

HOW TO BUILD A POSITIVE RELATIONSHIP WITH YOUR MENTEE



Becoming a mentor is one of the most valuable things you can do to make a real difference in a young person's life but you will need to step-up and develop a positive and unconditional relationship with your mentee first.

As in all good relationships, mutual trust and respect will need to be at the foundation of your relationship with your mentee. To develop that mutual trust and respect you will need to demonstrate in your words and actions that you are interested in your mentee, that you are open to listening to them, that you are dependable and that you are safe.

Next to building mutual trust and respect with your mentee, the most important thing you can do for your relationship is to remember your role is not to dictate to or to "fix" them.

Mentoring can have a transformative impact on an individual but the focus should be on becoming a positive, consistent presence in the young person's life – which will often mean just turning up unconditionally.

TEN TIPS TO A POSITIVE RELATIONSHIP WITH YOUR MENTEE

In the early stages of a mentor-mentee relationship the priority needs to be on creating rapport with your mentee. As trust and respect builds you will be able to gradually introduce goals and aims in partnership with your mentee. Here are ten tips to assist you to cement a lasting, positive relationship with your mentee.

1. Commit to the relationship.

Before you become a mentor you need to be absolutely confident you have the time, energy and commitment to dedicate to the relationship. Backing out of a mentoring partnership will make it much harder for the young person to develop a trusting, productive relationship with another adult. Remember those early weeks and even months will often be the toughest as the mentee tests whether they can depend on you to be there.

2. Be on their side.

You may not approve of everything they do but you need to be prepared to listen to and acknowledge their views and experiences. As a mentor your role is not to replace parents, peers, or to be an alternative authority figure. To influence their behaviour positively, do it by modelling the right behaviour and inviting them to share their aspirations, rather than by telling them what they should do.

3. Turn up.

One of the most important things you can do is to always turn up when you say you will and to catch-up frequently and regularly. Consistently turning up will show your mentee that you can be trusted, that they can rely on you and you respect them. For young people who have been disappointed by the adults in their lives, a successful mentoring relationship will be a conduit towards increasing self-esteem, self-confidence and self-belief.

4. Have fun together.

Spending time with a mentor should be an enjoyable experience for a young person – one that they want to repeat. Think about introducing your mentee to new activities and experiences that are fun and provide a less intrusive way of getting to know each other than sitting face-to-face and asking questions.

5. Let them make choices.

Letting your mentee voice their opinions and share the decision making on the activities you do together shows that you value and trust their opinion and have confidence in them. Inviting them to help decide on activities will also help you to understand what they like and they will feel more confident with the relationship because they have some control.

6. Be positive.

Young people are bombarded with negative messages on a daily basis. As a mentor you can empower them by noticing and acknowledging their strengths, abilities and talents. Consistent and genuine positive messages will build their confidence and encourage them to achieve their potential.

7. Listen.

It can be tempting to come to catch-ups with your mentee full of advice and "solutions" but you will have far greater influence in their lives if you dedicate yourself to 'hearing' what they have to say. Active non-judgemental listening is a critical form of emotional support and one that is often lacking in young people's lives. (See fact sheet 3 for more information).

8. Set realistic goals and expectations.

Once you have developed a trusting relationship you can instigate conversation about goals that your mentee would like to achieve. Help your mentee identify and set appropriate and achievable short-term goals and discuss the steps that need to be taken for the goals to be realised. Accomplishing short-term goals will build your mentee's self-belief and motivate them to tackle long-term goals. (See fact sheet 6 for more information).

9. Demonstrate your respect.

Respect and trust are two-way streets. To gain your mentee's respect and trust you need to show them you have respect for them and understand their needs. Let them guide what you discuss and how you discuss it, don't push for confidences or ask too many personal questions. When they do open up to you, show your respect by listening, avoiding judgement and keeping the information confidential. Young people fiercely guard their privacy and are harshly critical of anyone who breaks their confidence. Whilst you at no time should condone or collude with keeping secret any criminal activity or issues that threaten the mentee's – or another individual's – health and safety, you should let them know if you are obliged to break their confidence. (See fact sheet 8 for more information).

10. Take responsibility for the relationship.

You will need to take the lead in building a positive, lasting relationship with your mentee. This may mean taking responsibility for making and maintaining contact and recognise that while you may not get a lot of positive reinforcement from your mentee your relationship is an important one in their lives. Remember young people do not let 'outsiders' into their lives easily or readily. You will have to work at being given that privilege.

SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES FOR GETTING TO KNOW YOUR MENTEE

Getting to know each other can be easier in non-formal settings. Using activities to build the relationship will give your mentee the opportunity to begin talking when they are ready – rather than feeling pressured to talk. It also allows you to have fun together, which is a great way to break the ice, spend time together and learn about each other. Make sure you include your mentee in decisions about activities, and don't be afraid to learn from them and ensure that parents/guardians are okay with any activities you have planned.

- Organised physical activities:
 - Indoor rock climbing; Ten pin bowling; 1 on 1 basketball; Fishing; Rollerblading/stakeboarding; Bike riding; Obstacle courses; Mini golf; Go for a bush walk.
- Visit a beach – have your own sandcastle competition.
- A meal at a local restaurant – all you can eat can be good for teens.
- Check out the local library – there may be free talks and performances or it could just be a chance to pick up books, video or music that you and/or your mentee are interested in.
- Craft – get a book from the library and build something together.
- Learn a new skill together – such as how to screenprint a t-shirt or cook a seafood meal.
- Ask your mentee what they like doing – mutual interests can help to build the relationship and if it turns out you both like hiking, a walk could make a great backdrop for easy conversation.

By getting to know your mentee away from the usual settings – home, work or school – you free them up to be themselves and it enables you to concentrate on them without other distractions creeping in.

DEALING WITH DIFFERENCES

No 2 people ever agree all of the time and as your mentee and you will bring different experiences, ideas and backgrounds, it is likely you could have very different ways of looking at the world. While your mentee might have quite different values and beliefs, to build a trusting relationship it is important you allow them to express their ideas and opinions without making them feel judged.

- If you are finding a conversation or subject uncomfortable or confronting, try to think of it as an opportunity to learn more about your mentee and to openly discuss the consequences of different behaviours in a safe, non-judgemental environment. Remember that in listening to your mentee and sharing information about their life and yours, you are giving them a chance to think about the different options that are open to them.
- Try not to shut down conversations that make you uncomfortable or rush-in to give advice as this will discourage your mentee from opening up to you in the future. To help them think about consequences and outcomes of their actions use examples from your knowledge and experience to enable them to reflect on how their choices may impact on those close to them.
- When you discuss difficult subjects you can be honest about how you would feel about a situation and why, but you need to respect that your mentee may feel differently.
- In your role as a mentor, it is your responsibility to listen and appropriately share knowledge and information from your experience. It is not your responsibility to provide solutions or to tell them what to do; but rather to help your mentee make their own informed decisions.
- In your role as mentor it is not your job to pass on information that your mentee shares with you. The only exception to this is around criminal activity, in the interests of your mentee's safety and wellbeing or to protect another individual from harm. Both you and your mentee should be aware of your obligations in reporting information according to your organisations policies.

Finally, remember that some of the differences will be about their age and stage of life – take a moment to think back to when you were a teenager about what was important to you, what issues felt most important or most threatening and which adults did you confide in. Young people from all communities and cultures share the desire to be understood, supported, accepted and respected by the adults around them.



WHERE TO GO FOR MORE INFORMATION

Guide to Effective Safe Practice in Youth Mentoring, 2nd Edition, page 21.