

# Case study: Educational mentoring

## Introduction

Refugee Support Network (RSN) is a specialist refugee children and youth education NGO. Its educational mentoring programme is a blend of personal tutoring and well-being support, especially designed to meet the needs of young refugees and asylum seekers. RSN matches unaccompanied asylum-seeking and refugee young people with trained educational mentors, and pairs meet weekly to work towards specific educational goals identified by the young person. The programme has been running for over seven years, and operates in London, Oxford and Birmingham.

## The key problem this case study addresses

Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and care leavers not only often face complex barriers to educational progression (including immigration anxieties, trauma related mental health difficulties, and disrupted educational backgrounds), but in addition often do not have consistent education-focused support from caring adults. While social workers and key workers can provide excellent higher level support around school admissions, education choices and attendance, the day to day encouragement, help with homework, and confidence boosting practice, usually a parental role, is missing. In addition, large school or college classes, each with multiple young people with complex educational needs, mean that teachers are ill-equipped to provide the one-to-one academic support these young people need to flourish.

## What they do

Each unaccompanied refugee or asylum-seeking young person on the programme is matched with an individual, trained volunteer educational mentor who meets with them each week to provide bespoke academic and social support. Young people are referred to the programme by social workers, teachers, key workers or other professionals. When a referral is received, RSN's mentoring coordinator arranges to meet with the young person to explain what a mentor is, and to discuss their educational goals and aspirations.

Volunteer mentors are recruited from the local community; as well as an application and interview process, all potential volunteers complete compulsory training. This covers the asylum process, giving volunteers an insight into the process and the impact that this can have on young people; the type of education provision many receive and common barriers that prevent young people from progressing; safeguarding and child protection; the limits and boundaries of their role; and tips for supporting a language learner.

Referred young people are matched with a fully trained mentor, who, where possible, is from their local community and has skills and experience in areas of interest to the young person. At a matching meeting with the young person, mentor and an RSN Mentoring Coordinator, goals

are agreed and set, and the pair works on these each week. The mentors and mentees meet for one hour per week in a public place, and after each mentoring session the mentors are required to complete a feedback form. This feedback allows the RSN staff team to provide additional specialist support to each pair, as needed. After six months, mentoring coordinators meet with mentors and mentees separately to review their mentoring experiences and plan for the future.

## The difference this makes/why this is an example of good practice

Young people and their teachers consistently report that participation in the mentoring programme leads to educational progress. Circa 90% of young people on the programme remain in education, and 85% make tangible progress towards their educational goals. Young people working at GCSE or Level 2 / 3 have identified the subject specific support as instrumental in helping them pass exams, emphasizing the ways that mentors have explained difficult concepts or encouraged them to think through problems in different ways.

Other young people have commented on the value of the 1:1 nature of the support; in this context they report being more comfortable to ask questions and make mistakes, thereby facilitating information retention. Young people who are more newly arrived in the country have commented on the study skills support provided by mentors - essential for those who have not been in a school or college environment for many years. Young people at all stages of learning value the encouragement mentors give and report that they feel more confident in their own abilities and their capacity to interact with other adults. Although the initial mentoring commitment is 6 months, a significant proportion of relationships continue well beyond this, both mitigating the negative impact of these young people's lack of social networks and building bridges between communities over the long term.

In addition to education specific support, young people's awareness of and participation in local services has increased through having a mentor. Drawing on mentors' local knowledge, mentees have joined local football clubs, drama and youth groups, or accessed volunteering opportunities. For many mentees, their mentor is the only adult engaging with them who is not paid to provide support: young people report that the knowledge that someone from their local community is giving up their time to help them move forward in their education has, in and of itself, had a positive impact on their wellbeing. Mentors themselves also speak about their changed perceptions and increased understanding of both the issues faced by young refugees and asylum seekers, and the positive contribution they can make to the community.

For more information:

[www.refugeesupportnetwork.org](http://www.refugeesupportnetwork.org)