

# What is Mentoring?

**A matter of trust.** Mentoring is a structured and trusting relationship that brings young people together with caring individuals who offer guidance, support and encouragement aimed at developing the competence and character of the mentee. A mentor is an adult who, along with parents, provides a young person with support, counsel, friendship, reinforcement and constructive example. Mentors are good listeners, people who care, people who want to help young people bring out strengths that are already there. A mentor is not a foster parent, therapist, parole officer, or cool peer.

All young people have the potential to succeed in life and contribute to society. All children have the potential to succeed in life and contribute to society. However, not all children get the support they need to thrive.

By all estimates, an astounding 17.6 million young people – nearly half the population of young people between 10 and 18 years of age – live in situations that put them at risk of not living up to their potential.

Without immediate intervention by caring adults, they could make choices that not only undermine their futures, but, ultimately, the economic and social well-being of our nation.

Mentoring – the presence of caring adults offering support, advice, friendship, reinforcement and constructive examples – has proved to be a powerful tool for helping young people fulfill their potential.

Mentoring can help by:

- Improving young people's attitudes towards their parents, peers and teachers;
- Encouraging students to stay motivated and focused on their education;
- Providing a positive way for young people to spend free time;
- Helping young people face daily challenges; and
- Offering young people opportunities to consider new career paths and get much-needed economic skills and knowledge.

By using your influence and resources as a decision maker, you can bring new hope to young lives through the power of mentoring. And you'll be surprised how much you will benefit, as well.

## How Mentoring Helps

At its most basic level, mentoring helps because it guarantees a young person that there is someone who cares about them. A child is not alone in dealing with their day-to-day worries.

Think back. Did you know how to study for a test or make plans for college? Do you remember wanting your first car or looking for a part-time job? Simple things that seem easy or straightforward to you now may appear to be a complete mystery to a young person.

Mentors provide their mentees with an experienced friend who is always ready to help in any number of different situations.

## Support for education

- Mentors help keep students in school.
- Students who meet regularly with their mentors are 52% less likely than their peers to skip a day of school and 37% less likely to skip a class (Public/Private Ventures study of Big Brothers Big Sisters).
- Mentors help with homework and can improve academic skills.

## Support with day-to-day living

- Mentors help improve a young person's self-esteem.
- Mentors provide support for students trying new behaviors.
- Youth who meet regularly with their mentors are 46% less likely than their peers to start using illegal drugs and 27% less likely to start drinking (Public/Private Ventures study of Big Brothers Big Sisters).
- About 40% of teenager's waking hours are spent without companionship or supervision. Mentors provide teens with a valuable place to spend free time.
- Mentors teach young people how to relate well to all kinds of people and help young people strengthen their communication skills.

## Support in the workplace

- Mentors help young people set career goals and start taking steps to realize them.
- Mentors can use their personal contacts to help young people meet industry professionals, find internships and locate job possibilities.
- Mentors introduce young people to professional resources and organizations they may not know about.
- Mentors can help their mentees learn how to seek and keep jobs.

The number of ways mentoring can help a youth are as varied as the participants involved in each program. While the lists and statistics can be impressive, take a look at two very different personal accounts of two very different mentoring success stories.

# Mentor's Role

A mentor is a caring, adult friend who devotes time to a young person. Although mentors can fill any number of different roles, all mentors have the same goal in common: to help young people achieve their potential and discover their strengths.

Mentors should understand they are not meant to replace a parent, guardian or teacher. A mentor is not a disciplinarian or decision maker for a child. Instead, a mentor echoes the positive values and cultural heritage parents and guardians are teaching. A mentor is part of a team of caring adults.

A mentor's main purpose is to help a young person define individual goals and find ways to achieve them. Since the expectations of each child will vary, the mentor's job is to encourage the development of a flexible relationship that responds to both the mentor's and the young person's needs.

By sharing fun activities and exposing a youth to new experiences, a mentor encourages positive choices, promotes high self-esteem, supports academic achievement, and introduces the young person to new ideas.

A mentor may help a young person:

- Plan a project for school;
- Set career goals and start taking steps to realize them;
- Make healthy choices about day-to-day life, from food to exercise and beyond; and
- Think through a problem at home or school.

If you think you'd make a good mentor, great. We have lots of information about the many opportunities that are available. But you should be aware that it may take a while to be matched with a youth. Mentoring programs are concerned with the well being and safety of both youth and the volunteer mentors.

In joining a formal mentoring program, you will probably be asked to go through an application process. As part of that process, you will need to supply personal and professional references, perhaps have a background check performed, and complete a personal interview. Also, remember that the role of a mentor comes with substantial responsibilities so you will be required to take part in an orientation and training. Throughout the duration of your mentoring relationship, be sure to seek support from the program coordinator.

## QUALITIES OF SUCCESSFUL MENTORS

- **Personal commitment to be involved with another person for an extended time — generally, one year at minimum.** Mentors have a genuine desire to be part of other people's lives, to help them with tough decisions and to see them become the best they can be. They have to be invested in the mentoring relationship over the long haul to be there long enough to make a difference.
- **Respect for individuals and for their abilities and their right to make their own choices in life.** Mentors should not approach the mentee with the attitude that their own ways are better or that participants need to be rescued. Mentors who convey a sense of respect and equal dignity in the relationship win the trust of their mentees and the privilege of being advisors to them.
- **Ability to listen and to accept different points of view.** Most people can find someone who will give advice or express opinions. It's much harder to find someone who will suspend his or her own judgment and really listen. Mentors often help simply by listening, asking thoughtful questions and giving mentees an opportunity to explore their own thoughts with a minimum of interference. When people feel accepted, they are more likely to ask for and respond to good ideas.
- **Ability to empathize with another person's struggles.** Effective mentors can feel *with* people without feeling pity *for* them. Even without having had the same life experiences, they can empathize with their mentee's feelings and personal problems.
- **Ability to see solutions and opportunities as well as barriers.** Effective mentors balance a realistic respect for the real and serious problems faced by their mentees with optimism about finding equally realistic solutions. They are able to make sense of a seeming jumble of issues and point out sensible alternatives.
- **Flexibility and openness.** Effective mentors recognize that relationships take time to develop and that communication is a two-way street. They are willing to take time to get to know their mentees, to learn new things that are important to their mentees (music, styles, philosophies, etc.), and even to be changed by their relationship.

## TIPS FOR BUILDING A MENTORING RELATIONSHIP

### 1. **Be there.**

When you show up for every meeting with your mentee and strive to make things work out you send your mentee a strong message that you care and that he or she is worth caring about.

### 2. **Be a friend, not an all-knowing authority.**

Be the adult in your mentee's life who is just there without having to fix him or her. Hanging out and talking is surprisingly helpful to a young person's healthy development. Young people learn more conversing with adults than they do just listening to them. In the words of a mentee:

"My parents lecture me all the time. Why would I want my mentor to be the same way? I have the best mentor in the program, but sometimes he tries too hard to be a mentor instead of just being himself. What I mean is that he thinks he always has to share some wisdom or advice, when sometimes I would rather just kick it and joke around."

Of course, when your mentee comes to you for help or advice, it is appropriate to help them develop solutions. It's also okay to check in with them if you suspect that they are struggling with something. They just don't want non-stop advice. So, take the pressure off of yourself and just enjoy your mentee's company.

### 3. **Be a role model.**

The best that you can do is to lead by example. By becoming a mentor, you've already modeled the most important thing a human being can do: caring about another. Here are some other ways you can be a positive role model for your mentee:

- Keep your word: Call when you say you will. Do what you say you will. Be there when you say you will;
- Return phone calls and e-mails promptly;
- Have a positive outlook;
- If your program has group sessions, participate fully;
- If you enter a competitive activity with your mentee, keep it in perspective and by all means do not cheat (or even fudge a little) to help your mentee win, get a better place in line at an event, etc.; and
- Let your mentee see you going out of your way to help others.

### 4. **Help your mentee have a say in your activities.**

Some mentees will have a lot of suggestions about what you can do together, but most will need a little guidance on your part. If your mentee doesn't have any preferences, start by giving them a range of choices. "Here are some things we can do. Which ones sound good to you?"

## **5. Be ready to help out.**

When your mentee lets you know that he or she is struggling with a problem, you can help out by following these tips:

- Be there for your mentee and make it clear that you want to help;
- Be a friend, not an all-knowing authority: Don't fix a problem. Ask questions and help your mentee figure out how to come up with answers;
- Model ways to solve problems. You can also be a role model by describing how you overcame a similar problem in your life. Metaphor is a great teacher;
- Give your mentee a say: Once he or she comes up with a solution, don't try to come up with a better one, but help explore all the possibilities and offer support; and
- Be ready to help out by checking back and seeing how things worked out.

## GUIDELINES FOR MENTORS

It's not possible to anticipate every situation and the appropriate behavior to apply when one is mentoring. However, here are a few suggestions to use as general guidelines:

### Do:

- Get to know your mentee. Try to really understand how things are for him or her now.
- Be positive, patient, dependable, honest and sincere.
- Be consistent, but flexible. Expect changes in plans.
- Encourage, praise and compliment – even the smallest of accomplishments.
- Be an active listener. Use language that's easy to understand.
- Give concrete explanations.
- Be straight, honest and sincere (people pick up on falseness and shallowness).
- Ask for opinions and participation in decision-making.
- Work with your mentee. Share your knowledge rather than giving advice.
- Be enthusiastic – it's contagious.
- Stress the positive.
- Be firm. Have your mentee assume responsibilities and hold him or her accountable.
- Help your mentee use mistakes as learning experiences.
- Be fair – they'll notice if you're not.
- Help identify your mentee's talents, strengths and assets.
- Tell your mentee about yourself, especially what you remember from your high school years.
- Help them identify the significance for their own lives of the information you are discussing (e.g., possible future profession, similar experiences, etc.) – tell them how they can use the information.
- Have activities planned in advance.
- Take the initiative. A mentee who fails to call or attend must be pursued and the coordinator notified of the situation so that issues can be resolved and sessions can begin again, if applicable.
- If you're going to miss a mentoring session, call the coordinator and leave a message for the mentee. It is important to let the mentee know you did not forget about your mentoring session.
- Learn to appreciate your mentee's cultural and ethnic background. Strive toward cultural reciprocity.
- Be open to what your mentee can teach you or share with you.
- **Honor Your Commitment – This is extremely important! You'll hear this over and over again!**
- **HAVE FUN!**

# MENTOR ROLES AND TASKS

## What Is and What Is Not a Mentor?

### **A Mentor Is:**

Friend  
Guide  
Listener  
Confidant  
Resource Broker

### **A Mentor Isn't:**

Parent/Guardian  
Social Worker  
ATM  
Babysitter  
Disciplinarian

### **A Mentor Is . . .**

- **A trusted guide or friend**  
Young people today do not get much of an opportunity to be friends with adults, especially adults who are going to listen to them.
- **A caring, responsible adult**  
He or she provides access to people, places and things outside the mentee's routine environment.
- **A positive role model**  
A mentor may be a positive role model. A role model is someone the youth aspires to be like, whereas a mentor is someone who offers to help the youth be whoever he or she wants to be. Today, youth have many role models; however, they are not necessarily positive role models.

### **Key Qualities of a Good Mentor**

- Good listener;
- Persistent;
- Committed; and
- Patient.

### **A Mentor Is Not . . .**

Mentors must understand that they cannot be all things to their mentees. Quite often when mentors run into problems in their relationships, it is because the mentor, the mentee or the parent/legal guardian did not understand the proper role of a mentor.

The mentor may have taken on one of the following inappropriate roles:



### **A parent/legal guardian**

The role of a parent or legal guardian (governed by law) is to provide food, shelter and clothing. It is not the mentor's role to fulfill these responsibilities. If the mentor believes his or her mentee is not receiving adequate support, he or she should contact the mentor program coordinator rather than trying to meet the needs of his or her mentee.

### **A social worker**

A social worker is a licensed professional with the necessary skills and training to assist in family issues. If a mentor believes there is something wrong in the mentee's home life, the mentor should share this concern with the mentor program coordinator and not assume the role of a social worker and attempt to solve the problem.

### **A psychologist**

A mentor is not a formal counselor or therapist. A psychologist or psychiatrist is a licensed professional.

## **The Four Primary Tasks of a Mentor**

### **Establish a positive, personal relationship with mentee:**

- Establish mutual trust and respect;
- Maintain regular interaction and consistent support; and
- Make your meetings enjoyable and fun.

### **Help mentee to develop or begin to develop life skills:**

- Work with your mentee to accomplish specific program goals (e.g., drop-out prevention, general career awareness); and
- Instill the framework for developing broader life-management skills, (e.g., decision-making skills, goal-setting skills, conflict resolution, money management).

### **Assist mentee in obtaining additional resources:**

- Provide awareness of community, educational and economic resources available to youth and their families, and how to access these resources. Act as a resource broker as opposed to a resource provider;
- Act as a guide and/or advocate, coach and/or model; and
- Avoid acting as a professional case manager. View the role of a mentor as a friend rather than a counselor.

### **Increase mentee's ability to interact with people/groups/things from various backgrounds (cultural, racial, socioeconomic, etc.):**

- Respect and explore differences among people/groups from various backgrounds. Do not promote values and beliefs of one group as superior to those of another; and
- Introduce mentee to different environments, such as workplace vs. school setting; discuss differences in behavior, attitude and style of dress.

# STAGES OF A MENTORING RELATIONSHIP

## Stage 1: Developing Rapport and Building Trust

The “getting to know you” phase is the most critical stage of the relationship. Things to expect and work on during Stage 1 include:

- **Predictability and consistency**  
During the first stage of the relationship, it is critical to be both predictable and consistent. If you schedule an appointment to meet your mentee at a certain time, it's important to keep it. It is understandable that at times things come up and appointments cannot be kept. However, in order to speed up the trust-building process, consistency is necessary, even if the young person is not as consistent as you are.
- **Testing**  
Young people generally do not trust adults. As a result, they use testing as a coping or defense mechanism to determine whether they can trust you. They will test to see if you really care about them. A mentee might test the mentor by not showing up for a scheduled meeting to see how the mentor will react.
- **Establish confidentiality**  
During the first stage of the relationship, it's important to establish confidentiality with your young person. This helps develop trust. The mentor should let the mentee know that whatever he or she wants to share with the mentor will remain confidential, as long as (and it's important to stress this point) what the young person tells the mentor is not going to harm the young person or someone else. It's helpful to stress this up front, within the first few meetings with the mentee. That way, later down the road, if a mentor needs to break the confidence because the information the mentee shared was going to harm him or her or someone else, the young person will not feel betrayed.
- **Goal setting (transitions into Stage 2)**  
It's helpful during Stage 1 to take the time to set at least one achievable goal together for the relationship. What do the two of you want to get out of this relationship? It's also good to help your mentee set personal goals. Young people often do not learn how to set goals, and this will provide them with the opportunity to set goals and work toward achieving them.

## Stage 2: The Middle—Reaching Goals

Once trust has been established, the relationship moves into Stage 2. During this stage, the mentor and mentee can begin to start working toward the goals they set during the first stage of the relationship.

Things to expect during Stage 2 include:

- **Closeness**  
Generally, during the second stage the mentor and mentee can sense a genuine closeness in the relationship.
- **Affirming the uniqueness of the relationship**  
Once the relationship has reached this stage, it's helpful to do something special or different from

what the mentor and mentee did during the first stage, which helps affirm the uniqueness of the relationship. For example, go to a museum, sporting event, special restaurant, etc.

- **The relationship may be rocky or smooth**  
All relationships have their ups and downs. Once the relationship has reached the second stage, there will still be some rough periods. Mentors should be prepared and not assume that something is wrong with the relationship if this happens.
- **Rely on staff support**

### **Stage 3: Closure**

If the rough period continues or if a mentor feels that the pair has not reached the second stage, he or she shouldn't hesitate to seek support from the mentoring program coordinator. Sometimes two people, no matter how they look on paper, just don't "click." Some mentor/mentee pairs don't need to worry about this stage until farther down the road. However, at some point all relationships will come to an end—whether it's because the program is over, the mentor is moving or for some other reason. When this happens, it's critical that the closure stage not be overlooked. Many young people today have already had adults come and go in their lives and are very rarely provided the opportunity to say a proper goodbye.

- **Identify natural emotions, such as grief, denial and resentment**  
In order to help mentees express emotions about the relationship ending, mentors should model appropriate behavior. The mentor should first express his or her feelings and emotions about the end of the relationship and then let the mentee do the same.
- **Provide opportunities for saying goodbye in a healthy, respectful and affirming way**  
Mentors shouldn't wait for the very last meeting with their mentees to say goodbye. The mentor should slowly bring it up as soon as he or she becomes aware that the relationship will be coming to a close.
- **Address appropriate situations for staying in touch**  
Mentors should check with the mentoring program coordinator to find out the policy for staying in touch with their mentees once the program has come to an end. This is especially important if the program is school-based and mentors and mentees meet during the school year but the program officially ends before the summer starts. If mentors and mentees are *mutually* interested in continuing to meet over the summer, they may be allowed to, but with the understanding that school personnel may not be available should an emergency arise. Each mentoring program may have its own policy for future contact between mentors and mentees. That's why it's best for mentors to check with program personnel during this stage.

## Boundaries

The definition of a boundary is a border or limit. It is very important for mentors to think in advance about setting appropriate boundaries with their mentees. When working with young people, there are *do's* and *don'ts* which are prescribed by the nature of the relationship, the context, and other factors specific to the mentees' age and developmental level. Just as you think about boundaries at work and with different groups of people, it is important for you to always be thinking about what is and is not appropriate in your mentoring relationships. Keep in mind the three types of boundaries:

### 1. Physical

Be clear with your mentee about what type of physical contact is appropriate. Decide what type of physical contact, if any, you and your mentee will have. For example, is it okay for your mentee to give you a hug at the end of your meetings? If you have a young mentee, will you hold hands when you cross the street?

### 2. Emotional

Deciding what and how much personal information to share with your mentee can be challenging. Your mentee may bring up sensitive issues such as sexual activity or drug use. Listen without judging, and remember to keep such conversations confidential unless the mentee or someone else may be harmed. How much information you share about yourself will depend upon the age of your mentee and the policies of your mentoring program. *However, do not share if a certain topic makes you uncomfortable or you are not sure whether you should.*

### 3. Social

Your program most likely has specified guidelines about the meeting schedule you and your mentee will follow. You might meet once a week for an hour. But what if your mentee would like to see you more often? What if s/he would like to talk on the phone every day? Let your mentee know how often and what type of contact is appropriate.

Here are five things you can consider as you make decisions about what is or is not acceptable in your mentoring relationship:

1. Is it safe? Is it legal? Is there potential for harm (physical, social or emotional)?
2. Is it within the rules and guidelines established by your mentoring program?
3. Have your mentee's parents/caregivers told you what they expect and will accept, and it is within those guidelines?
4. Will it contribute to the positive and healthy development of your mentee?
5. Does it fit your comfort level and expectations for your mentoring relationship?

*If the answer to any of the five is no, this may be a sign of a potential boundary conflict. If you have any concerns about an activity or decision, follow up with your program coordinator, your mentee's parents/caregivers, or (depending on the age of the mentee) your mentee to clarify any uncertain areas.*

## HELPFUL COMMUNICATION SKILLS

The following four communication skills are very helpful for mentors to develop and practice. These skills are particularly useful when your goal is to open up communication with a young person. They are also useful skills that you can help your mentee develop:

### Active Listening

Active listening is an attempt to truly understand the content and emotion of what the other person is saying by paying attention to verbal and non-verbal messages. The task is to focus, hear, respect and communicate your desire to understand. This is not the time to be planning a response or conveying how you feel.

Active listening is *not* nagging, cajoling, reminding, threatening, criticizing, questioning, advising, evaluating, probing, judging or ridiculing.

Skills to Use:

- Eye contact;
- Body language: open and relaxed posture, forward lean, appropriate facial expressions, positive use of gestures; and
- Verbal cues such as “um-hmmm,” “sure,” “ah” and “yes.”

Results of Active Listening:

- Encourages honesty — helps people free themselves of troublesome feelings by expressing them openly;
- Reduces fear — helps people become less afraid of negative feelings;
- Builds respect and affection;
- Increases acceptance — promotes a feeling of understanding; and

When you actively listen, you cooperate in solving the problem — and in preventing future problems.

### “I” Messages

These messages give the opportunity to keep the focus on you and explain your feelings in response to someone else’s behavior. Because “I” messages don’t accuse, point fingers at the other person or place blame, they avoid judgments and help keep communication open. At the same time, “I” messages continue to advance the situation to a problem-solving stage.

For example: “I was really sad when you didn’t show up for our meeting last week. I look forward to our meetings and was disappointed not to see you. In the future, I would appreciate it if you could call me and let me know if you will not be able to make it.”

Avoid: “You didn’t show up, and I waited for an hour. You could have at least called me and let me know that you wouldn’t be there. You are irresponsible.”

Take care that the following actions and behaviors are congruent with an honest, open heart:

- Body language: slouching, turning away, pointing a finger;
- Timing: speaking too fast or too slow;
- Facial expression: smiling, squirming, raising eyebrows, gritting teeth;
- Tone of voice: shouting, whispering, sneering, whining; and
- Choice of words: biting, accusative, pretentious, emotionally laden.

Results:

“I” messages present only one perspective. Allowing the other person to actually have a point of view and hearing it doesn’t mean that he or she is right. “I” messages communicate both information and respect for each position. Again, this skill moves both parties along to the problem-solving stage.

## Paraphrasing

Paraphrasing focuses on listening first and then reflecting the two parts of the speaker’s message — *fact* and *feeling* — back to the speaker. Often, the fact is clearly stated, but a good listener is “listening between the lines” for the “feeling” part of the communication. Using this skill is a way to check out what you heard for accuracy — did you interpret what your mentee said correctly? This is particularly helpful with youth, as youth culture/language change constantly. Often words that meant one thing when mentors were young could have an entirely different meaning for youth today.

Examples for *fact*:

- “So you’re saying that . . .”
- “You believe that . . .”
- “The problem is . . .”

Examples for *feeling*:

- “You feel that . . .”
- “Your reaction is . . .”
- “And that made you feel . . .”

Paraphrases are not an opportunity to respond by evaluating, sympathizing, giving an opinion, offering advice, analyzing or questioning.

Results:

Using active listening skills will enable you to gather the information and then be able to simply report back what you heard in the message — the facts and the attitudes/feelings that were expressed. Doing so lets the other person know that you hear, understand and care about his or her thoughts and feelings.

## Open-Ended Questions

Open-ended questions are intended to collect information by exploring feelings, attitudes and how the other person views a situation. Open-ended questions are extremely helpful when dealing with young people. Youth, teenagers especially, tend to answer questions with as few words as possible. To maintain an active dialogue without interrogating, try to ask a few questions that cannot be answered with a “yes,” “no,” “I don’t know,” or a grunt.

Examples:

- “How do you see this situation?”
- “What are your reasons for . . . ?”
- “Can you give me an example?”
- “How does this affect you?”
- “How did you decide that?”
- “What would you like to do about it?”
- “What part did you play?”

Note: Using the question “Why did you do that?” may sometimes yield a defensive response rather than a clarifying response.

**Results:**

Because open-ended questions require a bit more time to answer than close-ended questions (questions that can be answered by “yes,” “no,” or a brief phrase), they give the person a chance to explain. Open-ended questions yield significant information that can in turn be used to problem solve.

## EXAMPLES OF ROADBLOCKS TO EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

The following, while not always bad to use, have a tendency to close down communication rather than open up communication and should be avoided in conversations with mentees.

### **Ordering, directing, commanding**

Telling the child to do something; giving the child an order or command.

“I don’t care what other children are doing — and you have to do the yard work!”

“Now you go back up there and play with Ginny and Joyce.”

“Stop complaining!”

### **Moralizing, preaching — shoulds and oughts**

Invoking vague outside authority as accepted truth.

“You shouldn’t act like that.”

“You ought to do . . .”

“Children are supposed to respect their elders.”

### **Teaching, lecturing, giving logical arguments**

Trying to influence the child with facts, counter-arguments, logic, information or your own opinion.

“College can be the most wonderful experience you’ll ever have.”

“Children must learn to get along with one another.”

“Let’s look at the facts about college graduates.”

“If kids learn to take responsibility around the house, they’ll grow up to be responsible adults.”

“When I was your age, I had twice as much to do as you.”

### **Judging, criticizing, disagreeing, blaming**

Making a negative judgment or evaluation of the child.

“You’re not thinking clearly.”

“That’s an immature point of view.”

“You’re very wrong about that.”

“I couldn’t disagree with you more.”

### **Withdrawing, distracting, sarcasm, humoring, diverting**

Trying to get the child away from the problem, withdrawing from the problem yourself, distracting the child, kidding the child out of it, pushing the problem aside.

“Just forget it.”

“Let’s not talk about this at the table.”

“Come on — let’s talk about something more pleasant.”

“Why don’t you try burning the school building down?”

“We’ve all been through this before.”



## notes

## Successful Mentor Practices

It is imperative to understand that the success of a match is dependent upon the strength of the relationship between mentor and mentee. Research has shown mentoring is effective if youth understand that they - not their performance or achievements - are the number one priority. Once a child feels supported and is able to build a strong bond with their mentor, then and only then, can we expect improvements in areas such as academics or behavior.

A follow-up study to the National Big Brothers Big Sisters evaluation sought to identify the characteristics that helped mentoring relationships to form, last, or break up. They sought to identify the distinguishable traits associated with positive relationship development and relationships that ended prematurely. They examined 82 matches across eight different Big Brother Big Sister sites. They found two broad differences in approaches to mentoring which they classified as developmental relationships versus prescriptive relationships. (From *Building Relationships with Youth in Program Settings: A Study of Big Brothers/Big Sisters* by Kristine V. Morrow and Melanie B. Styles May 1995)

### Developmental Approach: The Unconditional Friend

- Initial efforts concentrated on establishing strong relationships with youth first
- Efforts were centered on building trust
- Once relationship was established and the youth were receptive then mentors moved onto other goals
- Incorporated youth on the decision-making process
- Volunteers were flexible
- Volunteers were satisfied with the process and the relationship
- Youth felt supported, wanted to continue the relationship long-term, and felt they could talk to their mentors about anything

### Prescriptive Approach: The "Rescuer," "Savior" or "Reformer"

- Initial efforts were outcome based
- Time was spent primarily setting goals and working towards those goals
- Volunteers had their own goals or agenda as the priority

- Volunteers reluctant to change their agenda or to change expectations for relationship
- Unrealistic expectations
- Out to “transform” youth
- Expected equal responsibility from youth
- Both volunteers and youth felt frustrated with the relationship

notes

In recent years, we have come to learn that ineffective mentoring relationships can have damaging effects on the lives of youth. In order to avoid duplicating a failed or broken relationship, it is imperative that we begin our mentor trainings by clarifying the most successful mentoring practices.

Research on successful mentoring practices has pointed to five key areas as critical in developing healthy relationships with youth. (Source: *MENTORING ADOLESCENTS: WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED?* Cynthia L. Speil)

#### 1. The Relationship is the Intervention

Again, those mentors who take the time to development trust and get to know their mentees are able to create a nurturing environment for the youth to take positive steps in their growth. Successful mentors focus on relationship building and not the outcomes.

#### 2. Take Responsibility for the Relationship

Maintaining a relationship in a normal setting is hard enough as it is. Maintaining a relationship in a contrived setting with an individual who is often going through a great deal of change and internal turmoil is even tougher. Successful mentors need to be consistent, persistent and dependable. They need to be able to follow through on their commitment even when things get tough.

#### 3. The Longer the Duration of the Match the Greater the Impact

It takes time to develop trust and to establish strong bonds. If that bond is essential for mentoring to have a positive impact then it is easy to see why the longer a relationship lasts, the more likely it is the relationship will make a positive impact in the lives of youth.

## notes

A further study reiterates the importance of this step. (From *ASSESSING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF MENTORING PROGRAMS* Jean Baldwin Greenman and Amy Johnson)

Students in relationships more than twelve months:

- Felt more confident about doing their schoolwork
- Skipped fewer school days
- Had higher grades, and
- Were less likely to start using drugs or alcohol

Students in relationships lasting six to twelve months:

- Skipped fewer school days

Students in relationships lasting three to six months:

- No significant impacts

Students in relationships lasting less than three months:

- Felt less confident about doing their schoolwork
- Had substantially lower sense of self-worth

#### 4. Respect youth's viewpoint

Mentors who pay attention to what the youth wants to do during meetings seem to do better than those who just want to impose their own agenda for the match. In fact, one of the research findings pointed to the importance of engaging in fun social activities.

#### 5. Rely on Program for Support

Finally, though mentoring is generally a one to one relationship, it takes a whole team of committed individuals to make it work. Mentors should feel comfortable seeking support from program staff and program staff should really mentor the mentor. Without this support, mentors are more likely to encounter frustration and have a negative experience. A mentor training is an excellent opportunity to deepen your relationship with your volunteers and

to help them see you as a source of knowledge, experience, and support.

Other studies have duplicated these findings. In a longitudinal study of six urban youth programs, McLaughlin, Irby, & Langman (1994) interviewed youth in order to identify the traits of adults who made a positive impact in their lives. The research team concluded that adults motivated by "loving agendas" and positive purposes stood apart from those who came with an aim of controlling young people or a focus on their problems. Five specific characteristics emerged. The caring adults most trusted and respected by young people:

1. Were clear that they saw the potential, not the faults or problems in the youth they encountered.
2. Were clear that the young person, not the activity, was their priority.
3. They conveyed a sense of purpose for themselves and for the young people around them.
4. They were described as real, not fake.
5. They wanted to give back to the community in gratitude for what they had received.

### INEFFECTIVE MENTOR PRACTICES

On the contrary, research has found that ineffective "mentor practices that lead to disappointing relationship can have an adverse effect, eroding a youth's self-esteem and trust in adults." (Source: Grossman and Rhodes, 1999)

Some of these ineffective practices include mentors who are not consistent, who try to impose their own values, who place the outcomes before the relationship, or who are authoritative in their approach.

The BBBS study, found that over 70 percent of the matches that included volunteers who took these ineffective mentoring approaches met only sporadically, and nearly 70 percent ended within the nine months. In contrast, for matches whose volunteers adopted the effective approaches described previously, more than 90 percent met on a regular and consistent basis, and only nine percent of these relationships had ended after nine months.

### notes

## Realistic and Unrealistic Mentor Expectations

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**Unrealistic:** My mentee's overall functioning and success is dependent upon the mentoring process.

**Realistic:** Even though I will go to great lengths to help out, my mentee's success depends on his or her own choices and behaviors.

\*\*\*

**Unrealistic:** My mentee will surely make changes in his or her behavior after being with me for a few times.

**Realistic:** It will most likely take time for the mentee to make changes in his or her life (if at all). I should not expect someone to transform because I have spent a few hours with them. They have had "X" number of years being who they are. Assuming that they will make drastic changes after being with me for a short time would be presumptuous on my part.

\*\*\*

**Unrealistic:** If the mentee's behavior does not change immediately, that's proof that nothing is happening.

**Realistic:** The mentee may not appear to be benefitting from the relationship, but that doesn't mean that he or she is not getting something good out of it. Mentoring is like "planting seeds."

\*\*\*

**Unrealistic:** If I do not see extensive change in the mentee's functioning, it's a negative reflection on me.

**Realistic:** Not seeing changes in the mentee does not mean that I am a bad mentor. Mentoring is not a contest, and it is not about me.

\*\*\*

notes

## notes

Unrealistic: My mentee should always act like an adult. He or she will always be responsible, return phone calls, show up on time, etc.

Realistic: My mentee may or may not act responsibly. If my mentee doesn't return my phone calls on time, I won't lose my cool. I will always take the mature adult stance, and I won't get into hurt feelings and manipulation.

\*\*\*

Unrealistic: If I don't keep my commitment to my mentee it won't matter. The mentee should be able to handle it if I miss a number of sessions, or if I forget to call them. Young people these days are flexible, and they can go with the flow.

Realistic: If I make a commitment to mentor a young person, I should keep to my word. Young people in mentoring programs often have carry intense feelings of betrayal and abandonment, and if I let them down it may serve to damage them even more.

\*\*\*

Unrealistic: The only thing my mentee will understand is if I stress discipline and I am tough on him or her.

Realistic: My mentee wants to be treated like I want to be treated — with kindness.

\*\*\*

Unrealistic: I need to be a perfect, "mistake-proof" mentor.

Realistic: It is okay to make mistakes as a mentor. I may take the wrong approach or say things the wrong way from time to time, but my mentee will be resilient as long as he or she knows I have their best interests at heart. (Studies show that professionals and lay people have about the same results when trying to assist individuals who are in the midst of conflict.)

\*\*\*

Unrealistic: My mentee will be appreciative and thank me for my efforts.

Realistic: My mentee may or may not thank me. Some young people don't know how to even begin to show appreciation. The bottom line is that I will give my efforts as a gift, expecting nothing in return.

# EXPLORING AND VALUING DIVERSITY

## **Stereotyping**

This unit addresses one of the most critical training needs that has surfaced in surveys of mentors and volunteer coordinators: the need to help mentors deal with diversity. Some mentors talked about “culture shock” in reference to their initial apprehension and lack of familiarity with, and/or understanding of, the world from which their mentees came. When you think about it, it is normal and natural to feel a certain amount of apprehension about meeting someone for the first time, especially if it’s expected that you will become a trusted friend. Add to that a significant difference in age, in socioeconomic status and/or in racial and ethnic background and it is easy to understand why this is such a critical issue for mentors.

## **Toward a broad definition of cultural diversity**

Many mentor programs prefer to match mentees with mentors who come from similar backgrounds in terms of race, socioeconomic status, etc. Often this is not possible, and mentors are matched with young people who may look and act very differently than they do and whose backgrounds and lifestyles may be dissimilar to their own.

Culture, in this sense, is more than race or ethnicity. It encompasses values, lifestyle and social norms and includes issues such as different communication styles, mannerisms, ways of dressing, family structure, traditions, time orientation and response to authority. These differences may be associated with age, religion, ethnicity and socioeconomic background. A lack of understanding and appreciation of cultural diversity can result in mentors becoming judgmental, which may prevent the development of a trusting relationship.

## **What can you do?**

As in many other situations, knowledge is the key to understanding. Below are descriptions and examples of different diversity issues. Each has the potential to cause misunderstandings between a mentor and a mentee. However, cultural understanding is not something you can learn exclusively from a textbook. Talk to your mentee about his or her background and ancestry, about what life is like at school or home or with his or her friends. Find out the reasons for what he or she does. Your program director, other mentors, friends and coworkers may also have insights into cultural differences.

As you begin to learn and understand more about your mentee, you will be less likely to make negative value judgments. We hope that these examples will help you become more knowledgeable about and encourage you to explore your mentee’s cultural background.

## **Ethnic Diversity**

If your mentee comes from a different ethnic background, learn about the values and traditions of that culture. Such things as the role of authority and family, communication styles, perspectives on time, ways of dealing with conflict and marriage traditions vary significantly among ethnic groups.

For example, people from Scandinavian and Asian cultures typically are not comfortable dealing directly with conflict. Their approach to problems or disagreements is often more subtle and indirect. Consequently, a mentee from one of these cultures may find it difficult to discuss a problem with candor. Similarly, many Asian and Hispanic families emphasize respecting and obeying adults. For them, disagreeing with an adult, particularly a family member – or in this case a mentor – is forbidden. Conversely, the role and style of communication of some African Americans is much more direct and assertive.

Many Asian cultures have unique courtship and marriage traditions. For example, a Hmong girl typically marries before age 18 and most often is expected to marry a Hmong man of her parents' choosing. She may have no choice about whom she marries.

Ethnic groups can also vary in terms of their beliefs about and orientations toward time. For instance, some Native Americans may follow an inner clock, which they believe to be more natural, rather than adhering to a predetermined agenda or timetable.

Families that have recently arrived in this country often develop distinct reaction patterns. Children of recent immigrants typically react negatively to their parents' insistence that they follow the "old ways." These children are often ashamed of their culture and their traditions. They may even be ashamed of their parents. Mentors can help their mentees celebrate the uniqueness of their culture by showing curiosity and interest in the history and traditions of their mentees' cultures.

Obviously, these are gross stereotypes. They are used here only to demonstrate the range of diversity among different ethnic groups. It is your task as a mentor to learn about ethnic diversity from your mentee, from your observations and from discussions with program staff so that you can better understand the context of your mentee's attitudes and behavior.

### **Socioeconomic Diversity**

Often, mentors come from different socioeconomic backgrounds than their mentees. While one may have grown up on a farm, the other may never have been outside of the city. One may own a house, while the other may not know anyone personally who owns a new car, let alone a house. A mentee's family may move frequently, perhaps every few months, and may not have a telephone. A mentee may have to share a very small apartment with many people. A mentor must learn that many things s/he may have taken for granted are not necessarily common to all. These types of cultural differences are common between mentor and mentee and require time and understanding for an appreciation of their significance. Remember, however, that poverty is color-blind, i.e., many white people are poor, many people of color are not and dysfunction can occur regardless of income, geographic location or level of education. Try not to make assumptions.

It is important to realize that there are psychological effects of chronic poverty. Some mentees may develop a short-term "culture of survival" attitude. A mentor may comment that her mentee, who comes from a very poor family, spends large sums of money on things she considers frivolous (the example she gives is \$100 jeans). Poverty often prevents people from believing that their future holds any promise of getting better. Saving money and investing in the future is a luxury they don't believe they have. Buying a pair of \$100 jeans when you don't have enough food to eat may very well be a function of the "take what you can get while you can get it"



## Youth Culture

Many of the characteristics of adolescence are normal, common, developmental traits and consequently don't vary significantly from one generation to the next. For instance, while many adults believe that, in general, teenagers are exceedingly more rebellious than they themselves were as young people, rebellion is a common (and perhaps necessary) ingredient in an adolescent's transition into adulthood. Most of us, as teenagers, dressed very differently—perhaps even outrageously—by our parents' and grandparents' standards. We did things our parents didn't do, spoke differently, etc.

Take the time to remember what it was like to be your mentee's age. If you think about the following questions, you'll find that much of what you went through at that age, your mentee is also going through:

For example, when you were in \_\_\_\_ grade:

- What was a typical day like?
- What was really important to you at that time?
- What was your father/mother like? Did you get along? Were you close?
- Think of your friends. Were friendships always easy or were they sometimes hard?
- In general, did you feel as though adults typically understood you well?

However, it is also important to remember that some things, particularly sociological trends, do change dramatically and result in very different experiences from one generation to the next. There is significantly more alcohol and drug abuse today than there was when you were growing up (although, to be sure, alcohol and drug abuse have always existed); sexually transmitted diseases are more common and more dangerous; crime and violence have drastically increased throughout the country, particularly in urban areas; single-parent families have become more common and greater demands are being placed on all families.

For example, one mentor had a conversation with his mentee about school dances, which, for the mentor, were filled with fond memories of discovering dating and dancing. For the mentee, on the other hand, school dances were dangerous, since gunfire was a common occurrence. Obviously, it is important to be aware of these generational changes in lifestyle and children's coping responses to their life circumstances.

## Remember . . .

The following are some suggestions that may help you successfully handle diversity:

- Keep in mind that **you are the adult**—you are the experienced one. Imagine, for a moment, what your mentee might be thinking and feeling. In general, young people of all ages, but particularly teens, believe they are not respected by adults and worry about whether a mentor will like them or think they're stupid. They are coming to you for help and may already feel insecure and embarrassed about the problems in their lives. Thus, it is your responsibility to take the initiative and make the mentee feel more comfortable in the relationship.
- It's also important to remember to **be yourself**. Sometimes, with the best of intentions, we try to "relate" to young people, use their slang and be like "one of the gang." Mentees can see through this facade and may find it difficult to trust people who are not true to themselves.

- Furthermore, *you may learn a lot* about another culture, lifestyle or age group, but you will **never be from that group**. Don't over identify with your mentee; s/he realizes you will never know exactly what s/he is feeling or experiencing. A mentee may actually feel invalidated by your insistence that you know where s/he is coming from. There is a big difference between the statements, "I know exactly what you're feeling" and "I think I have a sense of what you're going through." It is helpful to paraphrase what you think your mentee has said or is feeling and to give examples of similar situations that you have experienced.
- If something about your mentee is bothering you, first determine whether the behavior is simply troubling to you because you would do it differently or it is truly an indication of a more seriously troubled youth.

If, in fact, you feel that a troublesome situation is harmful to your mentee or others, you have an obligation to discuss this with your program coordinator. The coordinator will know when and where to refer the young person for professional help. For example, if it is a serious problem — your mentee's abuse of alcohol and/or drugs, for instance — the program coordinator may refer the mentee to an adolescent drug abuse program. It's important to know what you should and should not do or say to your mentee. You are not expected to solve the problem or to be a therapist, but there may be situations where you can help. For instance, your program coordinator might suggest that you actively support your mentee's attendance and participation in support groups, or s/he might suggest that you talk with your mentee about similar situations that you have either experienced or heard about and the ways in which these problems were successfully overcome. Get suggestions from your program coordinator about ways in which you can be helpful and supportive.

Some behavior is not necessarily indicative of a serious problem but can nonetheless be troublesome. For example, being chronically late for appointments, adopting certain styles of dress or excessive swearing may have negative consequences. While your mentee has the right to make decisions about dress, speech and other behavior, you can help by letting him or her know:

- How the behavior makes you feel;
- What judgments others may make about the mentee as a result of the behavior; and
- The reactions and consequences s/he might expect from others.

EXAMPLE: Let's say your mentee usually wears torn jeans and a leather jacket with signs and symbols on the back and is quite proud of his or her unusual hairstyle. Although these outward differences made you uncomfortable at first, you (being the great mentor that you are!) have gotten beyond these "troubling" aspects and realized that, in this case, "different" does not mean "bad."

Now your mentee is looking for a job. Initially, you had decided to say nothing about the importance of appearances during job interviews, but your mentee is having trouble getting a job. You might ask him or her something like:

- Why do you think you didn't get the job?
- What do you think was the interviewer's first impression of you? What do you think gave him or her that impression?

- Do you think the impression you gave is one that is helpful in getting a job? What can you do about this?
- If you were 30 years old and owned a business, would you be hesitant to hire someone who looked and dressed in a way that was completely foreign to you?

You might also discuss ways in which your mentee could keep his or her individuality and identity (both very important needs in adolescence) yet make a more favorable impression. A typical response from a young person might be to refer to the “hypocrisy” and “material values” of the adult culture. Don’t mislead or misrepresent the truth — the fact is, like it or not, there are standards and norms in certain situations with which one is expected to comply.

### **Cultural Reciprocity**

An important but often forgotten aspect of cultural diversity is the mutuality of the mentoring relationship, which is what we call cultural reciprocity. This phrase refers to the fact that mentors and mentees alike can benefit from their increased understanding of others who may at first seem unfamiliar. For the mentor, a greater breadth and depth of understanding of others can facilitate better relationships at work, at home and in other social situations. As your mentee begins to trust and know you, s/he will begin to learn about life outside a limited circle of peers and discover new opportunities and ways of doing things: you can be a model for your mentee. The more options we have, the better off we’ll be.

**Remember: Our lives are enriched by diversity!**

# Reporting Abuse or Neglect

Under Massachusetts law, the Department of Social Services (DSS) is the state agency that receives all reports of suspected abuse or neglect of children under the age of 18. State law requires professionals whose work brings them in contact with children to notify DSS if they suspect that a child has been—or is at risk of being—abused or neglected. DSS depends on reports from professional and other concerned individuals to learn about children who may need protection.

Under Massachusetts law, the Massachusetts Disabled Persons Projection Commission is the state agency that receives all reports of suspected abuse or neglect of any person who is disabled. Under the Massachusetts Disabled Person Protection Law, a disabled person is defined as an individual between the ages of 18-59 who is mentally retarded or otherwise mentally or physically disabled as a result of mental or physical disability; and who is wholly or partially dependent on others to meet his/her daily living needs.

Contact information for Massachusetts Disabled Protection Commission:

1-800-245-0062

1-800-426-9009 (24 hour hotline)

## Mentoring Program Staff are Mandated Reporters

According to the Ombudsman's Office of the Department of Social Services, mentoring program staff are mandated reporters in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts and required to follow the procedures outlined in Chapter 119, sections 51 A-E of Massachusetts law. Only paid employees are mandated reporters.<sup>1</sup> Although there is no legal obligation for volunteers to report suspected abuse or neglect of children, mentoring programs are encouraged to familiarize their volunteers with the reporting procedure in their organization and encourage them to fulfill their moral responsibility to care for and protect youth.

Massachusetts law requires mandated reporters to immediately make an oral report to the Department of Social Services when, in their professional capacity, they have reasonable cause to believe that a child under the age of 18 years is suffering from abuse or neglect. A written report must be submitted to DSS within 48 hours after the oral report has been made. During the screening and investigation, mandated reporters are required, upon request by DSS, to disclose relevant information to the Department. Failure to make a report can be punished by a fine of up to \$1,000. Under the law, mandated reporters are protected from liability in any civil or criminal action and from any discriminatory or retaliatory action by an employer.

## How Are Abuse and Neglect Defined by Law?

Abuse means: The non-accidental commission of any act by a caretaker that causes or creates a substantial risk of physical or emotional injury or constitutes a sexual offense; or any sexual contact between a caretaker and a child under the care of the individual.

Neglect means: Failure by a caretaker, either deliberately or through negligence or inability, to take actions necessary to provide a child with minimally adequate food, clothing, shelter, medical care, supervision, emotional stability and growth or other essential care.

## What Does This Mean for Me as a Mentor?

As a volunteer mentor, you are not mandated by law to report suspected abuse or neglect. However, you do have a moral responsibility to care for and protect the young person you are mentoring.

If you suspect your mentee is being abused or neglected, your response is to immediately report to your mentoring program manager or coordinator. If you cannot contact the program, i.e. at night, on a

weekend, or another time when the program is closed, you should contact the Massachusetts Department of Social Services (DSS) directly. DSS procedures for reporting abuse or neglect are included in the handbook appendix along with contact phone numbers for DSS.

Remember, you are expected to make an immediate oral report *not a judgment* about an incident or circumstance. It is the role of the DSS to investigate and make a determination about the information you provide.