

TIPS FOR BUILDING A MENTORING RELATIONSHIP

1. **Be there.**

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

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

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

"My parents lecture me all the time. Why would I want my mentor to be the same way? I have the best mentor in the program, but sometimes he tries too hard to be a mentor instead of just being himself.

What I mean is that he thinks he always has to share some wisdom or advice, when sometimes I would rather just kick it and joke around."

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

3. **Be a role model.**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Courtesy of California Governor's Mentoring Partnership and Los Angeles Youth Mentoring Connection.

STAGES OF A MENTORING RELATIONSHIP

STAGE 1: DEVELOPING RAPPORT AND BUILDING TRUST

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

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

STAGE 2: THE MIDDLE—REACHING GOALS

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

- **Closeness**
Generally, during the second stage the mentor and mentee can sense a genuine closeness in the relationship.
- **Affirming the uniqueness of the relationship**
Once the relationship has reached this stage, it’s helpful to do something special or different from what the mentor and mentee did during the first stage, which helps affirm the uniqueness of the relationship. For example, go to a museum, sporting event, special restaurant, etc.

- **The relationship may be rocky or smooth**

All relationships have their ups and downs. Once the relationship has reached the second stage, there will still be some rough periods. Mentors should be prepared and not assume that something is wrong with the relationship if this happens.

- **Rely on staff support**

STAGE 3: CLOSURE

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

- **Identify natural emotions, such as grief, denial and resentment**

In order to help mentees express emotions about the relationship ending, mentors should model appropriate behavior. The mentor should first express his or her feelings and emotions about the end of the relationship and then let the mentee do the same.

- **Provide opportunities for saying goodbye in a healthy, respectful and affirming way**

Mentors shouldn't wait for the very last meeting with their mentees to say goodbye. The mentor should slowly bring it up as soon as he or she becomes aware that the relationship will be coming to a close.

- **Address appropriate situations for staying in touch**

Mentors should check with the mentoring program coordinator to find out the policy for staying in touch with their mentees once the program has come to an end. This is especially important if the program is school-based and mentors and mentees meet during the school year but the program officially ends before the summer starts. If mentors and mentees are *mutually* interested in continuing to meet over the summer, they may be allowed to, but with the understanding that school personnel may not be available should an emergency arise. Each mentoring program may have its own policy for future contact between mentors and mentees. That's why it's best for mentors to check with program personnel during this stage.