

5.2 SELECTION AND SAFETY CHECKING

Āu mahi, e te kawau moe ra – The net remains quiet, but secures the fish.

OVERVIEW

Figure 8. Selection and safety checking - key activities



Effective selection and safety checking practices are primarily aimed at ensuring the safety of all participants, but particularly for the young people involved in a programme. These practices are designed to increase the likelihood that all participants are safe, suitable and committed to making the mentoring relationship a positive experience. A robust process also gives all participants confidence that the programme is run in a professional manner.

Safety checking **potential mentors** helps programmes determine if applicants are safe, and have the personal qualities to be effective mentors to young people. This can include whether they have the necessary time and personal commitment.

Screening of **prospective mentees** and their **parents/caregivers** is also important to determine if they have the time and desire to participate.

New **safety checking regulations** and **child protection policy** guidelines as part of the Vulnerable Children's Act 2014 (VCA) are of particular relevance to the selection and checking of people to mentor young people, whether in a paid or voluntary capacity.

In summary, the VCA requires safety checking of paid employees and contractors, employed or engaged by government-funded organisations, who work with children⁴. Unfunded non-government organisations and voluntary organisations are not legally obligated to safety check employees and volunteers, but are encouraged to also adopt the new standards voluntarily⁵.

A **child protection policy** will guide programme staff to recognise symptoms of suspected abuse and neglect, and to be alert to warning signs throughout the selection and checking process, as well as during the mentoring relationship. The policy should have clear guidance about responding to concerns about people applying to be involved in the programme as a result of the safety checking undertaken. The decision to follow-up a concern about a person you have safety checked should be made in consultation with Child, Youth and Family and the New Zealand Police. This will ensure any actions taken do not

undermine any investigations being conducted by the external agencies. Further, the policy is about ongoing vigilance and providing guidelines and support for mentors who have a concern.

The Children's Action Plan website has guidelines on child protection policies, safety checking, and these also cover how programmes should respond to concerns about existing or potential staff. Appendix B of this Guide also provides a summary of the relevant publications and information:

- Safer Recruitment, Safer Children
- Safer Organisations, Safer Children
- Children's Worker Safety Checking under the Vulnerable Children Act 2014.

5.2.1 Mentor selection criteria

Establishing appropriate criteria for accepting mentors into the programme as well as criteria for disqualifying mentor applications is a critical first step in ensuring a robust checking and risk assessment process.

Mentor selection criteria will vary depending on the programme's goals and the desired outcomes for the young people. However, common themes include:

- age, gender and ethnicity
- level of education/academic skills; career interests
- geographical location (lives in proximity to the programme)
- cultural awareness
- interpersonal and communication skills
- personality profile (e.g., caring, trustworthy, empathetic)
- motivation for mentoring
- ability to commit for the duration of the relationship
- willing to attend all training sessions
- has a current drivers licence; good driving record and reliable transportation
- results of the police vetting check, in-person interview, identity and referee checks are all in order.

⁴For the purposes of MSD accreditation approval the definition of 'staff' includes anyone its organisation relies on to deliver its services, i.e. volunteers and contractors as well as paid staff members. Safety checking is required for all staff including volunteers. Refer to the Social Sector Accreditation Standards on the MSD website for further information.

⁵Refer to the Vulnerable Children Act 2014 for a definition of children under this act.

Criteria for ruling out mentors will include:

- questionable motives: to increase status, gain reward, sort out own problems
- inadequate skills and experience
- lack of availability
- a criminal record, history of violence, child abuse etc.⁶

5.2.2 Mentor Safety Checking Process

When designing the mentor safety checking process, it is crucial for programmes to remember that the young people, not the mentors, are their clients and keeping the young people safe is an absolute priority.

(Kremer & Cooper, 2014).

Your organisation should have a formal safety recruitment process that describes the checks on mentors you will do. This can be part of your organisation's child protection policy. This will ensure that checking is done consistently, without exceptions.

When developing this policy, you should be clear about whether your organisation is required to do VCA safety checks; is doing the same checks on a voluntary basis; or is doing a different set of checks based on a robust evaluation of the risk profile of the role being checked for. Different checks may be required for different roles, and you may wish to do additional checks beyond the VCA standard (some of which are described below).

At the outset of safety checking, it is important to outline the entire process to potential mentors and provide an indication of how long the process is likely to take so that expectations are clear and realistic. It is also important to outline any exclusion criteria and communicate these early in the process.

The safety checking process can include:

- a written application
- face to face interview(s)*
- police vetting*
- referee checks*
- proof of identity*
- checking at least a 5 year chronological work history*
- confirmation of professional memberships or licences*
- an assessment of risk*
- other checks as desired (e.g., credit checks, qualification checks).

* denotes a mandatory requirement for a check that meets the VCA standard.

⁶From 1 July 2015, the VCA introduces a restriction on people with certain criminal convictions from working as core children's workers. The restrictions apply to people with convictions involving children and/or violent behaviour, including child abuse and sexual offending. There is an exemption process that can be followed. The specified offences subject to the Workforce Restriction are listed in Schedule 2 of the VCA.

Every interaction during the process is an opportunity to screen potential mentors and it is important to act on any concerns that come up, no matter how late they arise in the process.

Written application

In addition to gathering information relevant to the specific mentor criteria set down by the programme, the written application provides important information to programme staff for creating effective mentor-mentee matches. Research shows programmes that match mentors and mentees based upon shared interests achieve greater positive outcomes for the young people (DuBois, Portillo, Rhodes, Silverthorn & Valentine, 2011), therefore gathering information about potential mentors' hobbies, skills, and interests is key (see Section 5.4).

In summary, the application form should allow space for applicants to provide:

- Personal details: name, (including any previous names), current address, phone, email; gender; date of birth; ethnicity; languages spoken; current job and workplace or place of study.
- Hobbies; interests; skills; experience; educational background; and membership of clubs and groups.
- Reasons for wishing to mentor a young person, including any previous experience volunteering or mentoring, or working with children and young people.
- Information to enable background checks (refer proof of identity page 42).
- Names and contact details of personal and professional references (refer referee checks page 41).
- Consent to contact people and organisations for information about them and to consult any agency or individual regarding the person's suitability to mentor.
- Consent to undertake a criminal history check or police vet (refer Police Vetting page 41).
- A declaration of whether or not they have been convicted of a criminal offence, which is not eligible to be concealed under the Criminal Records (Clean Slate) Act 2004.
- Any other disclosures that could be relevant to child safety.
- Agreement to commit to the duration, frequency and total hours of mentoring relationship as specified by the mentoring programme.

Face-to-face interview(s)

Face-to-face 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. As described in a recent literature review, "Mentors need to be caring and have a positive, non-judgmental 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" (Scrine, Reibel & Walker, 2012).

Interviews should focus on whether prospective mentors have the capability to establish and maintain appropriate relationships with children and young people. Programme staff should look for evidence of understanding of the needs and capabilities of young people, appropriate attitudes and behaviours, professionalism and an understanding of boundaries, and a willingness to be open and transparent as part of the mentoring relationship.⁷

At a practical level, interviews can also identify logistical issues, 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 them being able to carry out a mentoring role reliably for the duration of the relationship.

Questions should be designed to help the programme to assess the applicant's safety and suitability to mentor a young person:

- motivation to become a mentor
- willingness to commit to meeting the mentee regularly for the agreed length of the programme match
- willingness to commit to programme requirements, including initial and ongoing training, reporting and feedback sessions.

Where possible, programmes should consider having more than one person involved in the interview process to provide alternative perspectives on potential mentors. In particular, this will help ensure:

- you have someone to record, verify and discuss responses with,
- your values and biases don't sway the decision, and
- your impartiality, if you know the applicant already.

Referee checks

A minimum of two referees should be contacted as part of the safety checking process. Referees should have a close knowledge of the person and have known them for at least a year. Referee checks should be completed by staff trained to undertake these. Information provided in the application and the interview should be cross-checked with referees for accuracy, and consultation on the individual's safety and suitability for the role of mentoring. A record of referee checks should be maintained.⁸

Police vetting

While 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.

While mentors of children and young people may not be required under the VCA to undertake police vetting if they are

⁷The Safer Recruitment Safer Children guide has sample interview questions to help elicit the mentors' attitudes and experiences with children, pg 23-26.

⁸Safer Recruitment, Safer Children contains important information about referee checks including sample questions and maintaining the rights and interests of the applicant – e.g., how to deal with references provided in confidence, the circumstances where adverse comments should be shared etc. These are important issues that should be addressed explicitly, as they can be a source of problems for providers.

in a volunteer role, and/or are not paid/funded by a government agency, this Guide recommends that mentoring organisations use the comprehensive police vetting checks for all prospective mentors where practicable.

In order to undertake police vetting checks, your organisation will need to be approved to use the vetting service. Police vetting also requires the consent of the person being checked.

Some criminal conviction information will not be available through checks as it may be subject to the Criminal Records (Clean Slate) Act 2004, which may allow for less serious convictions to be concealed after seven years of the person remaining free of further convictions. There are exceptions to a person's eligibility to have this information concealed but in most mentoring instances these exemptions would not be applicable.⁹

At 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. Individuals can be required to disclose any convictions or matters involving the police in the interim. Guidance on safety checking for people who have lived overseas for one or more years in the past ten years is also available.¹⁰

All information relating to the vetting and checking of the individual should be fully documented.

The results of police vets must be carefully considered in terms of the following:

- Nature of the offence and relevance to the role.
- Length of time since the crime was committed.
- Age and maturity now, as compared to when the crime was committed.
- Seriousness of the crime e.g. length of sentence, use of a weapon.
- Circumstances at the time of violent behavior.
- Pattern of crime, e.g. a short spate may indicate a "phase" but a regular pattern may indicate continuing inappropriate behaviour.
- Proximity of the person undergoing vetting to the vulnerable person(s). For example, are they likely to have unsupervised access to vulnerable people?
- Any explanation the person makes when discussing the information with them.¹¹

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

⁹Children's worker safety checking under the Vulnerable Children Act 2014, pg 28.

¹⁰Children's worker safety checking under the Vulnerable Children Act 2014 RC v 1.00 May 2015, www.childrensactionplan.govt.nz.

¹¹New Zealand Police, <http://www.police.govt.nz/information-organisations-receiving-police-vetting-services>.

provider. These red flags indicate that the individual's application to mentor should be declined.

Proof of identity

In order to confirm a person's identity, the VCA requires two forms of identity documentation, one of which is photographic (e.g., passport and Community Services Card, or birth certificate and driver's licence). It is also good practice to obtain a person's proof of address. This may be an original utility bill or a letter from a bank. This Guide recommends following the VCA identity confirmation process, even if it is not required, as it is a robust standard.

Use of evidence-based screening instruments

Some programmes may decide to incorporate assessment screening instruments that measure the characteristics of potential mentors' personalities and motivations. When considering utilising these types of tools, programmes should not only consider the cost-benefit analysis, but also keep in mind the validity of the tool is limited by the expertise of the person using it. In other words, many screening tools only achieve high validity when delivered by a suitably qualified person.

Additional checks that programmes may consider

Driving record check: if the mentor is likely to transport the young person, then driving history and possibly motor vehicle records should be checked.

Home assessment check: if the young person is likely to visit the mentor's home, then the screening process should incorporate a home visit, to assess the safety of that person's living arrangements. This may include interviewing and completing a police vetting check on other adults living in the home.

The VCA also requires some further checks (e.g. work history checks and checks of professional licences).¹²

Evaluating prospective mentors and making a decision

It is helpful to keep in mind that the safety checking and selection process is not a simple checklist but more akin to a risk assessment process, which can aid in evaluating the suitability of potential mentors. When making a final decision on whether to accept or decline a prospective mentor, it may be important to consider individual contexts. For example, someone may not be suitable to work one-to-one with children due to past convictions but may be able to work in a supervised group setting.

It is always good to keep in mind that traditionally qualified/skilled people may not necessarily be the best mentors. People with rich life experiences, both positive and negative, who have developed coping and problem solving skills can bring a lot to a mentoring relationship.

Safety checking records, including decisions made in response to the information gathered in the safety checking process, should be kept on file.

If you decide to decline a prospective mentor's application, then they should be given the opportunity to respond to any concerns raised by third parties about their suitability, if applicable.

5.2.3 Mentee selection criteria

While mentoring can be a valuable social intervention and an opportunity for young people to develop in positive ways, not all young people will benefit from, or be suitable for, particular mentoring relationships or programmes. Hence, it is important for your programme to establish clear selection criteria to determine whether to accept or reject a young person.

5.2.4 Mentee screening process

There are several considerations to be made before a potential mentee is accepted into a mentoring programme. Programmes should collect relevant information for ascertaining whether the programme meets the youth's needs, and whether the young person is a suitable fit for the programme. This will often involve requesting information held by other organisations in order to develop a profile of the young person. You may therefore need to enter into formal agreements with these agencies on how information is to be used and disclosed in accordance with the Privacy Act 1993.

It may be helpful for programme staff to be knowledgeable on a broad range of other programmes and services offered in the community, in order to refer potential mentees who are unsuitable for your programme, elsewhere.

It is important to outline the mentee screening process to the young people and their parents/caregivers so they know what to expect.

The mentor screening process should include:

- an application,
- formal permission from parents/caregivers for their child to participate in the programme, and
- assent from the prospective mentee.¹³

Application (written/verbal)

At a practical level, application forms gather contact information in case of an emergency. More importantly, applications should be designed to provide information for creating effective mentor-mentee matches. For younger mentees, programmes may find it easier to gather this information through an interview with the young person and their parent/caregiver.

As part of the application process, programme staff should find out what other services and support, both formal and informal, prospective mentees have had previously, or are currently receiving. This will help to ensure the mentoring relationship builds on these prior services and experiences and avoids duplication and overlap. Prior services may include previous mentoring experience, so it will be important to ask prospective mentees about this.

¹²For more information see www.childrensactionplan.govt.nz, or the guidance documents referred to throughout this section.

¹³In New Zealand young people under 16 will require parental consent and young person assent. Young people 16 and over can consent without parental permission.

Formal permission (written consent) of parents/caregivers

There are a number of practices programmes should consider adopting, to ensure the mentee and their parents/caregivers are fully informed about the programme (including its duration) and are satisfied that the programme is suitable for their child (refer section 5.3).

These include:

- Parents/caregivers give formal permission for their child/young person to participate.
- Parents/caregivers agree in writing to support their young person's commitment to the mentoring relationship and to the terms of the programme. In particular, the duration of the relationship and the frequency/amount of hours they are expected to meet with their mentor.

Assent from mentees

In addition, programmes may consider getting written assent from mentees agreeing to participate in the programme. This practice is particularly recommended in cases where mentees are referred by a third party and their participation is not of their own choosing. Young people who have the opportunity to express some willingness or consider what their participation will mean are more likely to have a successful match than those who are involved against their will (MENTOR, 2015).

VOICES FROM THE FIELD

**Confidentiality and disclosure:
Pillars Children of Prisoners
Mentoring Programme, Christchurch**

The mentor, when collecting her 6-year-old girl from her home, noticed she was very quiet and sullen. As she had built up trust with the young girl she was able to discover that she had been physically abused and her life put in danger by her siblings. The mentor was gravely concerned about her welfare and contacted the Mentoring Coordinator who made a notification to Child Youth & Family with her caregiver being involved in the process.

A Child Youth & Family plan was put in place to ensure the safety and well-being of the young girl, and Pillars was able to put extra resources and support around the whole family. The young girl is now safely at home free from the physical abuse she had suffered.

Checklist 4. Selection and Safety Checking

CHECK	Effective safety checking practices are primarily aimed at ensuring the safety of all participants, particularly for the young people involved in a programme. These practices are designed to increase the likelihood that all participants are suitable and committed to making the mentoring relationship a positive experience
Mentor selection and safety checking guidelines:	
Establish clear selection criteria to determine whether to accept or reject potential mentors into your programme.	
Design a written application to help assess the safety and suitability of potential mentors for the mentoring role.	
Complete a face-to-face interview that includes a focus on disclosure of previous involvement with children and young people and assesses the appropriateness of the applicant for the role in terms of character and skills.	
Complete full police vetting checks including information subject to the Criminal Records (Clean Slate) Act 2004.	
Complete two referee checks with reputable individuals (ideally both personal and professional references) who have had close knowledge of the applicant for at least one year.	
Complete a proof of identity check sighting official and photographic proof of identity and proof of current address.	
Obtain written agreement from mentors to commit to the mentoring relationship and the terms of the programme, including the duration of the relationship and the frequency/amount of hours they are expected to meet with their mentee.	
Mentee selection and screening guidelines:	
Establish clear criteria to determine whether to accept or reject a young person into your programme.	
Ask parents/caregivers to complete an application and/or referral form .	
Obtain written consent from parents/caregivers giving formal permission for their child/young person to participate in the programme; committing to the mentoring relationship; and to the terms of the programme, particularly, the duration of the relationship and the frequency/amount of hours they are expected to meet with their mentor.	
Ask mentees to complete an application (written or verbally) and give written assent agreeing to participate in the programme. This practice is particularly recommended in cases where mentees are referred by a third party and their participation is not of their own choosing.	