

Safe Practice Guidelines for Youth Mentoring Programmes

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Introduction

Youth mentoring is an active social intervention associated with a wide range of beneficial outcomes for young people. Supportive relationships with non-parental adults can have a powerful and positive influence on the course of young people's lives.

New Zealand has a wide variety of youth mentoring programmes in place, offering valuable support and guidance to many young people. The New Zealand Government is keen to increase the availability of youth mentoring to young people, and is actively encouraging adults to volunteer to become youth mentors.

The Government is also conscious of the need to ensure youth mentoring programmes are safe. Youth mentoring relationships can be harmful if the adult lacks commitment or is inappropriate to carry out the role. Programmes must be constructive and have a meaningful impact for young people.

As part of the *Children's Action Plan* released in October 2012, the Government committed to ensuring that existing providers of child and youth mentoring initiatives have safe volunteer mentoring systems, practices, procedures and protocols in place, in order to achieve positive outcomes for young people through mentoring. These safe practice guidelines have been developed to support providers to ensure their programmes are safe for both young people and volunteer mentors, so that youth mentoring relationships have the best chance of success.

How to use these guidelines

Programme providers are encouraged to use these guidelines to work towards better systems, practices, procedures and protocols. The guidelines include advice to assist programme providers to:

- identify safety-related aspects of their programme that require further development
- ensure adequate support is in place for both young people and volunteer mentors
- ensure that the right measures are in place to build successful mentoring relationships.

Funders of youth mentoring programmes are also encouraged to use these guidelines to determine the suitability of youth mentoring programmes for sponsorship and other financial assistance.

More information

These guidelines are designed to cover the essential safety measures for youth mentoring programmes. Further information on best practice youth mentoring can be found on the New Zealand Youth Mentoring Network website and in resources such as the *Guide to Effective Practice in Youth Mentoring*.

Safe and effective operational policies and practices for mentoring programmes: Summary checklist for providers

<p>Screening and vetting of potential mentors</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Do you have adequate processes to identify and exclude anyone whose character or history indicates that they might pose potential harm to children or otherwise be perceived to be unsafe?• How do your processes consider whether mentors are stable, motivated, trustworthy, flexible, empathetic, sensitive and authentic? How do mentors demonstrate whether their attitudes, temperament, personality and skills fit the programme objectives?
<p>Considered matching of mentors and young people</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Do you have processes in place to find the most suitable match between mentor and young person?• Is your focus on the developmental needs of the young person?• Do your processes ensure that the mentor is culturally competent, where this is relevant?• Do you consider the interpersonal capabilities, cultural backgrounds and social circumstances of both mentor and young person, whereby both can have their say on the match?
<p>Preparing young people (mentees) for what they can expect and what is expected of them in terms of their engagement and commitment to the relationship</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Do you provide orientation for young people so they have a clear understanding of what they can expect from the programme, how to engage with the mentor and the provider, and what to do if there are any problems?• Does your policy include gaining parent and carer consent and support for the programme?
<p>Training and supporting mentors to enable them to carry out their role effectively and safely</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Is there a comprehensive orientation and training package in place for mentors, covering (at least) the expectations of the mentor, the programme structure, safety and security and how to be an effective mentor?• Do you offer mentors regular ongoing support and refresher training?• Are records kept for monitoring the progress of the relationship and the development of the young person?• Does the programme coordinator undertake contact with the young people to ensure the relationship is tracking well, and keep communication channels open?• Are systems in place to ensure that programme coordinators, trainers and supporters have the right skills, experience and support to undertake their roles effectively and are engaged in their own ongoing training and development?
<p>Programme duration and intensity</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Does your policy address the amount of contact time between mentor and mentee to ensure there is sufficient time to develop a trusting relationship and achieve the developmental goals of the programme and the young person?
<p>Clear and accessible complaints and resolutions processes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Do you have processes in place for receiving and resolving complaints?
<p>Continuous improvement processes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Are processes in place for frequently reviewing and improving practices and service quality?

Safe volunteer mentoring systems, practices, procedures and protocols

Research indicates the programme practices that are essential for strong, effective and safe mentoring relationships involve:

- screening and vetting of potential mentors
- considered matching of mentors and young people (mentees), who also agree to the match
- preparing young people for what they can expect and what is expected of them in terms of their engagement and commitment to the relationship
- training mentors to enable them to carry out their role effectively and safely
- supporting mentors as the relationship progresses, with further training and supervision
- continuous improvement processes.

Programme duration and intensity are also important factors in the safety and effectiveness of formal mentoring programmes.

In this document, 'youth mentoring' is defined as:

'a process by which a more experienced, trusted guide forms a relationship with a young person to offer support, guidance and encouragement, to assist young people to realise their potential as they transition into adulthood'.

A 'youth mentoring programme' is defined as:

'formalised arrangements where a third party matches a mentor and mentee (or group of mentees), who together work through a planned, structured programme over a sustained period'.

These definitions draw on those developed by the New Zealand Youth Mentoring Network (2008) and the Australian Youth Mentoring Network (2011) and include both one-to-one and small group mentoring programmes.

Vetting, screening and checking the suitability of potential mentors

The purpose of the vetting and screening of mentors is to ensure the mentor does not pose any safety concerns. Vetting and screening processes seek to exclude anyone whose character or history indicates they might pose harm to children or could otherwise be perceived to be unsafe.

Programme providers also need to assess the suitability of applicants for the role of mentoring and the programme itself. This assessment should consider the character of prospective mentors – their attitudes, temperament and personality – along with the skills they would bring to the role and their fit to the goals of the programme.

Information sources and requirements

Vetting and screening processes should include:

- checking official records and other documents to establish an individual's identity and residence, and any criminal or offending history
- seeking and cross-checking information with referees
- asking the applicant to provide consent for the programme provider to contact people and organisations for information about them and to consult any other agency or individual regarding the person's suitability to mentor
- an interview with the applicant that includes a focus on disclosure of previous involvement with children and young people.

Identity and proof of address

In order to confirm a person's identity, original identification of an official nature is required. This should include *at least one of* the following items: an original birth certificate, a passport, a Certificate of Citizenship, a New Zealand Certificate of Identity or a New Zealand Firearms Licence, and photographic identity if their official document is not a passport. Proof of address may be a person's original utility bill or a letter from a bank (for further information, see: www.dia.govt.nz/Resource-material-Evidence-of-Identity-Standard-Index).

Safety of the mentor's home

If a young person is likely to spend time in the mentor's home, the vetting and screening process should incorporate a home visit to assess the safety of that person's living arrangements.

Offending history

Criminal conviction information can be obtained from either the Ministry of Justice or the New Zealand Police. Police vetting checks are more comprehensive and can contain other information relevant to the safety and responsibilities of a mentor. They can also include information regarding family violence and violent or sexual behaviours that may not have resulted in a criminal conviction.

Ordinarily, criminal conviction information is subject to the Criminal Records (Clean Slate) Act 2004, in which less serious convictions are concealed after seven years of the person remaining free of further convictions. There are exemptions to this Act, for certain approved users and for roles predominantly involving the care and protection of children and young people. Approved mentoring providers are able to, and should, obtain a more complete offending history.

As a minimum, Police vetting checks should be repeated once every three years to ensure the ongoing safety of children and young people. Depending on the nature of the programme, more regular checks may be warranted.

The results of Police vets must be carefully considered in terms of:

- the nature of the offence and relevance to the mentoring role
- the length of time since the crime was committed
- age and maturity now, as compared to when the crime was committed
- the seriousness of the crime, eg, length of sentence, use of a weapon
- the circumstances at the time of any violent behaviour
- the pattern of crime, eg, a short spate may indicate a 'phase' but a regular pattern may indicate continuing inappropriate behaviour
- any explanation the person makes when discussing the information with them.¹

Police checks may include a 'red flag' stamp, a recommendation that the individual not have unsupervised access to children, young people or more vulnerable members of society. A red flag is used where details relating to this recommendation are not able to be divulged to the programme provider. A red flag indicates that the individual's application to mentor should be declined.

Interviews, referees and character checks

Interviews provide the means to ascertain an individual's character (attitudes, temperament and personality), the skills they would bring to the role, and their fit to the goals of the programme. Mentors need to be stable, motivated, trustworthy, flexible, empathetic, sensitive and authentic. As described in a recent literature review, 'mentors need to be caring and have a positive, non-judgemental approach to young people, particularly for programmes involving young people at risk, and be able to meet young people "where they are" and guide them in their journey'.² Cultural knowledge and competency may be relevant in some contexts.

¹ New Zealand Police, www.police.govt.nz/information-organisations-receiving-police-vetting-services

² Scrine, C; Riebel, T; Walker, R; Telethon Institute for Child Health Research. 2012. *Key Findings of the Literature on Effective Mentoring Programmes for Young People*. Sydney: Australian Youth Mentoring Network, page 5.

The interview should contain a focus on disclosure of previous involvement with children and young people. The interviewer should also request information on any behavioural issues such as those relating to violence, drug or alcohol abuse, or connections with unlawful organisations.³ Interviews and other checks should gather full information of previous involvement with children and young people.

At a practical level, interviews can also bring to the fore logistical matters, such as unpredictable schedules, a high level of family and other personal commitments, employment circumstances, immigration status and other aspects of the applicant's personal life that may be a barrier to their being able to carry out a mentoring role reliably for the duration of the relationship. During the screening process, it may become clear that some adults would require a level of support and supervision for which the provider does not have sufficient resources, personnel or expertise.

Referee checks

Referee checks are used to check both the safety and suitability of people to be mentors. A minimum of two referees should be contacted as part of the vetting, screening and suitability checking process. Referees should have a close knowledge of the person, have known them for at least a year and be able to verify information provided by the potential mentor as well as provide information relating to their suitability for the role. Information provided in the application and the interview should be cross-checked with referees for accuracy, and referees should be consulted about the person's safety and suitability for the role of mentoring. Referees can also be asked to provide any information on past behaviour or history that may be a cause of concern.

The assessment of the suitability of the person for mentoring continues during the initial training process and includes ongoing monitoring through support and supervision.

³ As a point of reference, Child, Youth and Family (CYF) requires providers to carry out and document formal recruitment of mentors, including written applications, panel interviews, satisfactory Police criminal check, disclosure statements of all circumstances in which they have been involved in the care or supervision of children or young people. Character and professional referee checks are performed, together with due diligence on previous involvement in activities with children and young people (eg, teacher aide, youth group involvement, sports coaching). Multiple interviews and referee checks assist to verify the consistency of information provided by various sources.

CYF-funded providers are not permitted to employ any person who has any physical violence or sexual offence convictions (includes any records from the Youth Court). Providers are also prohibited from employing any individuals whose character or professional referees, Police criminal check or information held by the Ministry of Social Development indicate that the appointment of that person as a mentor would not be appropriate.

Accepting young people on to the programme

While mentoring can be a very valuable social intervention, and an opportunity for young people to develop in very positive ways, not all young people will benefit from, or be suitable for, particular mentoring relationships or programmes. Some young people may have a background of offending, a history of violence and aggression or be known to be highly dishonest. Their circumstances may necessitate a particular programme design, an especially skilled and confident mentor, or for two adults to be present during mentoring, requiring a level of resourcing that might be outside the capacity of a programme. It may be decided that the programme cannot accept certain young people for these reasons, or because they would pose an unacceptable level of risk to volunteer mentors.

Programme providers need good access to information before they can establish whether a young person is suitable to be accepted on to the programme. This will often involve requesting information held by other organisations in order to develop a profile of the young person. Providers may need to enter into formal agreements with these other organisations on how information is to be used and disclosed in accordance with the Privacy Act 1993.

It is important that the mentor is provided with a full profile of the young person they will be mentoring, including information relating to risk factors (see 'Matching mentors and young people').

Vetting, screening and suitability

Mentoring programmes should have adequate vetting and screening processes in place to identify and exclude unsuitable candidates. Mentoring programme providers should also consider the suitability of the applicant to participate in the mentoring programme. Applicants should be asked to consent to the programme provider checking official records and contacting agencies to obtain information necessary to establish the safety and suitability of the applicant for mentoring.

At a minimum, vetting, screening and suitability checking should include:

- full Police vetting checks including information subject to the Criminal Records (Clean Slate) Act 2004, with careful consideration of information received
- official and photographic proof of identity and proof of current address
- two referee checks with reputable individuals who have had close knowledge of the applicant for at least one year
- an interview with the applicant, including a focus on disclosure of previous involvement with children and young people and assessment of the appropriateness of the applicant for the role in terms of character and skills.

Mentoring programmes should monitor and undertake regular Police checks of mentors to ensure the ongoing safety of children and young people. As a minimum, this should be repeated once every three years. Mentors can be required to disclose any convictions or

matters involving the Police in the interim. All information relating to the vetting and screening of the mentor should be fully documented.

Mentoring programmes should have processes in place to establish whether a young person is suitable to be a mentee on the programme. This includes obtaining information relating to the involvement of other agencies, and any known risk factors, such as history of violence, aggression and dishonesty. The safety of volunteers needs to be taken into account when considering whether to accept a young person as a mentee on to the programme.

Matching mentors and young people

Mentoring requires a good ‘fit’ between the mentor and young person in order for the relationship to be successful.⁴ Effective mentoring is based on a trusting relationship, through which meaningful support can be provided to the young person. The dynamics between the mentor and young person, and their ability to form a positive connection, affect the quality of the mentoring relationship and its capacity to promote positive developmental outcomes.

The match between the mentor and the young person needs to focus on the developmental needs of the young person and consider the relevant characteristics, skills and interests of both the mentor and the young person in light of those needs.⁵ This can include:

- the preferences and goals of the young person, their parent or carer (if appropriate) and the mentor
- the mentor’s experience, skills and expertise
- other shared interests between the mentor and young person
- similarity of personality and temperament
- the mentor’s knowledge and understanding of the young person’s cultural background
- gender or ethnicity
- any special needs of the young person
- geographic closeness and compatibility of meeting times
- other logistical matters, such as access to transport, internet and phone and holding a current driver’s licence.

There are various views about the difference matching makes to the success of a relationship. Empirical research suggests that matching gender and ethnicity are not essential, but that it is

⁴ Note that this section and others discuss the mentoring relationship as a one-to-one relationship, but the principles apply equally to small group mentoring.

⁵ Australian Youth Mentoring Network. 2012. *Australian Youth Mentoring Benchmarks: Fostering the growth of high quality youth mentoring programs*. Sydney: Australian Youth Mentoring Network, page 23.

important for the young person and mentor to have a say in who their mentor is and that there is an opportunity to do this before a final match is made.⁶

Mentoring programmes may formalise the match by way of an agreement or contract between the mentor and the young person on the structure and purpose (terms and conditions) of the relationship. A copy of such an agreement would be held by the mentor, the young person and the programme provider.

Premature termination of the mentoring relationship

For various reasons, a mentoring relationship may come to a premature end. For example, the young person is no longer responding to the mentor, the mentor is unable to continue to offer their time or there is an event that may have compromised the trust between the mentor and the young person.

Mentoring relationships that end prematurely have been found to have negative consequences for young people, impacting on their self-esteem and academic performance and reinforcing the negative experiences for those with dysfunctional family relationships.

When the mentoring relationship finishes earlier than expected, it is important that procedures are in place to find a replacement mentor, to ensure the match is suitable to both parties and to transition the young person to the new mentor. The reason for the relationship breakdown should be ascertained to enable issues to be resolved through a subsequent match, and to determine whether the previous mentor requires further training; for example, before being matched with another young person.

In limited situations, if a young person is no longer responding to mentoring as an intervention, it is good practice to liaise with their referrer regarding alternative arrangements for them.

Matching criteria

Programmes should have processes in place to find the most suitable match of mentors and young people. The processes should focus on the developmental needs of young people, and consider the interpersonal and cultural capabilities and social circumstances of both mentors and young people. Both mentors and young people should be given the opportunity to have their say on the match before it is finalised.

Processes should provide guidance on:

- matching mentors and young people
- monitoring and supporting the match
- closing the relationship

⁶ Miller A. 2010. Best Practices for Formal Youth Mentoring. In T Allen and L Eby (Eds) *The Blackwell Handbook of Mentoring: A Multiple Perspectives Approach*. West Sussex: Wiley & Sons, page 315.

- understanding why a mentoring relationship has not been successful and responding appropriately, and
- transitioning young people to a new mentor in the event a mentoring partnership ends prematurely, or
- appropriately transitioning young people to alternative arrangements, if required.

A mentor should be provided with a full profile of the young person before the relationship commences.

Mentee requirements – getting started

As with mentors, young people need a good understanding of what the programme involves, what they can expect from the mentor and what is expected in terms of their engagement in the partnership. They need to have a clear understanding of complaints processes and know how to raise any concerns. It is important that young people are informed of these processes, feel safe in raising concerns and know it is okay for relationships with mentors to end early if they are not working for the young person. Generally, it is expected that the programme coordinator would have this conversation with the young person.

Many young people need time to build engagement and enthusiasm regarding the partnership, but their consent and commitment is necessary at the start. It can help to build engagement and interest in the programme when the young person considers and communicates their goals and expectations for the programme.

For young people under the age of 16, parents and carers need to be well informed about the mentoring relationship and to provide their consent. Mentoring relationships benefit from the commitment and support of parents and carers, who should agree to the location of meetings and anything that requires their consent. Relationships with parents and carers may need to be skilfully managed. Written material covering expectations of the relationship and matters of disclosure and confidentiality should accompany, and be an integral part of, consent forms.

Criteria for preparing young people

- Before initial engagement with their mentor, orientation should be provided for young people so they have a clear understanding of what they can expect from the programme, how to engage with the mentor and the provider, and what to do if there are any problems.
- Young people should be made aware of complaints processes and made to feel comfortable about raising any concerns they have about the mentoring relationship.
- Parent and carer consent and support for the programme and mentoring relationship should be obtained as appropriate.

Training and support

Training is an essential ingredient of safe and effective mentoring programmes, and research points to the need for ongoing training and support for mentors, appropriate to the developmental stage of the young person and nature of the programme, to continually improve the practice of mentoring and sustain the benefits.

Initial training for mentors

Before commencing a mentoring partnership, mentors need orientation and training in aspects of the role, to increase the likelihood of their carrying out an effective partnership.

Initial orientation generally covers:⁷

- the programme's purpose and goals, kaupapa, format and content, and policies relating to communication, privacy, disclosure and confidentiality, liability, health and safety, and evaluation
- the basics of mentoring: what it is, what it seeks to achieve and how to be an effective mentor
- the needs and developmental stages of young people
- roles and responsibilities of mentors, including the level and nature of engagement and commitment required, and boundaries of the relationship
- an understanding of culturally appropriate practices
- activities, tools and resources, and how to overcome any barriers
- mentor coordinators and other supports available to mentors.

Some providers treat the orientation and initial training as an extension of the interview process and decide to decline applicants if it becomes clear that their attitudes or ability to commit will not meet the programme goals and structure. It is also an opportunity for adults participating in the training to decide to withdraw.

Good mentoring requires a number of skills including empathetic listening, relationship building, effective communication and support for personal development, goal setting, problem solving and conflict management. Mentors need to know how to treat information disclosed to them by young people while maintain trust. They need to know what to do when young people open up and disclose highly sensitive matters such as sexual abuse, self-harm and suicidal feelings. Training also needs to cover issues of safety and security. Mentors need to be clear about boundaries, such as with money lending, contact, intimacy and how to deal with disclosure.

⁷ New Zealand Youth Mentoring Network. 2013. *Mentoring Matters*, Auckland: New Zealand Youth Mentoring Network, module 8, page 5.

It is critical that mentors be sensitive to the cultural background of their mentees and carry out mentoring in a culturally respectful manner. This requires them to have a sound knowledge and understanding of the values, priorities, obligations and perspectives of the cultural environment they find themselves in. A failure to recognise this can have a disempowering effect on young people and can leave them feeling culturally disconnected.⁸

The quality of training is key to building the competency of mentors, and comprehensive training can represent a significant time commitment.

Ongoing support and training for mentors

Much of what is learned in the initial training may not be retained or comprehended until a mentor is carrying out the role and begins to face challenges. Research points to the need for ongoing training and support for mentors to be able to carry out their role effectively and safely.⁹

It may be more appropriate for a mentor to learn certain aspects of mentoring once they are in the role. For example, they may need information on how to deal with drug and alcohol abuse, mental illness and mental health promotion, and on counselling skills.

In the initial stages of a mentoring relationship, mentors need access to regular ongoing support to help them continue to develop skills and confidence and deal with specific issues. Supervisors or coordinators may need to provide mentors with ideas for activities, advice on managing a particular behavioural or communication issue, support to articulate their own emotions or help with drawing a mentoring relationship to a close.

As part of monitoring the relationship, it is good practice to record the frequency of contact between mentors and young people, the purpose of meetings and any issues raised. This can serve as a protection mechanism for the mentor and provide a means to monitor the progress of the relationship and the young person's development over time. It can also pick up any behavioural patterns or other issues that require special attention.

If mentors are dissatisfied with aspects of the support they are receiving, an escalation process may be needed to resolve their issues promptly.

Training and support for trainers

To ensure that training and support for mentors is of high quality, programme coordinators and training providers need the right skills, experience and support (eg, supervision) and to be engaged in their own ongoing training and development.

⁸ Scrine et al, 2012. page 5.

⁹ Scrine et al, 2012. page 17.

Support for young people

It is good practice for the mentoring programme provider to maintain regular contact with the young person and to periodically 'check in' to see how the mentoring is going and assess whether anything needs to change to improve the relationship. This keeps communication channels open for the young person to raise anything that is making them uncomfortable.

Training and support criteria

- Providers should have a comprehensive orientation and training package in place for mentors.
- At a minimum, orientation training should cover the expectations of the mentor, the programme structure, safety and security and details on how to be an effective mentor.
- Mentors should have access to regular ongoing support, particularly in the early months of the mentoring relationship and also have access to ongoing and refresher training.
- Records should be kept to monitor the progress of the relationship and the development of the young person and to detect any issues requiring additional attention.
- Programme coordinators should maintain contact with young people to ensure the mentoring relationship is tracking well. Providers should have systems in place to ensure that programme coordinators, mentor trainers and others involved in supporting mentors and young people have the right skills, experience and support to undertake their role effectively and are engaged in ongoing training and development.

Programme duration and intensity

Several studies have found that relationship duration is a key determining factor in the effectiveness of youth mentoring. Evidence supports that the longer a relationship lasts, the better the outcomes. Longer relationships such as 12 months or more allow time to establish and build trust and a bond in the relationship, before moving on to goal setting and other developmental functions of mentoring programmes. The level of 'intensity', or contact time and frequency, between the mentor and young person during the relationship is equally significant.

For example, a shorter programme involving a much greater level of intensity may be commensurate with a programme lasting over a year, where the mentor and the young person meet for an hour each week. As with programme duration, the level of contact between a mentor and a young person needs to be sufficient to foster the development of the young person and achieve the programme goals.

Programme duration and intensity of mentoring relationship

Mentoring relationships should be of sufficient duration and intensity to allow time to establish a trusting relationship and achieve the developmental goals of the programme and the young person.

Complaints resolution

From time to time, there will be problems in mentoring relationships, and complaints will be raised. Programme providers need straightforward, accessible and clearly communicated processes in place to receive and resolve complaints. Complaints resolution processes should be fair and reasonable and should ensure that complaints are dealt with in a timely manner, with parties being kept informed throughout the process and about the outcome. While managing complaints, providers need to be mindful of the need to act with discretion and protect the interests of the young people involved.

Complaints resolution

Mentoring programmes should include clear and accessible complaints processes and procedures to guide providers in the management of complaints to ensure the process is fair and reasonable and protects the interests of young people.

Continuous improvement

It is important for programmes to continually review their practices to ensure they continue to improve in quality and to address issues of safety and effectiveness. Review mechanisms will vary, in part determined by organisational maturity and capacity. They may range in complexity from a straightforward monthly organisational action planning meeting through to formal monitoring and evaluation with a programme of work to respond to the issues identified through the evaluation. Ideally, providers would carry out a comprehensive review every six months. Review processes would include consideration of:

- effectiveness of programme processes
- effectiveness of mentoring relationships
- development and outcomes of young people.

Continuous improvement

Mentoring programmes should have processes in place to frequently review and improve practices and service quality, for the purposes of ensuring that their programmes are safe and effective.