Mentors at Friends of the Children – Boston are meeting with students outdoors. The outings give caregivers a break and encourage students to leave their screens behind.
The path to academic achievement is an obstacle course for the 124 students served by Friends of the Children – Boston. The kids attend more than 60 schools in Boston. By the time they reach second grade, it’s not uncommon for them to have experienced chronic homelessness or watched a family member battle an opioid addiction. The nonprofit’s full-time professional mentors help students navigate the education system, find enrichment through hobbies, and meet personal and academic goals.

The nonprofit is “the connective tissue” between each part of these students’ lives, says executive director Yi-Chin Chen. When the pandemic broke out, that role got a lot more complicated.

Mentors kept up their relationships with students over video calls. For three to four hours each week, they’d see the reality of their students’ lives through the screen. While mentors occasionally visited their students’ homes before the pandemic, Chen knows from personal experience that they were probably seeing a glossy version of life at home. She says whenever teachers visited her childhood home to discuss Chen’s poor grades with her parents, “my mother would spend an entire day making the house look like we had no challenges.”

It’s natural for adults and students to want to put up a positive facade for Friends of the Children’s mentors, Chen says. But they couldn’t keep it up under the strains of the pandemic. It made Chen realize that students are most likely to succeed when the adults who care for them do, too. And that realization is shaping how Friends of the Children is thinking about its work going forward.

‘How Do We Show Up for You?’

During the pandemic, many of the students’ usual avenues for support — outings with their mentors, medical check-ups, meetings with social workers, check-ins with teachers — went virtual or were even canceled. Parents and other caregivers were suddenly on their own.

But they needed support, too. Many worked in the hospitality or food-service industries and lost jobs as hotels, offices, and restaurants shuttered. Others saw their work hours scaled back. It was harder for families to pay for groceries. And it was risky for them to go to the store: Upwards of 70 percent of the students live...
with someone whose pre-existing health conditions put them at high risk of suffering a severe case of Covid-19.

As mentors checked in with their students on video calls, they saw the full picture of their students’ home lives — the chaos of lockdown in a small apartment, how they bickered with siblings, how caregivers handled a child’s temper tantrum.

“It definitely gives a more intimate picture of what things look like at home, which I think we can use going forward,” says Mary Kate Sullivan, who manages the charity’s elementary school program. She mentors eight students from second to seventh grade. With this wider window into her students’ home lives, Sullivan says, she was able to ask caregivers how she could help them address the behavior she saw through the screen and offer them specific strategies.

Creative Moves

Charities had to be nimble to withstand a year of crises. Now some are building on those ideas to shape the future. Read more:

- A Children’s Museum’s Partnership With Local School District Brings in Revenue — and New Ideas
- Zoom Gives a Boost to Nonprofit’s Work to Promote Racial Healing
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- The Pandemic Reveals the Importance of Advocacy to a Food Charity
- An Early-Childhood Nonprofit Tunes Into Families’ Needs and Reconsiders Videocalls
- A Housing Nonprofit Finds New Ways to Reach More Supporters
“It pushes us to ask different questions,” Chen says.

Parents, grandparents, and other adults needed help navigating a new normal that was at times almost unbearable. Caregivers have always been involved with Friends of the Children – Boston’s programming, but the main focus of its mission is the one-on-one relationship between the student and the mentor. Chen wondered how the nonprofit could support caregivers in a way that empowered them to manage their families' lives.

So she asked them: “How do we show up for you, knowing that you have to do it all?”

After listening to the caregivers, the nonprofit started a new food-delivery service. Grocery store gift cards alone wouldn’t cut it, given the number of household members at risk for severe Covid. When caregivers talked about how loud their homes were with multiple children learning remotely, Friends of the Children provided headphones. When teachers couldn’t reach the grandmother who cared for three of their students, a mentor helped her create and use an email account.

Shané Lewis, who manages the nonprofit’s adolescent program, says she’s talking to caregivers more than before the pandemic. Lewis mentors nine students from eighth to 12th grade. She says the frequent check-ins helped the adults in the children’s lives feel more supported by the program.

**Two-Generation Approach**

Many mentoring organizations had to transform their approaches during the pandemic because they generally rely on in-person activities to build strong one-on-one relationships, says David Shapiro, chief executive of Mentor, a national umbrella group for mentoring nonprofits. But it was unusual to make these changes so quickly.

“Normally, this is a decision: You go through a strategic plan,” Shapiro says. “In this case, it was sort of the old adage: Necessity is the mother of invention.”

A Mentor survey of 137 organizations found that since the pandemic began, 108 said they have offered programs to provide students and families with food, internet access, mental-health services, and other support.

Friends of the Children delivered food, technology, and other essentials thanks to a $70,000 grant from the Boston Resiliency Fund. Another $87,000 from that fund went toward vouchers for families to use at local bodegas and grocery stores. Nine grant makers also lessened restrictions on their gifts — by waiving spending restrictions, offering general operating support, speeding up grant timelines, or supplementing their grants with emergency, unrestricted grants. Because students were no longer visiting the office, the group put its
budget for after-school snacks toward training for its staff on navigating children’s mental-health crises and encouraging teachers to honor individualized education programs the students had created during remote classes.

In their role as go-betweens for schools, families, health services, and other resources, mentors across the country held together systems that were struggling to function during the pandemic.

**Virtual meetings during the pandemic gave mentors an unvarnished look at the challenges that students’ families were facing.**

“Our focus during the pandemic and outside of the pandemic should be: What are the barriers that disrupt learning and disrupt the optimal conditions for thriving and striving?” Shapiro says. “Are you going to remove the barriers, or are you going to wait for someone else?”

He doesn’t see that approach stopping any time soon. Neither does Chen, who is developing a new two-generation approach to mentoring for Friends of the Children – Boston. The new approach will continue to support students’ academic and social-emotional development while also advancing caregivers’ career development and fostering connections between caregivers and their communities.

Chen will soon hire a staff member to oversee the programs serving caregivers, which are set to begin before the next school year. She and her staff are also selecting a group of caregivers to advise them as they create more programs for adults. The GreenLight Fund, which established Friends of the Children – Boston, helped get the new approach off the ground with a $50,000 grant. The nonprofit will also draw on the $94,000 raised at its gala to support two-generation programing.

Mentors are excited about this new approach. “There are often times where I have youth that may be a little reluctant to do things,” Lewis says. “But having their caregiver being really invested in it, in modeling at home, I think it’s going to help the success rate of getting kids to do certain things and feeling really confident.”

Student achievement will still be at the heart of Friends of the Children’s mission, Chen says, and the new programs for parents have resonated with donors — many of whom know the challenges of remote learning first-hand. Before the pandemic, some individual donors didn’t immediately understand how instability at home affected a student’s grades. But with $150,000 left to raise to meet its fundraising goal for its new approach, Chen is feeling confident donors will respond to her appeals. More donors now understand the spillover effect of stress at home. “It’s almost like you’re sharing the same vocabulary,” Chen says.
Looking ahead, she says it would be foolish for Friends of the Children to go back to the way things were before March 2020.

“Caregivers have to be a really critical part of the equation in more ways than we have done before,” she says. “We have to proactively engage them, and also we have to proactively build on what their own hopes and dreams are for this next phase.”

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We welcome your thoughts and questions about this article. Please email the editors or submit a letter for publication.

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Recommended Webinars for You

Major-Gift Fundraisers: Learn From Your Peers
How can you stay in touch with key donors in meaningful ways — and win big gifts — despite economic and health challenges?

How to Convey Impact to Donors in Times of Change
Join us to learn from foundation decision makers how to build a compelling case for support despite uncertainty and communicate results in ways that inspire confidence in giving.
