

# HOW TO MENTOR YOUNG PEOPLE FROM MIGRANT OR DIVERSE BACKGROUNDS



**Mentoring youth is an important and challenging role. Developing a relationship with a young person from migrant or diverse backgrounds can enrich the experience further.**

New Zealand has a growing population of young people from migrant or diverse backgrounds who are either born overseas or born in New Zealand with one or both parents or grandparents born overseas. Having an awareness of cultural diversity, developing a rapport based on individual similarities and appreciating differences that exist can provide a positive mentoring experience and establish new learning opportunities.

Culture drives the way we live our everyday life, from the type of food we eat, attitudes to time, to the way that we communicate. Cultural awareness provides us the opportunity to develop an understanding of diversity, difference in values, beliefs and behaviours; it also assists us to develop skills in which to communicate positively and respectfully.

## CROSS CULTURAL MATCHES

Cultural differences exist in many areas of life, these may include:

- Language spoken
- Attitude to family and work
- Religion/belief
- Attitude to time and environment
- Communication
- Celebrations/holidays
- Food
- The role of the individual in society.

Cross-cultural matches can be extremely positive and provide both mentee and mentor with the opportunity to develop an understanding of another culture, while sharing details about their cultural traditions, rituals and history. Mentees need a mentor that will listen, be respectful and trustworthy, committed, approachable and knowledgeable.

Depending on the programme and the needs of the mentee, at times it may be appropriate for the mentor to be from the same cultural background, but at other times it may not be required and the issue of culture is superseded by other needs and preferences of the mentee.

## REFUGEE YOUTH ACTION NETWORK

The Refugee Youth Action Network (RYAN) initiative was established in 2011. It is the result of a collaborative venture involving the Umma Trust, Ethnic Youth Trust, Ministry of Social Development, ASB Community Trust, and refugee advocacy groups.

RYAN's goals and objectives are:

- To foster and mentor the young leaders of the future from former refugee communities.
- To prevent and address issues of alienation, drug use, school problems or gang involvement in the early intervention approach.
- Culturally responsive counselling and guidance leading to results.
- Meaningful and effective career path development leading to employment.

## TOP TEN TIPS

### 1. Be culturally aware.

Culture is an essential part of our identity. As a mentor, demonstrate openness, a willingness to learn and respect the mentee's culture. It's important to recognise that culture shapes your own perceptions. Be aware of your beliefs, biases and world view and be open and non-judgmental to promote a harmonious cross cultural exchange.

### 2. Learning cross-cultural communication.

Discuss differences and similarities in verbal and non-verbal communication with your mentee. It can be a fun exercise that helps to develop the relationship and avoid confusion. Listen carefully and speak clearly in language that is appropriate to the level of English of your mentee.

### 3. Find common ground with the young person.

Find common ground with the mentee by asking and encouraging lots of questions. This can help build the relationship and trust.

#### 4. Be aware of the pressures young people face.

Young people face many pressures; juggling school, work, peer and family relationships and responsibilities. For young people from refugee or migrant backgrounds, these pressures are often increased with extra complications of negotiating a new culture, language and systems. Depending on the young person's background, they could have had a difficult experience on their journey to New Zealand. Don't pry into these issues unless the information is offered freely, but be aware and empathetic.

#### 5. Use a strengths-based approach.

Always emphasise the young person's strengths and try to promote pathways in which those strengths can be explored.

#### 6. Don't assume.

Each young person is an individual with individual circumstances. Do not stereotype according to race, gender, dress or sexuality. Two people from the same country can have completely different experiences and culture. If in doubt, ask.

#### 7. Be patient and persistent.

It may take a long time for young people to respond to their mentor or the programme. This can be frustrating for enthusiastic mentors who want instant connections. Don't take it personally. Relationships take time and with patience and persistence usually young people will open up for a rewarding exchange.

#### 8. Be consistent.

Be consistent, build trust and be supportive through out the relationship. Keep your promises and try to maintain regular contact.

#### 9. Be aware of power dynamics.

Being a mentor is an important responsibility and it brings with it a position of power. It is important to be aware of this and not to abuse it. In many cultures, young people view older people/teachers/mentors in very high esteem and may not feel comfortable or act as 'equals'. You can slowly address this by using a personable approach, encouraging questions and ideas and activities to be lead by the young person.

#### 10. Keep it fun!

Mentoring should be a fun experience for both the mentor and mentee. Make sure the activities you pursue are engaging, dynamic and entertaining for both of you. Laughter goes along way in breaking down barriers and building relationships.

## BUILDING THE RELATIONSHIP

---

- Silence is not always a bad thing; it may suggest that your mentee feels comfortable, is processing information or preparing a response.
- Use verbal (oh, yes, mmm) and non verbal (nod head, lean forward) cues to show you are listening, while providing space and time for your mentee to share.
- If your mentee is from a non English speaking background, attempt to learn some basic words from their language such as hello, thank you, please and goodbye.
- Do some research and be aware of special occasions and dates relating to your mentee's background.
- If appropriate support your face to face meetings with another form of communication, email or phone. This may provide your mentee with the opportunity to open up a bit more in a non confronting way.



## REFERENCES & FURTHER INFORMATION

---

- Refugee Youth Action Network  
[www.rasnz.co.nz/Views/Community/RVAN.htm](http://www.rasnz.co.nz/Views/Community/RVAN.htm)
- Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Training  
[www.rasnz.co.nz/Views/CALD/Index.htm](http://www.rasnz.co.nz/Views/CALD/Index.htm)
- Human Rights Commission: Diversity Dates in NZ  
[www.hrc.co.nz/race-relations/te-ngira-the-nz-diversity-action-programme/diversity-dates](http://www.hrc.co.nz/race-relations/te-ngira-the-nz-diversity-action-programme/diversity-dates)