

FRIENDS of the CHILDREN

Generational Change,
One Child at a Time

Chicago



Relationships Change What's Possible

Dear Friends,

The research is unambiguous. One of the most powerful protective factors in a child's life is the presence of at least one stable, caring adult who shows up for them consistently.

Not a curriculum. Not a program. A person.

That is the relationship Friends-Chicago is built to provide. We intentionally identify and serve children and families facing the greatest risk factors and with the fewest protective factors. Then we do something both simple and rare: we make a long-term commitment to them. Beginning in kindergarten, every child is paired with a Professional Mentor. We commit to walking alongside them until the end of high school—for 12.5 years. **No Matter What.**

We know that a consistent, skilled, caring Mentor offers more than support in the moment. Through a genuine relationship, emotional regulation, and intentional work in developmentally appropriate Focus Areas, children build the skills, relationships, and confidence they need to direct their own futures.

Getting there from where our children start—growing up in communities under real strain and experiencing trauma—is the work of a childhood, not a school year. Healing and growth happen through thousands of small, repeated experiences of connection, trust, encouragement, and regulation.

We cannot erase the adversity in a child's life. But we can make one powerful commitment: to show up.

Again and again. To know a child deeply. To help them build skills and confidence. To be there through setbacks, celebrations, transitions, and milestones.

Ask ninth-grader Amari what it has meant to have a Professional Mentor and the full Friends-Chicago team of support since kindergarten, and you will hear what years of showing up can mean. Her story, shared in this report, puts a face and a voice to that journey.

No single year can capture the full impact of a 12.5-year commitment. But every year gives us an opportunity to look closely, learn honestly, and keep getting better.

As we look back at Fiscal Year 2026 (September 1, 2025 – August 31, 2026), we are celebrating meaningful progress:

- ▶ **Literacy** surpassed our goal for the number of children reading at grade level or increasing their reading level by at least one grade.
- ▶ **Youth and caregivers** continue to tell us they feel supported, connected, and better equipped to navigate challenges.
- ▶ **Our Team** reports a strong connection to our mission and a supportive working environment.

We are also paying attention to where we need to grow. This year has highlighted opportunities to strengthen Mentor onboarding, Focus Area processes, and internal communication.

That is what we believe impact reporting should do: **celebrate progress without losing sight of the work still ahead.**

We owe this annual close look to our children and families. And we owe it to you, because your support makes it possible for us to keep showing up.

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

Thank you for being part of the journey.



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Our North Star: The Friends—Chicago Graduate Profile



Our goal is that each child who completes our program will enter young adulthood as *a person who knows their worth, has the skills, relationships, and confidence to direct their own future, and is prepared to contribute meaningfully to society.*

How do you measure a relationship? You can't.

And yet the deepest part of our impact lives in the trust between a child and their Professional Mentor: the bond a Mentor develops with each child, and the countless moments of connection that accumulate over time. These are powerful, lasting effects which can't be measured quantitatively.

But we *can* measure skills.

Nationally, the long-term results from Friends of the Children speak for themselves:



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



90% of youth receive their high school diploma or GED



96% of youth remain free from involvement in the juvenile justice system



95% of youth wait to parent until after their teen years



This annual Impact Report offers a one-year snapshot of Friends-Chicago and the children and families we are honored to serve.

Our local findings draw from the following sources:

- ▶ Outcome measurements in the Focus Areas our Mentors use to guide their work with each child
- ▶ Literacy data drawn from our annual Lexia assessments
- ▶ A Youth Survey conducted face-to-face by a Program Manager in August 2026
- ▶ A Caregiver Survey conducted via SurveyMonkey in August 2026
- ▶ An Employee Engagement Survey conducted in August 2026



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	FY 2026 Outcomes
12 average number of hours each child spends per month with their Mentor	11.8 average number of hours each child spent per month with their Mentor

From Relationships to Skills

Our program is built on a foundation of consistent, stable, nurturing relationships. Developmentally appropriate Focus Areas translate that foundation into intentional, skill-building work, with Mentors supporting children’s development over time.

In FY 2026, overall Focus Area results fell short of our goals. Looking at the data, we saw a clear pattern: outcomes built steadily through the first two trimesters before declining in the third.

The time Mentors spent with children remained steady, but how that time was used changed. In the third trimester, Mentors devoted significant time to our summer reading program, with older youth participating as “Mini-Mentors.” Our Focus Area planning and tracking did not adequately account for this shift or capitalize on opportunities to connect literacy work with Focus Area goals. We also identified a need for continued Mentor training around setting goals that are achievable within a single trimester.

These lessons are informing how we strengthen support for Mentors and Program Managers. We have updated our Program Guidebook, revised Mentor onboarding and training, and created our first-ever Program Manager Handbook, with a stronger emphasis on consistency, accountability, and supervision. Together, these tools will help ensure skill-building remains a consistent part of the mentoring relationship as program priorities evolve.

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	FY 2026 Outcomes
80% of youth will set, make progress toward and achieve at least three personal goals over the course of the year.	18% of youth achieved at least three personal goals. 74% of youth achieved two or more goals.



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

80%

of youth will develop at least **three** skills to build independence.

FY 2026 Outcomes

25%

of youth developed at least **three** skills to build independence.

69%

of youth developed at least **two** skills to build independence.



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

90%

of youth will have at least **two** adults on their Team of Support, beyond their caregiver and Mentor.

FY 2026 Outcomes

83%

of youth have **two** adults on their Team of Support, beyond their caregiver and Mentor.

92%

of youth have **one** adult on their Team of Support, beyond their caregiver and Mentor.



“Almost always, people will describe the source of their ability to overcome adversity as the people and places where struggles were met with a thoughtful, connected, and regulated response.”
—Doug Bolton, PhD

Literacy Development

Three years ago, we saw a gap. Today, we’re seeing what’s possible.



In 2023, we tested the reading levels of every young person in our program. Just 12% were reading at grade level, on par with other Black students in Chicago Public Schools at that time.

The finding was sobering. It made clear that if we were serious about helping every child thrive, we had to make literacy a priority.

Literacy is a gateway to learning, independence, and opportunity. It helps shape what a child can access and imagine for their future.

But for children who have experienced trauma, learning can be difficult when they are carrying stress, fear or unmet basic needs. Before a child can take a learning risk, they need to feel safe with the person asking them to try.

So we brought literacy in-house, hiring a full-time Education Specialist to build a trauma-informed reading program, one built upon the safe, stable, nurturing relationships our youth have with their Mentors.

IT’S WORKING. This is the first time since we started our literacy initiative that we have met and surpassed our ambitious goal.

Annual Goal

70%

of youth are at grade level in literacy or have increased their literacy by at least one grade level over the past year.

FY 2026 Actual

81%

of youth are at grade level in literacy or have increased their literacy by at least one grade level over the past year.



Behind the Headline

BUILD (K-5th Grade)

75%

of youth in kindergarten – 5th grade are at grade level in literacy or have increased their literacy by at least one grade level over the past year.

EMPOWER (6th-8th Grade)

88%

of youth in 6th-8th grade are at grade level in literacy or have increased their literacy by at least one grade level over the past year.

41% of our youth are now reading **at or above grade level**.
15% are reading **above grade level**; the highest percentage we have seen since beginning our literacy initiative.

Seeing the Difference

Students at or above grade-level proficiency in Chicago Public Schools and Friends-Chicago Youth		
	Black CPS Students*	Friends–Chicago Youth
Grades K-5	30%	40%
Grades 6-9	37%	30%

* Illinois Report Card 2024-2025

Our youngest readers are now outperforming Black students across CPS. For our middle school youth, the picture is different. These young people entered our literacy initiative significantly behind: in 2023, 83% of our kids entering 6th grade were only reading at the K–2nd grade level. They have a lot of ground to make up, and they are doing so.



We're not done.

Progress like this strengthens our resolve. We will continue surrounding each child with literacy support in all the places where their reading life happens:



At the Clubhouse: creating a culture of literacy where books are everywhere, children choose what they want to read, and reading is something they do alongside their Professional Mentor.



At Home: partnering with caregivers to make reading part of life beyond the Clubhouse, offering encouragement and practical ways to support a child's literacy journey, and providing books from our Take Home & Own Library.



At School: partnering with teachers and schools to help ensure children receive appropriate interventions, testing and resources.

Tamika's Story.

Tamika started 4th grade barely knowing her letters. Three years later, after receiving intensive literacy support alongside a Professional Mentor who knew her, believed in her, and never gave up, she started 7th grade reading on track. This is what's possible when a child has both the power of a lasting relationship and the right support to learn.

You can learn more about
Tamika's story here



Three years ago,
we saw the gap and
made a commitment
to change it.

Today, we have
proof that change is
possible.

And we'll keep going
until every child can
fully realize their
right to read.



“My favorite part about having a Mentor is being able to connect and share with adults how I feel. My relationship with my Mentor is good. I can joke around with her, tell her pretty much anything, and rely on her when I need to.” — Amari

Wise. Strong. Funny. Creative.

These are the words that Amari’s Professional Mentor, Tatiana, uses to describe her. Spending four hours a week together means that Tatiana knows her well.

She knows that Amari loves art, and that she has a successful bracelet-making business.

She knows that Amari is an avid basketball fan, and that one of their favorite memories was going to a WNBA game where Amari got to see her two favorite players.

She knows that Amari is thoughtful: she asks people when their birthday is, and she remembers.

She knows that Amari was extremely proud of herself for achieving all A’s on her 8th grade report card and was named salutatorian of her class.

It’s a remarkable journey for a girl who was referred to Friends-Chicago in kindergarten after struggling behaviorally and bringing a knife to school. Her father had recently been incarcerated, and she and her mother moved to a new neighborhood. Amari was under enormous stress, and it showed up as acting out and getting into altercations with her peers.

Amari’s circumstances were difficult. But she had a Mentor who kept showing up.

Over the years, with consistent support from the Friends-Chicago team, Amari learned to identify and regulate her emotions. She learned to form healthier relationships with her peers. She found ways to channel her energy into the things she loves. She embraced being a big sister. And when she arrived at high school, she immersed herself in her new community.

You can’t put a number on what it means for a child to know that there is an adult who knows her—really knows her—and will keep showing up. You can, however, notice what happens.

You notice Amari used to resist eating a vegetable at lunch, and now Tatiana and Amari enjoy entire meals together at vegan restaurants.

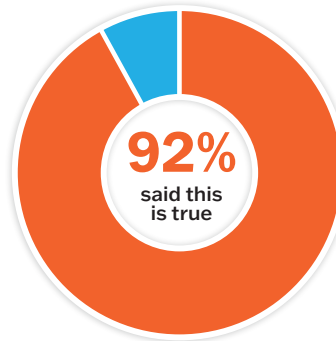
You notice that Amari used to struggle to make friends with other girls at school, and now she wants to go to a sleepover at her friend’s house.

And you notice that when she is with Tatiana at the Clubhouse, Amari smiles. She paints. She plays basketball. She reads. She asks for help. She helps others.

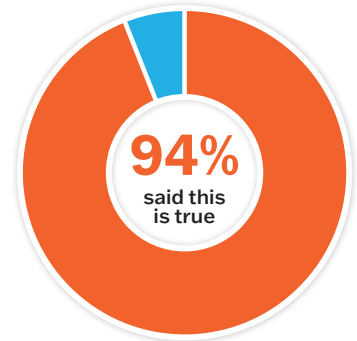
Amari has a space, and a person, she knows will be there for her. And we can see the power of that relationship.



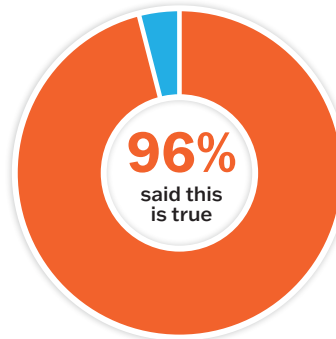
I feel like I belong/fit in at the Friends of the Children community...



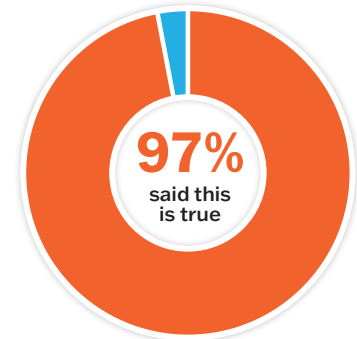
My Mentor helps me with my goals...



Friends-Chicago helps me learn new things...



I am excited about my future...



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

"Helping my little brother with his math"

"Getting my work turned in on time"

"I made it on the basketball team"

"Talking about stuff to my mom to let her know what's going on"

"I became the salutatorian of my class"

"Graduating the 8th grade"

"Keeping my teeth clean"

SELF-HARM UPDATE

The Youth Survey showed that during the past year:

- ▶ The number of children who reported having thoughts about suicide over the past year declined from 18 percent to 11 percent. And, unlike former reports, no child reported a suicide attempt.
- ▶ 17 percent of children reported having thoughts of self harm prior to the last year, while 6 percent reported having thoughts of self harm in the past year.
- ▶ The numbers are moving in the right direction, but we remain vigilant on the mental health front. We continue to provide ongoing mental health training for our Mentors and ensure youth and caregivers have access to mental health resources, including therapy.



When asked about parenting strategies learned from Friends of the Children- Chicago, caregivers said:

“How to say no but remain strong and raising my child to do the same”

“Talk things out and not hold it inside”

“How to listen before reacting”

“Remember to take time for self”

“I’ve been helped with calming and regulating my daughter faster than I was able to on my own”

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 August 2026, the results showed that, over the past year:

97%	93%
agree that their child enjoys spending time with their Mentor.	agree that their child has a strong trusting relationship with their Mentor.
93%	97%
have seen improved behavior at home from their child.	say their child’s self-esteem improved.
88%	93%
have seen improved behavior at school from their child.	report that their child’s reading ability improved.
100%	93%
are satisfied with the services received from Friends of the Children-Chicago.	report that Friends-Chicago has connected them to other community services.
86%	96%
feel that their child is learning helpful skills from their Mentor.	report that their child’s independence has improved.
78%	78%
attended a meeting with their child’s school during the 2025-2026 school year.	report that Friends-Chicago provided them with practical strategies and/or specific tools to help with parenting.

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



Caregivers say:

"I love that Friends of the Children focuses on building long-term relationships instead of quick fixes. As a parent, knowing a child has a trusted Mentor who is committed to them for years is something I think can truly change a life."

"The outings help with my child's reading and self-esteem, and they get to do things that others wouldn't on a normal basis."

"The entire family benefits from the program."

"My children having someone who they can always talk to outside of me."

"The excitement of my son on the days he gets to hang with his Mentor"

"They make you feel like part of the family."

Kids say:

"Learning how to read better"

"Going places with my Mentor"

"They help me a lot and they help me with hard answers"

"Being able to express myself"





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