even better."
	Credit score	• "[If I could change anything] help with credit score.. But it's like you go to a dealer, even if you want to get a used car, you cannot get it [because of poor credit score]. No credit check… [we can go to like [get a car] if there wasn't a credit check, wasn't a problem."

The narrative results of the satisfaction survey are presented in Table 5, which displays the themes that emerged from the open-ended responses of the 13 participants. The participants noted that connecting with their mentors and receiving support and understanding gave them hope and motivation to reach their goals.

Table 5. Narrative responses from the satisfaction survey (N = 13)

Themes	Subthemes	Direct responses from participants
Connection to Resources	General Resources	• Household resources • Housing resources • Help with holidays • Provided gift cards
	Recovery Resources	• Direction and transportation to NA meetings • Sponsors
Connection to Mentor	Motivation and Encouragement	• "[Mentor's] persistence and going above and beyond after hours, conversations upward of an hour or an hour and a half after [working] hours. I look at him as family." • "He believed in me, showed me hope, walked with me every step of the way."

Themes	Subthemes	Direct responses from participants
		• "Very encouraging, often called twice a week to check in on me and to see how progressing." • "She was proud of my accomplishments." • "[My mentor] was always there for me, great listener, extremely helpful, went out of his way to help me." • "[My mentor is an] employee of the century who cares about his clients, he gives fathers hope, without people like that it wouldn't be possible."
	Similar Background	• "Kind person, [my mentor] has been in my shoes, understands the system, feel more comfortable expressing myself." • "[My mentor was] not be too formal, helpful that she was relatable." • "[My mentor] identified with me, we connected, he was just like me, so that opened the door to trust and then I accepted the case plan after that."
Support with Systems	Social worker/ attorney	• "[My mentor] made everything understandable when dealing with attorney/social worker." • "[My mentor] always believed me when I made mistakes and backed me up."
	Court	• "With the court system, [my mentor] advocated for me, and helped me get my children back." • "[My mentor] always answered the phone or called back, always available to answer my questions. We need more mentors like him."
Areas of Improve- ment	More Resources	• Bridging the gaps between the courts and recovery groups • Channeling people into programs with sponsors • better resources, more reliable resources
	Mentor's roles	• "Provide more information about their role up front; I didn't know how [my mentor] could play a part." • "Resources that not all the mentors know about. More discussions about resources for the mentors, awareness of resources."

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the effectiveness of the DAC MPP and to obtain an understanding of the participants' experience and feedback. Our findings highlight the overall positive effect of the program on the participants' self-sufficiency across nine domains as well as a high level of client satisfaction with the program, across all categories of mentor parents, the DWC, and recovery support. More specifically, the self-sufficiency matrix indicated a clear improvement across all nine domains. In particular, there was a significant improvement in the client's substance use that aligns with the overall focus and mission of the program and in housing and job/employment which aligns with much of the positive feedback that was received in the focus group and narrative responses.

Additionally, the overall results of the satisfaction survey confirm that the program's participants are satisfied with all aspects of the program, including their individual mentors (scoring an average of 4.46 out of 5), DWC support (average score of 4.44), and recovery support (average score of 4.35). Participants

rated their overall satisfaction as 4.69, thereby revealing a high level of satisfaction with both their mentors and the program as a whole. The satisfaction survey highlighted the mentors' exceptional engagement skills, which was a common theme in the focus group and narrative feedback. The parents also conveyed a great deal of contentment with the aid they received during their process of recovery. However, when asked about finding a 12-step sponsor, a few participants gave a low score indicating that not everyone had the same positive experience in connecting with an effective sponsor. Further, although still highly rated overall, participants in satisfaction surveys reported the lowest satisfaction level in the DWC-specific question category. Specifically, questions related to the decision to enter the DWC had a wide range of responses. In gathering responses from participants, the research team found that participants were confused about the nature of the questions and the voluntary aspect of the program. Thus, the research team suggests revisiting questions 21 and 22 in future research. Similarly, while mentors are praised for their skill in linking program participants to resources, some worry about uneven access to those resources between mentors. To address this issue, the DAC could offer extra training to make sure that all mentors have a good understanding of the community resources that can help their clients.

We have received positive feedback from parents/clients about the program's effectiveness in dealing with substance abuse cases. Based on the findings, we have concluded that the MPP is a highly effective program that significantly boosts the self-reliance and contentment of its participants. The program's mentors have assisted them in navigating various components of the system—such as the courts, social workers, attorneys, and the criminal justice system—thereby resulting in positive outcomes. In conclusion, we highly recommend investing in more mentors and expanding the MPP to better serve parents who has been involved with CWS and struggled with substance use.

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