



**MENTOR**

# BECOMING A BETTER

Strategies to Be There  
for Young People

*Mentor*

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Edited by Dr. Carla Herrera and Michael Garringer

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# PREFACE

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Welcome to *Becoming a Better Mentor: Strategies to Be There for Young People*. We hope this resource will help you and other caring adults adopt a true “mentoring mindset” and build your skills for supporting young people. Much of the work of MENTOR has focused on over the years has been helping mentoring programs, and the professionals who work in those spaces, build their knowledge and improve their services. You may be familiar with our cornerstone resource, *The Elements of Effective Practice for Mentoring™*, which has been offering guidance to mentoring professionals for over a quarter century. But while that resource has been a valuable asset for organizations offering mentoring, it hasn’t been as much help to those who are closest to this work: the mentors of America who meet with young people every day and support their healthy development and journey into adulthood.

While mentors in programs are often trained and prepared for their role, we also recognize that the vast majority of the mentoring youth receive in the United States comes from relationships that have formed more naturally – with extended family, teachers and coaches, faith leaders, and other community members. We realized at MENTOR that our key *Elements* resource was not offering much to this legion of caring adults, so we started this project, which early on was conceptualized as an *Elements of Effective Practice for Mentors*. For you.

We spent a lot of time thinking about the skills that seemed central to good mentoring relationships across the board. Chances are we didn’t cover all of them here, but we hope it is a good start. And we were blessed to work with some of the brightest minds and most accomplished scholars in our field, each of whom has authored a chapter in the resource before you. We hope that their words and wisdom help you grow as a mentor, whether you are brand new to this movement or have worked alongside youth for decades.

Thank you for your work as a mentor. You are not only supporting the young people you know, but you are also providing a positive path forward for your community and the nation. May this resource be an asset to you in your deeply meaningful and invaluable work.

- Mike and Carla



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# INTRODUCTION

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Welcome to this resource, which we hope will be a valuable source of information and inspiration on your journey as a mentor. Whether you have been engaged as a mentor to young people for decades or are just now thinking about how you can be more supportive of a young person in your life, everyone at MENTOR thanks you for stepping up to make a difference in someone else's life.

The role of “mentor” is a very special one, not just in our modern world but since the dawn of civilization and in every culture and community. Mentors have come in many forms — as wise elders, as part of extended kinship networks, as spiritual leaders, as teachers and coaches, and as everyday citizens who simply want to offer a helping hand. But regardless of who has stepped into that role, all of these caring adults have played an important part in helping the next generations thrive. Young people experience many caring relationships with adults, from their own parents and families to the adults they meet at school and out in the world. But the role of *mentor* is unique, as it speaks to a relationship that is grounded not only in love, but also in common purpose and with an eye to the future. We *all* need mentors throughout our lives, and regardless of who you are mentoring, we sincerely hope this resource helps you be the best mentor you can be.

## What You Will Learn in this Resource

One of the realities of being in a mentoring relationship is that, like all human relationships, it will have its ups and downs, moments of joy and moments of challenge. Mentors are not simply friends to young people, nor are they simply “authority figures.” They show up to these relationships with purpose and a desire to help that young person explore possibilities, have conversations of learning and healing, set a course for their future, and overcome any challenges that

pop up along the way. Because this is a complex role to play, there are skills and approaches mentors may need to bring to a mentoring relationship to enable that young person to get what they need from the experience.

This resource will teach you about several key aspects of being a mentor:

- the mindsets and attitudes that lay the foundation for a strong mentoring relationship;
- basic information about youth development and the typical relationship cycle you might experience while mentoring; and
- critical skills and competencies you may need to grow and refine so you can meet the needs of the young people in your life.

All of these are explained in detail in the pages that follow. This information will help you fill your mentoring “toolbox” with the skills and attitudes that can help a young person (often referred to as a “mentee” in these types of relationships) on their journey. Because every mentoring relationship is unique, you likely won't apply *all* of these skills to every relationship. But the topics highlighted in this resource are the ones that research suggests are extremely valuable in a wide variety of mentoring contexts.

You should also know that your growth and learning as a mentor should continue well beyond the information in these pages. We encourage you to seek out additional knowledge, training, and tools, as well as the wisdom of other mentors. Here we offer information about, and links to, many other resources you can turn to if you want to go even deeper in building your ability to be an effective mentor.



So whether you are a new volunteer in a mentoring program, an extended family member who wants to better support a child you love, a neighbor who wants to support youth in your community, or a teacher, coach, or other youth-serving professional who wants to make a bigger impact on those you encounter in your work, we encourage you to dive into the content of these pages and remember to never stop learning, growing, and having fun as a valued mentor to the youth in your life.

## Adopting a Foundational Mentoring “Mindset”

While the later sections of this resource highlight a number of skills and strategies that research suggests are important to mentoring relationships, there are also some critical attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors that serve as the foundation of being an effective mentor. It may be helpful to think of these as contributing to a “mentoring mindset”— a way of thinking and interacting that places young people at the center of this work and allows those of us serving as mentors to be true partners in a young person’s journey.

Take some time to reflect on the components of a mentoring mindset described below and do an honest assessment of whether and how these beliefs and principles show up in your work with young people. It may be challenging to be the impactful mentor you’d like to be if you are struggling to bring these types of core values to your relationship. Think of them as the foundation that you build on in this role. There are four main components to this mindset:

### 1. *Be Intentional (“I see you”)*

**Always prioritize youth’s needs** – Though you may get a lot out of the experience of being a mentor, the aim is to support youth by keeping *their needs*

top of mind (read more on this in chapter 8). Be curious! Make an effort to get to know the young person — their dreams, goals, skills, interests, personality — and, importantly, their history and context. We all come to relationships with our own unique biases and ways of seeing things, but it is important as adult mentors to spend time reflecting on our own biases about what we want to see happen for the youth. We need to get past these biases to effectively center what the *youth* wants from the relationship.

**Have a positive and respectful view of youth and their families** – This work is not about “fixing,” “saving,” or having all the answers. Although there is space to bring your story, skills, resources, and expertise into the relationship in a way that can support youth on their journey, it’s important to provide this support without judgment. Check your biases and motivations, and be able to make the decision not to mentor if your beliefs and motivations are grounded in negativity. This is particularly important when you engage with the families, communities, and cultures of the young people you mentor (see chapter 7). Take the time to create a climate of mutual respect — your mentoring will not be valued without this.

**Honor the young person’s full self** – Recognize and appreciate the youth’s culture, identity, life experiences, and trauma, as they all contribute to how youth see the world and themselves. Don’t make youth have to fit your worldview or disregard things that make them “whole.” There is space for disagreement, difference, and challenge — with humility and openness to learning, and without rejecting or ignoring important aspects of young peoples’ identity. And by “full self” we mean every aspect of that young person. No one’s identity is comprised of just one or two factors (race, gender,



etc.). Honor all the identities that a young person may have (see chapter 2 for more on learning about and honoring youth's identities). Some of those may be strongly formed when you meet, while others may be emerging and can become stronger or healthier with your support.

## **2. Be Supportive (“I got you”)**

**Commit fully to the relationship** – It is very important to commit and follow through on being there for the young person you are mentoring, and not back out even when the role becomes challenging. Being consistent and curious, checking in and communicating regularly, and being fully present in your interactions is essential. Communicate ahead of time with youth about the “cycle” of your relationship, especially if it is time-bound with an agreed-upon closing point (such as those created in structured mentoring programs). And aim to celebrate your experience together when closure is needed. (See the next section for tips about how mentoring relationships typically progress.)

**Be authentic and honest** – Act with integrity. There is no room for coercion or deceit when working with a young person. You are enough and you can do it! Be yourself and share your story and life lessons. Just remember that anyone you mentor deserves your truth, your respect, and your real self.

**Do no harm** – Above all else, leave this young person at least as well as you found them. This is the most important foundational element in any mentoring relationship. Although mentors can do great good for young people, those who are inconsistent or disappear when things get tough can also do great harm. It's important to create a safe and healthy space for youth through boundary setting, appropriate disclosure, respecting privacy and confidentiality, and following through

on promises to let the young person know they will always be safe in their interactions with you and you won't let them down. Incorporate and model wellness, mindfulness, and coping skills to demonstrate the importance of taking care of oneself and others.

## **3. Take a Developmental Approach (“I'm here to help you grow”)**

The bulk of the remainder of this resource covers strategies for offering your mentee what we call “developmental” experiences. You could even think of the whole relationship as being “developmental” in that the core purpose is the healthy and positive development of this young person. There are endless ways a mentor can support development, but a few, further detailed in later chapters, include:

**Consider a goal-orientation** – If the young person has shared concrete goals and aspirations with you, place them at the center of your relationship and think about how you might leverage your skills, knowledge, or network to strategically support their steps. If the young person hasn't set any concrete goals, that's okay too – they might be able to with your help. It's also just fine if your relationship simply provides things like emotional support, love, hopefulness, and a sense of identity. But at some point, you will likely help this young person figure out what's next in their journey (see chapter 10 on goal setting).

### **Honor and strengthen the youth's web of support**

– You are only one person contributing to a web of supportive relationships for the young person you are working with. This web can include guardians, family, peers/near-peers, coaches, supervisors, teachers, and more. Take some time to get to know and work with the other caring members of this group (see chapter 7 for helpful tips in this area). This can help you gain insights into the youth you're



working with and can help the entire web support them better. You can also facilitate adding new people to this group over time, broadening the caring adults in their life in meaningful ways (see chapter 12 for more information on how to expand your mentee's support network).

**Take a “critical mentoring” approach** – Young people know that they occupy a world full of challenges among all of the opportunities, and they may need your help in learning to question and understand the world around them. Youth need support in navigating, shaping, and improving the spaces and broader culture they encounter. As a mentor you can be a major asset in helping youth move from surviving to *thriving* by helping them turn spaces shaped by oppression, bias, prejudice, and injustices into spaces rooted in liberation, empowerment, belonging, and equity (see chapter 9, which is devoted to critical consciousness-building).

**Be willing to grow and learn** – All mentors grow as people through the experience, but only if they are willing to be open to new experiences and ideas. You may find you are gaining as much from being in the young person's community and circle of support as they are in yours. Be sure to seek out additional resources, tools, and programs in their community to support your relationship. Every person is a teacher and a learner. The young people in your life are sources of knowledge, skills, and information that can be greatly beneficial in your own growth. Take the time to both teach and learn, investing in a bidirectional relationship. Allowing youth to “give back” in this way can be a gift to you both!

#### **4. Be Communal (“We are in this together”)**

##### **Leverage community resources and role models** –

Look for resources, role models, and opportunities in both of your communities to support your relationship and the goals of your mentee (see chapter 12 for tips on how to do this). One of the key skills a young person can learn is how to identify and sustain supportive relationships — engaging in your communities provides a rich context for experiences and connections.

##### **Care about *all* young people's circumstances**

– Whether you are mentoring for a season or a lifetime, a mentoring mindset can strengthen your interactions and relationships because it is oriented toward thinking about, and acting on, what is best for youth. It involves not only caring about individual young people you meet, but also contributing to the policies, practices, and contexts that allow young people to thrive wherever they live, work, play, and learn. Ideally, adults with a mentoring mindset will help turn these spaces into mentor/relationship-rich environments. So, try to think beyond just your role with specific youth, and contribute to making the world around you more supportive of young people on a broader scale. And once you have adopted this mindset and transitioned into a mentor role, use your abilities to wholeheartedly support the goals, dreams, vision, and abilities of youth through honoring their sense of agency and making a meaningful contribution to the process of their growth and progress. Consider this mindset to be the starting point on your journey to help all young people have the meaningful relationships they need to thrive.





## Mentoring Relationships 101

In addition to this mentoring mindset, there are some things you should know about working with young people of different ages, and some basic principles on how mentoring relationships tend to develop over time. This information will help you tailor your mentoring relationship to the needs and development of the young person you are working with, while also providing you with an understanding of what to expect as your relationship evolves over time.

### ***A basic understanding of child and adolescent development is helpful***

Although every child's development is somewhat unique, and youth will enter and exit "stages" of development at different ages, all youth will have distinct needs and challenges as they age. Knowing broadly what these needs are will help you understand how to support the young person you're mentoring and what they may be ready to work on with you. Below, we discuss a few broad stages of youth development and the chapters in this resource that explore specific topics in more detail.

**Early elementary school** – As children start elementary school, they are just beginning to explore the social world outside of their families and are full of wonder. They may occasionally struggle with managing their emotions and behavior and tend to be very self-focused — they can't yet see things fully from others' perspectives and can have difficulty holding two-way conversations. Engaging them in activities that let you play alongside and with them is a great way to enjoy your time together and help them build "people" skills that will benefit them far into their future. Young children "learn by doing" rather than listening or reading (as older children can do), so they will benefit most from

hands-on learning through play. Young children also have fairly short attention spans. Try to get them involved in brief, fun activities that can hold their attention and provide opportunities for them to grow and take pride in their own growth (see chapter 3 on the importance of play in mentoring youth of all ages). Young children are very curious about the "hows" and "whys" of the world around them. Offering children a wide range of new activities — from sports, music, and games to arts and crafts — is a great way to help them explore and learn from activities they may grow to love. Make sure to "tune in" to their engagement level to understand what they enjoy and shift to other activities as needed (see chapter 4 on the art of being attuned to the young person you are working with).

Although children in this stage often have a best friend at school or in their neighborhood, they are still very much based in their family, with "right" and "wrong" defined by their families. Developing a positive, respectful relationship with your mentee's family and taking time to understand how they would like your relationship to unfold can strengthen your mentoring relationship at every stage, but it is particularly important with very young children, as your activities will depend on your mentee's family's schedule and needs (see chapter 7 on working with central players in your mentee's world). Although children in early elementary school are still very much based in their families, they can also become very attached to adults outside of their family, will try very hard to please them, and may compete for their attention — something to be aware of in group settings (see chapter 6 on mentoring in groups).



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**Late elementary and middle school** – In early adolescence, the conversations young people have are becoming more “two-sided.” Youth are gaining a sense of humor (and are better able to understand your sense of humor). They can think more abstractly, make plans, and focus their attention for longer periods of time. They can also be emotional and argumentative. As peers gain importance, youth may worry about fitting in and may benefit from joining school or community groups to help develop a sense of connection to their peer group and larger community.

A particularly difficult phase for youth is the transition from elementary school, where there is only one teacher and set of classmates, to middle school where there are several teachers and new peer groups to engage with. Many youth struggle academically and socially during this time, so having access to a consistent, emotionally supportive adult can be crucial (see chapter 1 for more information on the art of offering empathy and emotional support). Some youth may want to talk about their social or academic challenges. But don’t expect your mentee to want or need a sounding board. Sometimes just providing a consistent presence and fun (or focused) activities can be a huge support. Finding and encouraging your mentee’s interests, talents, and passions, or “sparks,” is important in all phases of development but can be especially helpful during this time when school and peer groups can be difficult, and youth can benefit from finding activities that bring them joy and build feelings of competence.

**Late middle school and high school** – During this stage, youth are more comfortable being on their own in the community, without their family. Youth’s peers take on an even bigger role in their lives and adults may not be as sought after as they were at

earlier ages — particularly in contexts where peers are present. Chances are the youth you’re working with may not think you’re “cool” at this stage, but they may value your guidance more than ever. Youth may start to be attracted to other youth, and you may see your mentee less often as they get more involved with their peers and in school. Their use of social media is also likely increasing, so your communication may begin to shift to online outlets (see chapter 5 for tips on how to engage with your mentee online). Youth may also develop strong interests that they spend a lot of time on. Leadership experiences and other opportunities to make decisions and shape their world are important during this time (see chapters 8 and 9 for more information on how you can support their learning about the world around them and developing their agency to change it).

Youth may also become more interested in thinking about next steps in life and may have very specific ideas about activities they want your support in — for example, getting better at a sport or hobby, becoming more active in community issues, doing better in school, or planning for life after high school (see chapter 10 on how to help your mentee set and achieve goals). Adolescents’ schedules can, in fact, get very full with peers and activities. It’s important to follow your mentee’s lead and let them direct the course of the relationship, potentially thinking about ways you might be able to connect your mentee with other adults who could provide support in areas of interest to them but in which you don’t have expertise (see chapter 12 on helping youth build their social network). Remember, to be a great mentor, you don’t have to provide all of the specific supports your mentee needs — connecting them with others who could enrich their life in these ways is just as powerful!



As youth move further into adolescence, they are continuing to develop their self-concept (how they define and describe themselves broadly). Youth have a greater awareness of their own values and opinions as well as those of others. They can think more about their future and what might be possible for themselves. They may begin to explore or even question their sexual orientation and gender identity. Their ethnic and racial identity are also taking shape. Understanding how young people see themselves can help you get to know what's important to them and how you can be most supportive. For example, learning about their cultural background is important for mentees of all ages, but particularly adolescents, as this is a time when you can support youth in developing a positive and meaningful racial and ethnic identity, whether you identify with the same group or not (see chapter 2 on this important practice). Your mentee's self-esteem (what they think of their own abilities and worth) is also continuing to develop and continues to be linked with how well they feel they fit in with their peers. Supporting youth in feeling good about themselves in a variety of ways (for example, doing things they are good at and further developing those skills, engaging in behaviors that help others, and learning about the power of their own actions) is one of the most important roles you can play as a mentor.

Youth will also begin to want more independence from adults, which, for some, can show itself in increased misbehavior. Youth may get in trouble more often. And many adolescents — particularly young women — struggle with depression. During this time, you may find yourself helping youth through situations you don't feel prepared for. If so, you may need to get support from other trusted adults in the youth's social network and/or professionals who can help. You may also feel

that your mentee is pulling away from you. This is a natural part of development, as youth begin to move away from the adults in their lives and chart out their next steps in life. However, adolescents benefit greatly from structure and the continued guidance of trusted adults. Letting your mentee guide when and how you can support them is especially important during this time.

### ***Mentoring relationships also have their own stages of development***

Just like all relationships you have in your life, your mentoring relationship will have a beginning, middle, and end. You may find that your role shifts over time and that you need to pay attention to different aspects of your relationship at various stages. But most mentoring relationships go through a sequence that includes the following:

**Relationship formation** – In this phase, you and your mentee are getting to know each other and beginning to understand what both of you enjoy, what your personalities are like, and what kind of relationship you want to build together. If you are in a mentoring relationship outside of a structured volunteer program, chances are you went through this phase without even knowing it.

Wanting to change or “improve” your mentee as a person is never a good foundation for a relationship. Make sure to follow your mentee's lead throughout your time together, but especially as you set the tone for your new relationship. Your mentee might not be forthcoming in letting you know exactly where their interests lie, so discussing this with your mentee's parents or others in their network and “trying things out” is likely your best bet during this phase. For relationships that aren't structured around a specific purpose, it can help to try out a wide range of different activities to see what your



mentee might be interested in and find new interest areas they may not have explored yet.

This phase, particularly if your mentee has experienced disappointing relationships with other adults, can include trust building and “testing” in which youth are trying to understand your intentions (“What does this adult want from this relationship?”) and whether you will hold up your end of the bargain (“Will this adult follow through on promises?”). Your mentee may be clingy or may even show initial disinterest in the relationship or miss meetings to test whether you’ll sustain your interest. It’s always important to be consistent as a mentor. This is particularly true during this early phase when your mentee may need reassurance that you will stick around.

**Relationship building and maintenance** – Most of this resource is devoted to the “middle” phase of the relationship — helping you build and sustain a positive, meaningful relationship with your mentee. This phase can be very short — for example, in some very short-term, focused programs — or last several years or an entire lifetime, as is true for many mentoring relationships that develop naturally.

Like all relationships, as you spend more time together, you will grow to understand your mentee more — what they like and dislike, how you interact with each other, and what works in your relationship. You will further explore activities that you both enjoy and that can build your mentee’s confidence and skills. Over time, your mentee may also confide in, and rely on, you more. Your ability to be attuned to your mentee’s needs both more broadly and in everyday interactions is critical in developing and sustaining a positive relationship (see chapter 4 on developing “attunement” skills). It is also important during this time, to keep the following basic principles in mind:

- **Let the youth lead** – As noted when discussing a mentoring mindset, your job is to guide and support the youth, not boss them around, and the best mentors combine practical help on goals (see chapter 10) with a developmental approach that emphasizes youth learning and growth (see chapter 8). Make sure you share power in this journey!
- **Set boundaries as needed** – No two mentoring relationships are alike, and each will need to find the right balance in how the participants interact. Although you should share power in the relationship, that doesn’t mean you can’t have boundaries as to how and when you engage with each other and how you and your mentee hold each other accountable. Be sure you both know that this is a collaborative process, not a unilateral one.
- **Be consistent** – While there may be times your mentee needs more support from you than others, they will certainly value your being consistent and reliable in your communication and interactions. Research suggests that mentors can really harm youth when they blow off meetings, are late in replying to messages, and aren’t clear about planning or their expectations. A “flaky” mentor is one with no hope of providing meaningful support to a young person.
- **Expect ups and downs in the relationship** – All mentoring relationships have natural ebbs and flows. Expect occasional conflict or disconnection, and remember that youth often don’t express how meaningful these relationships are to them. If your mentee tests you or acts out, it may not be a sign that your relationship isn’t working. In fact, it can signal that trust is being built and that your mentee may be wanting you to step in even more.



- **Assume that the relationship will develop and change over time** – As discussed above, the needs of your mentee may shift over time, especially as the youth matures and can engage in more complex thinking and activities. It's important, especially in longer-term relationships, to pivot responsively during these changes and ensure that your mentee is continuing to get what they need from the relationship.
- **Know the limitations of your role and temper expectations** – Mentors can't — and shouldn't try to — alleviate every problem a young person faces. Mentoring can transform a youth's life, but even if not transformative, for most youth, another caring adult who can help them learn about themselves and the world around them is enough to positively affect their life. Make sure to allow serious issues to be addressed by appropriate professional supports (you can guide them to these); don't try to be "Superman" or expect immediate transformations. If you are mentoring in a program, the staff should provide clear information about where your role begins and ends with a young person. If your mentoring relationship formed naturally, you may have to figure some of this out on your own. Just know that you don't have to, and likely shouldn't, address every challenge a youth is facing. Get help when needed and focus on support in the moment, not on altering the trajectory of the youth's entire life. They may not need or want that type of support!
- **Practice self-care** – It can be hard being a mentor; make sure you are in a good place so that you can maximize your support of your mentee. Ask for help when you need it. Get advice from other mentors and your own

mentors. And be clear — both with yourself and your mentee — about what you can and can't give to the relationship. But whatever you do, don't give up on the relationship because you burned yourself out unnecessarily.

**Relationship ending** – Mentoring relationships can end for many reasons. Some end because they are a time-limited component of a program or because the mentee has gained what was intended from the relationship. Others end because something has changed in the mentor or mentee's life — for example, a move or a change in life circumstances. And still others end because the relationship simply isn't providing the mentor or youth with what is needed to maintain a relationship over time. In cases where you need to end the relationship, it is very important to let both your mentee and their family know that you need to end the relationship and why, giving them as much time to prepare as possible. If you can, plan a final meeting to say goodbye in which you discuss the end of the relationship and share what you both gained and how much you care about your mentee. Some programs have this expectation built into their requirements for mentors. Even if your program doesn't, or if you are ending a relationship that developed naturally, carving out time to say goodbye is critical. If you both plan on having a next "phase" to your relationship (for example, communicating long distance), it is important to discuss exactly what that will and won't look like, and make sure to never promise an outcome that you can't deliver!

Many mentors disappear from relationships because they don't feel needed or appreciated, and thus don't think their mentee will mind if they simply stop showing up. Some may feel embarrassed or ashamed because they aren't able to follow through on their original commitment. Regardless of the quality of your relationship or why it's ending, it is



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crucial to thoughtfully end the relationship to give youth and their families closure. Without this, youth may blame themselves for the relationship's end and wonder what they did to cause you to leave. Just remember, how you end your mentoring relationship can be even more important than how you start it!

## The Importance of Mentor Confidence

This introductory chapter has included a lot of basic concepts and mindsets that should give you a solid grounding in what being a mentor is all about. But there is one last aspect of being a mentor that we hope this Introduction and all the chapters that follow help you understand: the importance of being *confident* in your ability to be a mentor.

Research suggests that many mentors don't listen as well as they could to the needs of the young person they are serving. They may miss signs that the young person (or their caregivers) are unhappy with some aspect of the relationship. They can also be stubborn in the approaches they are using, too often expect immediate success, and can often feel disappointed when mentoring doesn't go as smoothly as they hoped. We call this the *overconfident* mentor.

Alternatively, mentors who are lacking in confidence tend to doubt their ability to help and feel overwhelmed when they hit a rough patch or need to rethink an approach. They may interpret a lack of enthusiasm in their mentee as reflecting a failure on their part, and often feel like they are not needed or are not making a difference when they likely are.

Unfortunately, research suggests that both of these types of mentors are more likely to quit their mentoring relationships early, often suddenly, leaving the young person not only without support, but also feeling like they are to blame. Thus, a mentor can shift from a very positive new presence

in a youth's life to yet another adult who has let them down or done them harm.

Your goal, both in reading this resource and beyond, is to gain enough knowledge that you feel like you can step up and do this kind of work with a young person, but at the same time, ensure that you enter your relationship understanding that you don't have all the answers and will need to learn and grow along with your mentee. Like any relationship in your life, mentoring relationships take patience, some humility, and a healthy belief in yourself. So, remember to take stock of how confident you are feeling while you serve as a mentor and be sure to process any feelings that may indicate your confidence level is off target. Talking about these things with other mentors (or program staff if you are in a program) can help you process these feelings and align your expectations in a way that is healthy for both you and the young person you are working with.

## How to Use the Remaining Content of this Resource

Each of the 12 chapters that follow represents a core skill or practice that research (and practitioner wisdom) suggests is important for mentors to bring to their relationships with young people. As noted earlier in this Introduction, not *all* of these may be relevant to your current mentoring relationships. But a good mentor has lots of "tools" in their toolbox and the ability to have effective conversations or engage in meaningful activities at the right moment in time to meet the needs of the young person they are working with. Each relationship is unique, but the practices here should form a solid foundation for much of what you will do as a mentor. Some of these skills may also prove valuable in other relationships in your life.



Each chapter provides a brief overview of the mentoring “skill”, including a short summary of why research suggests it is important in relationships with a young person. Each chapter then describes how mentors apply this skill, when and how it might be needed, and examples of what it will look and feel like when this is being applied well in your relationship.

And while these chapters offer a wealth of information, we certainly don’t expect your learning on these topics to end here. Each offers additional links and references to other resources, trainings, and online tools where you can further explore these practices and deepen your understanding. We encourage all mentors to have a mindset of continuous growth and improvement around the art of mentoring. We hope the resources we highlight here point you to a lifetime of learning and personal growth on these topics.

You may notice that these skills and practices are loosely grouped into two categories. The first, *Relationship-Building Practices*, consists of six skills that will help you and a young person build trust and engagement with one another, primarily through effective communication and cooperation (chapters 1-6). The second, *Practices for Supporting Youth*, emphasizes practices that may be useful in connecting with others in the youth’s life and in identifying and working on specific goals and tasks with the young person (chapters 7-12). These behaviors and practices have a more practical “action” or “helping” focus. But it’s important to remember that all of these skills and mentoring practices offer opportunities for both relationship building and helping youth grow and develop in some way. So, don’t be surprised if you start to notice how these skills overlap and complement each other.



# IF YOU ARE MENTORING IN A PROGRAM CONTEXT

It's important to keep in mind that young people can get the mentoring they need in several different ways. Various research studies<sup>1,2,3</sup> have found that about 70 percent of all young people in America report having had a mentor during their childhood, adolescence, or young adulthood, with the vast majority of those relationships coming through what might be called “natural” relationships — those forged with aunts and uncles, teachers and coaches, neighbors, coworkers and bosses, and other people they meet in the community. But youth in the United States also have access to millions of mentors through programs. In fact, you might be a volunteer in one of those programs right now! If so, you might be wondering how this resource applies to the work you'll be doing in that program.

Almost all high-quality mentoring programs offer their volunteer mentors several hours of focused training on the types of strategies and activities that align with the goals of the program. This is very important, especially for programs that are trying to achieve specific outcomes for youth. Mentoring relationships that form naturally (outside of programmatic contexts) often have more flexibility and can shift their focus more easily over time.

If you are volunteering in a mentoring program, chances are some of the content in this resource will echo or even expand on some of the training and instruction you have already received. That's great! But your primary source of guidance if you are mentoring in a program is from the staff, particularly the person assigned to support you and your mentee. Those dedicated mentoring professionals should be able to help you identify meaningful activities to do in your relationship, suggest key skills or tools that can guide your work, and help troubleshoot any challenges that emerge in your relationship. They will also offer you lots of support that will help you feel confident and effective as a mentor. Please listen to, and rely on, those program staff.

Even when things are going well, the best mentors are those who take a continuous improvement approach to their own skills and abilities. The information in this resource can help further expand your mentoring abilities and may come in handy in other relationships in your life, either now or in the future. If you have questions about how a skill or concept in this resource applies to your mentoring in a program setting, please talk to your program support person and see if what we suggest here is right for your relationship and the goals of your program. At the same time, you should know that the skills discussed in this resource are widely believed to be applicable to a variety of mentoring settings and age ranges of youth. We think most of what you'll find here will complement the training and guidance of your program well.

And on behalf of all of us at MENTOR, thank you for formally volunteering in a program and stepping into the life of a child.



<sup>1</sup>Bruce, M., & Bridgeland, J. (2014). *The mentoring effect: Young people's perspectives on the outcomes and availability of mentoring*. Washington, DC: Civic Enterprises with Hart Research Associates for MENTOR: The National Mentoring Partnership.

<sup>2</sup>DuBois, D. L., & Silverthorn, N. (2005). Characteristics of natural mentoring relationships and adolescent adjustment: Evidence from a national study, *Journal of Primary Prevention* 26(2), 69-92.

<sup>3</sup>McDonald, S., Erickson, L. D., Johnson, M. K., & Elder, G. H. (2007). Informal mentoring and young adult employment. *Social Science Research*, 36, 1328-1347.





## Final Thoughts

We also hope that the content of this publication, and the many additional links and resources we've provided, supports the young people in your life and encourages you to go even deeper in your learning. Remember, the work of a mentor in a community is never really complete — we hope that you continue to grow as a mentor and keep stepping up for the young people in your community. You will always have something to offer them if you bring a mentoring mindset to your relationships and have a few of these mentor skills up your sleeve.

And more than anything, just know that your work as a mentor is grounded in love and caring and it is in service of a better future. It shows that you have a purpose beyond your own life and a desire to make the world a better place. We encourage you to embrace that idea and make it part of your identity. You are a mentor — that means a lot, especially at this moment in time. Be strong on that journey so that the youth you support can also be strong. And stick with it! Mentoring alone can't solve every issue facing our nation, but none of those issues will get addressed as well as they could without caring mentoring relationships ensuring a brighter future for all. Thank you!

## Additional Reading and Resources

Most of the resources listed below can be accessed online at the links we have provided. The print titles listed here should be available through local or online bookstores or through your public library.

- ***Children and Youth: Their Growth and Development***, adapted by Anne L. Heinsohn from *Children—How They Grow: Elementary School Children Ages 6 to 8 and 9 to 12*, Bulletins GH 6230 and GH 6231, by Mary McPhail Gray and Terry Foltz — A helpful summary of child development, delving into the topics discussed in this chapter in more depth. Click [here](#) to access.
- ***Identity Formation*** - A description of adolescent identity development, self-concept, and self-esteem. Click [here](#) to access.
- ***The Developmental Relationships Framework*** by Search Institute - A description of five elements (and 20 actions) that make relationships powerful in youth's lives. Click [here](#) to access.
- Keller, T. E. (2005). The stages and development of mentoring relationships. In D. L. DuBois & M. J. Karcher (Eds.), *Handbook of Youth Mentoring* (pp. 82-99). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE. — A chapter exploring the development of mentoring relationships in more depth.



**MENTOR**

## **CHAPTER 1**

# **PROVIDING EMOTIONAL SUPPORT AND EMPATHY**

Renee Spencer – Boston University



### What Does Providing Emotional Support and Empathy Mean?

Empathy is a foundational human trait that makes being in meaningful connections with other people possible. There are many different definitions of empathy, but all are rooted in the common notion of “walking a mile in another’s shoes.” Empathy is being open to imagining another person’s experiences from their point of view and striving to find points of connection, not by presuming to feel the same but by trying to feel with, and be responsive to, the other person. It is an everyday but profound act of caring that can be all the more so when it requires finding connections where we thought we had none, as it allows us to see people for “who they are and help them realize their potential.”<sup>1</sup>

Some definitions of empathy emphasize its thinking aspects, whereas others focus more on the emotional side. However, most contemporary understandings of empathy, supported by neuroscience, recognize that it requires both thinking and feeling — trying to understand a person’s experience from their point of view and connecting with what they are feeling. But to go beyond feeling empathy to being empathic, you can’t stop there. You also have to be responsive to the person’s experience. One empathy researcher describes this as the “empathy loop” — perceiving what others are feeling, processing the information, and being responsive to the other person’s experiences.<sup>2</sup>

The benefits of being empathic in your mentoring relationship are great. Communicating that you care about and value your mentee and want to understand things from their point of view can result in them feeling emotionally supported by you. This can contribute to your mentee feeling heard,

understood, and responded to, and even respected by you. And respect is one of the most important features of effective adult-youth relationships from young people’s point of view.

In this chapter, I draw from the research on empathy in everyday life and almost two decades of interview-based research with mentors, youth, and youth’s families to show how empathy can be enacted in youth mentoring relationships. I break empathy down into two actionable components — perspective taking and adaptability — and discuss how mentors can use empathy to inform and enrich the emotional support they offer, which is one of the powerful means by which such relationships can contribute to mentees’ health and well-being. Developing your capacity for empathy can also boost your ability to effectively engage in other behaviors and practices that are important in positive mentoring relationships, especially attunement (see chapter 4 in this resource) and cultural humility (see chapter 2).

### Why Empathy Is Important in Mentoring Relationships

Empathy matters because it makes meaningful connections between people possible and has been identified as a key agent in the promotion of effective working relationships. When someone is empathic with us, it allows us to feel comfortable and even safe enough to be open to accepting help from them. Studies looking at how mentoring relationships work suggest that mentors with more empathy are able to develop higher-quality relationships with their mentee. This is not surprising, as research on other helping or supportive relationships, such as those with doctors, social workers, and teachers, has emphasized the importance of empathy.<sup>3</sup> For example, patients treated with greater empathy and respect are more

<sup>1</sup>Riess, H., & Noporent, L. (2018). *The empathy effect: Seven neuroscience-based keys for transforming the way we live, love, work, and connect across differences*. Louisville, CO: Sounds True.

<sup>2</sup>Riess & Noporent, 2018.

<sup>3</sup>Sulzer, S. H., Feinstein, N. W., & Wendland, C. L. (2016). Assessing empathy development in medical education: A systematic review. *Medical Education*, 50(3), 300-310.



likely to trust their doctors and have better health outcomes. And the helper benefits too, with reports of greater job satisfaction among helpers who increase their empathy through training.<sup>4</sup> Working to understand your mentee’s experiences from their point of view can make the support you offer more likely to be welcomed and experienced as meaningful and impactful.

Although most people are born with the capacity for empathy, some of us are more naturally empathic than others. The good news is that the capacity for empathy is a skill that can grow through learning and practice. There is now a good deal of evidence demonstrating the effectiveness of empathy training, and studies show that even short-term trainings can have a relatively big impact.<sup>5</sup> Practicing and trying things out is especially important in developing these skills. Even though you may not have the chance to participate in a formal empathy training, there are some things you can do to strengthen these muscles. Below are some real-life examples of what empathy in youth mentoring relationships looks like followed by information about what you can do to be more empathic in your own relationship with your mentee.

The good news is that the capacity for empathy is a skill that can grow through learning and practice.

### What Does Empathy Look Like in Practice?

Empathy can be shown in the overall approach you take in the relationship and also in small everyday exchanges with your mentee. Being empathic with someone whose experiences may be quite different from our own requires more work, and this is very frequently true in mentoring; in many cases mentees and mentors have quite different experiences, whether due to differences in social class, racial or ethnic backgrounds, other aspects of their lives and communities, or even simply their age. But bridging differences also has great rewards in that it can help to break down stereotypes we may be carrying without even knowing it, and helps us to hold the other person in a favorable light (see chapter 2 for more information on bridging differences). Being empathic is easier when someone is similar to us — we can more readily imagine and understand what they might be experiencing. However, even when someone is very similar to us, it still requires balancing appreciating the feelings of others while also learning to manage our own feelings so that we can be helpful. Regardless of whether you are working to connect across similarities or differences, empathy can be distilled down to two main sets of processes: perspective-taking and adaptability.

**Perspective-Taking** – Perspective-taking in mentoring is the ability to step outside of your own experiences and attempt to take your mentee’s, and sometimes even your mentee’s family’s, point of view. This has been referred to as “decentering,” as it requires setting aside one’s own values, beliefs, and worldviews and centering the thoughts and experiences of the other person. To achieve this, one empathy researcher offers what she calls the ABC model: Acknowledge, Breathe, and be Curious.<sup>6</sup> We can make room for empathy by acknowledging our own responses to the other person and then

<sup>4</sup> Riess & Neporent, 2018.

<sup>5</sup> Teding van Berkhout, E., & Malouff, J. M. (2016). The efficacy of empathy training: A meta-analysis of randomized controlled trials. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 63(1), 32–41.

<sup>6</sup> Riess & Neporent, 2018.



breathing deeply to ground ourselves and not let our emotions overtake us. This helps make space for being curious about the other person's experience and trying to understand things from their point of view.

Perspective-taking involves actively working to understand and relate to your mentee's experiences and to use this knowledge to be more responsive to their needs in the relationship. Finding commonalities in your experiences can be a good place to start. One mentor I interviewed for my research did just that by focusing on the shared experience of being from families who immigrated to the United States. Another drew from the shared personality trait of being "kind of shy." This mentor connected that to his own experience of being someone who might be a little slower to get to know someone and so didn't expect getting to know his mentee to happen overnight. Working to see things from his mentee's point of view, he realized it might take a little while for his mentee to feel comfortable with him and made the decision to be patient and wait. When communicating and interacting with a mentee's family, being empathic with these family members is important as well. In addition to fostering a better relationship with them, doing so can also expand and deepen your understanding of your mentee's world.

**Adaptability** – Although perspective-taking is an important first step, it alone is not enough. To be empathic, you must also communicate or show this to the youth by being responsive to their experiences. At times, this may mean you need to adjust your approach — your attitude and/or your behavior. For many mentors, being empathic early on in their mentoring relationship requires them to let go of some initial expectations they may be bringing to the relationship about what mentoring

was going to be like and ideas about what a youth might want or need, in order to adapt to being in a relationship with their actual mentee. One mentor I interviewed summed it up beautifully when he said, "I might have some expectations, but I can't really say that it will happen like I want. So, I'm just waiting to see what's going to happen and kind of adapt to what I need to for [my mentee]." A poignant example of adapting by changing behavior in response to a mentee's experiences comes from an interview I did with a mentor many years ago. This mentor told me that in response to his having arrived a few minutes late to their meetings, his mentee shared that it made him start to "freak out" about whether or not the mentor was going to show up that day. The mentor was aware that his mentee's father had been emotionally abusive and unreliable and so not only told his mentee that he appreciated hearing this, but also showed his mentee that he understood by adjusting his behavior and making an intentional effort to be on time to their future meetings.

### Putting It All Together

Being empathic plays a strong role in a mentor's ability to offer support that is more likely to be both welcomed and meaningful to their mentees. This is important because social support is an important way that mentoring can promote positive youth outcomes. Better understanding who your mentee is and how they experience the world helps you discern which types of support are likely to be most relevant and to time your offers of support well. I interviewed a mentor who was exceptionally good at waiting out his mentee. I met him four years into their relationship, and he described how his mentee had only recently started to even mention his father in conversation. Early on, when they were looking at a photo album together, the mentor got the distinct



feeling that his mentee really did not want to talk about this father. Responding to this hesitation, the mentor backed off and waited until his mentee initiated talking about him. In another arena, the mentor coupled this strategy with gentle pushes. He was a graduate student and had initially hoped to spend some of their meetings studying with his mentee. His mentee, however, hated school and didn't even want to talk about it much less spend time studying together. Here again, the mentor decided to back off but also began to take a light-touch approach of regularly dropping into their conversations a simple question about how school was going. Over time, the mentee shifted from not even wanting to answer that question, to offering small tidbits of information, and finally, to actually studying with his mentor. The mentee ultimately found this to be quite helpful as the presence of his mentor kept him more focused and on task, which was a significant challenge for him when doing schoolwork on his own. These sessions also created opportunities for the mentor to offer some tips for organizing schoolwork that his mentee tried out and appreciated.

As this example shows, being empathic does not mean simply going with whatever you think your mentee wants. This mentor still encouraged, and at times even gently pushed, his mentee but did so with an awareness of how his mentee felt and in ways that accounted for and was responsive to this. Moving too fast would have shut his mentee down. Never pushing would not have resulted in the mentor being able to eventually offer his mentee meaningful support with his schoolwork. There are also times when clear instruction, direction, and even correction may be needed, as is the case in any relationship between an adult and a young person. The key here is to begin by being curious and learning about your mentee's experience and

then offer direction in a way that is responsive to that, which consequently comes from a place of compassion rather than judgment.

How can you tell when you're being empathic? It can be hard to know for sure. Part of the challenge is that the best measure of success is how our efforts are experienced by the receiver. Does your mentee feel like you know or "get" them?<sup>7</sup> Even if the answer to this question is a resounding "yes," your mentee may or may not communicate that to you. You can also ask yourself how well you think you know your mentee. Do you feel like you have a good sense of who they are, how they see themselves, and what their interests and goals are? How challenged by this do you feel? Are you aware of how some of your own ideas about what you might think your mentee "should" think, or do, or want may be different from what they actually think, or do, or want for themselves? Are you open to these differences, and do you shift some of your own ideas and expectations to more fully appreciate your mentee as they are? And how much do you draw from this knowledge and use it to shape how you engage in your relationship with your mentee?

### **Contextual Considerations for Empathy**

Being empathic is important to the success of all types of mentoring relationships, whether short or long term or more or less goal-directed, and with mentees of all ages. It will help you in your efforts to get to know your mentee and to gauge their openness and interest in different types of activities. Communicating to your mentee that you genuinely want to get to know who they are and what matters to them will help your mentee grow to feel more comfortable with you.

<sup>7</sup> Ben-Eliyahu, A., Yoviene Sykes, L. A., & Rhodes, J. E. (2021). Someone who 'gets' me: adolescents' perceptions of positive regard from natural mentors. *Mentoring & Tutoring: Partnership in Learning*, 29(3), 305–327. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13611267.2021.1927438>



Empathy is also important at any stage of the mentoring process, as it helps you to shift and be responsive to your mentee's needs as they change. In the beginning of your relationship, you'll need to focus most intently on really listening for who your mentee is and what their experiences are. If you are observant and open, as your mentee grows to feel more comfortable with you, your knowledge of them can deepen over time as you really get to know them and observe changes in the kinds of support they may need and want. As was discussed in the introductory chapter in this resource, youth grow and change a lot through childhood. Being empathic will help you keep up with, and be responsive to, those changes that are a healthy part of youth development.

As mentioned earlier and is discussed in greater depth in chapter 7, empathy is also important in your relationship with your mentee's caregiver. Developing a better understanding of the family's experiences can help you have a more complete understanding of your mentee's world. It can also facilitate your support of your mentee's relationship with their parent(s). A critical part of one very successful mentoring relationship I encountered in my research was the mentor's ability to be a sounding board for her mentee when the mentee's mother remarried and formed a blended family. The mentee understandably had a range of emotions throughout this transition, including considerable anger toward her mother. The mentor would listen and allow the mentee to vent but would also remind the mentee that her mother loved her and had her own challenges to contend with. The mentor's empathic presence provided a safe space for the mentee to express her strong emotions while also helping to sustain the mentee's vitally important connection with her mother.

### Tips and Final Thoughts

Good intentions, although a start, are not enough to be successful at being empathic. In fact, in one study, my colleagues and I observed that although most mentors started their mentoring relationships planning or intending to see things from their mentee's point of view, not all were able to actually do so.<sup>8</sup> Mentors who were either more open-minded at the outset or more able to let go of their initial expectations and continually work to understand their mentee's experiences and expectations for the relationship tended to be better able to adapt and respond to their mentee's needs and build stronger connections, and often expressed more satisfaction with their relationship with their mentee. So, what gets in the way of being empathic, even when we intend or try to be? And what can we do instead? Below are some tips on "what not to do" in your efforts to become a more empathic mentor.

Good intentions,  
although a start, are  
not enough to be  
successful at being  
empathic.

**Assuming similar means the same** – One common pitfall is to assume that when you share similarities with another person, your experiences are the same. This can be especially tricky early in the relationship, before you know your mentee well and when your mentee might not be revealing much about themselves. While it is important to find places of connection to build your relationship, we have to be cautious not to overlay our experiences on to our

<sup>8</sup> Spencer, R., Pryce, J., Barry, J., Basualdo-Delmonico, A. & Walsh, J. (2020). Deconstructing empathy: A qualitative examination of mentor perspective-taking and adaptability in youth mentoring relationships. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 114, 105043.



mentees. Even when you notice similarities in your experiences and those of your mentee, don't assume they are the same. Instead, use your experiences to help you become more curious about your mentee. In what ways might there be some real similarities in your experiences and how might they be different? Consider what questions you might ask and what you can watch for to learn more about what your mentee's experiences are like.

**Thinking you “know best”** – Another trap that can be easy to fall into is to assume that you know what is best for your mentee. You may feel a strong urge to tell your mentee what to do to “fix” their problems — what is sometimes referred to as the “righting reflex” (discussed more in chapter 11). This can lead to a lot of tension in the mentoring relationship as mentors begin to push their own agenda on the mentee and then become frustrated when the mentee is not interested. It's better to listen for and learn about what the mentee is interested in and to join the mentee in working toward their own goals (see chapter 10 on goal setting and support). Also important are the mentee's parent(s)/caregiver(s) goals for the relationship. I have interviewed a number of parents who expressed frustration with mentors who seemed more focused on “fixing” than being with their child. This is not to say that as a mentor you can never offer ideas about things you think might be helpful to your mentee. Access to new ideas and opportunities can be part of what makes a mentoring relationship valuable for a young person's development and is a common reason why parents sign their children up for these programs. The difference lies in forcing one's own agenda because you feel you know what is “right” or “best” versus listening and learning and then perhaps introducing some new possibilities for your mentee to consider and gauging their response and receptivity.

**Drowning in emotions** – An important part of being empathic is keeping one's own emotional responses in check. Although being open to feeling what your mentee is feeling can be an important part of empathy, letting your mentee's experiences overwhelm you or dwelling on the negative can lead to what is called “compassion fatigue,” something nurses, social workers, and teachers are at risk for developing. It's hard to be open to more fully understanding someone else's experiences if you are too consumed by your own emotional reaction. Many young people who seek a mentor are navigating very challenging and complex circumstances in their lives and may be impacted by poverty, poorly resourced schools, inadequate health and mental health care, and multiple forms of discrimination. It can be emotionally draining to feel the weight of these forces in your mentee's life, especially for mentors who have no previous experience being in a relationship with people navigating these kinds of challenges. You can't wave a magic wand and make these things go away, so it's important to focus on what you can do, like being a positive and supportive presence, being reliable and consistent, and doing what you say you will do.

**Blaming the parent(s)/family** – It's important to keep in mind how some of these challenges may also impact your mentee's entire family, especially when their circumstances differ dramatically from your own. Not appreciating the obstacles the youth's family might be facing can make it all too easy to place blame for the youth's challenges on their parent(s) who may miss calls, forget meetings, or simply prioritize things differently than you imagine you would if you were in those same circumstances. Extending your efforts at empathy to your mentee's family by striving to see things from their perspective, rather than focusing on your





own, can help you to be more open to seeing and understanding the family's challenges as well as their strengths and resilience in the face of these challenges.

**Expecting to be “perfectly” empathic** – We all make mistakes and have moments in our relationships when we are not very empathic. Being perfectly empathic is not the goal — striving to be empathic and working to repair things when you have failed is what matters most. Simple acts can go a long way. Acknowledge when it feels like you have missed the mark with your mentee and let them know you'd like to try again. Be curious about your mentee and their experiences and show them through your body language, tone of voice, responses, and actions that you are listening and paying attention. Show openness, interest, and respect in how you engage with them. Also pay attention to what your mentee communicates to you. Observe their facial expressions, body language, tone of voice, and emotions to learn more about them.

Finally, build your empathic capacity in areas that directly impact your mentee. If your mentee's life experiences are quite different from your own, do things to help you better understand their world. Reading books (fiction, memoirs, nonfiction — I've listed a few of my favorites in the Additional Reading and Resources section) can be informative and offer insights, as can watching movies and television programs or listening to podcasts on topics that are connected to your mentee's experience. Visiting places like the ones your mentee and their family go to can help you explore and experience a little of their world firsthand and may also increase your feeling of comfort in these spaces. You can also ask questions and let your mentee be the expert and teach you; but do this

sparingly so as not to make them feel like it is their responsibility to be your only teacher. Most of all, be open to learning and deepening your understanding of your mentee and of yourself. You will not only become a more effective mentor, but you will also be contributing to building a more humane and connected world.





## Additional Reading and Resources

Most of the resources listed below can be accessed online at the links we have provided. The print titles listed here should be available through local or online bookstores or through your public library.

### Learn More about the Science and Practice of Empathy

- ***The Empathy Effect: Seven neuroscience-based keys for transforming the way we live, love, work, and connect across differences*** (2018) by Helen Riess, MD with Liz Neporent – A highly readable book that provides an overview of the research on empathy and the principles Dr. Riess teaches in her empathy training.
- ***The Power of Empathy***  
TEDx talk by Helen Riess – A review of the main ideas Dr. Riess offers in her book, here in an engaging 20-minute talk. Click [here](#) to access.
- ***How to Be more Empathic***  
This article provides a bunch of tips on everyday things you can do to develop your capacity for empathy. Click [here](#) to access.
- ***Why You Should Train for Empathy and How to Do It***  
An article to read for a few more tips on how to be more empathic. Click [here](#) to access.
- ***Fixing the empathy shortage***  
A brief TEDx talk that describes the decline of our collective empathy and makes the case that empathy is a skill rather than a trait and how practice can help us become more empathic, individually and collectively. Click [here](#) to access.
- ***How to Actively Listen to Others***  
Another highly engaging 15-minute TEDx talk that demonstrates how to use the guidelines of improvisational comedy to hone your ability to more fully listen and respond to others. Click [here](#) to access.

### Memoirs and Novels

- ***Say I'm Dead: A Family Memoir of Race, Secrets, and Love***  
(2020) by Delores Johnson – In this memoir, the author explores her family history that revolves around multiple generations of interracial relationships. The reader is given a front-row seat to the personal costs associated with the ugliness and violence of racism as well as the power of truth and love.
- ***Breaking Night: A Memoir of Forgiveness, Survival, and My Journey from Homeless to Harvard***  
(2011) by Liz Murray – Murray draws on journals she kept throughout her childhood to offer a vivid account of growing up in a family living in poverty and ravaged by addiction. This is no simple “rags to riches” fairy tale. Rather, Murray invites us to experience the complexities of her childhood from her vantage point and shows us how compassion and love can bloom in even the starkest circumstances.
- ***The Language of Flowers***  
(2012) by Vanessa Diffenbaugh – This novel takes the reader into the mind and heart of a person who had to endure abandonment and being in the foster-care system. It offers a portrait of the toll that betrayal and trauma take on the human psyche, the longing for love and connection that never dies, and the courage needed to take a risk again.



**MENTOR**

## CHAPTER 2

# PRACTICING CULTURAL HUMILITY

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## What Does Practicing Cultural Humility Mean?

Cultural humility is an ongoing, lifelong process of self-reflection and learning about how social identity and experiences are shaped by systems of oppression, power, and privilege. Social identity is a person's sense of who they are based on their group membership, which can reflect physical, social, and mental characteristics (e.g., race, gender, class, ability, sexuality, religion), and can be self-claimed or ascribed by others. Everyone has multiple social identities. As such, cultural humility is important in all mentoring relationships, even if mentors and mentees are similar in important characteristics, like race or gender, because there are likely many other ways that they differ (e.g., middle-class, White mentor and low-income, White youth). Mentors with cultural humility continuously reflect on their own social identity and make efforts to learn about their mentee's social identity, experiences, and background. Cultural humility further entails reflection about the differences and similarities between mentors and mentees that are shaped by inequalities in society (e.g., racism, sexism, inequitable schools, disproportionate justice system involvement, racial wealth gaps). The chapters on empathy (chapter 1) and attunement (chapter 4) discuss very helpful foundational skills to learning cultural humility.

## Why Cultural Humility Is Important in Mentoring Relationships

Research on cultural humility and related skills shows their importance in developing better mentoring relationships with youth and in fostering youth's ethnic/racial identity (i.e., individuals' beliefs and attitudes about their ethnic/racial group memberships). Links with youth's ethnic identity are particularly noteworthy because ethnic identity is an



important component in the healthy development of adolescents of color.

Cultural humility can also help mentors overcome barriers in a relationship with a young person, especially when mentoring a youth of color from a different racial background. Some youth of color have cultural mistrust toward people outside of their race, particularly White adults who are in positions of authority. This mistrust is a general suspicion of, or distrust toward, White people because of the historic discrimination experienced by people of color in the United States, and because youth of color directly experience racial discrimination from adults in their lives (e.g., shopkeepers, police officers, teachers). Having some mistrust is not necessarily a bad thing because it helps prepare youth of color for biased treatment from others, but it could also create a barrier that White mentors need to overcome when mentoring them. Further, when mentors are not attuned to cultural differences with their mentees, their mentoring relationships often end early.<sup>1</sup> Thus, cultural humility may help mentors overcome mistrust in their relationships with youth of color in a way that strengthens their relationships and helps them last longer.

<sup>1</sup> Spencer, R. (2007). "It's Not What I Expected": A Qualitative Study of Youth Mentoring Relationship Failures. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 22(4), 331-354. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0743558407301915>



## What Does Cultural Humility Look Like in Practice?

First, let's talk about what cultural humility is *not*. Cultural humility is not cultural competence, which many people confuse and use interchangeably with cultural humility. Cultural competence assumes mastery and that there is an endpoint in learning. This assumes that you can simply observe and read about another culture or study a culture in a course and then you are done and ready to work with and understand individuals from that cultural group. This attitude could lead mentors to be overconfident in their relationships with youth. In addition, cultural competence implies that you can understand the life experiences of individuals in a group simply by observing or learning about the group. The mastery of another culture further assumes that a culture is of only one "type," which results in stereotypes about individuals from that group. Another critique of cultural competence is that when people think of culture, they often only think of an individual's racial/ethnic identity and miss all the other aspects of a person's social identity, such as gender, religion, class, sexual orientation, and disability, that are just as important and help you understand the whole individual.

Cultural humility is also not color blindness. Some Americans grow up believing that "seeing" race is a form of prejudice and discrimination and that even mentioning a person's race is racist, in and of itself. Color blindness (i.e., "I don't see color") creates a discomfort around the mention of race and around individuals who are racially different from you. Color blindness is particularly common among White individuals who are raised to believe that they are raceless and that everyone around them is raceless too ("We are all human beings").<sup>2</sup>

Rather than benefiting youth of color, research actually suggests that adults' color blindness can be harmful.

For example, research on youth of color from early adolescence to college age reports that when their teachers or instructors do not step in to acknowledge racism when it takes place, students of color are left feeling like their instructors do not care about them and that they support the perpetrators of racism.<sup>3,4</sup> Some of my own college students of color have told me that when their instructors do not bring up highly televised racist events that take place in our society, they feel further alienated and offended and that they do not belong. Some mentors may feel uncomfortable bringing up racist events because they don't think about them, are afraid to talk about them or don't know how to talk about them with their mentees. Acknowledging race and racism is the first step to connecting with a person of color.

## Self-Reflection

So, what is cultural humility in practice? First, cultural humility is an ongoing, lifelong process that involves continuous self-reflection. This means that you commit and actively engage in a process of ongoing self-reflection and learning about your own social identity and experience. This involves asking questions about and exploring the many ways you define yourself (e.g., your race, gender, class, sexual orientation, religion) and what those identities mean in the context of the power structures in the United

2 Helms, J. E. (2020). *A race is a nice thing to have: A guide to being a White person or understanding the White persons in your life*. (3rd edition). San Diego, CA: Cognella.

3 Pica-Smith, C. (2009). Children speak about interethnic and interracial friendships in the classroom: Lessons for teachers. *Multicultural Education*, 17(1), 38-47. Retrieved from <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ871364.pdf>

4 Sue, D. W., Lin, A. I., Torino, G. C., Capodilupo, C. M., & Rivera, D. P. (2009). Racial microaggressions and difficult dialogues on race in the classroom. *Cultural Diversity & Ethnic Minority Psychology*, 15, 183-190. doi:10.1037/a0014191



States. For example, a mentor might be a White, middle-class woman who grew up in a Christian community and identifies as lesbian. How do her race, gender, class, religious upbringing, and sexual identity influence her experiences in the world? In what ways does she experience oppression due to her gender and sexual identity and in what ways does she experience privilege due to her race and class? How have these systems of oppression and privilege shaped her experiences, and when and in what contexts do certain identities become more important? Another part of reflecting on your identity is that you may feel pride about parts of your identity, and that can be very positive. But cultural humility means acknowledging that you may believe some parts of your identity (e.g., White woman) are superior to other groups.

Another mentor might be a Latino, middle-class, straight, Catholic man who grew up in a low-income household. This mentor can reflect on the same questions about his social identities and the systems of oppression and privilege that may have shaped his experiences in the world. It's important to also consider how your social identities affect your interactions with your mentee. What social identities will be most meaningful and salient to your mentee? You and your mentee might be similar in race but differ in your economic background or in your sexual identity. Perhaps your racial and gender identities are the most meaningful parts of how you perceive yourself and your own experiences, but for your mentee, perhaps their sexual identity is the most meaningful part, which may influence how your mentee perceives you and themselves and understands their own experience. How do your experiences and social identities influence your assumptions about your mentee and your interactions with them? Engaging in this critical self-reflection may bring up uncomfortable feelings,

such as anger, shame, guilt, fear, or sadness. These feelings are a normal part of this self-reflection process around social identity, oppression, and privilege, and it is important that you explore these feelings further and sit with them. We suggest that you engage in this self-reflection before, during, and after your mentoring relationship takes place. By engaging in this critical self-reflection, you will be ready and more open to learning about your mentee's experiences.

### Learning

Second, cultural humility involves an ongoing process of learning about your mentee. Remember that you are also a learner in your mentoring relationship. This means that you understand that you will never fully learn everything there is to know about your mentee's cultural group(s). Actively seek opportunities to learn about your mentee's culture, and when warranted and invited, to participate in that culture. You can learn about your mentee's cultural group(s) and experiences in different ways — through reading books (e.g., memoirs, fiction, nonfiction), watching movies and TV programs, and listening to podcasts. You can also spend time in the community where your mentee is from and go to the places your mentee and their family visit. Read about the history of your mentee's community and neighborhood newspapers to learn about what is happening in their surroundings. This will give you some insight into their world.

Also make sure to engage in a process of asking questions and learning about your mentee's social identities and how systems of oppression and privilege shape your mentee's experiences. Remain curious about your mentee's culture (see chapter 1 on empathy) before and throughout your mentoring relationship. This means that even if you and your mentee are similar in one social identity (e.g., race



or gender), you remain open to the idea that your mentee's life experiences are different from yours because of the many identities that make your mentee's life experiences unique. Remember that similarity does not necessarily translate to the same experience. It's important to maintain genuine interest in learning from and about your mentee and who they are. View your mentee as the expert of their own experiences, desires, and interests. This will enable them to share their experiences and views authentically and, in turn, will foster your growth and understanding. At the same time, don't put the burden on your mentee to teach you all about their culture and social identities. It's your responsibility. An openness to learning is in line with best practices in creating effective mentoring relationships: honoring youth voice, prioritizing your mentee's needs and desires, and not making your relationship about you and what you think is best for your mentee.

Learning about your mentee's identities and background requires that you also learn about your mentee's family (see chapter 7 on working with others in the mentoring relationship system). Understanding your mentee's family's experience will give you a better sense of your mentee's life and experiences. In my team's recent interviews asking youth what mentors could do to learn more about their race, ethnicity, and culture, some youth suggested that mentors take time to get to know their parents. They recommended that mentors spend some time with their parents to learn about who they are and what's important to them. The youth said that this is a window into understanding them. It's also important to honor the culture of your mentee's parents and how it might shape their wishes for their child. Assume that the parent knows what's best for their child — even if their opinions and decisions might be different from your own — and respect the parent's role.

### **Understanding the Power Differential Between You and Your Mentee**

Third, an important part of cultural humility is critiquing and reflecting on the power imbalance between you and your mentee. There is a very clear power differential between adults and children/adolescents based on age (i.e., adults have more power than youth), but there are also other power differentials, such as a White mentor paired with a Black child, a U.S.-citizen mentor paired with an immigrant mentee; a professional, middle-class mentor paired with a mentee living in poverty; or a heterosexual or cisgender mentor paired with a gay or transgendered mentee. Acknowledging this power differential in your own self-reflection is the first step toward cultural humility. The second step is to consider how these power differentials might impact your mentoring relationship (e.g., your mentee might have some distrust toward you or feel hesitant to develop a relationship with you). Because of these power differentials, understanding that your mentee is the expert in their own life experience and honoring their voice is even more important; it gives youth power in the relationship. It shows that you value them and what they bring to the relationship.

### **Contextual Considerations for Cultural Humility**

Cultural humility is important in any mentoring relationship, regardless of the mentee's age, the mentee or mentor's race/ethnicity, or the number of ways in which the youth and mentor seem to have similar social identities (e.g., mentor and youth share a similar race and gender). For example, in the novel, *Piecing Me Together* by Renée Watson, the main character, Jade, is a Black teenage girl from a poor neighborhood in Portland, Oregon, and she attends an elite private high school. Her guidance



counselor encourages Jade to join a mentoring program for “at-risk” teens, and she is paired with a Black woman mentor, who is an alumna of the high school and from an upper-middle-class family. Unfortunately, the mentor and program staff treat Jade as an object of pity, and she sees right through it. Needless to say, the mentoring relationship had a rocky start. As Jade finds her voice in her mentoring relationship and as a teenage girl more broadly, she expresses her concerns and that she simply wants to be heard and respected rather than viewed as someone who needs to be fixed.

Jade’s story is a great example of two common pitfalls in the development of cultural humility. First, cultural humility is still important in this mentoring relationship even though the mentee and mentor share the same race, as their lived experience differs in other important ways. Second, the story shows how adults may have good intentions to “help” low-income youth of color, but what the staff and mentors might actually be promoting is White middle-class cultural norms and views. For example, some programs teach Black boys how to dress for success (e.g., pull your pants up, how to tie a tie) so they can assimilate in White-dominated settings, such as corporate America. However, what this is communicating to Black boys is that they need to act “Whiter” to succeed. In addition, these behaviors do not address the root cause of the problems facing Black youth: structural racism. Wearing a tie or not wearing a hoodie will not save them when they are pulled over by police, nor will it help them when they get passed over for jobs by racist employers or denied a rental application because their name sounds “too ethnic.” The reality is that no matter how rich or well-dressed a Black person is, they still live in a society in which racism is a part of our structures and everyday lives, and as a result, Black people will be treated as “less than” in a variety of contexts.

Another consideration for cultural humility, for mentors who are part of a program, is the program philosophy, particularly when mentors reflect on the power differentials between themselves and their mentee and learn about the societal issues that their mentee’s community is facing. How might social inequality come up in the mentoring program itself? Are there ways the program may be advertently or inadvertently supporting an ideology that is against the best interests of your mentee? This isn’t something you can solve on your own, but at the very least, it’s important for you to become aware of this possibility and perhaps discuss with program staff.

### **Tips and Final Thoughts**

On the next page there is a list of questions for you to consider as you engage in ongoing, critical self-reflection and learning about your mentee. Perhaps grab a journal or note pad to write down your responses, or type your responses on your phone or tablet. Consider seeking other mentors or individuals who are also engaging in this lifelong process of cultural humility. You can support each other and hold each other accountable as you engage in self-reflection and learning. If you are mentoring in a program, perhaps your program or organization allows mentors to meet periodically to support one another. If you aren’t part of a program, then look for other adults who also serve in a mentoring capacity. Perhaps take a colleague or friend out to coffee and talk with them about some of these questions. Further, as you learn about your mentee’s social identities, take steps to support their development of positive identities (e.g., racial/ethnic identity, gender identity, sexual identity). For youth who are marginalized in any way because of their race, gender, or sexual identity, for example, helping them develop a positive identity can





contribute to a healthy sense of both themselves and the people in their group. You can support your mentee in developing a positive identity by showing genuine interest in learning about their identities,

helping them to explore their identities, connecting them to positive role models and other adults who have similar identities, and engaging in activities that support their identity development.

### Questions for Critical Self-Reflection

- What are my social identities (e.g., race/ethnicity, gender, sexual identity, religion, class, etc.)?
- What social identities are most important to me?
- How do my social identities shape my worldview and experiences?
- How have systems of privilege and oppression shaped my own identities and experiences?
- How do my social identities help or hinder my relationship with my mentee?
- Which of my social identities may be most meaningful to my mentee? What are my assumptions about how I think they might perceive my identities?
- What are my initial reactions to my mentee, especially if they are culturally different from me?
- What are my assumptions about my mentee and their life experiences? What are my assumptions about their identities and what identities are most meaningful to them?
- How do I make space in my mentoring interactions for my mentee to express their own identities?
- What do I learn about myself through listening and getting to know my mentee?

### Questions for Ongoing Learning About Your Mentee

- What are my mentee's social identities? How does my mentee identify (e.g., race/ethnicity, gender, sexual identity, religion, class, etc.)?
- What social identities are most meaningful or important to my mentee?
- What are the cultural values of my mentee and their family? How might these values shape my mentee and their parents' interactions with me?
- How have systems of privilege and oppression shaped my mentee's identity and their and their family's experiences?
- What is the history of my mentee's local community? What is the history of my mentee's cultural group in the United States?



### What Happens If I Make a Mistake?

Cultural humility is a learning process, so you will inevitably make mistakes along the way. We all do. That is part of human nature. Part of why some mentors avoid conversations about race is because they are afraid they will appear racist or that they will make a mistake that is offensive or harms their mentee. It is worse to not try at all than to try, and make mistakes. Take it slowly and start with your own self-education (e.g., reading books, listening to podcasts, watching movies, spending time in your mentee's community). Take time to listen and get to know your mentee and gain their trust. And when you do make a mistake, confront it, acknowledge it, and raise it with your mentee. Acknowledging

your mistakes to your mentee or in front of your mentee is good role modeling and shows your mentee that you care about them and are willing to improve. This may also gain your mentee's respect. Then you can try again and do better next time. You will know you are on the right path as your mentee gets more comfortable with you and shares more about themselves and their life. They may also become more comfortable to raise sensitive topics that are on their mind. Just keep in mind that cultural humility is a lifelong learning process that can enrich and strengthen not only your mentoring relationship, but also your own personal growth and understanding of, and relationships with, many other youth and adults in your life.

## Additional Reading and Resources

Most of the resources listed below can be accessed online at the links we have provided. The print titles listed here should be available through local or online bookstores or through your public library.

### Online

- ***How mentors and mentoring programs can support mentees' ethnic/racial identity***

This blog post provides tips for programs/organizations and mentors on how to help youth of color develop a healthy ethnic/racial identity. It also explains why a healthy ethnic/racial identity is important for youth of color. Click [here](#) to access.

- ***Color Blind or Color Brave?***

TED Talk by Mellody Hobson – In this TED Talk, Ms. Hobson explores why it's important to openly talk about race in the United States rather than be colorblind. She discusses this in a business context and the competitive advantage of diversity, but it's also helpful in thinking about why being explicit about race in our relationships is important. Click [here](#) to access.

- ***Cultural Humility***

TED Talk by Dr. Juliana Mosely – In this TED Talk, Dr. Mosely defines and describes cultural humility and challenges us to consider our own personal biases and how that impacts our interactions with others. Click [here](#) to access.



- ***How to Overcome Our Biases? Walk Boldly Toward Them***

TED Talk by Verna Myers – In this Ted Talk, Ms. Myers explores leaning into our discomfort, particularly our racial attitudes toward Black boys and men. Click [here](#) to access.

- ***5 Things You Can Do Today to Support LGBTQ Youth***

by Alison Delpercio – A short article with some great tips for how you can better support LGBTQ youth. Click [here](#) to access.

- ***How Can Mentors Serve as Advocates for GLBTQ Youth***

by Christian Rummell – This blog post provides a short snapshot of the struggles of GLBTQ youth and how mentors can advocate on their behalf. Click [here](#) to access.

- ***A Guide for Understanding, Supporting, and Affirming LGBTQI2-S Children, Youth, and Families***

This guidebook summarizes key concepts, myths, the coming out process, and strengths of, and challenges facing, LGBTQ youth. It also includes eight tips for supporting LGBTQ youth. Click [here](#) to access.

### In Print

- ***A Race Is a Nice Thing to Have: A Guide to Being a White Person or Understanding the White Persons in Your life, 3rd edition***

(2020) by J.E. Helms – This book is written for White people to help them understand and accept their racial identity, take responsibility for ending racism, and learn how racism negatively affects them. Each chapter is filled with reflection exercises to help readers engage in this process.

- ***Critical Mentoring: A Practical Guide***

(2017) by Torie Weiston-Serdan – This book is written to help mentors and program staff engage in a transformational practice that challenges the idea that youth of color need to be “fixed” or “saved.” It teaches mentors how to partner with youth to create social change while validating their culture and values.

- ***Piecing Me Together***

by Renee Watson (2018) – This is a young adult novel about a Black teenage girl who is in a mentoring program. Even though her mentor is a Black woman, the class differences between the mentor and mentee show up as good intentions, sympathy, and negative assumptions when the girl simply wants to be seen for who she is. This is a great lesson on cultural humility!



**MENTOR**

## CHAPTER 3

# MAKING ROOM FOR FUN AND PLAY

Michael Karcher – University of Texas-San Antonio



Just over ten years ago, I — along with my friend and mentor, Mike Nakkula — offered a proposal to our colleagues, based on a review of 30 years of research on youth mentoring and what made it most effective across different groups of youth and settings. The proposal was a framework in which there are four core types of mentoring activities: 1) playing, 2) talking, 3) learning, and 4) doing. It suggested that the strongest mentoring relationships reflected a balance of these four types of interactions. The ordering of these activity types in our framework was deliberate. It underscores that being playful is a critical tool in a mentor’s relationship-building toolkit, even if they are part of a mentoring program that is more goal-directed or structured. The capacity to be playful is tool number one. It’s that important! It’s also that challenging. This chapter tries to coach the skill of playfulness by revealing what it means to be a “playful” mentor, why it is important, and how fun in mentoring varies across contexts, and provides some ideas to help you be playful.

Before focusing on the tool of playfulness, let’s consider why mentors may need a “refresher” chapter on something so basic as having fun or being playful. It’s because you are a grown-up. You are in charge, “the adult in the room,” and you have entered into a mentoring relationship, either through a natural connection or as part of a program, because you know the stakes for the youth you mentor are high. You know you can make a big difference in your mentee’s life if you do it right. So, you take your mentoring seriously. That’s what separates you from another mentor who doesn’t go the extra mile and read this book. You want to do this right and maximize your potential impact — this youth mentoring is serious business!

Like Christopher Robin in the recent motion picture, Pooh, most adults struggle to retain, regain, or reengage their playful selves. For most adults, it is the other three tools in a mentor’s toolkit — talking, learning, and doing—that reflect the usual, familiar, and comfortable roles that characterize how adults interact with young people. In very few of the common roles adults play in youth’s lives does fun — doing something just for the fun of it — factor in as a central objective.

From my point of view, and supported by considerable research evidence, it is the opportunity mentoring affords us to reintroduce play into adult-youth relationships that makes youth mentoring a unique and powerful role that adults can “play” (pun intended) in the lives of youth. The goal of this chapter is to increase your appreciation of the power of play in adult-youth relationships, to boost your confidence in deploying this very important tool in your mentoring toolkit, and to authorize you to be a fun, playful mentor.

“A child who does not play is not a child, but the man who doesn’t play has lost forever the child who lived in him and who he will miss terribly.”

—Pablo Neruda

<sup>1</sup> Spencer, R. (2007). “It’s Not What I Expected”: A Qualitative Study of Youth Mentoring Relationship Failures. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 22(4), 331-354. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0743558407301915>



### What Does Making Room for Fun and Play Mean?

Being a playful mentor means expressing your joy when you meet with your mentee. There are lots of ways to define play and describe the experience of having fun, but for this chapter it may be most helpful if we focus on two elements of this tool: Your experiencing joy, and your expressing it to your mentee. Focus, further, on these two sources of joy. First, you can take pleasure or find joy in your mentee's engagement in activities (whether that activity reflects your mentee's playing, sharing, learning, or doing something). Second, you can experience joy in your relationship by engaging in, and thereby sharing with your mentee, something that brings you joy. This last example, of being playful by sharing something personally meaningful and pleasurable in your life, is an important concept unpacked later in this chapter.

Whether the source of your joy is from appreciating what your mentee is doing or saying or results from sharing something that interests, motivates, or inspires you personally, the result should be the same — a genuine expression of that joy in the context of time spent with your mentee, that generates a smile on your face (and ideally on your mentee's face too). Playful mentoring can happen in “big” ways, such as by choosing something fun to do during your time together (e.g., playing a game together); or playful mentoring can occur in smaller, unplanned ways, like through spontaneous sharing of funny stories with each other, or a playful, momentary digression from a more goal-oriented task. Play is an activity that can be both “in the moment” or planned, as well as youth oriented or mentor generated. Generally, however, it has no specific tie-in to adult values or future-oriented goals. That's what makes it particularly special to

## Play is work for a child. So, the work of a mentor is to relearn to play like a child.

—Me, Summer Institute on Youth Mentoring (2018)

youth and uncommon in the standard repertoire of many adult-youth relationships.

Almost universally, *effective* mentors do one essential thing. They communicate, nearly every time they meet with their mentee, their experience of joy when they are in the presence of their mentee. For the master mentor, expressions of joy happen during fun activities as well as in serious interactions. You'll know you are on your way to mastering the art of being a playful mentor, and you will recognize the moments when you have successfully incorporated play, fun, and joyful interaction into your mentoring, every time you become aware that your mentee sees a smile on your face.

### Why Play Is Important in Mentoring Relationships

Play is the best way to enter the world of a young person — no matter what age — because doing that extends a sign of respect to youth. Mentors empower young people, embolden them, encourage them, and respect them by being playful, because youth know that's their zone, not yours. Lawrence Cohen, in *Playful Parenting*, writes, “For adults, play means leisure, but for children, play is more like their job. Play is also children's main way of communicating, of experimenting, and of learning.” Play is their work, and it is what they are supposed to do.



**Play can serve to equalize the power imbalance between mentees and their mentors** — pulling them more toward the friend “zone.” For young people, game play of all kinds, including creative crafts as well as sports, falls in this zone and provides youth with a chance to win, succeed, and excel, relative to the mentor. These are uncommon experiences in youth’s typical interactions with adults, making them unique mentoring activities.

**Playful interactions can form bridges that transcend differences and mistrust.** This can be particularly true when there are differences in the personal characteristics of mentors and their mentees, whether these are age, sex, race, or social class. When such differences are a part of a given mentoring relationship, play may serve as the ultimate leveler and allow commonality to be found in the playful interactions they forge. Expressions of joy and pleasure in spending time with another person reveal the two individuals not “boundaried” and separated by their differences; it may thereby provide the best way to transcend those differences. So, if mistrust resides in perceived differences (particularly early in a relationship), or

when connecting with a mentor is compromised by a mentee’s history of feeling misunderstood or rejected by adults, playful mentoring can establish the necessary preconditions for harder work, such as by establishing mutual trust and creating a sense of being part of a team.

**Failures when trying to inject humor into a match can provide opportunities to deepen the relationship and build trust.** When a mentor’s joke or effort to introduce a game into the match falls flat, or worse, is experienced as hurtful or in poor taste, mentors have an opportunity to provide a reparative response and engage in the attunement practices described in chapter 4. Carefully tuning in to whether attempts at humor or fun are working for your mentee provide a unique way to learn about your mentee and respond empathically to your mentee.

**Playful mentoring interactions can build a safe haven at times when the nature of a planned activity brings up the mentee’s insecurities or anxieties** (e.g., the mentee fears revealing academic deficiencies by engaging in a science activity or doing homework together). A playful approach by the mentor can communicate their investment in the mentee and a willingness to be vulnerable and not-so-serious. For example, when a mentor shares a funny story of failing at a similar or related task, either when younger or more recently, they communicate a willingness to join the mentee in the anxiety or fear that an activity may evoke, and thereby help diffuse those fears, making the youth more open to taking risks and being vulnerable.

**Losing oneself through complete engagement in an activity is a form of play.** What may be most important for young people, and what adults sometimes can lose sight of, is the powerful experience of being lost in play. We can call it the



experience of “flow,” or the feeling of being fully engrossed in an activity such that you lose track of time and feel your capacities are fully engaged. Experiencing that flow is linked with many positive outcomes for youth, the most important of which is that it serves as a source of motivation and the desire to learn new skills in pursuit of new chances to experience this flow state. And when adults express joy in response to seeing the mentee deep in play or lost in that state of purposeful flow, the mirroring back of the youth’s playful joy is healing and reparative. Research on parenting interventions reveals that when adults respect a child’s deep engagement in play, it helps adults re-align with the youth and establish themselves as trusted confidants and partners.

**Infusing play into structured, formal, and goal-directed mentoring pays dividends to both mentors and the youth they work with.** Some youth may need time having fun and developing trust in the mentoring relationship before any “targeted” or strategic supports (e.g., those described in chapter 10 on goal setting) will be heard or received by the mentee. Research regularly finds that even for very goal-directed programs, the most powerful indicator of longer and stronger relationships is the extent to which the matches in those programs engage in play.

Infusing fun into mentoring efforts or programs that are instructionally focused or rely on information-rich mentoring activities can help the youth feel partnered with, valued, and important. Why? At a very basic level, because it gives mentees the message that they are more important than the task at hand.

This approach can also benefit mentors. In his book, *The Power of Play*, David Elkind argues that over time (across development) the separate internal

drives propelling adults’ investment in work, love, and play become more and more separated, such that by adulthood play becomes divorced from work and love. Elkind argues that this is not helpful to adults. I’d argue this split that adults form among work, play, and love restrains mentors. So, infusing fun and finding ways to make planned “mentoring work” more fun and playful will benefit all mentors, not just those who embrace the “luxury” of engaging more fully in traditional playful mentoring activities with their mentees.

I would like to conclude this section by returning to the idea that at least one of the reasons playful mentoring may be important is that a playful mentor is a happy mentor — and that a happy mentor *smiles*. In an article by a leading scholar (Renee Spencer, author of chapter 1 in this resource) called, “Girls (and boys) just want to have fun . . .”, a common theme emerging in interviews conducted with mentees was the central role of play and engaging in fun activities together. As exemplified by one young person: “. . . each time we hang out, we [are] always *laughing* and . . . glad to be together.” This mentee links laughing with the sense that *my mentor is glad to be with me*. When you smile, you convey being happy. What are you happy about? Your mentee’s conclusion often will be, at some emotional level, “You are happy, because you are with me, and that means I am loved, I am interesting, and I am worth your time.”

### What Does Play Look Like in Mentoring?

There are many different types of play, and figuring out which forms of playful engagement give you the most direct access to your mentee’s inner life can take some experimentation. Each mentee is different in terms of their interest in imaginative play, wordplay, creative expression, role play, or rule-based games and competitive play. If you google





“types of play,” numerous websites will pop up that offer a huge variety of different forms of play you could consider incorporating into your relationship. Below, I describe only a few. But you would be well advised to consider not only what types of play are most common for your mentee’s age and gender (considered in the next section), but also what types of play you, yourself, are most drawn to and likely to enjoy. It is critical that you bring your interests, passions, and curiosities to the table, not only as a way of sharing your joy, but also to increase the likelihood that you truly have fun when you engage in activities intended to be fun. Considerable research suggests mentoring relationships are most successful when mentors and mentees collaborate when selecting activities to do together.

**Play as a backdrop for conversations** – Mentors of youth of all ages will at times see the value of engaging in parallel play, where both the mentor and the mentee do something creative, but independently, as a backdrop to their conversations about other things. Drawing, painting, or building something together can provide a way to normalize conversations that might otherwise feel awkward or uncomfortable if done without such an accompanying activity. If this is the reason for deploying games into your time together, try to avoid games that are too mentally demanding and actually make conversation difficult. It’s hard to have a conversation with your opponent when playing chess, for example, but easy when playing checkers.

**Play as context to communicate appreciation of the mentee’s focused engagement** – Watching your mentee play (for example, by showing you their skills at a video game or demonstrating some other new skill or competence they want to show off) can also be valuable in your relationship. It can be a way for youth to communicate their competence and

can be very validating for them. Mentors would be well advised to avoid taking seriously the doubting comments that enter their mind, such as, “How is this a good use of our mentoring time?” or “How is the skill my mentee is showing me valuable, going to help them in the future, or related to our task today?” Remember, play is a youth’s work. And the youth selects the activity they find enjoyment engaging in or playing, and most adults would be well advised not to critique the value or potential use of such skills.

A young person can feel appreciated “on their own terms” when an adult or older peer watches them play or perform successfully at something that is meaningful to them. But watching your mentee engage in solitary play is only powerful when these observations are accompanied by explicit communication of your pleasure in their engagement. Watching a young person play without communicating your joy is a lost opportunity to show your pride in your mentee and your appreciation for the skill they are sharing with you.





### **Play as a way to connect, bridge differences, and share experiences that deepen the relationship**

– Play can even be a simple digression, where you communicate to the youth, “Hey, let me share something personal with you, something I think you’ll find interesting (given what I know about you) or that I want to share with you about me — something that has absolutely no linear, logical, or obvious role or purpose in my sharing other than for you and me to connect.” Similarly, laughter and play can also be inserted into more tense, tough moments with mentees to diffuse the tension and reestablish connection between the two of you.

### **Contextual Considerations for Play and Having Fun**

There are three pivotal factors to consider when deciding how or when to be playful in a match: the mentee’s age, their gender, and where you two are in your relationship’s life cycle.

#### **Age**

Play with young children often builds on themes of power, freedom, acceptance, and love, and such play communicates to you how they make sense of the world. This is why the animated reading of books that build on these themes is so engaging and playful for them, and can provide a way to engage in discussion that helps mentors better understand their mentees. For adolescents, the undeniable bridge they live on between fantastic childhood and serious adulthood leads them to want to have a foot in both worlds. Rule-based, competitive games offer such a bridge. Similarly, casual discussion of role conflicts and interpersonal dynamics in movies, news, and even friendships allow for a blend of fantasy and reality, and serves as a playground to practice the art of understanding social relationships.

#### **Gender**

It would be a mistake, and do mentors a disservice, to affirm stereotypes about what types of play are better for girls versus boys (in addition to considerations for nongendered or transitioning youth). Such splits by sex or gender in play types also are reflected in psychological research, to be sure. The famous developmental psychologist, Erik Erikson, highlighted gender differences in forms of play that he saw reflecting both socialization forces and biological drives to protect, defend, and dominate that differed between boys and girls. For example, his observations of girls and boys in his therapy work suggested boys liked to build tall, dominating structures, whereas girls tended to build enclosed spaces that were homelike. But such gender differences are not universal, and for some mentees, the expectations and prohibitions that have been placed on them by adults in their lives may feel stagnating. Mentors can provide healing, reparative responses for mentees with such experiences. In fact, mentors may be in a unique role to affirm a mentee’s interest in forms of play that do not conform to societal expectations about gender-typical play.

What is universal, very healthy, and good to encourage across both genders is the desire to create. Creation in many forms is equivalent to playing in the traditional sense. Think of creativity as the act of making something using a preferred set of materials. With blocks, mentees will build; with paint, they will illustrate and express what lies within them. But youth also create using words, through stories, poems, song lyrics, and communication of unique ideas. There are many forms of media that can be used to deploy creativity as forms of playful interactions.



### ***Where You Are in the Mentoring Life Cycle***

There is considerable evidence of the need for a balance of play and work, so to speak, across the mentoring relationship life cycle, and it may be somewhat (if not largely) contingent on the youth's age. For example, early studies of effective relationship styles apparent in the friendship-based Big Brothers Big Sisters community-based mentoring program revealed that mentors who build the relationship through play and non-directed conversations, which allowed the mentor and mentee to learn about one another, yielded stronger relationships and better outcomes. Once these relationships were established, mentors could then more easily begin to focus on more targeted goals. This work included mostly preadolescents; few older teens were included in their study, which clearly revealed that mentors who came in with a “fixing” approach and who, from day one, focused on sharing their wisdom on how the youth could improve their lives (called the “prescriptive style”) fared most poorly.

By contrast, foundational research on a mentoring in apprenticeship program for older youth found the opposite. Those teens, who came to the program hoping it would prepare them to enter the work world, were quite resistant to early efforts by mentors to befriend them through casual conversation and playful interactions. For them, it was work first, play later. In fact, the most effective relationships were those that established solid working relationships and then used those successes as the springboard for forming a more personal relationship later.

I argue that these two sets of findings are not inconsistent. First, as noted earlier, the age of the youth matters — with older youth often wanting a clear purposeful reason for developing this

relationship, while younger children may simply embark on and enjoy the relationship in and of itself. Second, the context of the relationship is also important. In the first example, the Big Brothers Big Sisters program sets up youth for a friendship; the program reported in the apprenticeship study was structured to help establish career-related competencies. Both programs achieved goals but did so differently and in different sequences of play and more purposeful “work.”

Most important was that in both types of programs, there was collaboration in decisions about what to do and discuss, and sharing by both mentors and mentees of personal experiences and interests. What seemed to influence the order was the explicit goals of the program, and the readiness of the mentees to partner. This brings us back to a point discussed earlier: When differences or mistrust may be at play, relationship building might need to be prioritized earlier, regardless of the goals of the program or the relationship. Where performance anxiety is possibly present — and for some youth, note that there can be performance anxiety around “relationship building” — bridges may need to be forged first. Play offers a relationship-building alternative to personal sharing (i.e., interpersonal risk-taking) that can help cultivate trust and safety in the match.





## Tips and Final Thoughts

In this section, I offer the following tips as you embark on efforts to become a more playful mentor:

### Be your authentic self, especially during moments of play and fun with your mentee.

You need to bring yourself to the table, in small ways and bigger ways. Let me share an example from my own mentoring experience of how I brought myself into my relationship in a playful way. One day during our meeting, I opened my Far Side calendar, and my mentee (a third grader in a school-based mentoring program) asked about it. Soon, I found that sharing Far Side comics with him, in between sets of math and spelling flash cards, was a fun way to help him practice reading and complex thinking. (That justification calmed my insecurities about having fun while working with my mentee in the hallway outside his classroom that arose whenever teachers walked by.) We read many Far Side comics — first I did, then he would read one — and we'd try to figure out what made them funny. Though I justified this as creative tutoring, my mentee's own words later confirmed what my own research on mentoring activities should have already taught me. To my surprise, after working with this youth for three years, when I asked him what he enjoyed doing most together, he said, "When you make me laugh." I repeatedly asked, "What thing did we do specifically that was helpful or positive in our mentoring?" and he just kept answering, "You were funny and made me laugh." Finally, he appeased my appeal for specifics and said it was

when we read the Far Side comics. That's the time I also recall laughing during our meetings the most. After meeting with him for three years, doing lots of school-related and creative things, that's what we both remembered and valued.

One reason reading those particular comics may have been so impactful has to be that they made me laugh, and I truly experienced joy sharing my interests with my mentee in this way. I love the Far Side and that came through. I think any activity that can lead you to smile and communicate joy will be useful — assuming your mentee also enjoys the activity — and there is no better way to be real with your mentee than to share what you love.

***Sharing funny stories from your own life can make you appear more real, personal, and open in a way that helps forge a connection.***

My children, for example, and my mentees alike, have always appreciated hearing odd, quirky, and sometimes funny stories from my own years in school, at summer camp, and in my family. Stories that provide a lesson by ending in an unexpected way, or that show how I did something stupid but that I can laugh at in hindsight are usually well received and help make me less unfamiliar and seem more like them. They make me more real, more vulnerable, more flawed — much as most youth view themselves every day. Such partly funny stories foster connection and mutual sharing of vulnerabilities and often trigger youth to either share their own "stupidities" or to ask adults questions about the types of coping strategies they've used in the past.



***Consider using playful activities that are not so fully engrossing or challenging that they can't be interrupted to allow a side conversation.***

This may seem contradictory to the “flow” discussion above, or inconsistent with the chapter in this resource on goal setting (chapter 10) and more targeted mentoring activities, but it is not meant to be. Rather, it is to emphasize that even when not trying to be deliberately funny or playful, be sure to select mentoring activities that allow you to “drop the prop” (set aside the task at hand for a moment) to connect through conversation, when such opportunities arise.

Games — or any activities — that demand uninterrupted attention don't allow the power of interpersonal connection through play to be realized. They foster more “parallel play” where each is doing their own thing, in relative isolation. Considering the earlier example, in a game like chess, where the youth is 100 percent focused on the game during their move, and the mentor is similarly preoccupied during their turn, opportunities for connection and conversation are sidelined. Likewise, most video games don't allow spontaneous digressions and conversation when they are all-engrossing. So, if your goal is to communicate joy at watching your mentee demonstrate their skills, then a video game may serve that brief purpose. But as a mentoring activity to deepen the friendship, such games are not very helpful because they don't allow back and forth interactions. By contrast, checkers is less demanding. It allows more pauses, side conversation, and ongoing discussion. Similarly, tic-tac-toe, is intense but short, and conversations can happen in between game sets. An exception to this general rule (as discussed earlier) is that engaging in an intense game that precludes communication may be useful to give the mentee a chance to shine

and “level the playing field.” But making your entire relationship focused on these kinds of activities would be a missed opportunity.

**Think about your face! Are you smiling, ever, often? You need to work hard on communicating “specialness” to your mentee.**

Do you tend to look serious, show a furrowed brow or squint (even if just because you need glasses but refuse to wear them), or cross your arms when you are thinking or observing? If so, you will need to work harder on communicating “specialness” to your mentee. Your job is to make sure your mentee remembers you looking happy to be with them. Smiling is the easiest way to do that, but so too are nonverbal signs of engagement and enjoyment, such as leaning forward, raising your eyebrows with your eyes wide open, and responding directly to what your mentee shares with you (even just reflecting what you hear back to them to communicate you are giving them your undivided attention). Your mentee will notice what you're saying with your body as much as they notice what you say with your words, so it's very important to be “attuned” to your own (as well as your mentee's) nonverbal cues (see chapter 4 on attunement). The easiest way to ensure you will laugh and smile in the presence of your mentee is to be prepared to play.



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### ***Bring fun things to do or share.***

Whatever makes you chuckle is a good start — even if it turns out to be what they call “dad jokes” — you know, phrases, plays on words, or other silly expressions that are supposed to be funny, even if they are only really funny to you. If you are the only one laughing, it may not matter, for two reasons. First, you are smiling — that’s what your mentee will remember (and attribute as your reaction to being with them). Second, it shows that you made an effort to share something you like and that is interesting to you, in an effort to engender similar happiness in your mentee.

### ***Bring a playful stance to a planned mentoring activity that otherwise seems boring.***

Sometimes bringing in a competitive stance is enough to make something boring, like completing math flashcards, fun. “If you can get six in a row correct, without missing any, we’ll stop and do that thing you wanted to do . . .” (e.g., use the phone to find a picture online to show you some TV character or musician that your mentee can’t believe you’ve never heard of). Thinking of ways to make a boring or worrying task or lesson fun and less serious helps shift the balance from boring to fun. Even in just those interactions and the negotiations they entail, you both will smile, and you will communicate to your mentee that their feelings have been heard and their needs are being recognized as important.

So, go out there and have some fun! And remember that even though being a mentor is a serious responsibility, the mentors who can bring and share joy and fun moments to a young person are those who are likely to do the most meaningful and memorable work.





## Additional Reading and Resources

The print titles listed here should be available through local or online bookstores or through your public library.

**Two books focused on helping adults bring play into their relationships with youth:**

- ***Playful Parenting***  
(2001) by Lawrence Cohen – This book provides step-by-step suggestions on ways to introduce play as well as how play can address parents' concerns.
- ***The Power of Play***  
(2007) by David Elkind – This book provides an overview of the importance of play for youth in their development, generally and in specific contexts, like at home and at school.

**Two books focused on helping adults bring play into their relationships with youth:**

- ***You've Got to Be Kidding: How Jokes Can Help You Think*** (2009)
- ***A Time to Laugh: The Religion of Humor*** (2005)

You can also find a wide world of books of both jokes and fun in-person games through the library, as well as through collections of jokes online. Websites where teachers provide ideas for jazzing up boring lessons and invite fun or competition into teaching are also a good source of fun mentoring activities.

### Diving into the research on play:

Much of the research on which this chapter was based can be found in a special issue of the *Journal of Youth Development* available online, including through [Amazon](#):

- Karcher, M. J., Nakkula, M. J. (Eds.) (2010). Play, talk, learn: Promising practices in youth mentoring [Special issue]. *New Directions for Youth Development*, 126. Jossey-Bass.

Mentors who want to go even deeper into the research on the importance of play can seek out these articles, which should be available through your local public library or online through sources like [Research Gate](#):

- Caldwell, L. L., & Witt, P. A. (2011). Leisure, recreation, and play from a developmental context. *New Directions for Youth Development*, 130, 13-27.
- Chilenski, S. M., Ridenour, T., Bequette, A. W., & Caldwell, L. L. (2015). Pathways of influence: How parental behaviors and free time experiences are associated with African American early adolescent development and academic achievement. *Journal of Negro Education*, 84(3), 401-415.
- Nakkula, M. J., & Harris, J. T. (2010). Beyond the dichotomy of work and fun: Measuring the

thorough interrelatedness of structure and quality in youth mentoring relationships. *New Directions for Youth Development*, 126, 71-87.

- Karcher, M. J., & Nakkula, M. J. (2010). Youth mentoring with a balanced focus, shared purpose, and collaborative interactions. *New Directions for Youth Development*, 126, 13-32.
- Karcher, M. J. & Hansen, K. (2014). Mentoring activities and interactions. In D. L. DuBois, & M. J. Karcher (Eds.), *Handbook of Youth Mentoring* (2nd ed., pp. 63-72). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- Keller, T. E., & Pryce, J. M. (2010). Mutual but unequal: Mentoring as a hybrid of familiar relationship roles. *New Directions for Youth Development*, 126, 33-50.
- Keller, T. E., & Pryce, J. M. (2012). Different roles and different results: How activity orientations correspond to relationship quality and student outcomes in school-based mentoring. *Journal of Primary Prevention*, 33(1), 47-64.
- Spencer, R., Drew, A. L., Walsh, J., & Kanchewa, S. S. (2018). Girls (and boys) just want to have fun: A mixed-methods examination of the role of gender in youth mentoring relationship duration and quality. *The Journal of Primary Prevention*, 39(1), 17-35.



**MENTOR**

## CHAPTER 4

# ATTUNEMENT IN MENTORING RELATIONSHIPS

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### What Does Being Attuned in a Mentoring Relationship Mean?

Attunement is a term we use to describe a set of communication strategies employed by a support provider to facilitate relationship connection and create a sense that the recipient feels “heard and seen.” In the context of youth mentoring, we often think about the importance of mentors demonstrating attunement in their relationships with mentees; we have also learned that attunement is important for program staff to demonstrate when interacting with those they support. That is, similar processes are needed to support each level of the mentoring system (see chapter 7 for more on the mentoring relationship system). Importantly, being “attuned” involves a set of skills that we can all develop, practice, and grow over time.

One component of attunement involves noticing one’s own cues as we notice those of others. In other words, we attune to ourselves, to attune to others. Attuned mentors work to notice their own cues (bodily state, thoughts, feelings). They can in turn observe their mentee’s verbal and nonverbal cues, and respond to those cues in a flexible way, without pushing their agenda at the expense of the connection. This process of attunement involves an intentional focus on building a relationship and on prioritizing the mentee’s needs and preferences alongside one’s own, in order to “meet the mentee where they are.” In this way, attunement represents a broad strategy to elicit, read, interpret and reflect on others’ cues.

In this chapter, we define attunement from the adult perspective, as well as provide initial insights on how youth experience attuned interactions with adults in their lives (including with their mentors). We discuss what attunement looks like, how it works, and how you can develop your skills in using this approach.

Using the information in this chapter, mentors can grow in their awareness of their own strengths and challenges in being attuned and reflect on how to be more attuned in their relationships with others. Attunement to your mentee’s cues incorporates the responsiveness discussed in chapter 1 on empathy and expands on the affective component of empathy by building in behavioral responses. Attunement skills may also be particularly helpful when mentors and mentees come from different cultural and personal backgrounds, as discussed in chapter 2 on cultural humility.

### Why Attunement Is Important in Mentoring Relationships

Attunement is a set of skills conceptualized and researched by the authors of this chapter. In the mentoring field, attunement emerged primarily out of watching supportive adults (i.e., mentors and staff) and young students interact together in school-based mentoring programs. By observing them weekly for a year, we were able to observe a set of skills, now labeled “attunement,” that were demonstrated by those mentors and staff most capable of building relationships with mentees across age, gender, race, and levels of risk. Through this work, we also saw that mentees paired with more attuned mentors reported stronger mentoring relationships and demonstrated improved school engagement relative to those with less attuned mentors.

Since this early work, attunement in youth mentoring has become the focus of a training initiative for mentors and mentoring program staff. The training uses the Mentoring FAN (Facilitating Attuned Interactions), an approach originally developed to support home visitors (i.e., helpers who support parents with new babies) by Professor Gilkerson and her team at the Erikson Institute.



Research on this training has demonstrated that it can help mentors and mentoring program staff improve critical attunement skills, such as expressed empathy, and increase their confidence and satisfaction in their role. Youth who experience attuned relationships with adults describe themselves as “feeling known” and “feeling seen” by these adults and feeling accepted for who they are.

The theory underlying attunement suggests that meeting young people where they are (e.g., in terms of their development, life experiences, personal wisdom, and worldview) facilitates collaboration and capacity building for mentees. As mentors read mentee cues and “meet them where they are,” they share ideas and decision-making, devoting intentional effort to hearing ideas from the mentee and building on them together.

Attunement requires empathy (i.e., flexible responding and perspective-taking; see chapter 1 on empathy) and suggests actions that build upon empathic skills. Empathizing with your mentee allows you to read cues, and attunement allows you to respond in a way that keeps pace with your mentee’s dynamic preferences and needs. You also identify places where and when you can challenge your mentee in ways that do not jeopardize, but rather strengthen, your connection.

Feedback on attunement from adolescents and emerging adults affirms its value and suggests important components. In ongoing work by the authors of this chapter, we are interviewing young people and learning how they experience and describe attunement in their own words. Generally speaking, they agree it is important for their adult and older peer mentors to pay attention to their body language, not just what they say; to check in on how they are feeling in the relationship; and to give them space to express their feelings and

their perspectives before offering solutions and advice. They want mentors to validate their feelings, explore their own ideas and solutions, and respect the expertise they have about their own lives. At the same time, some express resistance in engaging in mentoring sessions that feel “too much like therapy.” They acknowledge that mentors occupy a unique and special role, one that requires a bit of a balancing act! In this work, it’s disheartening to hear that young people often experience a lack of attunement in their mentoring relationships yet struggle to speak up when their needs are not being met because of the power mentors hold in the relationship. This speaks to and further reinforces the importance of attunement skills in mentoring practice.

### **What Does Attunement Look Like in Practice?**

Attunement is a process of paying attention to the young person (or their parent/guardian) in the moment and noticing their cues in order to meet them where they are. This often involves reading body language and verbal signs to understand how to move forward in the interaction. To begin, attunement involves calming or centering yourself and noticing your own cues, which can be particularly useful during times of stress and uncertainty for mentors. Am I feeling anxious? Worried about my mentee? Have I had a long day already, and am I dragging as I greet my mentee? Or am I excited and eager, building off our last great conversation? A brief check-in with yourself before connecting with your mentee provides an opportunity to attune to your own nonverbal cues. These cues could be tension in your neck, a faster heart rate, a sense of fatigue, or a faster gait than usual. In other words, developing skills in attunement requires that you first attune to yourself.



Otherwise, you are unlikely to be able to read and respond to the cues of your mentee because you are caught up in your own emotions, thoughts, and physical state.

To attune to your own thoughts, behaviors, and feelings, it's useful to consider how you can begin to read your own cues more clearly. What practices could you commit to that can help you read your cues regularly? How might other relationships in your life be causing stress right now? Could deep breathing help you be present here and now? A question to yourself prior to calling or seeing your mentee (e.g., "How am I feeling? What am I bringing to this call?") can be helpful. Some people visualize something that helps them feel calm, while others use physical movement to help ground themselves (e.g., touching the ends of your fingertips together and paying attention, which can help you notice your body in space). Before reading further, consider other ways you can ground yourself prior to connecting with your mentee, and commit to a practice that you can use easily and regularly.

As we attune to ourselves, we are better able to attune to our mentee's verbal and nonverbal cues, as well as the cues of others in their lives (e.g., parents, teachers). Research suggests that young people often communicate with their body language as much as with their voices, so observing cues includes noticing eye contact, body posture, pace of speech, and other behaviors. Take a moment and consider what cues your mentee shares with you to let you know how they're doing. Do they typically share their emotional state with you verbally (e.g., "I'm excited today!" or "I'm frustrated.")? Or are they more inclined to let you know by what they don't say, or how they move their body or shift their focus? What are the telltale signs from your mentee that they are feeling a certain way or that they have

something on their mind? What are the signs they share that are more difficult for you to read? Feel free, after reading this chapter, to consider having a conversation with your mentee about how they express themselves and what they want you to know or learn about the cues they send.

As you read the cues of your mentee, you can collaborate and explore with them, build capacity, and reflect on their strengths and insights. This process is illustrated through the Mentoring FAN model on the following page. This graphic can be useful before and after your time with your mentee, as you reflect on how you "matched" them or how you might have had trouble reading cues. As you become more familiar with the model, you can keep a vision of it in your head when you are meeting with your mentee to think about where each of you might be landing that day. While you may not use this model directly during mentoring, you might share it with your mentee and talk through the different pieces. It also serves as a helpful visualization of the concepts we discuss here.



# ATTUNEMENT IN MENTORING RELATIONSHIPS



In the center of the model are the many “balls” a mentor is “juggling” as they build their relationship with their mentee. You, as the mentor, have your own expectations and concerns as you work to get to know your mentee’s preferences and needs. If you are mentoring through a program, it also has expectations (e.g., how often you meet with your mentee, in what capacity), as well as its own concerns and constraints. As you juggle these balls, you work to meet your mentee, or others in their network, where they are.

As you can see on the far left, the **Calming** “wedge” is the place we start in every interaction. As we discussed previously, you will be better able to read your mentee (or another person in their life) if you are grounded and calm. You can return to a **Calming** practice throughout your time together. For example, in a difficult conversation about a fight your mentee had with their sister, they get frustrated and become withdrawn. This is a wonderful time to reengage a **Calming** practice as you try to give your mentee space to respond when they are ready, rather than filling in the silence with suggestions or worries.





Beyond starting with the **Calming** wedge, all other wedges (i.e., **Feeling, Thinking, Doing, Reflecting**) are places where you might join your mentee, depending on their cues. To be clear, we use the Mentoring FAN as a “GPS” tool to figure out where we are with the mentee, but it’s not giving us directions on where to go. That is, for the most part, we don’t try to move our mentee to another wedge. Instead, we strive as mentors to follow their lead and meet them in each wedge to be attuned together, but mentees will move on their own from wedge to wedge. It’s our job to meet them wherever they go.

So, if your mentee is expressing **Feeling**, either verbally or nonverbally, join them there (e.g., “That’s great! I’m thrilled too!” or “I’m so sorry to hear that — you’re right, it is so disappointing.” or “You seem quiet — what’s up?”). Do not skim over the **Feeling** in order to problem-solve or act. Instead, stay in the **Feeling** wedge until your mentee demonstrates they are ready to problem-solve (for example, they ask you what you think) or moves on to a different wedge. Similarly, if your mentee is problem-solving about a conflict with a friend or an upcoming tryout for a team (i.e., in **Thinking** wedge), share ideas together (perhaps by asking them what they think) rather than offering your advice all at once. In the **Thinking** wedge, it’s often helpful to build off of your mentee’s wisdom and ideas (e.g., “What has worked for you in the past?”) so that the solution you two identify is informed by their experience.

If you meet your mentee during a game of basketball, but you are concerned about their grades, hold off on raising the topic of their grades until the game (i.e., the **“Doing”**) is completed. Then, look for openings (e.g., they begin a discussion about school, expression of worry) to talk about their grades instead of redirecting their interest to

meet your needs (e.g., “I see you’re playing, but I wanted to talk about your grades first . . .”). In this example, while a conversation about grades is likely an important one, your mentee might join you there more openly if you first engage in their activity, and offer them a say in when they might be ready to talk about their grades (e.g., “Love playing basketball with you — before I leave today, I have to check in with you on a few things, OK?”). You may want to check out chapter 11, which offers a number of strategies for how to start these types of conversations and evoke “change talk” in effective ways, while in the middle of **Doing** activities.

Meeting your mentee in the **Reflecting** wedge takes place when they are taking stock or considering an experience, or when they are having an “aha” moment or insight (e.g., “I just realized I haven’t called my mom because I’m afraid of what I might hear.”) When your mentee is in the **Reflecting** wedge, it’s a time to “glow” with them in moments of accomplishment (e.g., “That is such great news — I’m proud of you.” “That took a lot of courage!”) or reflect back what you see them doing well. This is an opportunity to pause, perhaps to take stock in your time with your mentee, prior to parting ways for the day.

When using the Mentoring FAN approach, a set of questions (called the “ARC of Engagement”) can be used to help you stay attuned and let you know when you’re not tracking accurately. As shown in the model, these ARC questions are often useful when meeting your mentee in certain wedges (e.g., ARC Pre-Contact in Calming, ARC Beginning in Feeling, ARC Middle in Thinking, and ARC End in Doing). The Pre-Contact question is **“How am I doing?”** which you can ask as you attune to yourself prior to connecting with your mentee. The ARC Beginning question (i.e., **“What has the day [or period of time**



**since you last saw them] been like for you so far?”)** is helpful to ask when your mentee is in Feeling, and/or toward the beginning of your time together. You can modify this question if you'd like; the key is to make it reflective and personalized (i.e., make sure to include the “for you” part). This question facilitates sharing and connection and can help your mentee feel seen. The “ARC Middle” question (i.e., **“Are we getting to what you wanted to talk about today?”** or **“Anything else on your mind?”**) can be asked when your mentee is in the Thinking wedge, and/or toward the middle of your time together. This question allows you to share power with your mentee and gives them another opportunity to identify or remind you what is most important to them. The “ARC End” question (i.e., **“What stands out from our time together?”** or **“What are you taking away from our time together?”**) is a wonderful way to reflect together, often toward the end of your shared time. You can initiate this on your own by sharing what stands out for you, using this as a chance to praise your mentee and highlight something positive you noticed during your shared time. These ARC questions help provide structure for time with your mentee. They can be adapted to fit your style and approach; just try to maintain the function and spirit of the questions as you make them your own.

As we partner with our mentee, sharing our wisdom as needed while drawing on theirs, we help them feel seen and heard.

Using the Mentoring FAN model and incorporating the ARC questions is preferred to a more prescriptive approach that is mentor led and focused on the mentor's goals (or the program's) rather than the young person's. Attunement can result in stronger reflective capacity, stronger relationships, and increased confidence in one's role as a mentor.

### Contextual Considerations for Applying Attunement

Attunement can help build relationships with young people across all ages and stages of development, although it may take shape differently with older youth. For example, the opportunity to “think together” when a mentee is in the Thinking wedge may be particularly important for older children and adolescents, as they learn more and more how to use their voice and experience in their own lives. Youth feedback on attunement also reminds us that advice-giving from mentors is welcomed, assuming trust has been established and the mentee feels the mentor respects them for who they are and what they value.

Attunement can be applied not only to our mentees, but also to those in their relationship “system” (see chapter 7 for more details about the ecosystem of a mentoring relationship). As an example, consider a scenario where your mentee's parent expresses frustration at your mentee's behavior. An attuned response would acknowledge their feeling (e.g., “I hear you — this sounds so hard and it is frustrating!”) and pause to see if the parent is able to share more. This approach allows the parent to be heard, and it often also lets the feeling “move” through more quickly, instead of causing the parent to get “stuck.” The flexibility and adaptability that are core features of attunement can also be very



useful when attuning to a group — a process similar to that discussed in chapter 6 on facilitating group interactions.

Attunement builds the relationship steadily across the relationship cycle but may be particularly important at the beginning and end of the relationship, as well as during more emotionally sensitive times. Because attunement is an intentional and effortful process, it can be challenging to stay attentive to cues, especially when things are feeling relaxed, fun, and easy. Attunement may therefore feel more relevant in times when support is needed (e.g., during a conflict or transition), or when a mentee's needs change. However, working to attune can help mentors manage and respond flexibly to unexpected stressors and situations that arise in the mentee's life across the relationship cycle. Keep in mind that the signals to communicate mentee needs can be subtle. Cues can change from moment to moment, and different young people give different types of cues. Even when things are feeling generally relaxed and enjoyable, pay attention to shifts in mood or engagement. It could be a memory, or another person entering the space that triggers the shift, or it could be something you said that slipped out and felt dismissive to the young person.

Developing skills in attunement is a lifelong process and can look slightly different over time and across the many relationships in your life. We realize this may sound daunting! That said, practice makes perfect. The more you work at reading cues (i.e., yours and your mentee's), the easier it will become. As we practice, we grow in self-awareness and can start noticing those things that agitate us and those that help us calm down. We also learn which wedges of the Mentoring FAN are most comfortable and which require more work on our part. Finally,

we learn the critical value of repair, as none of us are attuned all the time! In fact, research on intimate relationships suggests that most of the time, we are not attuned. In those many instances, attunement involves acknowledging the misstep (e.g., “I got ahead of you there and was distracted — can we try that again?”) and rebuilding. This process of repair strengthens your relationship and builds capacity for yourself and your mentee.

Attunement requires particular effort when verbal and nonverbal cues are informed by significant cultural differences. For example, in some cultures, eye contact is seen as a sign of respect, and in others, it is seen as a sign of disrespect. Similarly, some families speak at high volume, regardless of content being shared, while other families speak quietly, whether angry or calm. Some cultures regard sharing ideas with an adult as collaborative and generative, while others expect the young person to primarily receive and implement adult ideas. The cultural humility useful in learning about and working with these differences is discussed well in chapter 2. As you move forward with your mentee, make sure to consider how cultural background might inform how you read your mentee's cues.

### Tips and Final Thoughts

The following tips can help you develop and practice your attunement skills with your mentee:

- Attend to your own stress level so you can be open and approach the relationship with curiosity more than authority.
- Make sure to regulate and calm yourself as much as possible. This facilitates connection with your mentee and helps you have empathy for them as you develop ideas and build solutions together.



- Get to know your own strengths and weaknesses in your use of the Mentoring FAN. Are you comfortable talking about feelings? Are you a “doer”? Is reflection hard for you? These insights can help you assess your comfort zones and areas of competence as a starting point for growth.
- Give the ARC questions a try during your time with your mentee, and practice them enough so you can make them your own. They may feel awkward at first, but mentors have shared with us that they help them connect with their mentee, as well as provide a safe and trustworthy rhythm for their time together.
- If you are part of a mentoring program, make sure to seek support from a program staff member or supervisor to discuss your self-identified weakness and ways to build your capacity in this area.
- Avoid a “therapeutic” approach; your mentee may experience this as confining or overly formal.

Finally, and most important, don't give up as you work to develop attunement skills! It's a slow but steady process, and when you misstep (as we all do), don't hesitate to repair and acknowledge what you have missed. Developing these skills is a worthwhile investment that can strengthen not only your relationship with your mentee, but also other important relationships across your life.

### Additional Reading and Resources

The resources listed below can be accessed online at the links we have provided.

- ***Mentor Attunement: An Approach to Successful School-based Mentoring Relationships*** (2012) by Julia Pryce – This research article describes the initial work of conceptualizing attunement. It is available through Research Gate [here](#).
- ***The Mentoring FAN: A Promising Approach to Enhancing Attunement within the Mentoring System*** – (2018) by Julia Pryce and Linda Gilkerson – This article describes research findings on the use of the Mentoring FAN in real-life programs. It is available through Research Gate [here](#).

Please email [jpryce@luc.edu](mailto:jpryce@luc.edu) if you are interested in learning more about attunement training for mentors and/or mentoring staff using the Mentoring FAN.





**MENTOR**

## **CHAPTER 5**

# **UNDERSTANDING EFFECTIVE ONLINE COMMUNICATION**

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### What Does Effective Online Communication Mean?

Online communication is communication between people using a computer or mobile device (e.g., cell phone, tablet, video game console). This form of communication is increasingly common in our modern world and in the world of mentoring, as well. The incorporation of online communication into mentoring is often referred to as **e-mentoring, digital mentoring, or online mentoring**.

Although we tend to think of mentoring as an inherently in-person, intimate activity, there are many mentoring contexts in which matches may communicate frequently, if not exclusively, using online technology. For instance, a youth may need support from someone with a particular skill, set of characteristics, or shared lived experience who doesn't live in their nearby community; e-mentoring can make a mentoring relationship for this youth possible. This chapter will discuss how to have a mentoring relationship — or enhance your mentoring relationship — through online communication.

Online communication can take many forms. It can include video calls through platforms such as Zoom, FaceTime, or social media applications (apps). It can also include text messaging or direct messages (DMs) through social media apps. Online communication can be conducted through online gaming where players talk via headsets and interact within the game while competing against each other from different locations. It can include joint use of mobile apps or interacting through social media such as sharing content or responding to each other's posts through "likes," "loves," comments, or shares. Online communication may also include phone calls, although technically not "online" so they are not described in detail here. Similarly,

although email is another common form of online communication, it's becoming less popular with youth, so it's not discussed here.

The online communication practices and tips discussed in this chapter can be helpful when considering almost any aspect or type of mentoring described in this resource. In fact, developing online communication skills in young people — and providing them with opportunities to watch you model such practices effectively — is crucial as they move toward adulthood in a digital world.

### Why Online Communication Is Important in Mentoring Relationships

For decades, social psychologists have been studying how friendships, romantic relationships, and professional connections are built online. Research shows that strong, successful online relationships are possible. The strength of such relationships depends on many factors, such as how often and for how long relationship partners connect online, the quality of their interactions, the extent to which more personal information and thoughts are shared by the partners, and what each partner gains and gives in such a relationship.

In mentoring, the strength of relationships that are developed entirely online depends on many of the same factors that are important in other types of online relationships. In addition, successful online communication between you and your mentee depends on your mentee's developmental stage (e.g., age, maturity level), the types of activities you do together online, the depth of your interactions, and your and your mentee's comfort level with a given technology platform. We advise you (and mentoring programs) to keep these factors in mind when communicating online with a young person.



There are many potential benefits to online communication in mentoring. First, in many ways, this approach meets young people where they are, as most youth are very comfortable communicating with their peers and others using these modes.

Today's young people are "digital natives," meaning they have grown up with the internet, smartphones, social media, and various forms of online communication and have learned how to use these technologies from a very young age.

Second, in-person mentoring relationships can be strengthened using online communication. For example, it can allow you and your mentee to keep in regular contact even when you can't see each other in person. This can help with consistency in the relationship and contribute to building trust and rapport between you. This may be especially true if you are mentoring in a program where meeting times are limited, such as in a classroom context or for set hours after school. Being able to reach you remotely outside of in-person activities can be of great benefit to a young person in times of crisis.

Third, online communication can be used in mentoring to talk about more sensitive topics that you or your mentee may be more hesitant to discuss when face-to-face. Such sensitive topics may include substance use, mental health challenges, sexual exploration, or anything else a young person may find difficult to discuss when facing an adult in person. Chatting online about such topics may be easier for you as well, as it will allow you time to be thoughtful in crafting your response.

Fourth, online communication can expand the reach of mentoring more broadly. For instance, some mentoring matches may communicate entirely online, which was a necessity for many programs during the COVID-19 pandemic. This allowed mentoring pairs to continue their relationships

and maintain social connection at a distance. Even as the pandemic subsides, remote learning and work, and networking across the globe will remain. During non-pandemic times, online communication can be used to link more youth with mentors who fit their needs. For example, if a young person is looking for a mentor who has a specific career (e.g., a female environmental engineer) or a specific health condition (e.g., organ transplant recipient), but there are few such mentors in the youth's local community, online mentoring can help that youth connect with a mentor in an entirely different geographic location.

**Learning about effective online communication is a good life and career skill for young people to develop.**

Finally, learning about effective online communication is a good life and career skill for young people to develop. Youth will be entering a technology-driven world as they transition to adulthood, and using online communication will be important in their higher education, career, and simply in their everyday interactions with family, friends, colleagues, and their broader communities. By incorporating online communication into your mentoring relationship, you can guide and model how to communicate effectively in this way, including safety in online interactions. For instance, you can guide your mentee on digital skills, such as how to monitor their online presence (given that



any text and video created is a permanent fixture in the broader internet), safe communication with strangers, and avoiding online content that may not be age appropriate. If you are unfamiliar with a given form of online communication, learning how to use it with your mentee could be beneficial for you in everyday life as well.

### ***A Note about Online Exploitation of Youth -***

Research shows that online exploitation of young people is not as common as the media may lead us to believe, and youth are more likely to be exploited in person by someone they know than by someone they meet online.<sup>1</sup> While such scenarios are certainly something for those working with or caring for youth to be aware of, the concern should be tempered by the fact that it is fairly uncommon. An online mentor who is connected with a structured program will likely be subjected to the same screening and background-check procedures as they would if they were applying to be an in-person mentor. If you are part of a program, serving as an online or in-person mentor, make sure you understand what online communication with your mentee can entail (e.g., what kind of platforms you can use, whether the program needs to review your exchanges, etc.). If you are working with youth outside of a program, it is recommended that your mentee's caregivers provide permission for you to communicate online with your mentee and outline the parameters of this communication.

### **What Does Good Online Communication Look Like in Practice?**

There are many different forms online communication can take. Here we summarize them, discussing potential benefits and challenges of each mode. One overarching challenge to note is that many of these forms of communication require a sufficient and stable internet connection. For some

mentees, particularly those in less-resourced or rural settings, this may be a challenge. Some types of online communication also require certain devices (such as a specific video game console) or a paid subscription (in the case of many apps).

Regardless of the mode, conversations around expectations for online communication are key to ensuring you and your mentee are engaging in ways that are acceptable to both of you. This could include expectations for communication frequency, hours of availability, response time, and what activities you'll engage in using online platforms. Younger youth may feel overwhelmed by too much online interaction, whereas teens may be tempted to engage in continuous texting throughout the day like they do with peers. Likewise, you may need to limit online interactions to certain hours or specifically scheduled times, and your mentee should not be distracted by text messages or their next move in a joint gaming app during school hours.

**Video calls** are phone calls that include a video image. These can be held on a number of platforms, such as Zoom, Skype, FaceTime, or through social media video calling features.

Benefits:

- Allows you and your mentee to have a face-to-face conversation without having to be in the same place.
- Allows you to see each other's facial expressions and body language and to read emotions accordingly.
- Can be used for joint activities that may typically be done in person, such as drawing, cooking, or playing a game like charades or Pictionary.

<sup>1</sup>boyd, d. (2014). *It's complicated: The social lives of networked teens*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.



- Enables you and your mentee to show each other your surroundings, pets, and other possessions, or to introduce each other to important people in your lives.

### Challenges:

- Requires extra creativity when working with younger children, given their attention spans are still developing.
- Requires more bandwidth from an internet connection.
- May take some extra coordination to ensure privacy during the call, especially if the mentee is living in close quarters with other family members. While privacy may not be an issue for younger mentees, it may be a challenge for older (teenage) mentees if you or your mentee want to discuss a sensitive topic.
- Power imbalances may be more apparent in video calls. For instance, calling your mentee from a balcony overlooking a pool or having a big-screen television in the background may make a mentee with fewer resources feel self-conscious.

**Texting/DMs** include short snippets of conversation that happen synchronously or asynchronously. For instance, you could send an encouraging text to your mentee the morning of a big exam or sports match. Or a full conversation could occur over text if both you and your mentee are engaged at the same time, mimicking an in-person conversation.

### Benefits:

- Allows you or your mentee to share GIFs (animated images), memes (a static image, video, or piece of text that is shared repeatedly across the internet and can be used to quickly relay information, a sentiment, or an idea —

click here to see an example), or emojis (a small digital image used to express an emotion or idea) to emphasize a point or quickly relay an emotion, joke, or idea.

- You can take your time crafting a thoughtful response to an important question from your mentee.
- These can be used to have more in-depth conversations that may be awkward for a mentee in a face-to-face situation, such as feelings around their parents' recent divorce.

### Challenges:

- Even though this can be used as an asynchronous form of communication that doesn't require you both to be "on" at the same time, a response is often expected quickly, especially by young people. If a mentee sends a text and the mentor can't respond immediately, a mentee may feel ignored or neglected. Likewise, if a mentee doesn't respond in a timely manner or with an expected level of engagement, you may feel the mentee is disinterested and that you're not achieving your mentoring goals. For this reason, it's important to set expectations with your mentee around responsiveness and engagement level, including when texts can be sent/received, and what it might mean if a response is not immediate (e.g., the mentee is in school or you're putting your own children to bed).
- Nuance can sometimes be lost in text. For example, sarcasm or humor may not be apparent in a text conversation; this is why emojis are often helpful to include to fully illustrate your intended meaning (e.g., 🙄 to indicate "I'm teasing you.").



**Gaming** involves using the internet to play a game together or as a team if in a small group mentoring setting. We recommend this form of online communication for mentors and mentees with gaming systems and experience, as there are usually costs and a steep learning curve involved.

Benefits:

- Gamers can use a headset to talk even when playing from different locations, or they can interact through the game without talking, depending on the type of game being played. Some examples of online games that can be played from different locations include checkers, Clue, UNO!, Minecraft, Among Us, and Mario Kart.
- Many online board games are free or very low cost.

Challenges:

- Different rules and controls are needed for each game and may require some patience while learning.
- Some games require an expensive console, purchasing the game itself, or upgraded account memberships for each mentoring partner.

**Joint app** use involves using a mobile app together from two different locations. This is similar to the setup for gaming, but can involve activities other than playing video games.

Benefits:

- The possibilities with this form of communication are endless. Mentoring pairs can participate in TikTok social media challenges or dances. They can watch movies or shows together on TeleParty, which

synchronizes video playback and adds a group chat to streaming platforms such as Hulu, Netflix, or Disney+. They can create a virtual universe where they can play, create, or do other activities together on Roblox.

- Many of these apps allow for multiple users at one time, which makes them ideal for small group online mentoring interactions.
- Social media apps can be used to share information with each other (and other social connections) about your likes and dislikes, and snippets of each of your daily lives. In the past, all of this information could only be shared verbally. These apps make it possible to get to know each other in a more passive way through quick photos, video clips, and musings about any topic of interest. Mentees may divulge information in this way that they may not feel comfortable chatting about in person.

Challenges:

- Some apps come with a small cost or may have charges to unlock additional features.
- Social media apps with many “friends” or “followers” means that everyone in your network will see what you post, unless your settings are adjusted otherwise.





## How do you determine which form of online communication or activity is best? Start by asking your mentee.

Chances are mentees have already used several of these platforms or activities, especially as a result of remote learning and virtual social interactions during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Generally, young people will let you know if they are (un)comfortable with online communication by how engaged they are. If conversations are forced or engagement falls off quickly during an activity, that may signal this is not the right mode or that your mentee isn't enjoying the activity. It may be helpful to check in with your mentee on a regular basis to see whether they are enjoying the online activities, whether their expectations are being met, and if there are other modes they want to try.

### Contextual Considerations for Online Communication

While online communication is now ubiquitous, and there are dozens of options for ways to engage a young person in online activities, there are several considerations to keep in mind. They include the programmatic context (if any), your mentee's age or developmental stage, where in the relationship cycle you are, and the role of your mentee's family.

Research has not yet revealed a definitive "right" or "wrong" way to incorporate online communication into mentoring. For instance, we don't know how often you and your mentee should communicate

online (if the relationship is completely digital) or the right blend of online and in-person communication. We also don't know which mode is best for different types of mentoring goals. How often and in what ways you should interact will vary depending on your goals and your mentee's specific needs. Regardless, we offer some suggestions below that may help prevent online communication from becoming unhelpful or even harmful to your mentee.

#### *Programmatic Context*

Some mentoring programs may place limits on the types of platforms that can be used with a mentee due to concerns with safety, information security, or even the program's own comfort level with a given technology. For mentors not tied to a specific program, it's best to start with a technology with which you and your mentee are already comfortable. For example, if you both use FaceTime to talk with other friends and relatives, you might want to start with that. You can always learn new apps and platforms later as your mentoring relationship grows. Check with your mentee's family (and your program, if relevant) to make sure they are comfortable with interaction on a given platform.

#### *Developmental Considerations*

Deciding on the type of online communication you will use and the length and context of your interactions depends on the youth's age and maturity level. For instance, a mentor would be unwise to force a 90-minute video call on an 8-year-old with a limited attention span. Texting with a teenager may come naturally, but for a younger mentee just learning to write, it may be too frustrating. Keep in mind your mentee's age and level of socioemotional development when choosing how to communicate online and how long you want each online interaction to be.



## **Timing in the Relationship Cycle**

Getting to know each other's online style and interests should come early in an online mentoring relationship, just as a mentor and mentee would get to know each other's hobbies, interests, and mannerisms if meeting in person. Our online persona is a part of our identities now, and this should be explored for both you and your mentee at the beginning of the relationship. Are you and your mentee comfortable on camera? Are you comfortable using social media platforms? Is communicating through text too much work, or does it feel less intimidating than staring at each other on video? Online communication styles should be explored early on, but joint activities can adapt to these technologies throughout the mentoring relationship and may, in fact, change over time as your relationship — and your mentee — grow.

## **The Role of Family/Caregivers**

Online communication may require coordinating with a mentee's family or caregivers to schedule a video call or establish limits on what hours an online interaction can occur (both for your mentee's and your own sake). Some mentees may be sharing electronic devices with others in their household, limiting their ability to send sensitive texts or to use the technology during certain times. Some families may also place limits on their children's use of certain types of technology, such as social media platforms.

## **Tips and Final Thoughts**

Online communication can open up a world of possibilities for creative interaction using technology. It can also greatly expand the reach of mentoring to youth who may not have access to the type of mentoring they need. But online communication can also be challenging. First, it requires sufficient access to technology tools, internet service, and bandwidth. The COVID-19 pandemic revealed that many young people are living in areas where access to WiFi is difficult, making their access to online learning extremely challenging. Both you and your mentee must have a reliable device and reliable internet. While the infrastructure to provide universal internet access is continually improving, this remains a challenge for many.

Another major challenge is that online communication, while in many cases a great substitute for in-person interaction, is not entirely "natural," and adjustments have to be made accordingly. For instance, staring at ourselves in a video call or having intense eye contact at close range on video can be more intimate and therefore more uncomfortable than having an in-person conversation where we can lean back, avert our eyes, or look at other things. For young people, especially teenagers who are adjusting to a developing body and the self-consciousness that comes with it, this awkwardness can be difficult to manage.







A third challenge is finding what works for a mentoring pair or group in the online space. Since online communication does not come as naturally as in-person socializing, it requires that you try many different types of communication, lengths of time per session, and activities to see what grabs and holds the attention of your mentee. Below are some suggestions for initiating and strengthening online communication as part of your mentoring relationship.

### ***Get to know your mentee's online capabilities.***

As a first step, consider your mentee's age, maturity level, and attention span, and which kinds of technology are best given these characteristics. Find out whether they are most comfortable with video chats or texting, and try not to force one mode of communication over another, at least in the beginning. Also make sure this mode is in line with program expectations if you are working with one. Start small and with realistic expectations. If possible, use their favorite platforms or apps; follow your mentee's lead in what they are most comfortable with or enjoy the most. If your mentee seems uncomfortable with certain aspects of online communication, you can model how to make it more effective, such as turning on your own camera during a video call even if your mentee prefers not to turn on theirs.

### ***Ensure privacy.***

Will anyone else be sharing your mentee's device? Will this impact what text conversations or data can be stored on it? Ensure that your mentee has access to a private location in their home or other setting so that more sensitive conversations are possible. Mentoring in an online space requires particular attention to privacy for all parties involved, as any written text or recorded video becomes a permanent fixture in the online space. In that same

regard, be careful what you choose to share with your mentee, always considering the possibility that it could be shared with or viewed by others. The same respect should be given to mentees themselves — never share with others the online content your mentee shares with you without their permission. Make sure to discuss these kinds of privacy issues at the beginning of your relationship, or when you begin using online communication.

### ***Get to know your mentee's online persona (and double check your own).***

If your mentee is old enough to be on social media (many young people start around age 10), your mentoring program (if you are part of a program) allows for it, and your mentee agrees, follow them on social media. What do they post? What do they “like” or share with their followers? How often are they online? Which social media influencers do they follow? It's helpful for mentors to follow those same influencers so they can become familiar with the messages and images their mentee is exposed to on a daily basis.

It's also important for you to monitor your own online presence, especially if your mentee will be following you. This includes the need to be judicious in the photos you post, the language you use, and the content with which you interact, as certain social media settings allow other users to see your activities. With some social media platforms, you can block your mentee from seeing specific pieces of content. Allowing a mentee to see your online presence is a great opportunity to model how to be engaged online in a safe, appropriate way.

### ***Learn the latest digital discourse styles.***

Stay current on the meanings of emojis and the latest acronyms. For instance, eggplant 🍆 and peach 🍑 emojis are often used to refer to body parts. Acronyms are also used frequently in



online communication, especially in spaces where character limits are in place. Also, make sure to keep up to date on online lingo, especially if you see your mentee using it.

Be aware of how digital communication is different from email or in-person communication. For instance, text communication is often short, frequent, and timely. If you write very long texts, you will likely find a teenage mentee is less engaged than if you write texts that are short, to the point, and use acronyms when possible. Mentees will also likely expect quick responses, otherwise they may think you are “ghosting” them. Again, make sure to discuss your and their expectations for communicating in this way.

### ***Use online-specific techniques for increased engagement.***

Communicating online via text using a relaxed, conversational style can be beneficial in a mentoring setting. (Don’t use all capital letters unless you want to indicate you’re SHOUTING!) It may also be helpful to ask your mentee specific, direct questions to get the conversation going. Some mentors may be disappointed to get one-word responses to a text or DM. Some youth may need coaxing with more open-ended questions (“How did that math quiz you were dreading go? What sort of questions were on it?”). You may also want to have icebreakers ready when early in the relationship (“Would you rather...”). Temper your expectations of how long or detailed a response you should expect from your mentee. Some mentors feel gratified by crafting careful, witty texts, only to feel disappointed by a mentee who doesn’t engage at the same level. This is OK! You should keep modeling what an engaging online conversation looks like.

### ***Stay up to date on the latest tech and apps of interest to youth.***

While several of the latest forms of online communication are mentioned here, the technology is constantly changing. Make sure to keep up to date on the latest trends in online spaces, such as hashtags, social media challenges, or online movements, especially those relevant to your mentee’s age. Doing so shows an interest in your mentee and will help you understand youth growing up as digital natives.

### ***Self-disclosure is important.***

When communicating online, we can’t see many of the social cues we have access to in person, such as nervous fidgeting, facial reactions (if not on video), and filler words. Therefore, online communication sometimes requires more directness and disclosure of emotions. This can be done on a video call (e.g., “You probably can’t see my foot nervously tapping right now.”), in a text using words or emojis, and through exaggerating emotions, for example, texting, “ROFL” (for “rolling on the floor laughing”), and clear facial expressions if on video. Sarcasm and jokes are often hard to interpret in online communication and may not be read as intended without these additional disclosures. You can model this disclosure until your mentee feels comfortable doing so themselves.

### ***Consider the special dynamics of mentoring a small group online.***

Online communication with one person can be challenging, but trying to manage the dynamics of several people in a mentoring group requires even closer monitoring and additional skills. If you are working with a group of youth online, get to know each member and have them get to know each other. Pay attention to group dynamics: Who is particularly chatty? Who holds back? Who seems



distracted or irritated? Breakout room features in video conferencing platforms and group chats can be a great way to keep all group members engaged. It may also be helpful to encourage your mentees

to keep in contact with each other so they can get to know their peers in the group in addition to the mentor(s) (see chapter 6 for more information on managing and facilitating groups of young people).

## Additional Reading and Resources

Most of the resources listed below can be accessed online at the links we have provided. The print titles listed here should be available through local or online bookstores or through your public library.

While resources on e-mentoring are still largely under development, there is plenty of content available regarding how young people manage online spaces. There are also several resources for parents, teachers, and others involved with youth that may be helpful for mentors. Here are just a few:

### Online

- ***Common Sense Media***

Common Sense is an independent nonprofit organization focused on helping youth thrive in a rapidly changing digital environment. They provide age-based media reviews, conduct surveys on youth's media usage, and host online events for people working with youth. Click [here](#) to access.

- ***Children and Screens: Institute on Digital Media and Child Development***

The institute seeks to understand and address questions regarding the impact of media on youth development. They conduct research projects and offer several online resources and a virtual workshop series called, "Ask the Experts" for general audiences on various timely questions related to young people and their online communication and digital media use. Click [here](#) to access.

- ***Parenting for a Digital Future: How Hopes and Fears about Technology Shape Children's Lives***

(2020) by Alicia Blum-Ross and Sonia Livingstone – This book uses research evidence to guide parents and other caring adults on how to successfully raise youth in a technology-driven world. The book discusses how using socially connected media can create opportunities for youth and how digital media can be used to teach values and healthy boundaries.

- ***iGen: Why Today's Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy – and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood***

(2017) by Jean Twenge – This book describes data from more than 11 million survey respondents over multiple decades showing how social technology has created a generation of youth that are more tolerant and safe, but also more anxious and lonely.

### In print:

- ***It's Complicated: The Social Lives of Networked Teens***

(2014) by danah boyd – This book, written by an academic researcher with technology expertise, unpacks what it means for teens to grow up with social media. It also discusses the myths about social media that frighten caring adults and how young people form communities online.



**MENTOR**

## CHAPTER 6

# FACILITATING GROUP INTERACTIONS

Gabriel Kuperminc - Georgia State University



Almost everywhere you look, you'll find a group of young people. Maybe you see a few friends just hanging out, or a group of youth attending a camp or an after-school program, playing on a sports team, or participating in a club. Increasingly, mentoring programs are adopting a group model in which one or more mentors interact with multiple youth on a regular basis. The whole program can be built around group activities, or programs can bring together several matched pairs of mentors and their mentees for some group activities as part of the larger program. Some youth programs, like sports teams or arts clubs, make intentional efforts to incorporate mentoring into their ongoing activities. And even in the mentoring relationships that spring up in schools or community settings, there is always the possibility that other young people will be around when a mentor and mentee are meeting and may want to be involved in what they are doing.

The possibilities for mentoring in groups are almost endless, but regardless of the specific framework, there are some common things mentors should keep in mind when facilitating group interactions. This includes being aware of the predictable ways groups develop and change over time and the inevitable conflicts that are likely to arise. This chapter will discuss potential advantages of mentoring in groups, social processes that can make or break the ability of a group to promote healthy youth development, strategies that facilitate the development of a productive and positive group experience over time, and some common pitfalls and mistakes to avoid. The term "mentor" will be used throughout the chapter, but it's important to recognize that mentoring can happen in many contexts. For example, mentoring can happen spontaneously in a moment when a group of youth are figuring out what to do, or can happen as part of coaching a team. Also, mentors aren't always adults

— just being a bit older and more experienced than a group of youth might be the basic qualifications.

### **What Does Facilitating Group Interactions Mean?**

Group facilitation is the art of "making it easy" for a group of people to interact and work together to achieve goals. Facilitators pay attention to the process of what is going on in a group and how group members are interacting. Good facilitators are more like coaches than directors; they help guide the group to keep it on track by sharing their experience and encouraging group members but refraining from directing the group's activities. Facilitation skills come in handy for one-time activities (e.g., an afternoon group project or even just a group of youth hanging out) and for longer-term activities (e.g., a club, team, or mentoring group) where the same group of young people meet together over a period of time.

### **Why Good Group Facilitation Is Important in Mentoring**

When we think of mentoring, we usually think about one-to-one mentoring, where a caring adult meets regularly with a young person to give advice and encouragement and just have fun together. In addition to these more traditional ways that a relationship with a mentor can foster positive development, mentoring in groups can expand the opportunities for young people to learn important skills. Research shows that the two main pathways for this to happen include opportunities to learn new skills through group interactions and social processes of the groups themselves.

First is what we might call the skills pathway. Being part of a peer group gives young people a chance to learn valuable skills, like making new friends, resolving conflicts, and standing up for oneself. A



supportive mentoring group can be a safe place for youth to try out a new skill or to learn by watching how other youth do it. Mentors can also help by modeling ways to use those skills in the ways they interact with group members. In cases where there are two or more mentors in a group, the way the mentors interact with each other can also serve as a model for youth. Another important part of the skills pathway is that being part of a group gives youth a chance to be a helper, not just a person who receives help. By focusing on ways that mentors provide help and support, it can be easy to forget what young people bring to the relationship. Mentors can encourage group members to share their thoughts and experiences in ways that can help the group develop a sense of mutual support. By guiding the group through intentional group-based activities and discussions, mentors can help keep group interactions positive and keep problems in the group from getting out of hand.

Second is what we might call the mattering pathway. Groups can provide young people with a sense of belonging to something important, feeling engaged and emotionally safe, and having a place to contribute. In one-to-one mentoring, interactions happen between a mentor and a youth. In a group, youth become part of a web of relationships and interactions: ones that occur between mentors and youth, between two mentors (when more than one is present), and between two or more young people — both those in which a youth is participating and those in which the youth is an observer. All of these relationship “layers” can be going on at the same time: the youth can benefit not only from what their mentor(s) says and does, but also from being embedded in a supportive peer context. Groups also can take on a life of their own by building a cohesive group identity. You know that a group is becoming cohesive when the members choose a name for it,

design a logo or a T-shirt, or develop a unique ritual.

Research on group mentoring supports both of these pathways to a successful group: Youth in group mentoring programs learn problem-solving and other social skills, and these skills lead to gains in “hard” outcomes like academic performance. In one group of studies,<sup>1,2</sup> for example, 9th graders who reported having a positive relationship with their group mentors showed increases in their sense of school support, school grades, and earning credits toward high school graduation. When those same youth reported a positive group climate (sense of cohesion, engagement, mutual help) they showed increases in self-efficacy, self-awareness, support from adults at school, and school grades. Importantly, the increases in problem-solving skills and school connectedness that youth experienced through their participation in the mentoring group helped to account for their improvements in academic achievement.

Peers are a powerful influence! We usually think of the negative ways that peer pressure operates — that “bad kid” influencing a “good kid” to smoke a cigarette because everyone’s doing it. But research shows that peer pressure works both ways — young people can also be influenced by their peers to do better in school, get involved in community service, and engage in other positive behaviors.<sup>3</sup> In addition, young people may sometimes be more open to taking advice from a peer than from an adult, and this can create opportunities not only for group members to receive support from their peers, but also to be in the role of giving support. Research further shows that effective group facilitation can limit the possibilities for negative peer pressure to take hold and increase the likelihood that peer groups will influence their participants in positive ways.

<sup>1</sup> Kuperminc, G. P., Chan, W. Y., Hale, K. E., Joseph, H. L., & Delbasso, C. A. (2020). The role of school-based group mentoring in promoting resilience among vulnerable high school students. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 65,136–148. doi:10.1002/ajcp.12347

<sup>2</sup> Chan, W. Y., Kuperminc, G. P., Seitz, S., Wilson, C., & Khatib, N. (2020). School-based group mentoring and academic outcomes in vulnerable high school students. *Youth and Society*, 52, 1220–1237. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0044118X19864834>

<sup>3</sup> Animosa, L. H., Johnson, S. L., & Cheng, T. L. (2018). “I used to be wild”: Adolescent perspectives on the influence of family, peers, school, and neighborhood on positive behavioral transition. *Youth & Society*, 50(1), 49–74. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0044118X15586146>



### What Does Good Group Facilitation Look Like in Practice?

There are a few things you can do that will help groups of youth find their footing and have more effective (and fun) interactions:

#### ***Make Sure Expectations for the Group Are Clear***

A critical task for group facilitators is to help everyone get on the same page. Group members need to know what they're supposed to be doing and what to expect from the group. Don't worry — this doesn't happen all at once! Encouraging group members to collaborate in setting expectations is a great team-building approach. When group members feel a sense of ownership, they are more likely to meet group expectations and to feel able to revisit them and make needed adjustments over time. Here are a few ways an effective group facilitator can help the group get there:

- **Create ground rules and group agreement** – Helping group members decide how they want to interact and develop agreements that everyone can live with is a critical early step that can ease concerns group members might have about being part of a group and build a sense of mutual trust. Some common ground rules include things like ensuring that everyone gets a chance to talk without interruption and agreements that “what’s said in group stays in group.” Developing ground rules can be turned into a fun activity, perhaps using a free brainstorming or polling app to collect ideas anonymously. Group members could vote on which rules to keep or could create a graphic that illustrates the most important ideas to keep in mind. Many groups will write up a formal agreement and hold a signing ceremony.

- **Establish group rituals and routines** – Developing a regular sequence of activities can help structure the group's time together as well as create a sense of ownership and belonging. For example, some groups will select a favorite icebreaker to start every meeting, or may assign a different group member to bring a new icebreaker to each group session.
- **Make sure everyone is participating fully and fairly equally** – It can be off-putting if one group member consistently talks more than everyone else, and a lack of participation by one or two members may be a sign that they are disengaging or that things aren't going well. Some youth may be more vocal or shier and more reserved, but a good facilitator makes sure everyone gets what they need and contributes in ways that are meaningful to them and to the group, even if not identically. For example, some groups may use an object like a talking stick to designate who has the floor, or use a popcorn sharing method, where a group member shares an idea and then calls on the next speaker. When using methods like this, it's important to allow youth to pass if they want to, so that they don't feel pressured.
- **Foster a group identity** – As group members develop a sense of how to work together and who they are as a group, it's common for them to develop symbols of membership. Some groups choose a name for themselves, develop a logo, or make T-shirts. Group facilitators can foster a group identity by encouraging members to collaborate on developing these symbols, promoting healthy competition, and helping the group secure resources they might need (e.g., a fundraiser).



### ***Recognize the Predictable Stages Groups Go Through***

Development is not only happening with the youth who make up the group's membership, the group itself is also developing! If you're working with a group that's going to be together for more than a few sessions, it's important to realize that groups go through a predictable series of stages. Note that even in informal or one-time groups, the first two stages are important to be familiar with as they can help mentors understand what process the group is going through and offer some guidance on how to facilitate the process.

1. The **Forming** stage is when the group is starting to come together. Nobody knows quite what to expect or what to do. Group members may rely on the mentor to help explain the group's purpose, help the group set ground rules, and delegate responsibilities.
2. The **Storming** stage begins when group members start to define their position in the group — personalities start to show, and group members may come into conflict with each other. This can be a stressful time, but it's also an opportunity for the mentor to help group members focus and start taking responsibility for getting along and supporting one another.
3. The **Norming** stage is when the group starts working as a unit. Group members learn they have to trust each other to be effective. Members are taking ownership of the group and starting to take on and share leadership roles.
4. The **Performing** stage is the most productive. Group members are truly depending on each other and have learned to be flexible to meet everyone's needs. They are in the groove. Not every group reaches this stage.

5. The **Adjourning** stage begins as members start to acknowledge that the group will come to a close. It's a time of transition as some group members might leave early, causing changes in how the group is structured and even what it's trying to accomplish. The group might continue to perform, but group members need time to manage their feelings of termination and transition.

### ***Recognize When It's Working***

Group facilitators can use the stages above to help them understand where the group is and how it's doing (refer to resources below for more in-depth descriptions). For example, it's perfectly normal for a little conflict to emerge after a few sessions — it doesn't mean things are going badly, but just that they are going through a predictable phase. Eventually, group members will usually settle into a routine that shows they have bought into the group's rules and expectations. They may start to remind each other what is expected (showing that it's not just the mentor's job to enforce the rules). Another sign that the group is working is when mentors start to find they are not always responsible for starting or moderating group discussions: group members are talking among themselves and making group decisions and plans.

As an example, one group of eight students was formed as part of a school-based mentoring program to support students who were struggling in school. These students had shown poor attendance, were earning poor grades, and generally felt disconnected. Early in the school year, the two co-mentors suggested that they spend a few minutes of each week's meeting doing homework checkups. The idea was to hold students accountable for keeping up with their work. The group members reluctantly agreed, with some of them saying that they wanted to improve their grades but worried





the checkups would be stressful and embarrassing. After talking it out, everyone agreed that homework checkups could be a way to help them keep up their motivation as long as it didn't feel punitive. The mentors agreed to keep it positive and focused on students helping each other develop strategies to succeed. Within a few weeks, group members were coming to group meetings asking for the chance to show their work and giving each other advice and encouragement. Grades were getting a little better, and group members were attending school more regularly, especially on the days they had group meetings.

#### ***A Note about One-time or Short-term Groups***

Some of the practices noted above take some time to come into focus. They are for longer-term situations where the group has time to build and grow. But many of the practices in this section can be used even if you are working with a shorter-term group, such as a one- or two-day camp. It may not be as important to do things like naming the group and forming a deep group identity. However, in short-term groups, success might look a lot like the themes discussed above: We got through the activity, there was little conflict (or we were able to resolve it), the youth led the “doing” of the activity, all youth participated fully, and they respected the ground rules set up at the beginning of the day.

#### **Contextual Considerations for Group Facilitation**

The basic elements of effective group facilitation — **share**, **encourage**, and **refrain from directing** — are the same regardless of the age of the young people or whether working with a spontaneous (one-time) group or a formal group that meets repeatedly over a period of time. It's important, however, to pay attention to the age(s) of youth in the group you are working with, how well-established the group is,

how the group is structured, and what the group's goals are.

#### ***Tailor Group Activities to the Age of Group Members***

It's important to account for the ages of youth in your group. For all ages, it's important that the youth feel a sense of “we” — a sense that the group is their own and they belong to it. But that might look different for youth in elementary school compared to youth in middle or high school. Mentors need to know when to offer options that group members can choose from and when to hand over the keys. For example, in the elementary grades, youth may be most likely to feel engaged with group activities when they have a say in choosing what to do or what to talk about in the group. By high school, teens might not be content with being able to choose among options. Instead, they might prefer to come up with their own ideas and carry out their own plans, discussions, or activities. (See chapter 8, “Honoring Youth Voice and Building Power,” for additional information on how to help youth sit “in the driver's seat” of the relationship.)

For all ages, it's important that the youth feel a sense of “we.”

#### ***Realize that Size Does Matter***

Face it — it's hard to keep everyone engaged when there is one group facilitator and many, many youth in the mix. But what is the right size for a group? While research hasn't definitively answered that question, there is a growing consensus that the



group needs to be manageable in size and allow for all members to contribute meaningfully. A group that is too large might splinter out into cliques that include some youth and exclude others. The right size for a group might depend on who the youth are and what the group's goals are. A large group that comes together just to hang out and have fun might work just fine, but a project-based group might be more effective if you keep the numbers relatively small. It might also be advisable to limit the size of groups when working with youth who have behavioral challenges. Common group configurations typically look like one mentor working with four to six youth or perhaps a team of two to three mentors working with 10 to 12 youth. There is no magic ratio, but those types of models will not overwhelm most mentors and will allow all the young people to play a part and not get lost in the shuffle.

When possible, a rule of thumb is to try to keep the overall group size to 10 or fewer youth, and to keep the ratio to about one mentor for every four youth. Of course, some activities, like sports teams, lend themselves to fairly large groups. But notice that in sports, everybody has a role to play: basketball has forwards and guards; baseball has pitchers, catchers, infielders, and outfielders. Even large groups can often be broken down into smaller,



more manageable groups where everyone has an important part to play. Two or three mentors can work together to facilitate groups that might be too large for one mentor to handle alone. The important point is to find a balanced group size that enables the group to do what it has to do (you need at least nine players to field a baseball team!) while making sure nobody falls through the cracks.

### ***Bring It Together: Watch How the Group and the Youth Are Developing***

Notice how the role of the group facilitator changes as the group moves from one stage to the next. Experts use the term “developmental relationships” to describe a process in which mentors help members gradually take ownership and responsibility for the group: Early on, the mentor is in the driver's seat and gradually moves to the passenger seat and maybe even a back seat. As groups move through the stages from Forming to Performing, the group process mirrors the healthy changes that occur as children grow into adolescents. Just like young people grow to become more independent, groups themselves take on greater responsibility. Keep in mind that things can change. Imagine someone leaves or a new member joins the group. In order to adapt, the group may need to revisit one or more of the earlier stages, and mentors temporarily may need to take on a more directive role.

### ***Keep Your Eyes on the Prize: Program Goals***

Group mentoring programs, teams, and clubs often have a job to do. A sports team needs to practice to be ready for the next game. A group program might have a curriculum designed to teach group members important skills. The challenge for the mentor is to help the group accomplish what it needs to do, while making space for important conversations to happen and relationships to



develop. Imagine that as part of a group mentoring program, you have a planned activity to discuss current events in the news. However, one of the group members was wrongly accused of stealing from another student and was suspended from school earlier in the day. Mentors need to know when to back off from planned activities and allow the group to process what has happened and work out a plan for supporting their peer. Mentors who keep the overall goals of the program in mind can continue to work with their group toward those goals, even when it means being flexible with plans.

### **Tips and Final Thoughts**

Many group programs are formed for a reason. Mentoring programs may seek to help youth improve their academic performance or learn new social skills. Sports teams, youth clubs, and camps are formed for recreation, competition, and learning. Even a bunch of friends hanging out has a goal of relaxing and enjoying friendship. Facilitating a group in any of those circumstances requires finding a balance between meeting the goals of the group and keeping it engaging.

#### ***Balancing Control and Facilitation***

If you are mentoring in a program that has a curriculum you need to follow, how do you do that while making room for youth to bring up the issues that are important in their lives, or to plan and carry out projects on their own? Here are some tips that group facilitators can use in striking that balance of giving away control of the group while keeping it on track:

- Get comfortable with silence. If you are feeling uncomfortable that nobody is speaking up, you can bet they are feeling it too. Wait it out and someone will eventually speak up.

- If they are talking more than you are, it's probably a good thing. If you aren't feeling the weight of keeping the conversation going, it means the youth are engaged in the topic.
- If they are bringing up difficult topics, it probably means they trust you and trust each other enough to come out with the important things in their lives.
- If you've got plans for the day, but they've got something else on their minds, maybe it's time to drop the plans and go with what the group needs. You can always come back to it later.

#### ***Be Prepared with the Tools and Materials Needed for a Successful Group Meeting***

Some programs have a set curriculum that mentors are expected to follow. A good curriculum should not only provide guidance on what to do but also the materials needed to do it successfully. Whether you're following a curriculum or improvising as you go, it's important to use the group space to foster interaction and inclusion. You might not need any special materials at all. For example, it might be as simple as forming a circle so that group members are facing each other. As mentioned above, it's important to establish a routine, ground rules, and regular opening rituals and to close each meeting with goals for the week.

Groups need something to do. The last thing you want is to bring the group together and find they have nothing to talk about and nothing planned. It's better to have a carefully crafted plan that you drop at the last minute because something more important comes up than to leave it up to chance. Luckily, resources with ideas for icebreakers and group activities are easy to find in your local library or are just an internet search away.



## Questions to Contemplate

Finally, group facilitation works best when it is a reflective practice. Take the time to reflect on how you're doing and how the group is progressing. Ask the mentees to reflect also: Are they getting out of the group what they had hoped for? How might things be changed to help them get more out of it? Keep asking yourself questions: What stage is my group in? What can I do to facilitate movement to the next stage? Are group members feeling a sense of ownership? Is anyone dominating or being left out? How effectively are my co-mentor and I working together?

We hope the advice and practices provided in this chapter help you in managing group mentoring interactions. Everything you can do to help build a sense of community, belonging, and shared experience will be helpful to the young people you are mentoring. The more they can collaborate and form positive relationships with one another, the more they will grow and the more they will value the partnership with you and other adults in their lives. Check out the resources below to further build your skills in this critical aspect of mentoring.





## Additional Reading and Resources

The resources listed below can be accessed online through the links we have provided.

### Learn Group Facilitation Skills:

- ***Group Facilitation and Problem-Solving (The Community Toolbox)*** A nice tutorial that can help you build your understanding of group facilitation. Click [here](#) to access.
- ***Developmental Relationships: Helping Young People Be and Become Their Best Selves*** This Search Institute resource describes how all adults can step up to help groups of young people grow in developmentally appropriate ways. Click [here](#) to access.
- ***A Framework for Effectively Partnering with Young People*** This Annie E. Casey Foundation resource offers a great primer on adult-youth partnerships that will be helpful to mentors. Click [here](#) to access.

### Work with the Stages of Group Development:

- ***The Five Stages of Group Development Explained*** A great overview of the group stages discussed in this chapter. Click [here](#) to access.
- ***Stages of Group Development: Tuckman's Stages*** A simple handout that details Tuckman's concept of group stages. Click [here](#) to access.

### Learn about Group Mentoring More Broadly:

- ***Group Mentoring Supplement to the Elements of Effective Practice for Mentoring™*** This resource, written for those designing mentoring programs, also has information that might be useful to you in your mentor role. Click [here](#) to access.
- ***Reflections on Research (Podcast): Season 2, Episode 1*** Mike Garringer and Gabriel Kuperminc discuss recent research on group mentoring. Click [here](#) to access.
- ***Group Mentoring, National Mentoring Resource Center Model Review*** Gabriel Kuperminc and Nancy Deutsch's comprehensive review of what research tells us about group mentoring. Click [here](#) to access.
- ***Designing Group Mentoring Curriculum (webinar)*** This webinar focuses on how to conceptualize and sequence activities for group mentoring programs and should be useful for mentors who are tasked with figuring out what a group should do together over time. Click [here](#) to access.



**MENTOR**

## **CHAPTER 7**

# **WORKING WITH OTHERS IN THE MENTORING RELATIONSHIP SYSTEM**

Thomas E. Keller – Portland State University



## What Does Working with Others in a Mentoring Relationship “System” Mean?

A mentoring relationship typically doesn't operate in isolation. Even youth who want or need additional support from a mentor are bound to have many other important people in their lives, such as parents and other caregivers, siblings, teachers, and peers. Consequently, a mentor already may have or may need to establish relationships with other people in the mentee's network of support. Because these other individuals, and a mentor's interactions with them, have the potential to enhance or detract from the mentoring experience, they are all important parts of the “mentoring relationship system.” This chapter outlines important considerations for how to approach these other people to create “working alliances” with them in which you communicate effectively, set appropriate boundaries, and agree on goals and activities in support of your mentee. Specifically, this chapter discusses:

- connecting with others in the youth's network while maintaining a focus on your mentee;
- respecting the priorities and values of caregivers, teachers, and other important people in your mentee's life and aligning expectations with them;
- appropriate sharing of information about your mentee (e.g., learning about your mentee, getting feedback on the mentoring relationship, informing others about your mentee while maintaining confidentiality); and
- clarifying boundaries and establishing expectations for your mentoring role.

Appropriate interactions with important people in your mentee's life can strengthen your mentoring relationship and help to avoid misunderstandings and complications. Furthermore, you can offer

greater support for your mentee when you align your efforts with others who care for them. This chapter goes hand in hand with chapter 12, which provides guidance on how you can expand the supports your mentee has in their life by helping them strengthen existing connections and forge new ones.

## Why Working with this System Is Important in Mentoring Relationships

A mentor and mentee are each embedded in their own networks of relationships.<sup>1</sup> A mentoring relationship may develop naturally when these social networks already share some overlap, bringing the mentor and mentee into contact — for example, when a youth begins to be mentored by the parent of a close friend or an adult they met through extracurricular activities. In mentoring that occurs in programmatic contexts, the introduction of the mentor and mentee creates new connections between their networks. A mentor should be aware of and effectively navigate important relationships in the mentee's immediate network because positive communication and coordination among network members generally supports youth development. A systems perspective helps to explain how the mentoring relationship can be influenced by individuals in the mentee's network and, in turn, how the mentoring relationship affects these other individuals in the network.<sup>2</sup> A systems view of mentoring emphasizes that separate relationships in the network are connected (e.g., mentor with youth, mentor with caregiver, caregiver with youth). A change in one relationship can have ripple effects on other relationships in the system. Research has shown, for example, that mentoring can improve the parent-child relationship,<sup>3</sup> that relationship difficulties between parent and mentor can contribute to the ending of an otherwise positive

<sup>1</sup> Keller, T. E., & Blakeslee, J. E. (2014). Social networks and mentoring. In D. L. DuBois & M. J. Karcher (Eds.), *Handbook of Youth Mentoring*, (2nd ed., pp. 129-142). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

<sup>2</sup> Keller, T. E. (2005). A systemic model of the youth mentoring intervention. *Journal of Primary Prevention*, 26, 2, 169-188.

<sup>3</sup> Rhodes, J. E., Grossman, J. B., & Resch, N. L. (2000). Agents of change: Pathways through which mentoring relationships influence adolescents' academic adjustment. *Child Development*, 71, 6, 1662-1671.



mentor-youth relationship,<sup>4</sup> and that the presence of a mentor can influence the mentee's peers in a way that improves the mentee's inclusion and social standing.<sup>5</sup> In mentoring programs, the mentoring system includes the agency staff member who supports the mentoring relationship and fosters communication and alignment among the key players (e.g., mentor, mentee, caregiver, teacher).

A mentor's collaboration with a caregiver or other important adult in the mentee's life can be described as a working alliance. This refers to a partnership with a purpose, in this case to support the development of the young person. A working alliance is characterized by three elements: mutual agreement on the goals being sought; understanding of each person's responsibilities and tasks to achieve those goals; and a personal bond (e.g., liking, caring, trust) that promotes continued collaboration.<sup>6</sup> For a working alliance to be effective, it's important for a mentor and caregiver to share a common understanding about the reasons for mentoring the youth and expectations for the mentoring relationship. Likewise, the mentor and caregiver should be clear about their respective responsibilities for supporting the mentoring relationship and making it successful. A positive bond between mentor and caregiver based on communication and respect supports the type of alignment, cooperation, and accountability that leads to ongoing commitment to the mentoring relationship by both parties.<sup>7</sup> These principles can serve as a model for coordination with other adults in the mentee's network, such as a teacher or coach, and they can even provide a useful guide for working with the young person in the mentoring relationship itself.

### What Does Working Collaboratively with this System Look Like in Practice?

A caregiver shows a lot of trust in allowing a mentor to spend time with their child. A mentor who considers the perspective of a caregiver or teacher will appreciate that the adults responsible for the well-being and education of their child/student would want to know something about the mentor and the types of activities they are doing when they meet. Likewise, it may be important for the mentee to know that their caregiver or teacher approves of their mentoring relationship. Thus, especially early in the mentoring relationship, the mentor and key adults in the mentee's network should make a strong effort to get to know each other and discuss expectations for the mentoring experience. Such conversations also can be very helpful for the mentor to gain a better understanding of the mentee's needs and background. For example, a mentor can ask questions such as:

- What are the most important things you want me to know about your child?
- How do you want the mentoring relationship to support your child?
- How can I make sure I'm being consistent with your priorities and values in raising your child?

There is also value in talking about very practical matters, such as how and how often you will communicate with the caregiver, whether planned activities and outings should be discussed in advance, what procedures are best for scheduling and keeping appointments, how any costs for activities will be covered, and how feedback regarding the mentoring relationship should be shared. The beginning of the mentoring relationship is generally the best time to negotiate these arrangements to avoid making assumptions or

<sup>4</sup> Spencer, R., Gowdy, G., Drew, A. L., McCormack, M. J., & Keller, T. E. (2020). It takes a village to break up a match: A systemic analysis of formal youth mentoring relationship endings. *Child & Youth Care Forum*, 49, 1, 97-120.

<sup>5</sup> Pryce, J., Giovannetti, S., Spencer, R., Elledge, L. C., Gowdy, G., Whitley, M. L., & Cavell, T. A. (2015). Mentoring in the social context: Mentors' experiences with mentees' peers in a site-based program. *Children & Youth Services Review*, 56, 185-192.

<sup>6</sup> Bordin, E. S. (1983). A working alliance based model of supervision. *The Counseling Psychologist*, 11, 1, 35-42.

<sup>7</sup> Spencer, R., Basualdo-Delmonico, A., & Lewis, T. O. (2011). Working to make it work: The role of parents in the youth mentoring process. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 39, 1, 51-59





establishing patterns that need to be corrected later. Remember, however, these discussions should be negotiations, not informing your mentee's caregiver of what you intend to do. It's important they feel heard on these important aspects of the relationship. Trying to achieve clarity, transparency, and alignment regarding expectations is the goal, because too many mentoring relationships falter due to what are often simple misunderstandings!

Developing a relationship with your mentee's caregiver based on collaboration, respect, and regular communication can be helpful in navigating many situations that may affect your mentoring relationship. The same approaches you are encouraged to use in the mentoring relationship, such as being consistent, fostering collaboration, showing curiosity, and practicing cultural humility (see chapter 2), can be used with the caregiver to build a foundation of trust and facilitate your negotiation of roles, routines, and boundaries. For example, a mentor and caregiver can discuss preferences about visiting the mentee's home before or after an outing. One caregiver may expect the mentor to enter their home and greet family members as a social courtesy and may be offended if the mentor never does this; while another may want privacy and feel it's an intrusion for the mentor to enter their home. Likewise, a mentor can express expectations or preferences, such as stating they would feel uncomfortable picking up or dropping off the youth without the caregiver at home.

Similarly, there should be clear communication between the mentor and caregiver about goals for the mentoring relationship and the role of each in supporting those goals. For example, both may agree it's appropriate for the mentor to support the mentee's success in school. But this support could take many different forms, such as the mentor

showing interest in the mentee's school experiences, taking the mentee to the library to get books, or attending a school event. Would it also involve the mentor advocating on the mentee's behalf regarding a special need or a disciplinary action? In some cases, a caregiver may appreciate the mentor's support in talking with a teacher or helping to navigate the school bureaucracy. In other cases, a caregiver might feel full responsibility for addressing the issue and would view a mentor's contact with school personnel as interference or overstepping boundaries. By the same token, a mentor may want to establish boundaries to avoid getting too involved in a parental role if asked, for example, to attend parent-teacher conferences. Similar considerations might arise if the mentee's family is struggling financially. On one hand, a mentor may want to offer assistance or make a referral for services. One caregiver may be appreciative; another may feel the mentor has been presumptuous. On the other hand, a caregiver may ask for assistance, and the mentor may not be comfortable being put in that position. These scenarios highlight the importance of clear communication and coordination between the mentor and parent/guardian up front, before misunderstandings can happen, and if they do happen, open conversations to course correct. If





a disagreement with someone in the mentoring system does arise — which is likely to happen at some point — it's important to work constructively to a resolution that preserves the mentoring relationship. Problem-solving approaches might include trying to return to areas of fundamental agreement about supporting the mentee, practicing empathy, cultural humility, and attunement, (see chapters 1, 2, and 4 respectively) and consulting with others for perspective and advice (particularly agency staff who provide match support if you are in a mentoring program).

### A mentoring relationship can benefit in several ways from the collaboration and support of important individuals in the mentoring system.

For example, the caregiver can provide the mentor with important background and context regarding the mentee's interests and needs, help the mentee to keep appointments with the mentor, and offer the mentor encouragement and appreciation. Similarly, a mentee's teacher can provide updates, recommendations, and reinforcement for work the pair may be doing during their time together. Likewise, for mentoring that occurs in programs, the agency staff member working with the match can be helpful in giving advice and problem-solving when kept informed of what is happening both in the mentoring relationship itself and in the mentor's relationship with the caregiver. For transparency, the mentee should

be aware when members of this network of adults (e.g., mentor, parent/guardian, teacher, coach, staff member) are communicating and cooperating with each other. At the same time, to ensure your mentee feels comfortable confiding in you, there should be clear understandings among these adults about the importance of your being able to maintain the confidentiality of conversations with your mentee (and/or to clearly specify the limits of confidentiality). In addition, a mentor is wise to encourage direct communications between the mentee and others and to avoid being the conduit of information, taking sides, or speaking for someone else.

You also should be prepared for potential interactions with the younger members of your mentee's social network, such as siblings, friends, and peers. Within the family, for example, a sibling may be jealous that your mentee has a mentor and may want to join your outings, or your mentee may want to invite friends to participate in your activities. Decisions about such scenarios should be made in consultation with your mentee's caregiver and should take into consideration the potential benefits and drawbacks in terms of building your relationship and supporting your mentee's development. If one of the goals for your mentoring is to model good relationships and help your mentee to develop social skills, then including their friends in activities could be very helpful. However, in other cases, having friends join may be counterproductive if they vie with the mentee for your attention, or vice versa (see chapter 6 on things to consider when meeting with your mentee in a group context).

### Contextual Considerations for Working with Others in the Relationship System

The nature and extent of coordination with others in your mentee's network will depend on the age and maturity of your mentee. More interaction



with the caregiver is likely to be necessary and appropriate for younger mentees. For mentees in early elementary school, the mentor and caregiver generally have frequent contact because the caregiver likely will need to be involved in arranging outings, such as scheduling, approving plans, and making sure the mentee is ready for the activity. Likewise, because youth (especially young children) are not always the most reliable reporters, it may be important for the mentor and caregiver to check in after outings to recount what they did together. These conversations go both ways — the caregiver may be able to provide feedback to the mentor regarding what the mentee likes about the mentoring relationship and to offer thanks and appreciation that may not be forthcoming from the mentee. As mentees mature, they can take more responsibility for making and keeping appointments and communicating these plans to the caregiver, but periodic conversations between the mentor and caregiver remain valuable even as youth get older, to make sure both parties are staying well informed and that the mentoring relationship is on track.

Your mentee's age also may affect your potential interactions with their friends and peers. For instance, having a mentor may enhance social status for younger youth, and youth may want to show off their mentor to friends who are likely envious and eager to join in activities. However, older adolescents may be more reluctant to let their friends know they want, much less need, a mentor. Although mentee age may influence the inclusion of friends in mentoring activities, this is not always the case; it is more likely to depend on the mentee's individual circumstances and the general nature of the mentoring relationship.

One factor that could strongly determine how a mentor interacts with others in the mentoring system

is whether the relationship developed naturally or was created through a structured mentoring program. Ideally, a mentoring program will provide clear guidance on its philosophy and policies regarding how a mentor is expected to interact with others in the youth's network. In addition, clearly stated goals for the mentoring program could help frame the goals agreed upon by the mentor and caregiver that create the foundation for the working alliance between them. In a program context, mentor training and agency staff support should provide advice and guidance in negotiating these new relationships. As noted, the agency staff member is an important part of the mentoring system who can monitor and facilitate communications among the mentor, mentee, parent/guardian, and other key people in the youth's life. In fact, you should recognize that volunteering in a mentoring program means establishing not just a mentoring relationship but also a relationship with the agency, which has responsibility and accountability for supporting the success of the mentoring experience for both your mentee and you.

In a mentoring relationship that develops outside of a program, the mentor doesn't have program professionals to guide their navigation of relationships with people in the mentee's network. For this reason, it may be even more important for the mentor to be proactive in meeting with the caregiver and setting clear expectations for the mentoring relationship. Establishing a strong working alliance with the caregiver may be especially valuable when there is no program for backup support. The mentor and caregiver already may be acquainted through mutual networks, which could mean a positive bond is already there, but it's still important to make sure there is common understanding about your role in the youth's life. Similarly, you already may be familiar with your



mentee's teachers and coaches or friends and peers through existing networks, but it still may be important to clarify with them any shift in roles that may result from designating yourself as a mentor to the youth.

### Tips and Final Thoughts

The following tips can help you as you navigate the relationships your mentee brings to the table:

- Remember that other adults (e.g., parents or other caregivers, teachers) care for your mentee, and many individuals influence your mentee. You are not responsible for your mentee, but you are responsible to your mentee.
- Proactively communicating and collaborating with the other important people in your mentee's life can help prevent inaccurate assumptions and misunderstandings that could complicate or even threaten the success of your mentoring relationship.
- Aligning your expectations with these other important people is particularly relevant in the early phases of your mentoring relationship, although expectations may continue to evolve and be renegotiated throughout your mentoring experience.
- How you choose to interact with others in your mentee's network when you start your relationship can set precedents that may be

expected to continue. Although you can always change course, make sure to consider the long-term implications of your choices.

- Remember that other people in your mentee's network are important to them, and what happens in your relationship could be shared with them. Don't say or do things that could diminish your mentee's relationship with these other people.
- Similarly, don't say or do things that could damage your own relationship with these other people. In particular, never ask a mentee to keep a secret from anyone else, especially a parent/guardian.
- Although you may interact with many people connected to your mentee, the mentoring relationship should always remain primary, and the mentee's trust should be maintained through as much consultation, information, and inclusion as possible.
- Your mentee should have no doubt that your focus is on them and not the other people in their life.

Other skills that will help you succeed in partnering with others in your mentee's network include practicing cultural humility, being attuned during your interactions, collaborating on goal setting, and helping youth develop their social networks and social capital — all are the focus of other chapters in this resource.

## Additional Reading and Resources

The resource listed below can be accessed online through the link we have provided.

### ***Starting Relationships Right: Topics and Questions to Align Participant Expectations in Youth***

***Mentoring Programs*** Although originally written for program staff, this set of pre-match expectation-setting questions can help mentors, even those outside of programs, think about the expectations they have for the mentoring relationship, as well as questions to ask caregivers and other adults that comprise that relationship system, so that the mentoring relationship is one that effectively involves all the relevant stakeholders. Click [here](#) to access.



**MENTOR**

## CHAPTER 8

# HONORING YOUTH VOICE AND BUILDING POWER

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### What Does Honoring Youth Voice and Building Power Mean?

Honoring youth voice and building power can mean many things, from taking a step back and letting youth take charge in planning activities and discussions, to listening to youth interests and stated needs then making connections to broader contexts for them, to intentionally creating a relationship dynamic that gives youth a sense of agency. At their core, mentors need to have an unconditional positive regard (a term taken from the humanistic psychologist, Carl Rogers, that we will describe in more detail in this chapter) for their mentee and a belief that all youth are poised for greatness. These are skills and attitudes that can be learned to create environments where youth can be their authentic and full selves.

Your role as a mentor then becomes a knowledgeable navigator, a nonjudgmental sounding board, and a partner whose goal is to affirm, support, and encourage. This is the foundation to developing young people who have confidence in their voice and can affect positive change in our society. But, knowing when to lead and when to follow, when to share your point of view, and when to open yourself to a different way of thinking, requires practice and skill. This chapter will describe how mentors can honor and cultivate their mentee's voice and build power in youth, as well as the skills needed to successfully navigate this role.

### Why Is Honoring Youth Voice and Building Power Important in Mentoring Relationships?

*“There was a lot of distrust between me and adult figures, I always felt beneath and belittled by authority figures. By having that trusting*

*relationship with my mentors, it taught me to have better relationships with adults later on in life. Now I'm more assertive and more comfortable with adults . . . Even though there is a certain level of respect I need to give [adults], [I learned that] I also demand a certain respect that young people aren't given just because we are younger.” —Sesha, 18, Maximizing Youth Voice, January 2021*

*“Young people constantly have to battle to be heard properly.” —Meg, 22, Black Youth Town Hall, June 2020*

*“The relationship that my mentor and I have has taught me that collaboration is important and sharing power is even more [important]. I think it's important that adults and elders and mentors guide us, don't suffocate us, and join us as we are going through this. Support us.” —Aniya, 18, Black Youth Town Hall, June 2020*

As you can see in the quotes above, taken from a variety of youth-led webinars focused on mentoring, viewing youth as partners allows youth to build confidence in themselves and in their voice. They become more comfortable in spaces with adults, which gives them a sense of agency. Youth need and want to know they have power and can leverage the confidence they are building in their mentoring relationships toward achieving their broader goals. They are looking for partners and guides who see the greatness within them and are committed to nurturing that greatness.

Aniya talked about sharing power, which is a key component in how relationships support positive youth development. In 2013, the Search Institute released the Developmental Relationships Framework (click [here](#) to access), which highlights the characteristics of relationships that help young



people succeed. Since its release, this framework has been used in several research studies that have found sharing power is the strategy most strongly associated with multiple positive outcomes. According to the Search Institute, “Sharing power involves specific actions such as showing mutual respect, giving young people a voice in decisions, collaborating in solving problems, and creating leadership opportunities for young people.”<sup>1</sup>

Dr. Torie Weiston-Serdan in her book, *Critical Mentoring: A Practical Guide*, describes the importance of being youth-centric. She speaks to the tradition of youth voice in youth movements. Without hearing and lifting youth voice, we might not have had a civil rights movement or current-day social movements like Black Lives Matter. While mentoring programs and mentors may not see themselves as part of social movements, it’s clear that in order to make space for youth to grow as socially conscious beings, mentors need to be ready to create this kind of environment.

Before we move into practical application — the how-to of this chapter — let’s look a little more closely at why bringing *unconditional positive regard* into the mentoring relationship as a foundational attitude will help create the conditions needed for honoring youth voice and building power.

### **Unconditional Positive Regard**

*“My mentor did a great job breaking down those boundaries . . . Every time I would greet [my mentor], she would greet me with ‘Hello, my friend.’ Just her letting me know that we were in fact friends and that she wasn’t just an adult telling me what to do, that meant a lot to me.” —Kyndall, 17, Maximizing Youth Voice, January 2021*

Psychologist Carl Rogers asked the question: How can we encourage our youth to grow into healthy and happy people with a positive sense of self-worth? He shares that having an unconditional positive regard is a powerful attitude to adopt. It can have a huge impact on how youth feel about themselves and others, and set them up for success. So, what is unconditional positive regard?

When you have unconditional positive regard for someone, nothing they can do could give you a reason to stop seeing them as human and lovable. It does not mean that you accept everything they do, but that you accept who they are as a person. A young person who is worried about their mentor being judgmental will most likely withhold information or parts of themselves, which can have a negative impact on the relationship. The mentoring relationship may be one of the few places a young person can be their authentic self with an adult. We want them to feel safe and be accepted for who they are.

As a mentor, you have the privilege of bringing out the best in your mentee, but that often requires you to be intentional and prepared. The following describes what you need to do to prepare and is followed by the next section discussing what it all looks like in practice.

### **Are You Ready to Be a Youth-Centered Mentor?**

*“Actively seeking out insight from the youth is what helps make the most out of the [mentoring] relationship and will cultivate that trust and that bond, rather than taking the wheel yourself and doing what you think you need to do as an adult.” —Kyndall, 17, Maximizing Youth Voice, January 2021*

<sup>1</sup> Search Institute. (2016, July 13). 11 ways to share power with youth. Search Institute Blog. <https://blog.search-institute.org/11-ways-share-power-youth>.



As you take on the role of a youth-centered mentor, you should start by taking stock of yourself. Why do you want to be a mentor? What motivates you? Take a moment to reflect on your goals for mentoring, because those reflections will help you identify whether you are ready to have an authentic partnership with youth. Here is a personal assessment to consider [adapted from *Youth Service America's Youth and Adults Working Together: Integrating Youth Voice and Leadership into Programs*].<sup>2</sup> Ask yourself whether you:

- appreciate and seek to understand different perspectives, especially when they are unlike anything you have personally experienced;
- respect adults and youth equally;
- are willing to learn from young people, acknowledging they have knowledge to impart;
- focus on potential rather than what youth can already do; and
- recognize that young people can be — and are — leaders in their communities.

Your responses to these questions will help you determine where you are. If you have never been in situations where you learned from youth, for example, that's fine, but can you see yourself letting youth share their truths and knowledge? If you have never seen youth lead, can you acknowledge that youth have already been leading in many areas of our society?

You also need to examine your motives for wanting to be in a mentoring relationship. If you are doing this to feel better about yourself, then you may be disappointed. If you have chosen to mentor because you believe youth are our future and need our guidance to be the best they can possibly be, then you will come across that way when interacting with young people. Youth can tell when an adult is there

for them or there for some other reason, so it makes sense for you to first examine your readiness to share power with youth through mentoring.

### What Does Honoring Youth Voice Look Like in Practice?

*"We're looking for adult allies who can elevate our voices and get us into rooms that we are often pushed out of. We no longer want to be a generation that is seen but not heard. Let us into these rooms, give us a platform to speak, and also provide us with the resources that we need to elevate these voices and these visions we have in our head." —Meg, 22, Black Youth Town Hall, June 2020*

The beginning of this chapter describes why youth voice is important and gives you some things you can do to prepare for elevating "the visions youth have in their heads," as Meg so beautifully noted in her quote. Now you may be asking yourself, "How do I do this? What can I do to lift my mentee's voice and build their power? How can I become a trusted navigator and advocate for my mentee's voice and vision?" Below are some helpful reminders and practical tips you can implement in your interactions with your mentee to honor their voice and work in partnership together.

#### ***Provide your mentee with choices and respect those choices.***

Give your mentee options in deciding how you will spend your time together and what activities you will do. Whether your mentee is 8 or 16 years old, offering them choices is an important action. However, the way you do it may look different as your mentee grows. For example, for younger mentees, consider providing a menu of options, as it can be harder for younger children to think about what they want to do without some direction or

<sup>2</sup> Youth Service America (2014). *Youth and adults working together: Integrating youth voice and leadership into programs*. Retrieved 6/8/21 from <https://ysa.ispringcloud.com/acc/Yvsm3YAxMzg5MA/s/13890-a7cYg-PtLDF-hcHo2>





structure. Older mentees may want to co-construct their choices with you. As a young person navigates the transition to becoming a young adult, you want to allow them to develop a stronger sense of agency and have greater decision-making power. Encourage them to be independent thinkers while also offering diverse opportunities to be challenged and successful. If your mentee makes a choice you question, respectfully ask them questions to help you understand their reasoning.

### ***Be open to learning from your mentee.***

As discussed earlier, in assessing your readiness to be a youth-centered mentor, it is essential for you to recognize that young people can and have been leaders in their communities. They are full people with knowledge to impart, and you must enter the relationship with the mindset that you can learn just as much from your mentee as they can learn from you. Initially, young people may feel intimidated when interacting with adults as there is an unequal power dynamic and a learned assumption that it is the adult's job to "teach" the young person things they don't know about or have not been exposed to. As a mentor, expressing your genuine enthusiasm and openness to learn from your mentee helps break down this power dynamic. It shows that everyone — adults and young people alike — are continually growing and bring unique experiences to their relationships that we can all learn from. Young people, especially, have tremendous potential to be teachers and leaders. Mentors can cultivate this power by listening to youth's thoughts and ideas. Mentors can use the resources, platforms, and networks to which they have access to connect their mentee, elevate their mentee's voice and ideas, and encourage their mentee to lead in actualizing and implementing their ideas and goals.

*"[What] means a lot [to me] is asking a young person's insight on something. [It shows that] you really care about their perspective and what they care about, and that you're willing to have those conversations with them and willing to learn from them. Showing them that you're viewing them not only as a young person [to whom] you're teaching things, but [as] a young person who can teach you things. That's an extremely important and crucial way to really make your mentee feel like they also have a say in the relationship."—Kyndall, 17, Maximizing Youth Voice, January 2021*

*"What do we have individually and what can we bring to this relationship together as two separate people?"—Sydney, 22, Maximizing Youth Voice, January 2021*

As mentioned in the Introduction to this resource, building trust takes time in any relationship, but this trust is the foundation to a successful relationship. When interacting with your mentee, don't push them to talk or expect that they will open up right away, as they may be struggling with a history of feeling distrustful of, and unheard by, adults. A part of building trust requires mutual respect, honesty, and being vulnerable to share who you are authentically with your mentee. As with any other personal relationship, you can't expect your mentee to share about themselves without sharing about yourself as well. Address gaps in knowledge and be sensitive to the different identities and experiences you both bring to the relationship (see chapter 2 on cultural humility). At the same time, you should not only center yourselves on how you feel or what you think in your interactions with your mentee. Give youth the opportunity to talk and share their ideas and thoughts, and recognize instances where you may talk over or talk at your mentee about your



ideas and how this may come off as patronizing. Test yourself: Who is talking more — you or your mentee? How much time are you spending asking questions and responding versus imparting information?

*“My relationship with my mentor has taught me and inspired me to be a mentor as well.”  
—Kyndall, 17, Maximizing Youth Voice, January 2021*

### **Practice proactive listening and actively ask questions and seek insights.**

Listening proactively and asking questions to learn about your mentee’s perspective will keep you from assuming what is best for your mentee and telling them what to do. Remember this is not about doing what you may feel is best, but rather doing what is best for your mentee’s specific needs and goals and supporting them by listening, asking questions, and validating what they are feeling and what they hope to accomplish. Some questions to consider asking include:

- What do you need?
- What do you want to do?
- What do you care about?
- What is something you’re struggling with right now, and what can I provide for you?
- What would be most helpful for you at this moment, and how can I help?

When your mentee is sharing something, ask them, “What would you like me to provide? Would you like my honest feedback? Or do you just want someone to be a listening ear or someone to vent to?”

Remember to validate your mentee when they are confused, are questioning, or don’t know what they want or what to do next.

As an advocate and supporter, it’s important to always practice active listening and give honest recognition and specific (as opposed to overly general) praise for your mentee’s successes, good decisions, and actions. At the same time, while we want to create space for youth voice and respect their decisions, mentors also can’t expect that mentees will have all the answers and know what decision to make. This is where you come in as a navigator and nonjudgmental sounding board to provide your feedback, share any relevant past experiences, and work with your mentee to problem-solve and talk through next steps. Offer options or multiple potential solutions and get their feedback, rather than just suggesting one way of figuring out or solving a problem. Consider asking, “What do you think about this Option A or this Option B?”

### **Hold yourself and your mentee accountable for next steps.**

Be sure to follow up with your mentee after you’ve worked together to discuss a problem or have decided on a course of action. Consider asking, “Last week, we talked about X being a potential way to help you. Were you able to get a chance to do X? How did it go?” In addition, if you promised you would help with reaching out to someone in your social circle for your mentee or researching some materials or resources they could use, hold yourself accountable to that promise. As Ivette says in the quote below, creating a plan together and then implementing it based on your mentee’s feedback helps them feel respected because it shows that you value what they have to say and will go beyond simply validating, to also taking action to support them.



*“When the mentee speaks or the mentee suggests something, give some type of input and not only say ‘Yes, we can consider it,’ but actually flesh it out with ‘I want to know more,’ ‘What else do you think should come after,’ and being the listening ear and have the mentee speak . . . Give the mentee an environment where what they have to say is welcomed and if anything is important, then just writing it down or making a plan [with the mentee] ... it really does make the young person feel like what they have to say is important and is respected because something is being done about it, it’s actually being considered. Rather than ‘OK, I’ll keep that in mind.’ but actually fleshing it out and being proactive about it [together].” —Ivette, 21, Maximizing Youth Voice, January 2021*

*beginning how to best communicate and set goals . . . Mentees all have different personalities. Some mentees will want the mentor as their friend and have someone to vent to and be a resource. Some mentees won’t and are only there for the goals that were established. It’s part of the role to be sensitive to one another, not only to the mentee, but the mentee to the mentor as well . . . Be open to change as the relationship develops.” —Ivette, 21, Maximizing Youth Voice, January 2021*

*“Young people don’t just want a seat at the table, we want our own table and our own seats and we’re inviting adults to come onboard.” — Meg, 22, Black Youth Town Hall, June 2020*

### **Regularly check in and encourage mentee feedback.**

As a mentor, you should frequently check in, both directly and indirectly, on what is working and not working in your mentoring relationship. Being a mentor is a learning process for you and what better way to evaluate yourself than to ask your mentee? Provide opportunities for your mentee to give you feedback on how you can be a better mentor, whether that is during your meeting or in a written format (e.g., through email/texting). Without ever forcing them to respond, give your mentee time to process how they may feel and check in to see if there was something they had been thinking about but needed more time to process. Once you get this feedback, show your appreciation for your mentee’s honesty, and act on it! Do your best to improve whatever your mentee feels may need improvement. This shows them that you respect their opinion and will honor (and act on) their voice.

*“Figure out and communicate clearly in the*





### **Pitfalls to Avoid**

*“Adults don’t know what it’s like to be a young person in today’s world.” —Aniya, 18, Black Youth Town Hall, June 2020*

When a young person feels comfortable and willing to be their authentic selves, situations may arise that give you pause. Here are a few things to expect:

- 1. Be prepared to be challenged by youth.** As youth find their voice, they will demand to be heard — which is the point! As long as there is mutual respect, it’s OK to disagree on approaches or goals. Being an active listener and guide will help. If you are working on a project, creating norms for decision-making may help mitigate any challenges.
- 2. Check your biases.** It’s important for young people to know that their voice, culture, and identity are of equal importance to those of anyone else, including their mentors. If you

are in a program, ask your program leaders for extra training, or visit chapter 2, “Practicing Cultural Humility,” for more information.

- 3. Don’t patronize.** In other words, don’t pretend you’re interested in learning more when you really aren’t. Youth can tell if you’re patronizing them. Always be authentic, and ask if you’re unsure.

So, what does this look like in the real world? The case studies below illustrate some common pitfalls mentors may experience around supporting youth voice and provide suggestions for how mentors can approach their interactions to ensure youth are meaningfully engaged and that they feel their voices and opinions are valued. Though the strategies in this chapter are not always easy to put into practice and require continuous practice and self-evaluation, these examples are a good place to start to reflect on your mentoring journey so far, and how you would respond in situations where there may be a disconnect between you and your mentee.

## Case Study 1

Marie is a first-time mentor who has been matched with Sandy, a 13-year-old in middle school. Marie is a young lawyer and is very excited to be a mentor, as she feels like she has a lot of experiences and knowledge that could help a young person. Marie has met with Sandy a few times now and usually comes into their interactions with a lot of excitement. She always starts by asking Sandy a bunch of questions, such as, “How was school today?” “What do you like in school?” “What are some things you enjoy doing?” After a long day at school and having to take care of her siblings at home, Sandy is overwhelmed by all of Marie’s questions and her enthusiasm feels fake to her. Sandy responds either with short, one-sentence responses or “I don’t know.” Marie isn’t sure what to do now or how to get Sandy to elaborate, so instead of asking more questions, Marie jumps right into the next activity, without asking Sandy what she would like to do today or what would be most helpful.

In actuality, Sandy is intimidated by Marie and sees Marie as another professional authority figure who is hard to relate to, as Marie hardly ever shares anything about herself other than stuff about her job and her academic experiences. Sandy feels uncomfortable asking Marie any questions or sharing that she would actually like to work on her public speaking skills as she is terrified of presenting in



class. In one instance, when Sandy did mention that she really disliked her English class, Marie was adamant that Sandy should speak to her English teacher to let him know how Sandy was feeling, as from Marie's past experiences, this has always helped Marie feel more comfortable. Sandy wasn't sure if this was the best thing to do and felt like it was already difficult to speak to her teacher because he held views different from hers. However, Sandy just agreed and told Marie she would talk to her teacher. Marie later checks in with Sandy and asks her if she talked to her teacher. Even though she hadn't, Sandy says, "Yes" because she doesn't want to disappoint or upset Marie.

### **Analysis:**

In this case study, Sandy, the mentee, does not feel comfortable enough with her mentor, Marie, to open up about her life, including the things she is struggling with in school and at home, because there is a lack of trust and relationship building. Marie, the mentor, approaches their interactions in a friendly way, however, does not realize her overexcitement comes off as being fake and inauthentic to Sandy. Marie asks a lot of questions and is unaware that she is doing more talking than listening, and she doesn't give Sandy enough time to answer truthfully and elaborate. In addition, Marie doesn't share anything about herself, which makes Sandy feel like all the attention is on her and that she doesn't feel like she knows who Marie is. When meeting, Marie doesn't give Sandy the opportunity to choose how they will spend their time together or ask her what she wants to do. When Sandy does express that she's having difficulty in her English class, Marie doesn't ask about what it is that Sandy is struggling with, but rather assumes that Sandy's experiences will be similar to her own past experiences in the classroom; if Sandy just talks to her teacher and communicates that she's having a hard time, this will fix the problem.

Marie doesn't see that Sandy isn't getting what she needs out of the relationship. As further discussed in chapter 4 on attunement, some key clues that any mentor, like Marie, can pay attention to include: Marie is doing most of the talking and talking more than listening; Sandy's short one-word answers suggest she doesn't feel like more "real" answers would be heard; Sandy doesn't liven up when she sees Marie, but rather folds in and closes up more as their meetings continue. Marie could consider doing an icebreaker activity with Sandy where they both share things about themselves such as their likes, dislikes, and hobbies, their families, who they live with, and what feels like home. Creating a list together of things they would like to do during their meetings or goals and things they would like to improve on would also create more structure, set expectations, and provide opportunities for Sandy to weigh in with her input, all the while getting to know Marie a bit better and her intentions for entering this relationship. When Sandy brings up disliking her English class, Marie could ask for more information about why Sandy doesn't like the class and any aspects that Sandy may like. If Sandy currently feels uncomfortable with her teacher, what other supports, such as other school staff, counselors, or supportive adults, exist at school who could help advocate for her or help Sandy with working through her class assignments? Marie should recognize that Sandy may have a different way of approaching a problem that is preferable to her personality and comfort level — just because something has worked for you in the past, doesn't mean it'll work for your mentee.



## Case Study 2

Jordan is a mentor and has been paired with Cameron for two years since Cameron was a sophomore in high school. Cameron feels comfortable talking with Jordan about the stresses and pressures associated with school, especially as Cameron thinks more about college and options after high school. Cameron is now a rising senior, and over the years, Cameron has developed a greater understanding and self-awareness of his personal views, passions, and the change he wishes to see in his community and broader society. The continued violence against the Black community in the United States has taken a toll on Cameron's mental health, but has also ignited his drive to take action and raise awareness, specifically awareness of the daily challenges and issues faced by Black and Brown youth in Cameron's own city.

Cameron, along with a group of friends, want to organize a rally against police brutality and racial injustice at his high school, but they don't know where to start nor do they know if the school administration or the teachers will be supportive. Cameron tells Jordan he hasn't been able to focus on his college applications and homework lately and then mentions his idea to organize a rally. Jordan immediately responds that Cameron and his friends will get in trouble and questions if he should hold an event at this time because the issue is "controversial." Though Jordan agrees with the message behind the protests, he mentions that a lot of protests recently have become violent and have led to looting and property destruction. He then expresses worry for Cameron and how it might look for Cameron on college applications if Cameron is arrested or suspended.

Cameron is surprised and extremely hurt by Jordan's response. Cameron feels unheard and misunderstood and now feels that he doesn't want to share what's really important to him with Jordan. Cameron is determined to move forward with this event, regardless of what their school may say or if he gets in trouble.

### **Analysis:**

In this example, Jordan's response dismisses and invalidates Cameron, especially when the event Cameron wants to host pertains to an issue that is deeply important and personal to him. When Cameron mentioned that he had been having trouble focusing on school work, Jordan could have responded first by acknowledging what has been going on in the world, checking in on how Cameron is feeling lately and why it has been hard to focus. When Cameron brought up the idea of planning a rally, Jordan could have given Cameron space to elaborate on what his vision is as well as talk more about his school's culture in allowing students to rally, while also making sure he was not bombarding Cameron with questions to discourage him or make him feel like his plan or lack of a plan is bound for failure or punishment from the school. This would have provided a safe space for Cameron to think and talk through his plans and the school's potential reaction without Jordan explicitly raising these issues/concerns himself. Instead of expressing his views so quickly, Jordan could ask Cameron what would be most helpful and how Jordan could be supportive in the moment. Would Cameron like to hear Jordan's opinion on the event? Would Cameron like more guidance on organizing an event? Or would he simply like a sounding board to brainstorm some ideas with Jordan providing his honest feedback on what Cameron is thinking about doing?



While Jordan may have been genuinely concerned for Cameron's safety, Cameron was hurt that Jordan did not acknowledge why this idea matters to Cameron in the first place. Hearing Cameron's initial ideas first and doing some brainstorming would have provided a better context for Jordan to ask Cameron if Jordan could share some of his questions and concerns as some things to consider moving forward, such as whether the school has rules and policies around protests. Regardless of what Jordan may think on the issue or the protest itself, Cameron is not asking for permission from Jordan to host it. A mentor should recognize they are not in the position to persuade a young person to act or do something in a way that they completely agree with, but rather to listen to what the young person has to say, empathize with what they are feeling in the moment, ask what they need, and offer their honest feedback on ways to approach a situation if the mentee is looking for more support.

Part of building youth voice and confidence involves giving your mentee the agency to make their own informed decisions. In order for them to do that, as mentors, we have a role in equipping them with information they may not have known, and sharing different points of views and perspectives with respect and genuine care that can help inform their decisions. At the same time, we must acknowledge that we also do not have all the answers, and there is never one "right" way to answer or respond. Acknowledging our own gaps creates space for mentors and mentees to learn and grow together. Mentors should also recognize that their knowledge and views are largely shaped by their own personal and lived experiences. It is essential to be sensitive and empathetic to what young people are feeling, especially when there are traumatic and violent events that directly impact them. Though we may have our mentee's best interest in mind, just as Jordan does for Cameron, we should continuously practice checking in with ourselves as people who have individual biases and varying experiences in a world that is constantly changing. The young people we want to support are just as multifaceted and have their own experiences, views, and passions that may not always align with what we feel is "best" or "accepted."

Of course, there may also be situations when your mentee is engaging in clearly dangerous behavior. As discussed later, honoring youth voice and building power doesn't mean sitting by and watching them go down a harmful path. Instead it's ensuring that your mentee feels heard and is acting in line with their own values (see chapter 11 on conversations about behavior change), and offering your own thoughts and experiences when your mentee is ready to hear them.



### Contextual Considerations for Honoring Youth Voice

Honoring youth voice and building power can look different depending on your mentee's age as well as the program or community context. If your mentee is still in elementary school, providing choices in activities and asking questions are ways to honor youth voice, gain their trust, and gauge their interests. Part of this involves letting them sit in the driver's seat and giving them some directions to help guide them in figuring out their goals, likes, and dislikes. As your mentee develops over time, their needs and interests will undoubtedly change, which may require a change in your approach, especially as they begin to form more of their own views and sense of self. Identifying and naming emotions, identifying potential options, and making decisions or acting toward a goal are all important skills to cultivate as a young person develops.

For older youth, it's important to move from not only providing options or asking questions, but also to actually allowing your mentee to ask their own questions, make their own decisions, create their own plans, and execute these plans as the main driver. Adolescence is a critical time for young people to have these experiences to build their confidence and leadership skills. Make efforts to cultivate their self-advocacy skills, give youth space to identify issues that matter to them, and brainstorm with them how they can achieve their goals or work to create change. See chapter 9, which discusses how mentors can build critical consciousness in youth and serve as "co-conspirators" in helping them take action, which will deepen your skills as someone who can partner with youth to cultivate their voice and power.

The context of your mentoring work also matters. We acknowledge that mentoring happens both in

structured mentoring programs and naturally in communities. Depending on your particular context, you may approach the relationship differently. If you are mentoring through a program, you have program staff who can help you navigate issues or provide training and support in how to build rapport with, and learn about, your mentee. However, no program can prepare you for all situations, and you may find yourself in the moment and realize you have to think on your feet. Your first priority should be to ensure that your mentee feels heard. This is the best way to empower them and strengthen their voice. As things come up, make sure you are consistently creating a safe space for them using all of the skills and suggestions noted in this chapter.

This is also true in mentoring relationships that form naturally, outside of programs. For example, you may have a young neighbor who seeks you out for advice. Sometimes, you feel confident in your counsel, but other times you may need more reflection. In either case, your goal is the same. Do not stifle, overwhelm, or judge. Instead, listen and get additional support if needed. See below for a few tips for applying the skills discussed in this chapter.

### Tips and Final Thoughts

*"A lot of times, naturally adults try to help and guide but will accidentally suffocate us or try to take control, take the lead, be in front." —Aniya, 18, Black Youth Town Hall, June 2020*

When we are unsure of ourselves (or too sure of ourselves, in some cases), we may inadvertently stifle, or as Aniya describes it, accidentally suffocate or try to take control. It is helpful in those moments to pause, listen, and ask clarifying questions. One of the ways you can get more comfortable with listening and asking questions is to do some





homework. Read about the issues affecting youth. Specifically, ask young people about the issues they care about without overwhelming them with questions. If your mentee mentions that they are curious about issues related to food insecurity, you might ask some general, clarifying questions then do some research on your own to understand the issue more broadly. That way, you can help your mentee process questions and maybe even do a volunteer project together to help address the issue.

You may find yourself in a situation — particularly early on in your relationship — where the young person is not used to being asked questions and may not have much to say. In that case, ask them what they like doing or if they have a desire to learn something new. Maybe mention hobbies or skills you have, to see if they spark interest. There are other chapters in this resource that speak to establishing a relationship with a young person, but, ultimately, you have the privilege of building a relationship with your mentee, so you should be as prepared and intentional as possible.

Projects are an excellent way to establish relationships while doing something meaningful for the community. Programs may help set the stage for projects to occur or provide set projects that you can participate in with your mentee. Establishing partnerships with youth toward a common goal has proven to be an excellent way to connect with young people.

The term **youth-adult partnership** (Y-AP) refers to youth and adults who are working together for a common purpose. In the Y-AP model, youth and adults jointly identify a problem in the youth's life that they are trying to solve or work through or a broader community or societal issue. They then work together to design possible solutions and implement those solutions. Within programs, Y-AP

can focus on governance and program planning, co-delivering workshops, collaborating on research, and fundraising. Within schools, Y-AP can focus on redesigning curriculum, school policy revisions, and school-community collaborations. These types of projects are typically geared toward older youth, but projects like these can be done with your mentee at any stage of their development. We should never assume that elementary-school-aged youth, for example, would not want to positively impact their communities. Younger mentees can participate in book drives or make gift boxes to deliver to food pantries or even make cards for service people who are away from home.

As you prepare to mentor, remember that honoring youth voice and building their power is about being a trusted guide. That doesn't mean that you sit silently by and let youth go down paths you know are problematic and unhealthy in the mistaken belief that this is how to raise youth voice. Being prepared to mentor youth means being willing to work in collaboration with them and to have high expectations for performance. Mentoring works when adults teach young people things, be it new skills or viewpoints, they didn't know before. At the same time, all youth also have the potential to teach adults things they didn't know before. If this is happening in an authentic way, your mentoring relationship will be successful.



## Additional Reading and Resources

If you want to learn about a few youth activist leaders, here are three to explore:

- **Mari Copeny**, 13-year-old activist, philanthropist, and “future president,” is on the front lines helping youth to embrace their power through equal opportunity. She is also known as Little Miss Flint because of her leadership around clean water in Flint, Michigan. Click [here](#) to access.
- **Greta Thunberg**, 18-year-old Swedish environmental activist who has worked to address the problem of climate change, who founded a movement in 2018 known as Fridays for Future (also called School Strike for Climate). Click [here](#) to access.
- **Lonnie Chavis**, 12-year-old antibullying advocate, has launched a campaign, IGTV show, and hashtag around #FixYourHeart. Click [here](#) to access.

### Other Online Resources:

- **“Why Youth Voice Matters,”** Blog posted by the Birmingham City School of Education and Social Work – This article highlights some of the promise and tension around youth voice. Click [here](#) to access.
- **“Here’s Why It’s So Important to Create Opportunities for Youth Voices to Be Heard,”** by Jaclyn Cirinna, published by The Juvenile Justice Information Exchange – An article written by a formerly incarcerated young person speaking to the importance of youth voice. Click [here](#) to access.

- ***The Developmental Relationships Framework***  
The Search Institute has identified five elements, expressed in 20 specific actions, that make relationships powerful in young people’s lives. Click [here](#) to access.
- **“What is Unconditional Positive Regard in Psychology?”** by Courtney E. Ackerman, published by Positive Psychology – A detailed article about unconditional positive regard. Click [here](#) to access.
- **“12 Community Service Projects for Kids“**  
An article highlighting different projects to do with youth of all ages. Click [here](#) to access.

If you are interested in viewing recordings of the events where the youth quotes in this chapter originated, you can find them here:

- **Black Youth Town Hall Webinar**  
Click [here](#) to access.
- **Maximizing Youth Voice Webinar**  
Click [here](#) to access.



**MENTOR**

## **CHAPTER 9**

# **BUILDING CRITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS AND YOUTH ACTIVISM**

*How Elder Wisdom Can Power and Resource Youth for Future Change*

Torie Weiston-Serdan – The Center for Critical Mentoring and Youth Work



### What Does Building Critical Consciousness and Youth Activism Mean?

Many have labeled 2020 the “year of the twin pandemics” — COVID-19 and racial injustice. COVID-19 exposed both class and race divides when we learned that it was disproportionately impacting particular communities and all of the reasons why. Amid the backdrop of this pandemic, the extrajudicial murder of George Floyd further exposed the chasm between our white communities and our Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) communities, especially as it relates to policing. The reckoning for these crises has only just begun, and we have so much work to do, but the crux of that work is *with our young people* — and it doesn’t look like the work we were doing before. Youth work is particularly important at this moment because young people are not only the future, they are also actively engaged in change-making. In 2020, young people hit the streets to force a reckoning on race and demand justice. Young people have been recording incidents and ensuring they are made public so that we collectively bear witness. And it is young people who will build new systems that free us all.

However, young people won’t be able to do that work without elders being willing to ensure they have the language, historical knowledge, and *critical* understanding of existing systems. To be clear, there is still a need for mentoring — for adults to create and dwell in spaces where they can positively impact young people. However, even more than the need for mentoring, the events of 2020 made it clear that mentoring alone is not enough. Being present and being available to young people indeed make a difference, but if we are interested in cultivating a kind of future that is radical, free, and rooted in love and that reimagines

our existing systems, then it is even more essential that adults see themselves as builders of a *critical consciousness* that can strengthen and activate youth power. We mentors are individuals who are responsible for ensuring that youth have voice, power, and choice, and our job is to cultivate spaces where young people can tap into and build their own power.

### What Is Critical Consciousness?

**The term “critical consciousness” refers to the ability of individuals, in this case young people, to critically understand social conditions, feel empowered to change those conditions, and take action to improve the world around them. This can be about issues that are small scale and directly personal (e.g., issues in the youth’s school or community) or at a larger scale (e.g., participation in regional or national movements).**

**The development of critical consciousness is thought to unfold over several stages: reflection (thinking about current social or community issues and how historical context has shaped that reality), motivation (in which youth start thinking about what they can do to help), and action (which involves working to directly address issues of importance). Critical consciousness also involves understanding the many aspects of one’s self and how those different identities relate to their experiences of the world around them.**

**Obviously, caring adults like mentors can be instrumental to young people understanding themselves, the history that surrounds them, and their sense of agency to bring about positive change. As you read this chapter, think about how these concepts might play out in the young people you work with.**



Mentoring in this way requires a different set of skills than just showing up. It first requires that we see ourselves as elders with wisdom to offer, and then that we begin exercising the best ways to share that elder wisdom with young people to build them up and support their work. We cannot shy away from naming ourselves as elders. While western society often associates the word “elder” with “old,” in most other societies the elder is associated with wisdom and experience. In BIPOC communities, our elders are considered worthy of respect and regard because of the lives they have lived and the experiences they have had. They are seen as having something special and spiritual to offer us as we move into our future. They serve as guides and in many ways are recognized as the individuals who have helped to pave our way, who contribute to the shaping of our collective future.

After acknowledging our eldership and elder wisdom, we need to hone our listening skills, and really tune in to what young people want and need. This listening requires a level of humility. It reminds us that we are not the voice that needs to be centered and that we do not have all of the answers.

On some level, the powerful act of listening positions us as servant leaders, helping us understand what we must know in order to best serve our young people.

Finally, we must have the courage to follow young people as they lead — to see ourselves as individuals with the power to provide young people with what they need to lead us into the future. Angela Davis, a well-respected member of the ongoing civil rights movements in this country, once said that “young people should be able to see further because they are standing on our shoulders.” This quote is a reminder that young people benefit from the foundations we lay; that they can do their work because we do ours. But it also reminds us that young people can do future work — that they can not only pick up where we have left off but move us further into the future than we might have imagined ourselves.

As youth consciousness builders, we hone our skills with the intent of ensuring that youth have space and place to *freedom dream* and do their future work. We recognize that our responsibility as elders is to ensure that youth have every resource, platform, and opportunity for the learning and understanding they require to generate power, organize themselves, and make meaningful change.

### **Why Supporting the Development of Critical Consciousness and Youth Activism Is Important in Mentoring Relationships**

When we think about mentoring, our imaginations are often limited to an idea of just “spending time with” or being a “connection” for a young person. While those things can be of tremendous importance, they may not be enough to fully support young people, given the context we all exist in. We all must recognize that our shared context of racism, sexism, ableism, trans-antagonism, homo-antagonism, and other “isms” not named here, create a harmful and toxic context for *all* of us. If mentoring is defined as a caring relationship focused on the consistent support and positive



development of a young person, how can any form of true mentoring be done without acknowledging what’s happening around us? On some level, it’s irresponsible to think that we can isolate a mentoring relationship from all of the issues and challenges in the world that surround the youth we work with and not be intentional about supporting youth as they navigate these challenges — and even change things for the better. Especially as many mentoring organizations continue to make the claim that BIPOC youth require mentoring “help” due to the oppression and marginalization they often face, it seems reckless to then ignore that oppression and marginalization during the course of our mentoring relationships. It also seems like a missed opportunity not to use mentoring itself to counteract that oppression and marginalization.

In 2017, I wrote *Critical Mentoring*, which was focused on the need to align our mentoring work with a critical examination of our context and an intention to support young people as they navigate the aforementioned “isms.” In addition to my own work on this issue, other mentoring scholars like Bernadette Sanchez (see chapter 2) and Noelle Hurd were doing the important work of highlighting what mentoring looked like among specific BIPOC populations and issuing an ongoing critique of the types of support we were offering these youth. In 2014, Dr. Sanchez authored a piece that questioned why “despite evidence that race and ethnicity play an important role in mentoring relationships, there are limited research-based guidelines in the practice field regarding how race/ethnicity should be considered. Some of the most important resources in the field, such as [MENTOR’s] Elements of Effective Practice [for Mentoring], pay little attention to the role of race and ethnicity in mentoring programs.”<sup>1</sup>

At the same time, a lot of education, civic engagement, and philanthropic scholarship notes the importance of investing in young people, youth-led efforts, and youth power building in communities. Scholars like Rod Watts have made the case that infusing critical consciousness building and civic engagement in youth-adult partnerships is critical to youth development and social justice.<sup>2</sup>

In addition, philanthropic entities like The California Endowment (TCE) have been both investing in and studying the importance of youth-generated and youth-led movements in the fight for equity and justice. In fact, in TCE’s work, four important themes were identified among the youth power-building groups they funded and studied:

- 1) development of civic skills;
- 2) a critical civic education;
- 3) capacity for civic action; and
- 4) personal growth and well-being.

What’s most interesting is that the first three themes don’t sound a lot like mentoring to most people, but the last theme rounds out the work and reminds us of what mentoring youth with the intention of increasing leadership capacity and youth power building really looks like. All of this work was done, very intentionally, with traditionally oppressed and marginalized youth populations that aren’t typically invested in in this way. (See this chapter’s Additional Reading and Resources section for a link to a document describing the TCE initiative.)

All of this scholarship points to several important ideas: that our shared context requires that we critically examine issues of race, class, gender, etc.; that mentoring alone — at least in the ways we typically imagine it — isn’t enough to fully support young people or the change they want to make;

<sup>1</sup> Sánchez, B., Colón-Torres, Y., Feuer, R., Roundfield, K. E., & Berardi, L. Race, ethnicity, and culture in mentoring. In D. L. DuBois & M. J. Karcher (Eds.), *Handbook of Youth Mentoring* (2nd ed., pp. 145-158). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

Watts, R. J., & Flanagan, C. (2007). Pushing the envelope on youth civic engagement: A developmental and liberation psychology perspective. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 35(6), 779-792. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1002/jcop.20178>



and that a more active focus on civic engagement and youth power building is what the next level of mentoring should look like. This means we must be intentional about centering young people's voices, listening to what young people want and need, and positioning ourselves to help resource those dreams.

### **What Does Building Critical Consciousness Look Like in Mentoring Relationships?**

The Youth Mentoring Action Network (YMAN), which I cofounded, has been engaging in this work of youth power building both formally and informally since 2007. Always a mentoring organization, we recognized that our mentoring relationships should be leveraged in the fight for equity and justice in the communities that we serve and that young people are — and must continue to be — a very big part of that. The lessons we learned early in our collaboration with youth are the examples I share here.

Young people already have radical tendencies. They already think in terms of what's possible. As they get older, they learn to dampen those thoughts because adults and life experiences give them opposing messages. We tell them what's not possible or what has never been done and feels impossible. But we should help young people critically interrogate their world by having open and honest conversations with them, and providing them with varied perspectives. Instead of presenting them with what we think, we should present them with the possibilities and let them choose. We need to help support their natural critical thinking by reinforcing the idea that more than one thing can be true and that the world they inhabit has complicated origins and many entities attempting to claim what is really "true" about our history and current moment. I recently watched a hilarious TikTok video with a mother recording her daughter talking to another

youth about Jesus. She exclaimed confidently that Jesus was bisexual and nonbinary. Her mother, aghast, asked her where she had learned that. The youth responded, "In school," though no one had told her this directly. This was what she had inferred given the information provided. Her mother continues, "Why do you think Jesus is bisexual?" The youth answered, "Because he loves everyone." "Why is he nonbinary," asked her mother. "Because he's a man and he wears a dress," she answered. The links seemed incredibly clear to this young person, and it's in moments like these that we can foster that thinking or stop it with the way we interact with young people, the way we shame them with words or facial expressions, the way we correct what we think is wrong. A mentor, in this situation, could take offense or harshly correct this youth's thinking — but we encourage mentors to build on the clarity of observation and thought young people can bring to a wide range of topics, including those more serious than this funny example.

I continue to affirm this idea of gentle guidance: supporting and affirming young people rather than imposing our ideas about what is right and wrong onto them. The best way to explain how to do this work is to say we have to, at every opportunity, interrogate our own thoughts and behaviors and ask ourselves why we feel the need to impose those on young people and not allow them to experience and make sense of the world around them, for themselves.

So, what does this look like?

### ***It looks like becoming aware.***

We need to become aware of ourselves — who we are, what we think about young people, what we think about social issues, and the power we yield to make change. Most important, we need to become



aware of our **adultism**. Too many of us suffer from adultism and see ourselves as superior to youth. While we do have knowledge and wisdom to share, we often think we can shove that knowledge and wisdom down young people's throats. So as a mentor, make sure you think deeply about how the world you have experienced has shaped you, how it has biased you in certain ways, and what you can do to keep those biases in check, avoid that tendency toward adultism, and honor the observations of the young person you support.

Becoming aware also means developing a consciousness and intentionality about how we connect and collaborate with young people and how we share with them what we have to offer. This brings us back to the idea of an elder. The elder holds space; the elder waits for opportunities to teach; the elder knows their value and does not need to impose themselves on the younger. At YMAN, we do this by checking in on our processes and intent before connecting with youth and holding each other as staff and volunteers for the organization accountable for how we engage young people. We ask ourselves a set of questions:

- Did young people tell us they wanted or needed this?
- Were young people included in building this?
- What part of this process highlights young people's talents and capabilities?
- Are we taking up too much space with our words or ideas?

We must always do our own work before working with youth.

### ***It looks like listening.***

After the first year of running a school-based mentoring program, we took an entire session at the

end of the year to hear what young people thought about the programming. It was the best thing we could have done. Young people were open and honest and expressed their feelings about how we "did mentoring to them." Our focus on academics had been too much, and it didn't include any help identifying, calling out, and challenging the "isms" rooted in the institutions they dealt with every day. Naming is particularly important because so often what happens feels unexplained or undefined. Naming helps us pinpoint, label and correct what is happening. Our focus on fixing young people, rather than supporting them in fixing the context that surrounded them, made them feel like the problem and ignored their daily lived experiences. They wanted action and experience, not just "a bunch of talking," so they would feel better prepared to go out into the world. Not only had we done a lot wrong, but what the young people were asking for made a whole lot of sense. Listening was the best thing we could have done to understand how to move forward. Too many see listening as passive, minimal, or something to rush through so they can get to work. Listening to young people as we engage in mentoring is not only right, it is absolutely essential. It's a powerful skill and, when done correctly, it's mutually beneficial.

When we shifted our mentoring focus to centering and listening to young people, not only did we do a better job of mentoring, our programming also greatly improved. We didn't have to recruit young people anymore, they came to us, and they came because other young people found meaning in the work and brought them to us. We started building programs led by youth, and those were the most successful, because young people were actively engaged in creating their own services. At YMAN we actually hire youth to help us build out and run programs. If you are a mentor working with a young





person outside of a program, you can support youth leadership and agency by letting the young person organize your outings or decide how you will spend time together (see chapter 8 on honoring youth voice and building power).

It shouldn't take a lot of effort to listen, and though you can make it a formal exercise, you don't have to. If listening to youth is something you struggle with, spend some time preparing yourself to listen without interrupting, to listen without judgment, and to listen to understand, not argue or impose your own view. Remember, the goal is always to listen and to listen with intention. After we listen to young people, we then need to do what they have suggested. Tokenizing youth voices and listening to them just to say you did isn't enough. Following up on what the young people have said and actually working alongside them to implement their ideas are necessary next steps.

### ***It looks like getting out of the way.***

Too often adults center on themselves, their experiences, and their ideas when solving problems. There is definitely some value in that, but it neglects some of the freshness and innovation that youth bring to the table. One of the most important aspects of being a youth power builder is to center youth experience and action by providing young people with a platform and work alongside them as they come up with solutions for challenging problems. For example, sometimes the best thing we can do as the mentor and elder is to step aside. There is a saying that goes, "You don't need to be a voice for the voiceless, just pass the mic." This quote represents the work of getting out of the way. Every time there is an opportunity to highlight a young person, to give them an opportunity to shine, to provide a platform for them to speak, to center their experience and talent, we should do just that.

When YMAN began working on its Black Girls (EM) Power initiative, we spent a year talking to young Black women and girls about what they wanted and needed. During that year of connecting with that community, leaders emerged. When we finally sat down to organize our initiative, we made sure to recruit and pay those leaders to help us organize the programming. That is part of what youth power building looks like. For an individual mentor, it may not be about programming, but it certainly is about making sure young people are given opportunities to shine — helping your protégé get a paid internship, having them collaborate with you on some community work you might be doing, asking them to think about a community project you might want to do together, and letting them organize it. It looks like providing space for young people to lead their own work, to use their own voices, to freedom dream, to work toward liberation — to, very literally, build their own power. That does not mean that they do it without us, but rather, that sometimes the best we can do for them is to move out of their way and follow them as they lead.

This is especially important for those later stages of critical consciousness: motivation and action. Young people often can identify issues in their communities that need to be addressed, but they may not feel like they can make a difference or may have reservations about taking action. This is where you, as a mentor, can offer valuable scaffolding in the form of both emotional support that lets them know they can lead and "instrumental" support that can bring adult resources to the action they want to take. Just remember that they should be in the lead and your role is as a coconspirator helping to bring their vision to life.



### Contextual Considerations for Building Youth Power

Let's start with the biggest context: We exist in the midst of a tremendous moment. A pandemic, a racial justice awakening, climate change, and global unrest are among some of the many challenges we are collectively facing. Young people have been crying out for a radical shift — for a change in the way we address these issues. They have taken up the mantle of the unfinished civil rights movement, and they are working to ensure our planet still exists for future generations. They are vocal and bold and ready for change. And they have a lot of work to do because there are so many problems to solve! Our role as youth power builders helps to ensure that young people have all the skills and resources they need to work on these problems. Without their work, the world and all those within it, will continue to suffer. This is not to say that young people can single-handedly save us, but rather, that they play a key role in doing so, which means our roles are important too. Who raises the next generation? Who ensures they think critically? Who challenges them to think and act boldly? Who leverages their own power and resources to power and resource them? Our role as mentors is to aid in this development process and to do so in critical ways. This moment requires the bold vision of young people, the energy of young people, and the imagination of young people. What young people do not often have is institutional power, resources, and platforms to do the work of moving us all forward. That is where we come in. There are more than enough problems to solve, and young people can solve them, but the support and encouragement they need lies with elders who work to position themselves as conspirators, not as leaders of the movement.

As a mentor, you may be wondering how this work looks different depending on the age of the mentee. Young people at every age and stage of development can be engaged as power builders. As youth grow we teach them about agency, about power, about choices. We help them make sense of the larger world around them. They have opportunities to see themselves as powerful beings, as individuals who can make a change. We can also nurture, as noted in the TikTok example earlier, their ability to notice things and perspectives that our adult brains cannot. Our job is to constantly speak life into them, to encourage their radical imaginations, to give them opportunities to practice and fail, to encourage them and love them. We can provide these supports no matter the age of the youth.

### As youth get older, they can move into deeper leadership roles.

They can bring their peers into the work and build coalitions that we adults often cannot. The last few years have been full of examples of young people building powerful movements. If you are working with older youth, you may have the opportunity to build something similarly powerful alongside them. (See chapter 8 for more examples of amazing youth leaders.)

And to be clear about who this work is for: it's not just for BIPOC youth or other marginalized groups, although this critical approach may be most vital to their thriving. It's for all young people and all of us can be allies to movements and causes that



are not directly our own. But our involvement is a choice, and we hope you choose to walk alongside the young people you are mentoring, even if their passions for social change are not inherently your own.

It is our responsibility to do these things, and we do them by being supportive of young people, by engaging them in critical discussions, by never giving up on them, by always looking for ways they can use their voices and speak to issues that matter to them, and by engaging in a process of care. We want young people to harness the power they already have.

### **Tips and Final Thoughts**

Many adults mistake the idea of centering youth with the idea that adults aren't needed. Youth power building is not about rendering adults useless, it's about centering young people and positioning adults as supporters and resources rather than leaders. Elders are needed and wanted. In fact, youth need the love, support, stories, and experiences of their elders. What they often reject is the way we insert ourselves into their lives without being asked, often looking down on or judging them for their differences or for the ways they choose to live or engage in liberation work. We need to remind ourselves that young people have powerful ideas about how to build the future.

Most of what is being laid out in this chapter is really about philosophy and approach. Every young person, no matter what age, has ideas about the world. The adults around them decide how to treat them and interact with them around these ideas. Our choices as mentors to question them, encourage them, judge them, or support their processing are important and can either enhance or inhibit the steps these young people take to bring

about change in our world. At each stage of youth development there are ways that we speak to and interact with young people that can aid them in their ability to be free and to work toward a free world.

If you are interested in volunteering in a mentoring program, it's also important to think critically as you select that program — what its aims are and how you would be matched with a young person. This work requires that we look for programs with aims that are aligned with our own. That may not always be what we find, so if you want to mentor in a program, be an informed and picky consumer.

### **Some final tips for building youth critical consciousness and power:**

#### ***Be Honest***

Honesty is needed both with yourself and with the young people you work with. Be upfront about who you are and what you bring to the table. Let young people know where you stand and what kinds of experiences you have had. It's even OK to let them know you worry. But there is a difference between that and stopping them from speaking truth to power and taking bold action. Be honest with yourself too. It takes courage to acknowledge where we are, especially if where we are is not where we would like to be on our journey. That honesty pays off in a big way when it comes time to course correct or be accountable to young people.

#### ***Be Accountable***

Youth are not the only ones who should be accountable for their actions. As elders engaging in youth power building work, we must be accountable to our young people and to the communities we belong to. We have to understand that our words and our actions illustrate our values and our beliefs. To be accountable means reconciling those values



and beliefs with the people around us, especially those we are building alongside. When young people lovingly correct us, we must be accountable to them. We must accept responsibility for our failures and repair harm. In this way, we model healthy interactions and community building for our young people.

### ***Be Brave***

Most important, we must be brave. This work is not for the faint of heart. You will be challenged, you will face criticism, and nothing will change overnight. But we must move forward anyway. Too many adults talk a lot about progress and justice and liberation, but when it comes down to action, many of us lose our nerve. This kind of youth collaboration requires that we act boldly and walk in courage. Our youth need us to support them, they need us to back them, they need us to stand up for them. And that may mean going against popular opinion or “conventional wisdom.” Be brave — and follow young people anyway.

Building critical consciousness is absolutely essential not only to these young people, but to our collective future. We need elders to see themselves as such, and to channel their wisdom and make it available to young people as they build a world that is just, a world that is free, a world that is hopeful and a world that is loving. Without youth power, we may not accomplish a better future. Our job is to lift young people up — to give them our shoulders to stand on so they can see further. Young people deserve the best of us so that they can be better than us.

## Additional Reading and Resources

Most of the resources listed below can be accessed online at the links we have provided. The print titles listed here should be available through local or online bookstores or through your public library.

- ***Building Healthy Communities Through Youth Leadership*** One of many reports produced on the work The California Endowment is doing to invest in youth activists and in the concept of youth power building. Click [here](#) to access.
- ***Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination by Robyn D. G. Kelley*** An important book around the ability to dream about liberation and to free ourselves enough to dream.
- ***Black Girls (EM) Power: Black Girls Self Care Workshop*** A highlight of a wellness program YMAN does with Black girls in our mentoring program. We use this to illustrate what critical mentoring looks like in action. Click [here](#) to access.
- ***Black Girls (EM) Power Launch*** Another example of what this work looks like in action. Young people are featured talking about their role in the work. Click [here](#) to access.
- ***The California Endowment's Youth Power Infrastructure: An Overview of Youth-Serving Organizations and Intermediaries It Supports, by Veronica Terriquez*** A report providing examples of the infrastructure required to engage in youth power-building activities. Click [here](#) to access.



**MENTOR**

## CHAPTER 10

# GOAL SETTING AND SUPPORT

Ed Bowers - Clemson University



### What Does Supporting Your Mentee in Goal Setting Mean?

Goals give meaning and direction to life and are linked to well-being, health, and success across the life span. The process of helping young people set and pursue their goals is not only a central task of many mentoring programs, but it's also a common activity in the many natural (meaning outside of a program context) mentoring relationships adults have with young people. Mentoring relationships are well suited to support these goal-directed processes, as mentors often help mentees navigate the world by promoting skill development and self-confidence and encouraging mentees to focus on their futures. Indeed, high-quality mentor-youth relationships support a mentee's confidence in their goal-setting ability and goal-directed skills. Goal setting and support can structure the interactions and activities in mentoring relationships and gives mentors direction for working with their mentees; by helping their mentees set and pursue their goals, mentors are better able to identify where and how to focus their support. The process of supporting mentees as they set and pursue their goals is often labeled as “instrumental support.”

In this chapter, I will identify and describe three key skills youth use for setting and pursuing their goals, how mentors can support the development of these skills, and suggestions for how the characteristics of your mentee should be considered when fostering these skills. Promoting goal-related skills is relevant for all types of mentoring relationships — from short-term, highly structured academic-focused mentoring programs to more informal relationships where a caring adult helps a young person pursue their passion. Helping youth set and pursue their goals will not only help them on their life path, but also strengthen your relationship with them.

Other chapters in this resource can also help strengthen your ability to support your mentee's goal-directed activities. Chapter 4 on attunement and chapter 2 on cultural humility may be helpful in establishing a safe and supportive context for goal-directed processes. Chapters on empowering youth (chapters 8 and 9), expanding networks of support (chapter 12), and encouraging change talk in your mentee (chapter 11) may help with identifying strengths and resources mentees can leverage in pursuing a goal.

### Why Goal Setting and Support Matter in Mentoring Relationships

As young people navigate increasingly complex worlds, setting and pursuing goals can help them in several ways. Goals help young people: (1) make sense of their world; (2) meet their needs in the face of changing demands and opportunities; and (3) promote their own positive development. Not only is making progress toward their goals linked to positive mental health, but just the process of setting and monitoring that progress also promotes positive outcomes in young people such as motivation, empowerment, and improved communication between youth and the adults in their lives.<sup>1</sup>

Youth who are successful at achieving their goals have three separate but interrelated abilities. First, youth must be able to set, prioritize, and commit to a set of personally relevant goals that they want to achieve. Second, they are able to pursue these goals by developing strategies and leveraging resources. To achieve their goals, youth need to be able to make goal-directed plans and develop and tap resources — from practicing a skill to asking for help from others. Finally, youth must be able to “bounce back” from failure. If an initial plan doesn't work out, young people must be able to switch to a new

<sup>1</sup> Pender, F., Tinwell, C., Marsh E., & Cowell, V. (2013). Evaluating the use of goal-based outcomes as a single patient rated outcome measure across CWP CAMHS: A pilot study. *Child and Family Clinical Psychology Review*, 1, 29-40.

## GOAL SETTING AND SUPPORT



strategy to achieve their goal. In some cases, youth may have to decide whether it's worth it to keep pursuing their original goal or if they should select a new goal.

A young person's abilities to select and pursue their goals, as well as their ability to shift gears if things aren't working out as expected, have important implications for their success in multiple areas, from earning high grades and getting a job, to balancing the stresses of family, school, and social obligations. In fact, an extensive body of research has linked a young person's goal-directed skills to healthy and positive development as well as making positive contributions to their communities. Higher levels of goal-directed skills are also linked with lower levels of depressive symptoms, delinquency, and risky behaviors such as smoking, underage drinking, and substance use (interested readers can find references to some of this research in the Additional Reading and Resources section at the end of this chapter).

Young people often need help in developing these goal-directed skills. As mentors, you can be real assets to helping your mentees learn to develop and apply these skills to succeed in their own lives. In the remainder of this chapter, I discuss some ways mentors can support their mentee's development of these three skills.

### What Does Goal Setting and Support Look Like in Practice?

A helpful metaphor for understanding the three processes youth use to set and achieve their goals is the GPS navigation system on your smart phone. Youth enter their destination (Goal Selection), and the GPS provides them a route to reach their destination (Pursuit of Strategies). Note that the recommended route is only one of several potential

routes to the same destination. Sometimes when youth encounter traffic, construction, or a road is blocked, they are re-routed (Shifting Gears). For instance, a youth may select a specific goal (improve Spanish conversation skills) and pursue a strategy to achieve that goal (complete online Spanish modules). If that first strategy doesn't work, then the student may shift gears and choose a different strategy (communicate with native Spanish speakers on Zoom).



A well-functioning GPS leads youth to their destination (achieving a goal). Mentors might view themselves as driver's ed instructors providing support throughout the learning process as young people become more skilled at independently applying their goal-directed skills. How might a mentor support their mentees on this journey? How can mentors teach youth about the importance of selecting positive goals, guide them to identify and use effective strategies to pursue those goals, and support them when they need to shift gears, change directions, and move forward when things don't work out as planned?

First, it's important to recognize that supporting a mentee in setting and pursuing their goals is an iterative, back-and-forth, collaborative process between the mentor and mentee. There will be



starts and stops, and successes and failures, along the way. Below are general guidelines for how a mentor can support a mentee with developing their GPS skills along with several examples of how this process might look in a mentor's interactions with their mentee.

### **Goal Selection**

To support a mentee's goal selection (G) skills, mentors can help them identify positive and personally relevant goals. These goals should challenge mentees, excite them, and put them on a path toward reaching their full potential. If you are mentoring in a program that offers a structured mentoring experience, your program may have domain-specific goals for mentees to set (e.g., academic or character-related goals) or may ask you to help your mentee set more broadly defined, open-ended goals. If you are not mentoring in a formal program, you may hear your mentee talk about their hopes and dreams, as well as the challenges and struggles they are facing in different areas of their life. Those revelations present natural opportunities to ask your mentee more questions about their aims in life and to see if you can apply the strategies suggested here. Remember, however, that regardless of the program's overall aims or the type of relationship you have with your mentee, youth should set goals they want to achieve, not what the mentor, program, or parent wants them to achieve. Mentee's voices should be heard and respected as mentors provide their guidance and advice to mentees to come to a shared decision (see chapter 8 on honoring youth voice and building power). Mentors can have youth prioritize the goals that are most important to them and discuss with mentees how they might not be able to do everything they want.

For example, Maria is 17 years old and just started her junior year in a new school in a new town. The first few months at her new school were difficult, as the classes were much more advanced than those at her prior school. She agrees to join a college and career mentoring program. After building a rapport with Maria, Latoya, her mentor, has Maria brainstorm a list of possible goals they can work on — both long-term and short-term, realistic and unrealistic. Listing out all possible goals, even unrealistic ones, during this brainstorm can help guide their discussion about what goals might be best to set and pursue. For instance, you may have heard of the acronym, **SMART** Goals (**S**pecific, **M**easurable, **A**chievable, **R**elevant, **T**imely). Latoya could use the idea of SMART goals to help Maria evaluate each of the goals she has listed. Her role as a mentor is to help Maria select a goal that is meaningful to her, realistic to her skill level and resources, and demanding of her focus and effort. In discussing these goals with Latoya, Maria identifies that her most important goal for this semester is to improve her math grade.

The types of goals your mentee selects are also critical. When youth set goals that are specific and well defined, rather than general, they are more likely to be successful. Therefore, mentors can help mentees select manageable yet challenging goals. Mentees may have really big dreams, such as opening their own restaurant, appearing on Broadway, or becoming an engineer. These dreams may be a long way away, separated by years of hard work, effort, and opportunities. And the path for reaching those dreams may be a little fuzzy. Goals should have clear steps that can be met along the way. Therefore, as a mentor, you can help your mentee break those big goals down into manageable steps to be completed within a realistic time frame. You may also have to help your





mentee fill in the “gaps” between the steps. These steps will allow your mentee to achieve success on smaller goals that will motivate them toward their destination and provide natural timepoints for you to provide feedback. For example, Maria and Latoya work together to set a realistic, meaningful, and demanding math goal for Maria to achieve. Maria generates the clear, action-oriented goal with a time frame that she “will earn an A in math at the end of first semester” and to achieve this, she will get A’s on most of her weekly homework assignments and improve her daily class participation score, which she had been struggling with in previous semesters.

### **Pursuit of Strategies**

As mentees begin to plan out how to pursue their goals (P), the mentor can help them consider and identify the strategies and resources that can be used to help them reach these goals. For example, you can help your mentee identify, or even introduce them to, people and organizations that might be able to help them, or you might introduce them to people you know who have a career that interests them (see chapter 12 on expanding your mentee’s networks of support). Mentors can take their mentees to places with helpful information or links to other resources, like libraries, and work with them to develop a plan to use these resources. As mentees become more competent in identifying strategies to pursue their goals, mentors can teach help-seeking and self-advocacy skills, so youth feel empowered to recruit these resources themselves.

In order to reach her goal to earn an A in math at the end of the first semester, Maria works with Latoya to develop a step-by-step plan of strategies to improve her grade, each with clear deadlines and anticipated obstacles. Maria decides to meet with her math teacher every Wednesday at lunch to discuss where she is having difficulties, set up an

account with a virtual math academy to complete tutorials each Monday night, and complete the bonus math homework items each week.

A key support mentors can provide youth as they pursue their goals is to help keep track of their progress through regular monitoring and feedback. The schedule and process for checking a mentee’s progress toward their goals should be clearly laid out with the mentee during the initial goal setting and planning meeting(s). You want to be sure this process doesn’t become another stressor in your mentee’s life. Therefore, it’s important to approach this process with empathy and to let your mentee guide this feedback process. How often would they like you to check in on their progress? What role could you play that would be most helpful to them? Maybe your mentee can identify ways to make the process more enjoyable and motivating such as finding a workout or study buddy to check progress with or creating a map of their journey toward their goal. Several research-based tools exist such as goal-based outcomes<sup>2</sup> and GPS rubrics/growth grids<sup>3</sup> that are helpful for monitoring progress and structuring mentor-mentee discussions of the goal pursuit process (interested readers can find links to these tools in the Additional Reading and Resources section at the end of this chapter). When there is a lack of progress toward a goal, the mentor and mentee should jointly revisit the goals that have



2 Law, D., & Jacob, J. (2015). *Goals and Goal Based Outcomes (GBOs): Some useful information* (3rd Ed.). London: CAMHS Press. Retrieved from <https://www.annafreud.org/media/3189/goals-booklet-3rd-edition220715.pdf>

3 Bowers, E. P., Napolitano, C. M., Arbeit, M. R., Chase, P., Glickman, S. A., Lerner, J. V., Lerner, R. M. (2013). On a pathway towards thriving: Evaluating the effectiveness of

the “GPS to Success” tools to promote positive development and intentional self regulation in youth. *Journal of Youth Development*, 8(3) 4 - 31.



been set. The mentor might discuss whether the goal is still relevant, whether the contexts around the youth have changed that make initial goals and/or strategies difficult to achieve or implement, or maybe initial goals were too ambitious.

Maria's mentor, Latoya, monitors and reviews Maria's progress with her each time they meet. They use a goals record sheet in which Maria self-rates her progress toward her goal. On the sheet, Maria scores her own progress from zero to ten, with zero indicating no progress and ten indicating that the goal has been reached. Maria and Latoya then discuss why Maria rates herself a particular score and how her progress can be maintained or improved. The discussion can help them identify which strategies are working or how Maria might make better use of the resources available to her. Two weeks prior to their current meeting, Maria rated herself a four on her progress because she had missed completing some bonus math homework items; however, Latoya made sure not to criticize Maria for missing the items and instead listened with empathy to why Maria struggled to complete them. Latoya also supported Maria's intentions to work harder to complete her bonus homework items going forward. At their current meeting, Maria has rated herself an eight because she earned full credit on each bonus homework she completed and earned an A- on the weekly math quiz. Latoya and Maria celebrate her success and discuss what she did to make this success possible and how she plans to continue making progress toward her larger goal going forward.

### ***Shifting Gears***

When mentors check in with mentees on progress toward their goals, they may discover it's best to shift strategies (**S**) because the original strategies weren't successful or a goal became blocked.

Mentors can work with mentees to identify potential barriers to reaching their goals and develop contingency plans in case they arise. Mentors can also share times they have struggled with meeting a goal or find stories of exemplars in the community who have overcome the odds to succeed. You might also look to the other adults in your mentee's life, such as their parents, teachers, or coaches, to identify real-world, relevant solutions (see chapter 7). In identifying exemplars and resources in your mentee's community, you are also extending and nurturing your mentee's networks of support (see chapter 12).

For example, during a discussion on her goal progress, Maria reported that her original plan to complete virtual math tutorials each Monday night was not working, as she was too tired after basketball practice and had other homework to complete. Therefore, Latoya set her up with another student in the program who could tutor Maria at the library on Saturday afternoons.

Sometimes a mentor may have to support a mentee in recognizing that no matter how hard they have been working, a goal may become unattainable. Recognizing the need to move to a new, more appropriate goal is about accepting loss as part of the learning process, analyzing options, and keeping an overall positive perspective. A mentor can help their mentee cope with the emotions that may come with giving up on a goal and help their mentee identify new goals that may still reflect their original "destination." Mentors can remind their mentee of all the hard work they've done along the way and celebrate how much they've grown through the process. In addition, they can work together to find new goals that are similar to the original blocked goal, but that also leverage the skills the mentee has been working to develop. Learning through failure is

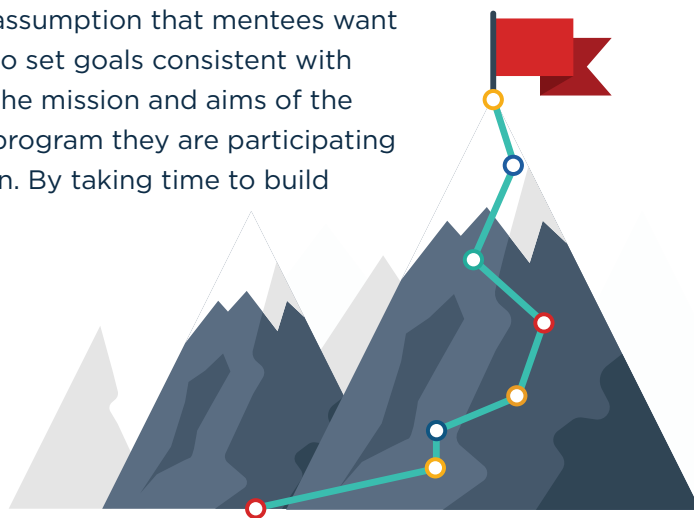


key to life success, but you also want to remind your mentee of the accomplishments they have had and the resilience they have shown. When having these potentially difficult discussions with your mentee, advice from chapter 11 on conversations about behavior change may be helpful.

### Contextual Considerations for Goal Setting and Support

It's important to have established an authentic relationship with your mentee marked by care, trust, and empathy before you introduce goal-directed activities to them. Mentors with cultural humility (see chapter 2) try to learn about their mentee's social identity and experiences, which play a substantial role in the types of goals mentees set and the strategies they may prefer to use to achieve those goals. Your mentee's parents, peers, and cultural norms may influence the types of goals they set (e.g., rural youth whose parents are farmers may set more agricultural-based goals) and ways to achieve that goal (e.g., getting a job versus joining an agricultural after-school program). Cultural humility can help mentors support their mentee's selection of goals given the contextual opportunities and barriers that are shaped by inequalities in society. For example, your mentee may want to apply to a top-tier college engineering program, but you are aware that their high school doesn't offer the advanced math classes needed to be accepted into that program. Therefore, you may suggest that they enroll in a local community college to build the math background they need to apply to the top-tier program later. Cultural humility and empathy can also help mentors build the trust necessary for mentees to share their goals, hopes, and dreams with them and the trust that's needed to kick off the goal-setting process and maintain mentee buy-in when things may not be going as planned.

It takes time to build trust and connection to a mentee in an authentic way; however, this time is important for laying the groundwork for working on goal-directed skills. There is no "right time" to start working on goals with mentees; some mentees may be ready to work toward a specific goal early on in your relationship and want your help immediately, or you may be in a mentoring program that has a specific curriculum in place to guide your interactions with your mentee and determine when goals become a part of your relationship. If the program is well structured with clear expectations for mentors and mentees and clearly identified goals, success in setting and pursuing those goals over a brief period is more likely.<sup>4</sup> However, there are other factors at the program level that should be considered. For example, if a youth enrolls in a mentoring program because the program's aims and goals align with their own (e.g., a robotics program for a STEM enthusiast), they may be more motivated to develop their goal-directed skills and ultimately achieve their goal. However, if a youth is placed in a program with goals that are not well aligned with their own goals (e.g., a sports-based program for a STEM enthusiast), their motivation and goal pursuit may be tempered. For this reason, it's important to question the assumption that mentees want to set goals consistent with the mission and aims of the program they are participating in. By taking time to build



<sup>4</sup> McQuillin, S. D., & Lyons, M. D. (2016). Brief instrumental school-based mentoring for middle school students: theory and impact. *Advances in School Mental Health Promotion, 9*(2), 73-89.



a relationship with your mentee, you can identify these potential concerns prior to setting goals together.

All young people use goal-directed skills. Research suggests, however, that a young person's ability to use these skills differs across childhood and adolescence. The goals young people have and the strategies they use to achieve those goals become more complex as youth mature. When working with your mentee, it's important for you to consider your mentee's age, maturity, and ability when working to support their goal-directed skills. For example, the best kind of goals help mentees out in many different areas of life. So, identifying the relations among one's goals is an important skill to learn. For example, a mentee may join a running club to get in shape, but through this activity, they can also improve their self-esteem and make friends — two other goals they were interested in achieving. However, the ability to consider and set more complicated “layered” goals like these, and the strategies needed to achieve them, may be too cognitively difficult for younger mentees to handle. You can help your mentee review their goals and adjust them to benefit more areas of their lives. Your mentee might also pick strategies to reach one goal (e.g., go to a party to make friends) that conflict with another strategy or goal (e.g., staying home to study to improve their grades). Your role as a mentor is to help them navigate these conflicts.

The content and time frame of goals will also differ for younger and older mentees. Younger mentees may set goals such as making friends or earning a high grade in the next semester. Older youth can think more about their personal futures and begin to set longer-term and more complex goals, such as improving their relationship with their parents, earning a scholarship to college, or getting an

internship. Even the concept of a “goal” may need to be illustrated for younger youth. Discussion around a mentee's “sparks” (activities or interests that bring them joy) may be particularly helpful to younger mentees. For younger youth and those having difficulty identifying a long-term goal, mentors might help to identify shorter-term achievable goals; these shorter-term goals may be easy “wins” that can enhance a mentee's confidence and motivation to set and achieve future long-term goals. Mentors who are well attuned to their mentee's needs and preferences are likely to provide more targeted and helpful support for their mentee's selection of goals, plan for initial strategies, and revision of strategies when things aren't going well.

Similarly, it's important to remember that the way teenagers set goals may look different from how adults set goals. Adults are more likely to face time and contextual pressures to decide which of their desired goals should take priority, so high-priority goals (e.g., finding a job, starting a family) must be given the most resources. Adolescents are still exploring multiple pathways to adulthood. In adolescence, being flexible with goal priorities may be adaptive. Mentors may find tips from chapter 11, on conversations about behavior change, helpful for guiding empathetic conversations with mentees on changing and reprioritizing goals.

### **Tips and Final Thoughts**

Relatively structured goal-directed activities for mentors and mentees show promising benefits for mentees. Still, mentors (and programs) often worry that too much of a focus on goal setting and pursuit can get in the way of the relationship. The trick is to find a balance between relationship building and goal-support activities. Mentors are more likely to find that balance when they are responsive to their mentee's interests as they set and pursue personally



meaningful goals. You may want to consult chapter 3 on the importance of fun and play in your mentoring relationship to further strike a balance between goal-directed work and more fun, relational mentoring time.

As noted above, how younger versus older youth understand and apply goal-directed skills may differ. However, research points to six key goal-directed skills that are important to focus on for youth of all ages:

- 1. Select and prioritize a set of meaningful, realistic, and specific goals.**
- 2. Make and stick to a detailed, step-by-step plan.**
- 3. Stay focused and show persistent effort with using strategies.**
- 4. Keep track of goal progress and how strategies are working.**
- 5. Seek help from others.**
- 6. Substitute strategies when first-choice strategies are not working well.**

Be sure you are intentional about the ways you support your mentee as they set and pursue their goals. By being intentional, mentors will be better prepared to provide constructive feedback to their mentee to maintain positive progress toward goals, suggest additional activities or resources, and/or consider revision of their goals. In monitoring their mentee's progress, mentors should remember that bias may creep into their assessment. This bias could be positive, as mentors may be motivated to see positive change given their and their mentee's hard work, or it could be negative because their mentee doesn't appear to be making as much progress as the mentor hoped or expected. Mentors should remember that they should have high, but realistic, expectations of their mentee's progress

and to temper their own (and their mentee's) unrealistic expectations of goal attainment. Mentors should emphasize to their mentee the skills and connections they have built over the course of pursuing their goals and that these skills will support their success going forward.

In reviewing a mentee's goal progress, mentors should aim to collect additional information from relevant sources such as parents, teachers, or coaches (i.e., the settings in which the goals are relevant). For example, Latoya could ask Maria if it would be OK to talk to her math teacher to see if there were any ways that Latoya could better support Maria's progress. Latoya could also share Maria's goals and progress with her parents to build a broader system of support around Maria. Mentors might also consider using their own goal pursuits as a model to teach successful goal-directed strategies to their mentee. When mentors practice and apply goal-directed strategies themselves, they can benefit their mentee directly through modeling and by connecting their mentee to additional resources that could help them. For example, if Latoya had been pursuing her graduate degree as Maria was working on her math grade, Latoya could have shared the opportunities and obstacles she experienced along the way. Latoya might also have met students in her own classes that could have provided math support to Maria.

Finally, remember that your mentee may have well-developed goal-directed skills, but may be using these skills toward problematic or maladaptive ends. For example, your mentee may be popular among their classmates and seen as a leader but may often encourage their peers to act out in class as opposed to taking their classwork seriously. A more extreme example could be a mentee who has used their goal-directed skills to organize a successful



drug selling operation. Mentors should leverage the strengths of their mentee to motivate them in identifying positive and purposeful goals.

Working with your mentee to set and pursue goals is one of the most important activities you could engage in together. Goals direct the decisions we make, the actions we take, and ultimately, the

direction our lives take. Therefore, it is critical that mentors are intentional in providing goal support to their mentees. As a mentor, you will have the opportunity to provide your mentee with needed guidance and advice as they travel along their goal-directed journeys. It is an awesome privilege to be a passenger on your mentee's journey to fulfill their dreams, passions, and purpose.





## Additional Reading and Resources

Most of the resources listed below can be accessed online at the links we have provided. The print title listed here should be available through local or online bookstores or through your public library.

- ***Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance***, TED Talk by Angela Duckworth – In this TED talk, Angela Duckworth describes her work studying grit (passion and perseverance for goals) as a key strength of success in youth and adults. Click [here](#) to access.
  - ***GPS 2 Success*** project resources – This website provides an overview of GPS 2 Success, a suite of materials to help mentors guide their mentees in developing GPS skills. The materials include a handbook on the GPS skills as well as rubrics, activities, and videos to help promote and monitor these skills. Click [here](#) to access.
  - ***The Mentor’s Guide to Youth Purpose*** by Meghan Perry – This workbook guides mentors in supporting their mentee’s exploration of purpose (a long-term intention to accomplish goals that are meaningful to the mentee and to the world beyond the mentee). Click [here](#) to access.
  - ***My Life program resources – My Life*** is an evidence-based program aimed at supporting youth to achieve their educational and transition-to-adulthood goals. Click [here](#) to access.
  - ***Discovering the Possibilities: “C”ing Your Future*** by MENTOR New York – This resource is a series of twelve modules designed to help mentees and mentors collaboratively explore college and career opportunities. Click [here](#) to access.
  - ***Thriving in Childhood and Adolescence: The Role of Self-Regulation Processes***, edited by Richard M. Lerner, Jacqueline V. Lerner, Edmond P. Bowers, Selva Lewin-Bizan, Steinunn Gestsdottir, & Jennifer Brown Urban. Special issue of *New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development*, Number 133 – This volume includes several chapters from scholars who have focused on the importance of self-regulation for success across the life span. The articles in this issue should be available through your local public library, as well as through the publisher [here](#).
- If you are interested in measuring your mentee’s goal-setting skills, abilities, and attitudes, the following tools may be useful to you. They can also help you think about various aspects of goal setting and concepts where your mentee may be struggling.**
- ***Global Scale of Selection, Optimization, and Compensation*** – This scale is a nine-item measure that assesses a mentee’s goal-directed skills. The GPS skills described in this chapter are based on the Selection, Optimization, and Compensation model. Click [here](#) to access.
  - ***Youth-Centered Outcomes*** – This tool provides a way to help mentees and mentors collaboratively set goals and monitor their progress toward those goals. Click [here](#) to access.
  - ***Assessing Self-Regulation: A Guide for Out-Of-School Time Program Practitioners*** by Tawana Bandy and Kristin Anderson Moore – This guide provides an overview of measures of goal-directed skills, including the items for the measures. Click [here](#) to access.



**MENTOR**

## **CHAPTER 11**

# **EFFECTIVE CONVERSATIONS ABOUT BEHAVIOR CHANGE**

Samuel D. McQuillin – University of South Carolina





## Talking about behavior change with your mentee is one of the riskier activities you'll engage in as a mentor.

These conversations could be simple nudges for your mentee to complete their homework, or more serious exchanges such as a discussion about avoiding risky sexual behavior. Such conversations can be hazardous because they have the potential to disrupt your relationship as well as make behavior change less likely. Take Jorge, for example, a mentor who is deeply concerned about his mentee's newfound interest in vaping. Jorge, with his mentee Paco's health in mind, confronts the problem: "You're going to make yourself sick with the vaping, you have to stop." Although common sense might suggest this is the right thing to say, research evidence suggests just the opposite. This attempt to alter Paco's choices and behavior will not be successful. In fact, Paco's relationship with Jorge will be compromised — he'll be less likely to ask Jorge for help in making future decisions and may even be more likely to continue vaping than he would have if the conversation had never happened. The good news is that psychologists, counselors, and researchers have discovered that some approaches to having conversations about behavior change can be tremendously helpful and can help mentors like Jorge mitigate the risks of such conversations.

### What Does Having Effective Conversations about Behavior Change Mean?

This chapter will focus on a style of communication designed to help motivate young people to make

choices that are consistent with their values. Readers will learn how to avoid potentially harmful behaviors when having conversations about behavior change, and how to encourage young people who experience *ambivalence*, or the competing motivations for and against behavior change. The content in this chapter is based on research of the counseling style of Motivational Interviewing or "MI."

### Why Effective Conversations about Behavior Change Are Important in Mentoring Relationships

So, what went wrong with Jorge's attempt to save his mentee from the perils of vaping? Jorge's approach was guided by something researchers, Drs. William Miller and Steven Rollnick, call, the *righting reflex*, or the reflexive tendency of helpers to "right" a "wrong" in someone else. These righting reflexes can look like war stories (e.g., sharing a tragic incident from your past related to the current behaviors of your mentee), giving unsolicited advice ("If you started running in the morning, you would probably have more energy in the afternoon"), sharing a warning ("Vaping will kill you!"), providing a suggestion in the form of a question ("Have you tried studying more?"), moralizing ("Cursing is wrong, you should stop"), and so on. There are dozens of righting reflexes, and they all share one common feature: **the motivation for change comes from the person doing the righting, not the person who could benefit from changing their behavior.** We use the term "reflex" to indicate that this is a nearly universal problem among helpers. It doesn't make the helper bad, it just makes their attempts to influence another's behavior less likely to help, and more likely to harm. So, perhaps the most important strategy for helping your mentee make choices is more about what you don't do (i.e., the righting reflex) than what you do.

<sup>1</sup> Miller, W. R., & Rollnick, S. (2013). *Motivational interviewing: Helping people change*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.



Attempts to persuade people to change their behaviors often backfire, making people less likely to change, less likely to seek help or insight from the persuader, and more likely to resist future conversations about behavior change. This is particularly true for adolescents. Mentors are at great risk for disrupting their relationship when they use directive, confrontational, or persuasive approaches to these conversations. Research-based practices, discussed below, including active listening, accurate expressions of empathy and understanding, and evocative questions help mentors mitigate these potentially harmful behaviors and increase the likelihood that mentees will make value-consistent choices that enhance their wellbeing.

Why is it that people resist attempts at persuasion? One reason is that most people have competing motivations for and against changing, which is referred to as “ambivalence.” Change might involve leaving something behind, trying something new, quitting a comfortable habit, or exerting yourself beyond your typical comfort zone. All of these things, to some extent, highlight reasons why people might not want to change. Even if a mentor understands all the benefits of changing a particular behavior, in all likelihood the mentee is plagued by ambivalence. Take Paco, for example, he may be aware of some risks associated with vaping but might also enjoy how the smoke feels in his mouth and how relaxed he feels from the buzz of nicotine, he may experience elevated social status among his peers for exercising autonomy, and so on. When people are ambivalent about change, they resist attempts at persuasion by others. For example, you might want to run more in the morning, but you also like staying up late watching Netflix. You have two behaviors that compete for your choice. Ambivalence is a normal part of being human. We

all experience ambivalence, whether it is in the challenge of quitting problematic habits, in picking up new helpful habits, or in putting into action the key steps necessary to achieve a long-term goal — ambivalence is always hanging around, like a tug-of-war for our decisions.

### **What Does Effective Conversation about Behavior Change Look Like in Action?**

So, what can mentors do if they can’t “right a wrong?” A key place to start is creating a mentoring atmosphere that is characterized by compassion, acceptance, and empathy (see chapter 1). Although creating such an environment looks different for each relationship, there are a few questions mentors may ask themselves to begin thinking about how their mentoring atmosphere feels to their mentee, or how it might be improved. Put yourself in the shoes of your mentee, and ask yourself the following questions:

- How do I know my mentor respects me?
- How do I feel after I meet with my mentor?
- How do I know my mentor understands me?
- What do I expect my mentor to do when I share sensitive information?

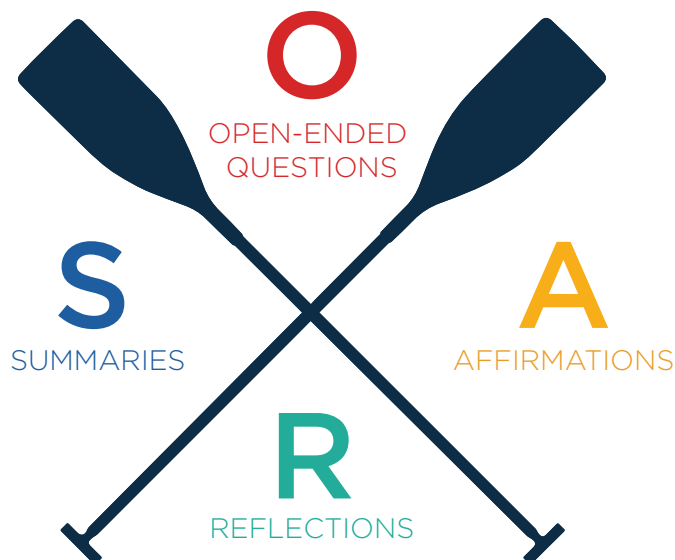
Creating an atmosphere of acceptance involves communicating an unconditional positive appraisal of your mentee’s worth and value. To your mentee, it feels like, “No matter what, I can count on my mentor to treat me with respect, dignity, and kindness.” In this atmosphere, regardless of your mentee’s choices, they can count on you to accept them as they are. Importantly, acceptance is different from agreement. Acceptance expresses your unchanging feelings about your mentee’s worth and dignity; agreement, on the other hand, communicates approval of your mentee’s choices or behaviors. There will be many times when mentors



disagree with their mentee's choices or behaviors, but the most effective mentors will accept their mentee throughout these differences and avoid the righting reflex. If a mentor hasn't established this type of atmosphere, conversations about behavior change won't be very helpful and, in general, mentors should avoid these conversations if their relationship doesn't have that foundation.

One way to begin building such an atmosphere is understanding your mentee's values and perspectives. This can be accomplished by asking your mentee about their values, "What are the most important things in your life right now?" or "How would you like your life to be different next semester?" You may also use more focused activities to take a deeper dive into values. Activities, like a "value card sort," can be particularly helpful, especially if mentees are less talkative. In this activity, a mentee sorts cards that have values written on them (e.g., "Making My Parents Proud"; "Being Kind"; "Being a Hard Worker"; "Loving God", etc.). When making these cards, try to tailor some of them to what you know about your mentee, but also include statements about broad categories that all youth might have values around, such as school, friendships, ambitions, and how they treat others. Mentees are then asked to sort these cards into three piles, Very Important, Important, or Not Important. It can be helpful to limit the Very Important stack to five or so cards to encourage the mentee to think about what really matters to them. During this activity, it's important to withhold judgement if your mentee rates things that you find valuable as not valuable (or vice versa). Focus on the things they find valuable. It can be helpful to ask for examples, such as, "I see that you put making your parents proud as one of your very important values. Can you tell me what that looks like? At school? At home? How do you make your parents proud?"

An atmosphere of acceptance, compassion, and curiosity about your mentee's values and perspectives is a starting point for having helpful conversations about behavior change. In fact, this atmosphere is one part of a two-piece explanation for why MI works. That is, research suggests two main reasons why people change their behavior following conversations about behavior change: 1) They feel accepted and understood (the "relational component" of MI); and 2) They make statements that favor change (the "technical component" of MI). The relational component is facilitated by asking **open-ended questions** (e.g., "What is your perspective on this?"), making **affirmations** (e.g., "Thank you for being honest with me"; "You are working hard"), **reflections** (e.g., "This must be really frustrating and challenging for you right now"), and **summaries** (i.e., statements that take stock of the conversation). These statements — **Open-ended questions, Affirmations, Reflections, and Summaries** (or **OARS** for short) — are the backbone of helpful conversations about behavior change. The technical and relational components of MI help increase the likelihood that a mentee feels understood while





mitigating the righting reflex — both of which pave the way for thoughtful conversations about resolving ambivalence. The technical component builds on the relational component in a way that evokes (i.e., brings from within the mentee) change talk, or statements that favor changing.

The value card sort is a great opportunity to build an atmosphere of acceptance through using the **OARS**. Mentors can ask evocative open-ended questions (“What is something you could do this week to make your parents proud?”), provide affirmations (“I can tell you really care about your family”), make reflections (“Prayer is a big part of your life”), or provide summaries, like the following:

*We talked about this one value of making your parents proud. This is a big one for you. Maybe the most important right now. You make your parents proud by being a helper around the house, by doing the right thing at school, and by getting good grades. You mentioned that one way you could continue to make your parents proud would be to bring up some of your grades that they've been hassling you about. Did I miss anything about that value?*

Once you've established an atmosphere of acceptance and understanding, you can begin focusing the conversation. **Focusing** is a process through which the direction of the conversation becomes clearer. A mentoring program that serves students who have been expelled from school might have a focus that is clear to the mentor (i.e., school reentry), but the mentee might not be there yet. Part of the focusing process will involve the mentor finding a common ground in which to work with the mentee:

*We have a few options for what to talk about today. You've shared a bit about concerns with your girlfriend right now, and whether or not it's going to work out now that you're not around the school anymore. I'd also like to talk a bit about the school reentry plan, but you might have something else that's more pressing. What do you think?*

In a less targeted program, or perhaps in a mentoring relationship outside of a program context, the focus of the conversation might be informed by a concerning disclosure from the mentee, as in Paco's example above, or a precipitating event, for example a disappointing report card. In cases like this, the mentor should use discretion in focusing so as to avoid the sense that the mentor is forcing the conversation. Ask permission to discuss these things: “I noticed your report card was upsetting to you. I wonder if we might chat a little bit about it today?” Alternatively, the focus of the conversation might be the product of a goal-setting process, in which the mentee has a particular goal in mind. Focusing is like laying a map on the table in front of you and your mentee, and then deciding the general direction of the conversation. Are we going to Toronto or Detroit?

Once there is a general focus of the conversation, the mentor can begin evoking change talk. Using the map analogy, evoking is like figuring out, and then reinforcing, why the mentee might want to go where they're headed. Remember, MI works, in part, because the person being helped uses change talk, or statements that favor change. How do you know change talk when you hear it? One helpful acronym is **DARN**, which stands for **D**esire, **A**bility, **R**easons, and **N**eeds. **Desires** are statements that express the relative advantages of change, or positive expectations surrounding change: “I want to be at



the same school as my friends next year.” **Ability** statements reflect the confidence of the mentee to make the change: “I could totally stop vaping. I’m not addicted.” **Reasons** for change are typically represented in if-then statements: “If I could control my anger, I would fight less.” These might be things that your mentee may not really want, but that they can recognize as true. For example, sometimes it can be helpful to make a list of reasons for and against changing. Some of your mentee’s reasons for change may not be particularly appealing, or they may lack confidence to accomplish the reason, but they still recognize it as true. **Needs** are often expressed with statements that include words like “I have to ...” or “I must ...” They express an intense dissatisfaction with the status quo or a clear problem with the current situation: “Alternative school sucks. I’ve got to get out of this place.” One of the key skills in conversations about behavior change is the ability to hear change talk, even when it is sandwiched with a bunch of “sustain talk” (i.e., the opposite of change talk).

How does a mentor influence a mentee’s use of change talk? Well, the easiest way is to simply ask for it, with open-ended questions: “What do you think are some benefits of vaping less?”; “If you decided to stop fighting at school, what would be different?”; “Why would you want to improve your grades?” Questions like these ask the mentee to reflect on their DARNs, and elicit change talk. Importantly, these questions evoke the mentee’s (as opposed to the mentor’s) motivation to change.

You can also use a strategy called *importance* and *confidence rulers*. An importance ruler is when you ask how important change is for your mentee in a particular area: “On a scale from 1 to 10, how important is it for you to cut back on vaping, where 1 is not important at all, and 10 is,

like, really important?” Using this example, imagine that your mentee indicates they are currently at a three. You could evoke change talk by asking “Why are you at a three, and not at a one or zero?” Importantly, note that the evocative mentor asks a question that elicits change talk (i.e., “Why is it that important?”). However, using an importance ruler like this can be a bit tricky, and some mentors fall into the trap of the righting reflex. You can imagine the mentor who is dismayed that quitting is not a higher priority, asking “What!? Why only a three? Don’t you know the risks?” This type of response actually asks for sustain talk, instead of change talk, and risks shutting down the conversation and ultimately harming the relationship. The confidence ruler is similar, except it asks about how confident your mentee feels: “On a scale from 1 to 10, how confident are you that you could cut back on vaping, say, to like one or two times per week, with 1 being you are completely sure you couldn’t, and 10 being it would be really easy.” Let’s say the mentee responds with a four. The evocative mentor would then ask why a four and not a zero, evoking “ability talk” (i.e., talk about the mentee’s confidence and ability to achieve their goal). The mentor may also ask a question to help partner with the mentee, something like, “What would it take, say, if you and I worked together on something, for you to feel a little bit more confident, like going from a four to maybe a five or six?” or “What’s something we could work on over the next week to boost that confidence from a four to a five or so?” These types of open-ended questions actually get us to the last important component of effective conversations about behavior change: partnering and planning.



If your mentee is motivated to change, is using a lot of change talk, identifies the change as consistent with their own values, and expresses interest in changing, then it might be time to begin *planning*.

In the map analogy, planning is essentially picking the route to your destination: Are you going to take I-10 or Highway 59? Importantly, if your mentee is not motivated, is not using change talk, or doesn't see the change as consistent with their values, you shouldn't be planning. Remember to resist the righting reflex – the motivation for change must come from within your mentee. One of the most common mistakes mentors make is the “bait and switch.” This happens when the mentee expresses a small amount of change talk, and the mentor turns full steam ahead into the righting reflex, planning on behalf of their mentee. A mentor who motivates their mentee will be patient and evocative and will wait until the mentee expresses interest in making the change.

If your mentee does want to make a change, you might consider helping them set some “**SMART**” goals (see chapter 10 on goal setting for best practices in this area). However, there will be times when your mentee may not know how to get to

the goal that they want. A mentor should not underestimate their mentee's capacity to solve their own problems, but inevitably, if you mentor long enough, some mentees may want to change, but might not know how. This is where partnering comes into play.

**Partnering** is when a mentor guides their mentee toward a solution to their goal. It typically involves asking permission to share information. In the map analogy, partnering is asking permission to show some different routes to your mentee. This is different from advice giving, which is a righting reflex. Notice the difference between these two attempts to influence: 1) “You should start your homework when you get home, before you get on the Xbox,” versus 2) “Would you be interested in looking over some homework strategies with me?” The first is directing and is likely to reduce the mentee's motivation to change. The second emphasizes autonomy by asking permission to share information. This may seem like a very small difference, but it matters in conversations! With the second option, you are letting your mentee know: “It's your choice, not mine.” In fact, you might even follow up a question like number two with a statement that explicitly emphasizes autonomy: “Ultimately, it's up to you, Paco, you know what's important to you, and what you would like to see change, but the choice is yours. I'm happy to support you if you decide to do something different.”

### **Contextual Considerations in Having Conversations about Behavior Change**

Although many supportive strategies that are designed to influence the behavior of young people rely on similar principles to that of MI (e.g., encouraging autonomy and providing verbal affirmations), there is limited research on using



MI with youth younger than 8 years old. Similarly, there is limited research on using this approach with youth who have intellectual disabilities or other developmental delays. While it is unlikely that approaching conversations in the ways outlined here would harm young people, currently, there is also no strong evidence that it will be particularly helpful for these youth.

It is also important for mentors to understand their role as a mentor, and not confuse it with professional mental health care providers, like psychologists, counselors, or therapists. Many issues that might come up in conversations between mentors and mentees might be better served by a professional service provider. You may also find yourself in many gray areas, where it's not clear whether a certain conversation is appropriate for you to take on with your mentee. In such cases, if you're in a program, supervision should be sought. For example, if your mentee mentions feeling sad or hopeless, or if your mentee indicates they may want to try drugs with their friends, reach out and connect with a supervisor.

### Tips and Final Thoughts

In closing this chapter, there are a few things to remember. The process of MI is not a cure-all and isn't a way to trick your mentee to change. If you are trying to "Motivationally Interview" your mentee into behaviors or thoughts that are not consistent with their own values, you are not using MI — you are doing something else, and it probably isn't going to work. The righting reflex is a challenging personal barrier for mentors to overcome, and it takes practice. It will creep up when you least expect it, and it will sometimes show its nasty head without you noticing. If you feel it creeping up, take a step back and ask yourself: "Is the motivation for change coming from my mouth or my mentee's?"

and "What would the righting reflex look like right now?" Another helpful strategy for learning to be more accepting, compassionate, and evocative, is to have others who are more skilled in MI listen to recordings of you practicing. Role plays, in particular, are a risk-free way to get feedback on your approach, and to home in on a more accepting, evocative, compassionate, and curious approach to helping.

## Additional Reading and Resources

The print title listed here should be available through local or online bookstores or through your public library.

- Miller, W. R., & Rollnick, S. (2013). *Motivational interviewing: Helping people change*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.



**MENTOR**

**CHAPTER 12**

# **EXPANDING NETWORKS OF SUPPORT**

Sarah Schwartz - Suffolk University





### What Does Expanding Your Mentee's Support Network Mean?

Youth mentoring has traditionally focused primarily on the development of a one-to-one relationship between a mentor and a young person. Yet, the impact of mentoring can be stronger when a mentor actively helps their mentee build and strengthen connections with other supportive adults and organizations. Importantly, this does not replace building a strong relationship with your mentee and all the practices described in this resource, but instead builds on the strength of that relationship to help mentees cultivate connections and ask for support from others as well. While chapter 7 in this resource focuses on how the mentor can work with others within the mentoring relationship “system,” this chapter describes how mentors can help youth expand their networks beyond that system — supporting mentees in identifying and strengthening relationships with other caring adults and programs and in developing robust networks of support. Building these support networks can not only expand your mentee’s “social capital” but also develop their capacity to identify and reach out to supportive adults now and throughout the rest of their lives.

### Why Helping to Expand a Youth's Network of Support Is Important in Mentoring Relationships

Social capital is often defined as the resources, information, support, and opportunities that we have access to through our social interactions and relationship networks.<sup>1</sup> Different people and organizations in youth’s lives can provide different types of support. In fact, research increasingly points to the importance of “webs of support.”<sup>2</sup> Mentors can both recognize existing supports in

their mentee’s lives — an important component of a strength-based approach — and they can help mentees identify and reach out to new supports.

Before going any further, it’s important to note that too many conceptualizations of social capital have focused narrowly on career and economic achievements, valuing the kinds of support provided by people with privilege (for example, based on wealth, race, or gender), while dismissing the kinds of support provided by people from marginalized communities. Scholar Tara Yosso’s model of community cultural wealth provides a different perspective, emphasizing the valuable forms of capital, including cultural knowledge, skills, abilities, and connections, within marginalized and oppressed communities.<sup>3</sup> Helping youth build networks of support means recognizing the many types of support that enable youth to thrive — even those that may be different from the types of support you may have found valuable in your life or those you have seen valued in society.

Moreover, as much as an individual mentor can provide, they will never be limitlessly available or all-knowing. By explicitly and intentionally helping mentees to strengthen existing relationships or form new connections with people and programs, mentors may help their mentees expand and diversify their networks of support — and even access types of support outside of what a volunteer mentor can provide. For example, many young people in mentoring programs are experiencing unmet mental health needs, and mentors may be able to help facilitate engagement in formal mental health services.<sup>4</sup> Helping your mentee to build their support network is also an opportunity to help them develop their capacity to build supportive relationships and draw on that support — a skill they can use throughout their lives. In fact, research

<sup>1</sup> Bourdieu, P. (1986). *The forms of capital*. In J. G. Richardson (Ed.), *Handbook of theory and research for the sociology of higher education* (pp. 241–258). New York, NY: Greenwood Press.

<sup>2</sup> Varga, S. M., & Zaff, J. F. (2018). Webs of support: An integrative framework of relationships, social networks, and social support. *Adolescent Research Review*, 3(1), 1–11.

<sup>3</sup> Yosso, T. (2005). Whose culture has capital? A critical race theory discussion of community cultural wealth. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 8, 69–91.

<sup>4</sup> Browne, R. & Schwartz, S. (2020, November). *Changes in the Utilization of Psychological Services in a Diverse Youth Population*. Philadelphia, PA. Poster presented at the Association of Behavioral and Cognitive Therapies Annual Convention, Philadelphia, PA (Virtual).



indicates that mentees with mentors who actively connect them to other people, programs, and settings are more likely to show improved parent-child relationships, increased involvement in extracurricular activities, and greater help-seeking behavior. Other research on underrepresented students' transition to college suggests that teaching students about the importance of social capital and providing opportunities to practice support-seeking behaviors can increase their willingness to seek help, which in turn, can result in improved relationships with their instructors and better grades. Particularly in the context of time-limited mentoring relationships, mentors may be able to increase their impact by helping their mentee connect with other people, programs, and organizations, and ideally help them feel comfortable seeking support throughout their lives, even after their relationship has ended.

### **What Does Expanding Your Mentee's Support Network Look Like in Practice?**

There are several steps that will help you build and strengthen your mentee's network of support. It should be noted that many of the strategies described here, particularly those that include connecting youth to new people outside of their social network, are a better fit for older youth.

#### ***First, take time to get to know your mentee.***

Before trying to help your mentee expand their social network, it's important to get to know your mentee and develop your relationship with them. What are their interests, values, worldviews, goals, strengths, wants, and needs? Are they introverted or extroverted? What makes them light up? What makes them shut down? Are they more comfortable in group or one-on-one settings? Who are the important people in their lives? Caregivers and program staff can also be helpful in getting a

fuller picture of your mentee. Make sure you aren't making assumptions about what your mentee wants or needs without first getting to know them. See the "Introduction" of this resource, along with the chapters on empathy, cultural humility, attunement, and working within the relationship system (chapters 1, 2, 4, and 7 respectively) for more details on this crucial first step.

#### ***Help your mentee identify and reach out to existing supports.***

Developing your mentee's network of support is not just about connecting your mentee with new people, it's also about recognizing, honoring, and supporting their existing relationships. This not only shows respect to the people already in your mentee's life who have been supporting them in countless ways, but also encourages your mentee to draw on the existing supports in their lives that, in many cases, will continue to be in place even after your mentoring relationship has ended. In some cases, this may also help youth recognize support they may have but may not be aware of (e.g., extended family members, neighbors, members of a religious community, former teachers, or after-school staff).

One way to identify the people in your mentee's network of support is to create an "eco-map" of the relationships in their lives and the types of support they provide (see the video on creating an eco-map in this chapter's Additional Reading and Resources section). It's important to note that your mentee will need you to support them in this process of identifying people to include on their eco-map, particularly in identifying those who may not be close relationships but do have the potential to provide support. Additionally, depending on your mentee's relationship history and current relationships, this process may bring up



uncomfortable feelings (for example, concerns that they don't feel supported by many people), which is why it's very important to first have a trusting relationship with your mentee before embarking on this process. Once you have created the eco-map, you can explore the different types of support provided by different people in their lives, as well as the areas in which they feel well supported and those that are lacking. In addition to more formal strategies like eco-mapping, you also can informally ask your mentee about the different people in their lives, or simply express interest and ask about relationships as they are brought up in conversations with your mentee.

Once you have a sense of who is in your mentee's life, help them identify how they can draw on that support and strengthen those connections. For example, you could suggest that your mentee text their aunt to share with her the problem or accomplishment your mentee shared with you. You can also think about how your mentee may be able to leverage other supportive adults in their lives to help them move toward their goals. For example, for academic goals, you could encourage your mentee to ask their coach about scholarships or to reach out to their teacher for extra help. Remember that asking for help or reaching out to adults may be hard for your mentee and part of your job is to support them in this process. Your mentoring relationship can be a safe place to practice these kinds of skills. Take the time to help them plan when and how they could make these requests and explore what might get in the way. You can also role-play and discuss different scenarios that might occur to help them feel more confident. More generally, as various issues, challenges, or goals come up in your mentee's life, help your mentee identify who they could go to for different types of support (in addition to you) and how they could go about reaching out.

### ***Connect your mentee with services, programs, and other community resources.***

In addition to strengthening individual relationships, you can build your mentee's social capital and networks of support by connecting them and their families with services and programs that reflect their interests and expressed needs. While helping to connect youth and families with other organizations can be a powerful intervention, it's important to remember that this should be driven by what the youth and their family see as their needs, rather than by your assessment of their needs based on your values and worldview (see the Contextual Considerations and Tips sections below for further discussion).

To make effective referrals to services and programs, it's important to be familiar with the resources, services, and programs in your mentee's neighborhood, school, and community. If you are part of a program, staff can help you with this, especially if you're coming from a different neighborhood or community. For some mentees, it also could be helpful if you talk with them about how they could reach out to and ask others in their networks, such as teachers, friends, or family members, about programs and opportunities that might benefit them. This can both allow your mentee to gain valuable knowledge of resources and to practice the skill of reaching out to people in their network (as discussed previously, be sure to provide individualized support in this process, as needed). Then, try to connect your mentee and their family with relevant programs and services. For example, if your mentee likes to dance, share information about local dance programs (with thoughtful attention to transportation needs, cost, etc.) and talk to your mentee and their caregiver about the possibility of joining an after-school



dance group. If your mentee is experiencing mental health challenges, explore the possibility of formal mental health services (e.g., counseling, therapy) with your mentee and their caregiver. For any of these referrals, it's important that this be a collaborative process with caregivers.

### ***Connect your mentee with people from your own social network.***

You also bring with you your own social capital that you can leverage to support your mentee. You can use your network to gather information about summer jobs or internship opportunities for youth. Or, with your mentee and their caregiver's permission, you could invite a friend who has a similar interest or life experience as your mentee to one of your meetings with your mentee. You also could connect your mentee with someone in your network who works in a career in which your mentee is interested. In addition to providing the connection, you can support the process by helping your mentee write an email asking for an informational interview, helping them prepare for the interview, and debriefing with them afterward. As with connecting with new services or programs, it's important that both your mentee and their caregiver are on board before moving forward with new connections.

It's critical to remember that you are responsible for the connections you make. Make sure anyone you connect to your mentee is safe, appropriate, and well-vetted. Are there ways you can prepare those coming in contact with your mentee to be responsive to your mentee's strengths, needs, and goals? It's also important to consider safety precautions when connecting your mentee with a new adult, such as attending the meeting with them, scheduling a meeting in a public space, and/or debriefing with your mentee afterward. Additionally,

if you are part of a mentoring program, talk with program staff to ensure that the program supports these practices.

### ***Help your mentee develop positive relationships with peers.***

In addition to helping your mentee create supportive relationships with adults, you can also take steps to foster positive peer relationships in your mentee's life. This may be particularly relevant for those in mentoring programs that are based in schools or after-school programs. Make space for conversations about peer relationships with your mentee, including what they are looking for in peer relationships, what comes more easily to them in their interactions with peers, what is more challenging, how they feel with different friends, and how they act with different friends. Based on those discussions, if your mentee is open to it, you could encourage them to invite a peer to one of your meetings. Spending time with your mentee and their peers may benefit mentees by improving peer relationships<sup>7</sup> and can give you a new "window" into your mentee's life by allowing you to see them in a new context. Although bringing peers into the mentoring relationship can have important benefits, it also can bring new challenges to navigate for both the mentor and the mentee (see chapter 6 on mentoring in groups).

## **Contextual Considerations for Expanding Networks of Support**

Many of these strategies are more relevant for older youth (middle and high school) and less relevant for younger children (elementary school). In particular, connecting youth to new people outside of their social network is recommended primarily for older adolescents. For young children, this practice may focus primarily on acknowledging and

<sup>7</sup> Elledge, L. C., Cavell, T. A., Ogle, N., & Newgent, R. A. (2010). Lunch buddy mentoring as selective prevention for bullied children. *The Journal of Primary Prevention, 31*(3), 171-187. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10935-010-0215-7>



supporting existing relationships (e.g., extended family, teachers, peers) and providing referrals to caregivers as needed.

As discussed earlier, it's important to take the time to get to know your mentee before working with them to expand their networks. The practice of expanding your mentee's social capital typically should be integrated later in the relationship, after a trusting relationship with your mentee has already been established. At the same time, taking the time to ask your mentee about existing relationships in their life can be one way to get to know them and their world.

Importantly, research shows that well-meaning mentors may employ a strength-based orientation for their individual mentee (i.e., focusing on the mentee's strengths), but this may not extend to other people in the mentee's life.<sup>8</sup> By acknowledging the strengths and supports within your mentee's existing social network, you can help your mentee identify and draw on those supports and avoid potential harm by unintentionally giving the impression that you are dismissing or judging important people in your mentee's life. To do this, it's necessary to first examine and reflect on how your own biases may be influencing how you see your mentee's family or community (see chapter 2 on cultural humility for some excellent strategies for doing this reflection).

When connecting youth with new people or organizations, make sure to involve your mentee's caregiver. This is important both from a liability standpoint and for your relationship with your mentee and their caregivers, as it shows your respect for their role and authority. Moreover, when mentees and caregivers feel more invested in the relationship or referral, it's more likely to "stick" or be maintained. Although there may be

times when caregivers prefer to be less involved, generally, the more you can collaborate with your mentee's caregivers on these efforts, the better (see chapter 7 on working with others in the mentoring relationship system). Additionally, if you are part of a mentoring program, be sure to keep program staff informed and follow their policies. And of course, even if you are not working with a program, be thoughtful about who you are introducing to your mentee to make sure that the new connection is a safe and appropriate one. Finally, strengthening your mentee's social network may be especially important in time-limited relationships in youth programs, mentoring, or otherwise.

For example, many of these strategies could be part of preparing for closure in the last few months of a relationship. Mentors may work with their mentee to identify and strengthen connections with other important adults in their life (i.e., those mentoring relationships that form naturally in settings outside of programs), specifically thinking about how these people may be able to provide some of the supports after the programmatic mentoring relationship has come to an end. Conversations can include how youth may know if they need additional support, who they can reach out to, and specifics about how they could reach out. Developing youth's help-seeking skills, including their comfort with



Lakind, D., Atkins, M., & Eddy, M. (2015). Youth mentoring relationships in context: Mentor perceptions of youth, environment, and the mentor role. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 53, 52-60.



asking for help, can increase the likelihood that they will be able to access support throughout their lives. Additionally, mentors can help youth explore if and how they will stay connected with the program or program staff, even after the mentoring relationship has formally ended. This may also be an important time to provide “soft hand-off” referrals to other school or community-based programs. For example, you could work collaboratively with your mentee and their caregivers to identify their interests and needs moving forward and how to find other programs and supports that could address those needs and interests. Then, make sure to support your mentee and their caregivers in establishing those connections before your relationship comes to an end.

### Tips and Final Thoughts

Make sure your approach to expanding your mentee’s network is a good fit for your mentee and their family, and take the time to listen to and validate any concerns they have. There may be a range of reasons they are uncomfortable with bringing new people into their existing network. Make space for exploring with your mentee what may be challenging for them about expanding their networks — for example being shy, valuing independence, family concerns about connecting

with people outside the family, experiences of discrimination, fear of being rejected, previous negative experiences asking for help or networking, just to name a few. While some of these challenges may be helpful to explore with your mentee and help them to overcome, it’s also okay if your mentee isn’t open to expanding their network at this time.

Mentees and their caregivers also may be more open to building social capital and expanding their networks when this process is explicitly connected to helping them to advance their goals (see chapter 10 on goal setting). Taking the time to discuss your mentee’s values and goals first and then exploring how different types of relationships can support them in reaching those goals can make this process more meaningful and empowering, especially for older youth.

Finally, as discussed earlier, it’s critical to avoid making assumptions about which relationships or types of social capital are valuable. In fact, this skill is really about acknowledging that we all need a range of types and sources of support to develop and thrive. By recognizing and honoring the different types of support that different people in your mentee’s life can provide, as well as helping your mentee identify, draw on, and expand their networks of support, you can also expand your impact as a mentor.

## Additional Reading and Resources

Most of the resources listed below can be accessed online at the links we have provided. The print title listed here should be available through local or online bookstores or through your public library.

- ***Finding Mentors, Finding Success*** A great guide for mentees from YouthBuild USA about how youth can recruit mentors and get help with specific areas of their life. Click [here](#) to access.
- ***Brokering Youth Pathways: A Toolkit for Connecting Youth to Future Opportunities*** Resources for adults working with youth on how to broker connections for youth that includes practice briefs and research reports (primarily geared toward out-of-school learning). Click [here](#) to access.
- ***Who You Know: Unlocking Innovations that Expand Students’ Networks*** by Julia Freeland Fisher – This book, and accompanying website by the Christensen Institute, offers great advice for adults and students on how they can build social capital (geared primarily toward college students). Click [here](#) to access the website.
- ***Ecomap Animation*** YouTube video describing eco-mapping. Click [here](#) to access.



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