



CLOSING THE MENTORING RELATIONSHIP:

Guidance and Best Practices for Park and Recreation Programs



NATIONAL
RECREATION AND PARK
ASSOCIATION



A Rotary Club member assists high school volleyball team volunteers in performing maintenance along Legacy Trail in Colorado. Photo courtesy of Town of Castle Rock (Colorado) Parks and Recreation.

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I.

INTRODUCTION

At the National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA), we believe parks and recreation are vital to community health and well-being. Access to these spaces, programs and services remains essential to community vitality and is a key factor in advancing health and well-being for all, improving individual and community-level health outcomes and enhancing quality of life. Park and recreation professionals and their agencies protect and promote health for all people, especially youth, in the communities where people live, learn, work and play.

Local park and recreation agencies serve as Community Wellness Hubs — trusted gathering places that connect every member of the community to essential programs, services and spaces that advance health and well-being for all, improve health outcomes, and enhance quality of life. In this role, park and recreation agencies provide vital programs and services that address the various health and wellness needs of youth.

Park and recreation agencies are a leading provider of youth development services — including mentoring, youth sports, afterschool and summer programs, workforce development, environmental education, and other enrichment activities. Parks and recreation serve millions of youth across the nation each year. According to the *2021 NRPA Out-of-School Time Report*, more than four in five park and recreation agencies offer out-of-school time (OST) programs for youth — and include programming beyond traditional physical activity and recreational opportunities. Many agencies deliver programming to support young people's life skill development so



Photo courtesy of Dreamstime.

they can better manage the challenges that come with growing up and support youth in the following areas:

- 37 percent of agencies offer mentoring programs
- 18 percent of agencies plan to offer mentoring within the next two years
- 35 percent of agencies have learning curriculum focused on developing soft skills
- 57 percent of agencies implement mindfulness programs (i.e., yoga, meditation, arts)



II.

WHAT IS CLOSURE IN THE MENTORING RELATIONSHIP?



Photo courtesy of Dreamstime.

MENTOR, *The National Mentoring Partnership*, is one of the leading national organizations committed to expanding opportunity for young people. They offer wonderful guidance on how to best shepherd and support the mentee and mentor relationship. In *Elements of Effective Practice for Mentoring*,¹ MENTOR provides key benchmarks as well as enhancements that programs should implement as they are facilitating mentoring activities.

The six *Elements of Effective Practice for Mentoring* are:¹

1. Recruitment
2. Screening
3. Training
4. Matching and Initiation
5. Monitoring and Support
6. Closure

Reasons for closure may include:²

- Mentor or mentee relocates
- Change in job or school
- Loss of interest
- Time commitment
- Mentee ages out of program
- Match is not a good fit
- Financial challenges
- Duration of match successfully ends

One of the core *Elements of Effective Practice for Mentoring* is closure.

According to MENTOR, “**Closure is the process of bringing a mentoring relationship to an end in a way that affirms the contributions of both the mentor and the mentee.**”

Closure is essential to ensuring the relationship ends with positive outcomes for the mentee(s) (i.e., the youth receiving mentoring services). Closure is a normal stage in a mentoring relationship. Mentors and mentees should be able to prepare for and assess their experiences with the relationship.

¹ MENTOR. (2022). *Elements of Effective Practice for Mentoring*. Retrieved from: <https://www.mentoring.org/resource/elements-of-effective-practice-for-mentoring/>

² Kea Norrell-Aitch. (September 16, 2014). Things to Consider When Closing a Mentoring Match – Part 1. Retrieved from: https://www.canr.msu.edu/news/things_to_consider_when_closing_a_mentoring_match_part_1

The fourth edition of the *Elements of Effective Practice for Mentoring*, MENTOR offers key benchmarks (indicated below as “B”) and enhancements to help mentoring programs facilitate closure in a positive and meaningful way.

Key Benchmarks and Enhancements for Closure of a Mentoring Relationship	
B.6.1	Program has a procedure to manage anticipated closures when members of the match are willing and able to engage in the closure process.
B.6.2	Program has a procedure to manage unanticipated closures when members of the match are willing and able to engage in the closure process.
B.6.3*	Program has a procedure to manage closure when one member of the match is unable or unwilling to engage in the closure process.
B.6.4	Program conducts exit interview with mentors and mentees and, when relevant, with parents or guardians.
B.6.5*	Program has a written policy and procedure, when relevant, for managing rematching (when a new match needs to be made).
B.6.6*	Program documents that closure procedures were followed.
B.6.7*	<p>Regardless of the reason for closure, the mentoring program staff should have a discussion with mentors that covers the following topics:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Mentors’ feelings about closure b. Reasons for closure, if relevant c. Positive experiences in the mentoring relationship d. Procedure for mentor notifying the mentee and their parents, if relevant, far enough in advance of the anticipated closure meeting to provide sufficient time to adequately prepare the mentee for closure e. Review of program rules for post-closure contact f. Creation of a plan for post-closure contact, if relevant g. Creation of a plan for the last match meeting, if possible h. Discussion of possible rematching, if relevant

<p>B.6.8*</p>	<p>Regardless of the reason for closure, the mentoring program should have a discussion with mentees, and when relevant, with parents or guardians that includes the following topics of conversation:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Discussion of mentees' feelings about closure b. Discussion of reasons for closure, if relevant c. Discussion of positive experiences in the mentoring relationship d. Procedure for notification of mentor, if relevant, about the timing of closure e. Review of program rules for post-closure contact f. Creation of a plan for post-closure contact, if relevant g. Creation of a plan for the last match meeting, if possible h. Discussion of possible rematching, if relevant
<p>B.6.9</p>	<p>Program has a written public statement for parents or guardians, if relevant, as well as for mentors and mentees that outline the terms of match closure and the policies for mentor/mentee contact after a match ends (e.g., including communication between mentors and mentees via digital or social media).</p>

*Benchmark and enhancement practices that are marked with an asterisk represent those that are either new or were substantially changed from the Third Edition of *Elements of Effective Practice for Mentoring*. Mentoring programs are encouraged to give equal consideration to the implementation of all of the benchmark practices that are listed under this standard.

In addition to the identified benchmarks and enhancements provided by MENTOR, youth mentoring programs can incorporate additional best practices related to closure as they prepare for the transition, celebration and reflection on the mentoring relationship and move forward on a positive path that promotes continued growth and positive outcomes for the mentee and mentor.



III.

BEST PRACTICES FOR POSITIVE CLOSURE TO THE MENTORING RELATIONSHIP

Change and transition can be hard — especially for young people. Research shows that if approached with clear communication and consistent follow through, the challenge that a changing relationship presents can positively influence the lives of mentees, mentors, families/caregivers, program staff and the community at large. Smith College School of Social Work applied attachment theory to youth mentoring relationships and determined best practices for a well-structured, positive closure experience.³



Photo courtesy of Dreamstime.

According to Smith College School of Social Work, mentorship transitions feel best and are most effective for all individuals involved when it is planned, promotes growth, and is process-oriented and clear.

- **Planned.** The match will come to an end — start thinking about closure from day one, so there are clear expectations throughout the entirety of the relationship.
- **Promotes Growth.** At closure, offer the chance to reflect on the relationship — how it made your participants feel, why it needed to end (expected vs. unexpected), and celebrate the relationship for what it was.
- **Clear.** Regular check-ins with mentors and mentees can help eliminate the sudden termination of a relationship. Maintain frequent communication with all parties involved.

³ Karen Silberstein and Renee Spencer. (October 2014). "Breaking Bad: An Attachment Perspective on Youth Mentoring Relationship Closure." Retrieved from: <https://nightingalementoring.mau.se/files/2019/09/Breaking-bad.pdf>

PLANNED.

This set of best practices will dive deeper to ensure that closure in the mentoring relationships is planned.

When to Talk About Closure

- Orientation
- Pre-match training
- Ongoing match support
- During periods of transition
- Ongoing trainings

- Invite mentees and caregivers to a kick-off orientation where expectations of mentees, mentors and agency staff are presented and offered in written format (i.e., program handbook, manual and/or contract).
- Prepare mentors and mentees for endings from the beginning of the relationship.
- Provide continuous communication to mentees and caregivers related to closure throughout the course of the mentoring relationship.
- Plan for expected and unexpected closures and outline how to handle these closures appropriately.

The timing of a match closure is important and can fall into two categories: **functional** and **dysfunctional**.

	Early Ending	Well-Timed Ending	Overdue Ending
Functional	Unexpected but structured <i>Sadness, pensiveness</i>	Expected and structured <i>Satisfaction, admiration</i>	Delayed but structured <i>Frustration, acceptance</i>
Dysfunctional	Unexpected and unstructured <i>Abandonment, fear, anger</i>	Expected and unstructured <i>Anticipated, confusion</i>	Delayed and unstructured <i>Resentment, dissatisfaction</i>

PROMOTES GROWTH.

This set of best practices will dive deeper to ensure that closure in the mentoring relationships promotes growth.

- Create space for mentees and mentors to reflect and share their experience upon the culmination of the program.
 - Consider developing a formal survey or tool for program participants to complete. Focus groups also are a great way to receive feedback.
- Host a culminating event planned for the end of the program and ensure it includes space for celebrating program successes, challenges, next steps, gratitude for partners and ways to stay involved.
 - **Tip:** Engage youth in the planning of the event to ensure the youth's voice is centered. This practice lends itself to fairness by centering and engaging youth voices that may otherwise go unheard.
 - Ensure that agency leaders, board members, youths' family members, and any vital volunteers, community members, and/or community organizations who made your program possible are invited and present at the celebration — this is a celebration of their involvement and a show of gratitude to them as well.
- Offer youth the opportunity to graduate into leadership roles including mentor or peer support roles. They can become mentors for younger youth or take on paid leadership roles to assist in management of program (best for youth ages 15 and older). For high school/working age youth, consider building in compensation for their knowledge and talents — an educational stipend can be appropriate and supports fair opportunities for them to gain valuable leadership and other life skills.
- Connect youth and families to other opportunities that your park and recreation agencies offer based on their interests, skills and knowledge.

CLEAR.

This set of best practices will dive deeper to ensure that closure in the mentoring relationships is process-oriented and clear.

- Provide ongoing training to mentors on the importance of closure and establish policies and clear expectations for communicating expected and unexpected changes to the mentoring relationship (e.g., moving out of town).
- Develop clear program closure policies and ensure they are provided to mentees, mentee caregivers and mentors at the onset of the relationship. MENTOR has a guide for healthy closure in youth mentoring⁴ that may be helpful for your own program.
- Develop closure forms and ensure implementation when mentoring relationships change (e.g., mentee receives new mentor and mentor receives new mentee, mentor/mentee transitions out of program, or mentor/mentee develops new relationship with the program). [Find a manual with customizable program policies and procedures here.](#)⁵

⁴ MENTOR. (June 18, 2015). "They Always Come and They Never Say Goodbye": Understanding Healthy Closure in Youth Mentoring. Retrieved from https://www.mentoring.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/JUNE_2015_Resource_Packet.pdf

⁵ National Mentoring Resource Center. (2022). *Generic Mentoring Program Policy and Procedure Manual*. Retrieved from: <https://nationalmentoringresourcecenter.org/resource/generic-mentoring-program-policy-and-procedure-manual/>



IV.

CASE STUDIES: CLOSURE IN THE REAL WORLD

Local youth assist in painting a mural by artist Cody Wombold during a Community Day event at Wells Park in Nevada. Photo courtesy of City of Henderson (Nevada).



A group sits at the lake. Photo courtesy of City of Oviedo (Florida) Recreation and Parks.

GRANITE MENTORING PROGRAM

MOUNT AIRY PARKS AND RECREATION MOUNT AIRY, NORTH CAROLINA

To prepare our mentors and mentees for the culmination of their relationship, we share as much information as possible — and as often as possible. As our program comes to a close, staff are gathering relevant resources, materials, best practices and the like, to best support the closure process. We have several family engagement activities and events planned which will be great touch points for providing these materials and having discussions about relationships ending. Our mentoring program also will have a final celebration/closure event to mark the end of mentor/mentee matches and signify the closing of the relationship.

PEAK MENTOR PROGRAM

ELIZABETHTON PARKS AND RECREATION ELIZABETHTON, TENNESSEE

PEAK mentors are trained on closure at the beginning of their involvement in the program. Both mentors and mentees are notified throughout the duration of the relationship as well — matches last for one year and are formally notified at six months and 11 months. We encourage our mentors to be straight forward and clear when discussing the relationship ending, which should be done well before the match ends. Mentors also are asked to reflect on their experience with their mentee as well as to share positive feedback and words of encouragement and support.



Photo courtesy of Dreamstime.

V.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Use the following tools to address the proper support and eventual closure of youth mentoring matches. The National Mentoring Resource Center provides the following suite of resources to strengthen and support matches as well as to facilitate a positive mentor-mentee closing. The tools are intended to provide mentoring programs with the support they need to thrive and ways to ensure strong implementation of the closure process that affirms positive experiences gained from the mentoring process.

TOOLS TO STRENGTHEN MATCH SUPPORT AND CLOSURE⁷

- **Starting Relationships Right — Aligning Participant Expectations** (Word)
 - This resource seeks to avoid match challenges by ensuring that participant expectations for the mentoring experience are clarified before mentoring begins. Sample scripts and questions for staff to ask are provided.
- **Examining the Health of Youth Mentoring Relationships⁸** (PDF)
 - This resource — inspired by the STAR study’s insights into why and how match participants can experience conflict or disappointment in the mentoring experience — can help program staff assess 10 theoretical dimensions of match health. It offers insights into which participants may need extra support or how match support services can be strengthened overall.
- **Match Support Check-In Questions** (Word)
 - These customizable sets of check-in questions for parents, mentors, and youth are designed to inform the *Examining the Health of Youth Mentoring Relationships⁸* tool but also can be used separately to deepen staff understanding of participants’ experiences and challenges.
- **Closure Tools provided by BBBS of Mass Bay⁹** (PDF)
 - This agency has used prior research on the topic of match closure to develop these updated program practices and tip sheets for mentors in their community- and site-based mentoring models.

SUPPORTING CLOSURE FOR YOUTH EXPERIENCING ADVERSE CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES (ACES) AND NEURODIVERGENCE

It may be more difficult for youth with these experiences to transition. Extra time, support, guidance and planning is likely necessary. This mentor training (<https://bit.ly/3nYaXDC>), provided by MENTOR and Midlands Mentoring Partnership, can help guide you as matches come to a close.

⁷ The National Mentoring Resource Center. (2022). Tools to Strengthen Match Support and Closure. Retrieved from: <https://nationalmentoringresourcecenter.org/research-tools/tools-to-strengthen-match-support-and-closure/>

⁸ Meghan Perry. *Examining the Health of Youth Mentoring Relationships*. Retrieved from: <https://nationalmentoringresourcecenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/3.-Examining-Mentoring-Relationship-Health-FINAL-revised.pdf>

⁹ Big Brothers Big Sisters of Massachusetts Bay. (January 2016). “Let’s Finish What We Started” Closure Practices for Match Support. Retrieved from: <https://nationalmentoringresourcecenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/5.-BBBS-Mass-Bay-Closure-Tools-FINAL-revised.pdf>



Photo courtesy of Dreamstime

VI.

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ABOUT THE NATIONAL RECREATION AND PARK ASSOCIATION

The National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) is the leading not-for-profit organization dedicated to building strong, vibrant, and resilient communities through the power of parks and recreation. With more than 60,000 members, NRPA advances this mission by investing in and championing the work of park and recreation professionals and supporters — the catalysts for positive change in service of parks for all, climate-readiness, and overall health and well-being. For more information, visit www.nrpa.org. For digital access to NRPA's flagship publication, *Parks & Recreation*, visit parksandrecreation.org.

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