

**FR1ENDS** of the  
**CH1LDREN**

Generational Change,  
One Child at a Time

Chicago



# FRIENDS OF THE CHILDREN—CHICAGO | FY 2025 IMPACT REPORT

Friends of the Children identifies kindergartners most impacted by poverty and gun violence and pairs them with salaried Professional Mentors. We commit to staying by their side for 12.5 years. No Matter What.

There are no quick fixes to the depth of the struggles and barriers faced by the families we serve. That's why we build trusting relationships with youth and caregivers, and why we promise to stay by their side for the long term.

Friends of the Children has been using data to guide our work for 30 years. Third-party longitudinal studies funded by the National Institutes for Health, the Annie E. Casey Foundation, and others have demonstrated the power of our model: providing children facing the greatest obstacles with safe, calm, nurturing relationships and committing to them for 12.5 years. Combine this with our two-generation (2Gen) approach and we are impacting entire families and communities.



92% of youth go on to enroll in post-secondary education, serve our country, or enter the workforce



93% of youth remain free from involvement in the juvenile justice system



83% of youth receive their high school diploma or GED



98% of youth wait to parent until after their teen years

## To reach these long-term goals, we must regularly ask ourselves:

- ▶ *How are the kids feeling? What is the state of their well-being?*
- ▶ *How are our youth progressing toward the ambitious goals we have for them and that they have for themselves?*
- ▶ *How do they feel about the time they spend with their Professional Mentors?*
- ▶ *Are caregivers getting what they need from Friends-Chicago?*

This report attempts to answer these questions and more by presenting a one-year snapshot of Friends of the Children-Chicago (from September 2024 – August 2025). It provides a summary of four program evaluations:

- ▶ Dosage of 1:1 time our children are receiving with their Professional Mentor.
- ▶ Outcomes measurements of the Focus Areas that Mentors use to guide their work with each child.
- ▶ A Youth Survey conducted face-to-face with a Program Manager in August 2025.
- ▶ A Caregiver Survey conducted through Survey Monkey in September 2025.

This exercise is about accountability – to our mission, to our youth and families, and to our donors. It's also about praxis, putting theory into practice; taking what we've learned and refining our approach to best serve our families.

Thank you for being a member of our Team of Support and for your ongoing curiosity about how we can truly make a difference in the lives of children who face unimaginable challenges.



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As always, we invite you to learn more and welcome your input.  
Please reach out anytime to schedule a tour of our Clubhouses or simply to chat.

## Data matters.

Data helps quantify the impact of our work. Data helps us measure progress and identify areas where we need to improve. This is especially important because we intentionally identify and serve the children and families facing the greatest hardship.

There is no magic solution to address the myriad of challenges they face. Progressing towards the long-term outcomes is a non-linear process. Therefore, we identify annual measurable outcomes that we track to provide evidence of progress and to raise the alarm if a child is not developing the skills they need in order to thrive.

The voices of the children and caregivers we serve are important as well. Gathering measurable feedback from them is as valuable as tracking skill development. Knowing how they feel about themselves and being part of the program matters.

## But data is not everything.

Some things are simply unquantifiable. *Safe, calm, and nurturing relationships are what every human being needs.* Not only when they face hardship, not only when they are teenagers, but throughout their lives.

We all need someone to celebrate our successes, recognize our interests and talents, help us make good choices, and expose us to new ideas. We also need people to support us when times are tough and to help us access resources when we need them.

Professional Mentors are responsive. They work in real time in a child's real world. They can pivot at any moment to address what the child or family needs. They work in all areas of a child's life. Most importantly, they tend to a child's overall well-being.

**Vanessa** has been with us since kindergarten. Now a seventh grader, she has grown into a teenager who exudes confidence, kindness, and leadership. But her journey has not been easy. From the start, Vanessa's family struggled with instability. Her mom faced depression and substance abuse, while her parents' relationship was marked by violence.

Tragically, when Vanessa was in 3rd grade, her father was shot and killed. The first call her mother made after hearing the news was to Friends-Chicago. Mentors rushed to pick up Vanessa and her siblings from school and held them as their mother shared the devastating news. At that time, Vanessa had just been paired with her new mentor, Kianna. The bond between them grew quickly, beginning with a mural they painted together to honor her father's memory.

Since then, Kianna has become a trusted part of the family. When tensions arise between Vanessa and her mom, both turn to Kianna for support and solutions. Even as the family continues to face hardship—currently living in a shelter with five children—Friends-Chicago has remained their steady anchor. Vanessa and her family participate in individual and group therapy in our onsite Wellness Room.

Despite the challenges faced by her family, Vanessa continues to shine. She has a natural charisma that draws people in, and with guidance, she is learning to use that influence to inspire others. At our Summer of Success Reading Camp, she helped younger children practice reading. She serves on the Empower Youth Advisory Board and even mentors a younger peer, Chloe, offering encouragement with schoolwork and everyday choices.

Vanessa dreams of a future in real estate or cosmetology, and she sets and works toward goals with determination. As Kianna says, "We're Vanessa's chill place, her second family. She feels the love here, and she knows we'll always be by her side, no matter what."



 **Developmentally Appropriate Focus Areas**

Only after a relationship is established and a child feels trust and safety can they develop social and emotional skills. Drawing on a host of resiliency literature, we prioritize developmentally appropriate Focus Areas that combine to meet the needs of our youth. These Focus Areas are divided into three phases:

- ▶ **Foundations** (K–5th Grade)
- ▶ **Empower** (6th–8th Grade)
- ▶ **Launch** (9th–12th Grade)

Because all children enter our program in kindergarten, this year’s report includes outcomes only for the Foundations phase of each child’s journey. We are now implementing the first full year of the Empower phase and look forward to reporting on an exciting set of outcomes for our older youth in next year’s report.



 **Quality Time**

The foundation of our program is providing each child with an authentic relationship that is long-term, consistent, trusting, and nurturing; a relationship with a Professional Mentor that is attuned to the child’s needs and well-being.

That is why **time spent with their Mentor** is one of the first things we measure:

| Annual Goal                                                                            | Actual to Date                                                                       |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>12-16</b><br>average number of hours each child spends per month with their Mentor. | <b>11.8</b><br>average number of hours each child spent per month with their Mentor. |

 **Goal Setting**

The ability to stick to a task and a goal is the greatest predictor of success – stronger than IQ, academic achievement, and test scores. Goals are set by youth with their Mentor and reflect each child’s interests, such as improving in a sport, trying new foods, or learning a new artistic skill.

| Annual Goal                                                                                                                        | Actual to Date                                                                                                                            |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>80%</b><br>of youth will set, make progress toward and achieve at least <b>four</b> personal goals over the course of the year. | <b>75%</b><br>of youth achieved at least <b>four</b> individualized goals.<br><b>97%</b><br>of youth achieved <b>three</b> or more goals. |

 **Team of Support**

Children need as many supportive adults in their lives as possible. In addition to their caregivers and Professional Mentors, we help them identify and nurture relationships with other adults in their lives, including someone from school, the community, or other members of the Friends-Chicago staff.

| Annual Goal                                                                                                              | Actual to Date                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>90%</b><br>of youth will have at least <b>two</b> adults on their Team of Support, beyond their caregiver and Mentor. | <b>83%</b><br>of youth have <b>two</b> adults on their Team of Support, beyond their caregiver and Mentor.<br><b>93%</b><br>of youth have <b>one</b> adult on their Team of Support, beyond their caregiver and Mentor. |

 **Building Independence**

Children need autonomy, competence, and agency to flourish. These qualities can be built by empowering children to do things for themselves and make their own decisions. Examples include learning a caregiver’s phone number, learning to tie their shoes, and learning how to get themselves dressed and ready for school in the morning. For older youth, examples include ordering for themselves at a restaurant, taking public transportation, or managing their own homework schedule.

| Annual Goal                                                                            | Actual to Date                                                                                                                                                              |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>80%</b><br>of youth will develop at least <b>four</b> skills to build independence. | <b>75%</b><br>of youth developed at least <b>four</b> skills to build independence.<br><b>95%</b><br>of youth developed at least <b>three</b> skills to build independence. |



## Literacy Development

Friends of the Children-Chicago is determined that every child in our program achieve literacy. We mobilize the authentic and trusting Child/Mentor relationship to create a safe space for children who have been exposed to trauma to learn.

### Where we started:

We brought literacy development in-house two years ago after testing all the youth in our program and finding that only 12% were reading at grade level. They were in exact alignment with other Black children in the Chicago Public Schools\*. At that time, 83% of our kids entering 6th grade were only reading at the K-2nd grade level.

### Progress to Date

**50%**

of youth in kindergarten – 5th Grade are at grade level in literacy or have increased their literacy by at least **one** grade level.

**88%\***

of our 6th and 7th graders are at grade level in literacy or have increased their literacy by at least **one** grade level (\*up from 18% one year ago).

*\*2022 Illinois Board of Education CPS Report Card*

### *Building a Culture of Literacy makes a huge difference.*

- ▶ Books everywhere in the Clubhouse
- ▶ A “Take Home & Own” Library
- ▶ Literacy incorporated into all Mentor outings
- ▶ Providing the older youth leadership roles in teaching the younger kids how to read
- ▶ Making literacy relevant to kids’ own lives – our first-ever Book Club was a huge success

### *Training for Mentors is key.*

- ▶ All our Professional Mentors receive ongoing training in how to support literacy development.

### *Dedicated staffing has paid off.*

- ▶ Investing in a full-time Literacy Specialist with experience in trauma-informed learning was a game changer.

### *Some students have undiagnosed learning differences.*

- ▶ Thanks to funding partners we are paying for private cognitive testing to identify learning differences.
- ▶ We are also advocating in the schools to ensure students receive the services to which they are entitled.

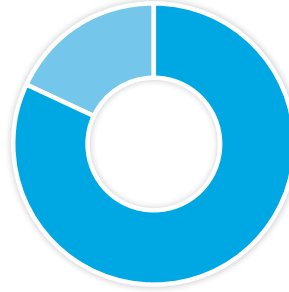


**We are determined that ALL kids in our program access their full right to literacy.**



**I feel like I belong in the Friends of the Children community...**

- Totally true **65%**
- Mostly true **35%**
- Not at all true **0%**



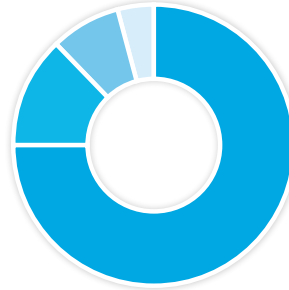
**My Mentor helps me with my goals...**

- Totally true **82%**
- Mostly true **18%**



**Friends-Chicago helps me learn new things...**

- Totally true **68%**
- Mostly true **27%**
- A little true **5%**



**I am excited about my future...**

- Totally true **75%**
- Mostly true **13%**
- A little true **8%**
- Not at all true **4%**



**In the past year, what is something that you are really proud of?**

*"I joined a book club."*

*"Scoring in a football game."*

*"I learned how to play chess."*

*"Got a good report card."*

*"I learned how to do a back handspring."*

*"Crocheting a tote bag."*



## SELF-HARM ALERT

The Youth Survey showed that during the past year:

- ▶ **18% of youth** had suicidal thoughts, including one child reporting a suicide attempt.
- ▶ **12% of 6th-8th graders** engaged in self-harm.
- ▶ **An additional 24%** said they have engaged in self-harm, but not in the past year.

## Our Response:

All our Professional Mentors recently participated in mental health first aid and suicide prevention trainings. As part of the Stronger Together initiative of Cook County Health, we are now providing on-site individual and group therapy for youth, caregivers, and Professional Mentors.

Caregivers are our partners. Professional Mentors and Family & Community Engagement Specialists work closely with them to:

- ▶ Empower them to advocate for themselves and their children
- ▶ Connect them to community resources
- ▶ Strengthen their positive parenting skills

When we surveyed our caregivers in September 2025, the results showed that, over the past year:

98%

agree that their child **enjoys spending time with their Mentor.**

98%

agree that their child has a **strong trusting relationship** with their Mentor.

88%

have seen **improved behavior at home** from their child.

97%

say their child's **self-esteem improved.**

85%

have seen **improved behavior at school** from their child.

97%

report that their child's **reading ability improved.**

98%

are **satisfied with the services** received from Friends of the Children-Chicago.

72%

report that Friends-Chicago has **connected them to other community services.**

95%

feel that their child is **learning helpful skills** from their Mentor.

97%

report that their child's **independence has improved.**

88%

of caregivers **attended a meeting with their child's school** during the 2023/2024 school year.

90%

report that Friends-Chicago provided them with practical **strategies and/or specific tools to help with parenting.**



When asked about the parenting strategies they've learned from Friends-Chicago, Caregivers said:

*"Helping with reading."*

*"Taking time to sit and talk to your kids."*

*"To be patient with the child."*

*"Help me understand a different way to help my child learn better."*

*"Support with making my kids confident."*



# What is your favorite thing about the Friends of the Children program?



## Caregivers say:

*"The whole mentor and mentee program itself is a blessing to us. I love how the love is spread during the holiday season."*

*"My favorite thing is to see my child interact with other people and having a mentor that cares about her deeply."*

*"They're like an extended family with resources."*

*"My favorite thing is how the mentors take so much time and put in a lot of effort to make sure their mentees are being raised as well-rounded people. Showing them different ways of handling things and giving them the courage to be great."*

*"They care about the whole family and really step up in your time of need."*

## Kids say:

*"The mentors."*

*"I like the Empower program [for 6th-8th Graders]."*

*"My mentor teaches me things I didn't know before."*

*"They take time to help you."*

*"I like that when I feel down, they talk to me."*

*"We have fun."*