

INTRODUCTION

What is a successful mentoring relationship? What are the qualities of an effective mentor? Volunteers come to mentoring programs because they want to make a difference in the lives of youth. But how does that happen? How are they able to make a difference?

Several years ago, Public/Private Ventures, a research organization in Philadelphia, set out to learn what helps successful mentoring relationships develop. Almost all of the mentors in the successful relationships believed that their role was to support the youth, to help him or her grow and develop. They did not have the belief that they could or should reform their mentee. They saw themselves as a friend. Those successful mentors understood that positive changes in the lives of young people do not happen quickly or automatically. If they are to happen at all, the mentor and youth must meet long enough and often enough to build a relationship that helps the youth feel supported and safe, develop self-confidence and self-esteem, and see new possibilities in life. Those mentors knew they had to:

- ~Take the time to build the relationship
- ~Become a trusted friend
- ~Always maintain that trust

While establishing a friendship may sound easy, it often is not. Adults and youth are separated by age and, in many cases, by background and culture. Even mentors with good instincts can stumble or be blocked by difficulties that arise from these differences. It takes time for youth to feel comfortable just talking to their mentor, and longer still before they feel comfortable enough to share a confidence. Learning to trust—especially for young people who already have been let down by adults in their lives—is a gradual process. Mentees cannot be expected to trust their mentors simply because program staff members have put them together. Developing a friendship requires skill and time.

What are the qualities of an effective mentor? The following information describes 10 important features of successful mentors' attitudes and styles.

1. Be a friend

- **Don't try to be an authority figure**

It can be difficult for a youth to befriend an unknown adult. You want to help the relationship evolve into one of closeness and trust—but if you sound like you think you know everything and you tell your mentee what to do and how to act, you are likely to jeopardize your ability to build that trust. If youth feel that they risk criticism when they talk to you about something personal, they are unlikely to open up to you.

- **Don't preach about values.**

Don't try to transform the mentee. Take a "hands-off" approach when it comes to the explicit transmission of values. And especially, hold back opinions or beliefs that are in clear disagreement with those held by the youth's family. In general, young people do not like being told how they should think or behave—and they are uncomfortable if they feel that their family is being criticized. Preaching about values is likely to make it difficult for you to build a trusting relationship. Don't preach; instead teach—silently, by being a role model and setting an example.

- **Don't act like a parent.**

One of the things your mentee will appreciate about you is that you are not his or her parent. However much they love their parents, young people might sometimes see them primarily as people who set rules and express disapproval. Youth need other adults in their lives, but they are unlikely to warm to a friendship with an unrelated adult who shows these parental characteristics.

- **DO focus on establishing a bond, a feeling of attachment, a sense of equality, and the mutual enjoyment of shared time.**

These are all important qualities of a friendship.

2. Have realistic goals and expectations

What do you expect will change for your mentee as a result of his or her relationship with you? How will life be different? How will it feel different? Strong mentoring relationships do lead to positive changes in youth. These changes tend to occur indirectly, as a result of the close and trusting relationship, and they often occur slowly. If you expect to transform your mentee's life after six months or a year of meetings, you are going to be frustrated. The rewards of mentoring are, most often, quieter and more subtle.

Mentors might have specific goals for their mentees. They might, for example, want the youth to attend school more regularly and earn better grades. They might want him or her to improve classroom behavior or get along better with peers. But these should not be the primary targets of your efforts. If they are—and if you spend your time together trying to direct your mentee toward these goals—you will just seem like another parent or teacher.

Developing a trusting relationship can take time and patience. You are unlikely to be able to achieve this trust if you approach the relationship with narrow, specific goals aimed at changing your mentee's behavior. Instead, you can:

- **Focus on the child or youth and his or her overall development.**

Do not focus narrowly on performance and change.

- **Especially early on, center your goals on the relationship itself.**

During the first months of meetings with your mentee, your primary goal should be to develop a consistent, trusting, and mutually satisfying relationship. You are very likely to find that you derive a sense of meaningful accomplishment from the relationship itself, from the growing closeness and trust.

- **Throughout the relationship, emphasize friendship over performance.**

A strong mentoring friendship provides youth with a sense of self-worth and the security of knowing that an adult is there to help, if asked. This friendship is central, and it is eventually likely to allow you to have some influence on your mentee's behavior and performance outside of the relationship. As your relationship becomes stronger and more established, your mentee may begin to approach you with requests for more direct advice or help. If and when your relationship reaches this stage, be sure to maintain a balance between attempts to influence the youth's behavior and your more primary goal of being a supportive presence. Keep the focus on your friendship.

3. Have fun together

Young people often say that the best thing about having a mentor is the chance to have fun—they have an adult friend with whom to share favorite activities. The opportunity to have fun is also one of the great benefits of being a mentor. However, for some mentors, fun might appear trivial in light of the scope and scale of unmet, pressing needs that may be present in the lives of their mentee. Thus, it is important to remember that fun is not trivial—for youth, having fun and sharing it with an attentive adult carry great weight and a meaning beyond a recreational outlet, a chance to “blow off steam,” or an opportunity to play.

- **Many youth involved in mentoring programs have few opportunities for fun.**

Having fun breaks monotony, provides time away from a tense home situation, or introduces them to experiences they would not otherwise have.

- **Having fun together shows your mentee that you are reliable and committed.**

One mentor explains: “To get kids to where they know that you really care and can be trusted, you just have to spend time with them and do things that they like to do.” The observation is a good one.

Youth see the adult's interest in sharing fun as a sign that the mentor cares about them. They experience a growing sense of self-worth when their adult partner not only pays persistent, positive attention to them, but also willingly joins them in activities the youth describe as fun.

- **Focusing on “fun” activities early in the relationship can lead to more “serious” activities later.**

As your mentee comes to see you as a friend, he or she is likely to be far more receptive to spending some of your time together in activities that are less obviously fun, such as working on school-related assignments. Always be sure that these more “serious” activities are not forced upon the youth—that they are something your mentee seems agreeable to doing. Also be sure that activities such as

schoolwork sessions are kept brief, and that they do not become the primary focus of your meetings together.

4. Give your mentee voice and choice in deciding on activities

Be sure that your mentee is a partner in the process of deciding what activities you will do together. Giving your mentee voice and choice about activities will:

~Help build your friendship: It demonstrates that you value your mentee's ideas and input and that you care about and respect her or him.

~Help your mentee develop decision making and negotiation skills.

~Help avoid the possibility that you will impose "it's-good-for-you" activities—like homework sessions—on your mentee without her or his agreement. This kind of imposition may make you seem more like a teacher or parent than a friend.

- **It really is difficult for them to come up with ideas.**

Many youth in mentoring programs have had little opportunity to travel outside their neighborhoods and so do not know what the possibilities might be. Also, they don't want to seem rude or disagreeable so it might take time for them to feel comfortable saying that they want or don't want.

- **Give a range of choices concerning possible activities.**

Be sure the choices are youth-focused—be sure your mentee will enjoy the activities.

5. Be positive

People who feel negatively about themselves tend to live down to their own self-image. And youth who are matched with mentors usually have a number of situations in their lives that are leading them to feel exactly that way. They might, for example, have problems with a parent or sibling, difficulties in school, conflicts with peers, or involvement with the juvenile justice system.

One of the most important things you can do as a mentor is to help your mentee develop self-esteem and self-confidence. Doing activities together provides many opportunities for you to encourage your mentee to feel good about themselves. You can:

- **Offer frequent expressions of direct confidence.**

Praise and encouragement help build self-esteem.

- **Be encouraging even when talking about potentially troublesome topics, such as grades.**

Be supportive; don't sound like you are criticizing.

- **Offer concrete assistance.**

At times, your activities might include helping your mentee with schoolwork, and this assistance should be given in a way that helps build his or her self-confidence.

6. Let your mentee have much of the control over what the two of you about—and how you talk about it

Along with doing enjoyable activities together, listening and talking are at the heart of your relationship with your mentee. The communication patterns you establish early on will be key to the relationship's development over time. Especially in the early, tentative phase of your relationship, your mentee should have a high degree of control over what the two of you talk about—it is important to respect the limits youth place on how much they choose to reveal about themselves.

Take the time and effort necessary for your mentee to develop trust in you. While you know that your mentee should trust you, the reality is that you have to earn the trust.

- **Don't push.**

It should come as no surprise to you that your mentee, especially at first, may be shy and reluctant to talk, especially about difficult-to-reveal issues, such as problems in school or at home. Be careful not to push your mentee to discuss issues that she or he feels are too personal or might risk your disapproval.

- **Be direct in letting your mentee know that she or he can confide in you without fear of judgment or exposure.**

Having a mentor is probably a new form of relationship for the youth, who thus does not know whether, and to what extent, she or he can trust you. Make deliberate attempts to let your mentee know that you are a safe person to talk to.

- **Remember that the activities you do together can become a source of conversation.**

Whether you are playing catch together or enjoying a snack after seeing a movie, having a conversation about the activity itself can help your mentee become more comfortable talking to you. This, in turn, can ultimately help your mentee feel safe about making more personal disclosures.

7. Listen

When your mentee does begin to “open up” to you, how you respond will serve to either promote or discourage his or her ongoing disclosure. One of the most valuable things you can do is to just listen—it is impossible to overemphasize the importance of being a great listener.

- **When you listen, your mentee can see that you are a friend, not an authority figure.**

Many youth appreciate being able to bring up issues and having an adult who responds primarily by listening. They recognize that listening is a form of emotional support, and they may have few other sources of support in their lives.

8. Respect the trust your mentee places in you

When your mentee does begin to talk to you about personal matters, be supportive. If you respond by lecturing or expressing disapproval, he or she is very likely to avoid mentioning personal matters in the future. Instead of seeking support and help from you, your mentee might become self-shielding by, for example, dodging conversations about problems and hiding school or family difficulties.

- **Reassure your mentee that you will be there for him or her.**

Some youth may be reluctant to disclose things about themselves because they worry that their mentor will disapprove of them and, as a result, disappear from their lives. This is a reasonable fear for youth who have an absent parent and may feel responsible for the parent’s leaving—youth often believe that they did something to drive the parent away.

- **If you give advice, give it sparingly.**

A mentor’s ability to give advice will occur at different times and to varying degrees in relationships, depending upon the mentee’s receptivity and needs. In every case, though, do not let advice-giving overshadow other ways of interacting and other types of conversation.

9. Remember that your relationship is with the youth, not the youth’s family.

- **Maintain cordial but distant contact with family members.**

Be friendly and polite. But keep to a minimum the amount of time you spend in conversation with them about the youth or about other family members. Try just to talk about activities you and your mentee are doing together, or keep the discussions in the area of general “chatting.”

- **Resist families’ efforts to extract help beyond providing a friendship for the youth.**

Do not allow your mentee’s parent to influence you into disciplining the youth or lecturing your mentee about his or her behavior at home or school. In joining with the parent in this way, you would be taking on a parental role yourself. In addition, do not allow family members to draw you into their problems or disputes. Similarly, resist any desire you might have to intervene with the family. If there is a problem in the family that seems to require outside services, contact program staff so they can deal with the issue. Also, do not hesitate to contact program staff about any difficulties you are having with the family and to ask them to talk to the family about your role.

- **Be nonjudgmental about the family.**

Both in interactions with your mentee’s family and in conversations with your mentee about them, do not be judgmental. If your mentee complains or vents about his or her parents, provide support and, if appropriate, help your mentee find ways to deal with the problems, but refrain from commenting in ways that disparage the youth’s family. Finding a response that simultaneously conveys understanding of your mentee’s difficulties with parents, and implies little or no criticism, can be a challenge. But criticizing a parent—even if you believe you are only agreeing with the youth’s criticism—puts your

mentee in an awkward and embarrassing position. The key is to listen without judgment and to assure the youth of your empathy and caring.

10. Remember that *you* are responsible for building the relationship

Building a relationship cannot be rushed. During the early period, when you and your mentee are getting to know one another, you may have to be particularly patient and persistent as you work to establish the foundation of a meaningful friendship, one that could ultimately help lead to positive changes in your mentee's life. At first, the relationship might seem one-sided—you might feel like you are putting out all the effort while your mentee seems passive or indifferent.

Remember that this is the time when young people are going to be at their shyest and most reticent, because they do not yet know you. It is also the time when they may be testing you, because they could have limited reason to believe that adults can, in fact, be reliable and trustworthy.

Take responsibility for making and maintaining contact.

Having regular meetings with your mentee is essential if you are going to be able to develop a strong relationship. You are the adult and must be responsible for being sure that the two of you meet regularly. If you are meeting with your mentee on a prearranged schedule at a school or other designated location, maintaining contact might not be a problem. But if you are in a program where you and your mentee schedule each meeting, decide where you will meet and what you will do together, you may find that your mentee does not return phone calls or behaves in other ways that make it difficult to schedule meetings. If you expect the youth to contact you, it is very likely you are going to feel disappointed and frustrated, and it also means that you very likely will not be meeting consistently. Be understanding— consider the situation from your mentee's point of view.

- **Understand that the feedback and reassurance characteristic of adult-to adult relationships is often beyond the capacity of youth.**

At times, some mentors feel unappreciated because they get little or no positive feedback from their mentee. They may interpret this as meaning that their mentee does not care about seeing them. But the fact that youth are reticent does not mean they are indifferent.