



MENTORING FACT SHEET

U.S. Department of Education ■ Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools

Mentoring Resource Center

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Overcoming Relationship Pitfalls

Congratulations on your decision to become a mentor to a young person who needs your guidance and support! Mentoring is a rewarding and positive experience for all involved, but it is not without its challenges. A mentoring relationship is unlike many of the others in your life—it is formally created and has a purposefulness that your friendships and family relations may not. Because mentoring relationships are unique, you will need some perspective and some helpful tips as you move forward in your match.

Unlike many forms of volunteering—such as cleaning up a neighborhood or helping with an event—the impact of mentoring is not seen immediately. As one prominent researcher put it, “mentoring may be more like the slow accumulation of pebbles that sets off an avalanche than the baseball bat that propels a ball from the stadium.”¹ Because mentoring relationships take time to gain momentum, it is critical that mentors have patience and the ability to work through any difficult stretches. Matches that last longer have a greater chance of achieving program outcomes, while those that cannot get past those initial bumps in the road have the potential to do harm to the youth.²

The Match Life Cycle

Mentors have an easier time getting through trouble spots in their mentoring relationships if they understand the basics of the typical match “life cycle.” All

¹ Darling, N. (2005). Mentoring adolescents. In D.L. DuBois and M.J. Karcher (Eds.) *Handbook of youth mentoring* (p. 182). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

² Rhodes, J. E. (2002). *Stand by me: The risks and rewards of mentoring today's youth*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

matches go through a similar set of ups and downs and you will have an easier time working with your mentee and getting appropriate support from staff if you know what to expect.

The development of any relationship between two people depends on a complex mix of factors, including age, balance of power, roles and responsibilities, frequency of interactions, and natural bonds or level of commitment involved. Relationships go through a series of stages as they develop and evolve, from the first moments of sharing a common interest to the satisfaction of a fully developed friendship.

Formal, one-to-one mentoring relationships also go through a series of stages. Each mentoring relationship begins, develops, changes, and evolves in unique ways. However, understanding the primary stages of mentoring relationships can help mentors nurture their new friendships and deal more effectively with challenges that may come up along the way. In this discussion we identify four stages of mentoring relationships: *beginning*, *building*, *testing*, and *transition*. This fact sheet focuses on the common pitfalls encountered during the first three

When challenges arise in the mentoring relationship, remember:

A mentor is . . .

- A responsible and caring friend
- A role model
- A patient listener
- An advocate
- A nurturer of possibilities

A mentor is not . . .

- A counselor or social worker
- A parent or guardian
- A disciplinarian
- A party planner or money machine
- A savior

stages of the relationship. *Transition*, a topic to be addressed in a subsequent fact sheet, mostly refers to what happens as the mentoring relationship ends, something you are obviously trying to avoid as the relationship gets started.

Phase 1: Beginning

Every mentoring relationship has a beginning phase—including that first meeting—that is often the source of much anticipation and sometimes a little anxiety. When you ask a mentor or mentee what makes him (or her) most nervous about this phase, you'll usually hear the same thing: "I hope he likes me."

What it feels like:

The beginning of any relationship is often awkward, and mentoring relationships are no exception. Your first few months will focus on getting to know each other, exploring similar interests, discussing expectations, and starting to form norms and bonds that will shape the rest of your first year together. It is during this phase that mentors should work with their mentees to set parameters for the match, such as when to meet and for how long, what kinds of activities will take place, and how to contact each other.

Common pitfalls:

Mentors can **get off on the wrong foot** early on by making all the decisions rather than sharing that job with their mentee. If you start off by calling all the shots, your mentee is more likely to close up and be reluctant to share her thoughts. A good friendship is a partnership, and although it may feel harder to share decisionmaking with your mentee, it's more likely to build a strong relationship down the road. Spending time at your first few meetings brainstorming a few activities to do in the future can help break the ice and make the mentee realize you value his opinions. If you can't agree on activities, try taking turns picking within the guidelines established by your program.

Missed meetings are one of the most common pitfalls for new relationships. Every missed meet-

ing means less time you have to build your friendship. Many young people have not yet developed strong organizational skills, so you may need to help them learn how to keep track of your meetings. Parents and guardians can also negatively affect scheduled meetings, especially if they have not bought into the program or do not understand the significance of consistent meetings. If possible, call your mentee the evening before a meeting, have him write down the next meeting in a school notebook or planner, and establish a routine for your meetings so they are easier to remember. Make sure the mentee knows how to reach you if he must break a date, either by calling you directly or by contacting the mentoring program.

Mentors should also be sure never to miss a meeting without notifying the mentee in advance. Because many of the youth who come to mentoring programs have a history of rocky relationships with adults, it is crucial that they do not get "stood up" by their mentor. If you are unable to meet, contact your mentee or the program immediately and reschedule the meeting time. Everyone knows things come up from time to time, but mentoring research tells us that consistency of meetings is a key to youth success.³

Another common issue mentors report early in the match is that **the mentee will not "open up"** or talks very little. This can be frustrating for mentors, who may see their mentee's reserve as a sign of boredom, ambivalence, or even dislike for the mentor. In fact, it's much more likely that the mentee is simply not yet comfortable with the mentor and is guarded about expressing thoughts or sharing personal information during conversations. Many youth have good reason not to trust every new adult who enters their life, and any attempt to push them to open up can have the opposite effect.

A few conversation techniques may help break the silence and help engage your mentee in productive, stress-free conversations. Start by finding an activity that you both enjoy doing. If you are in a

³ Sipe, C.L. (1996). *Mentoring: A synthesis of P/PV's research: 1988–1995*. Philadelphia, PA: Public/Private Ventures.

school-based setting, choose an activity that will stimulate discussion, such as a board game or a collaborative art project, or see if you can use the school gym to shoot baskets and use the time to talk about your favorite sports heroes. You will soon begin to develop common conversation threads that can be revived for future match meetings. Try to frame your questions so that your mentee will have to provide more than a yes or no answer. For example: “Do you like doing art?” is likely to get a yes or no response. In contrast, “I’m not so good at drawing, but I like using clay. What kinds of artwork do you like doing?” will elicit a more in-depth answer. Beginning questions with phrases such as what, who, when, where, and why is a tried and true way to encourage conversation. Be patient—your mentee may never have had an adult in his life who wants to sit and talk or who truly cares about what he has to say.

Program staff often report that a common early pitfall occurs when **mentors expect too much too soon in a mentoring relationship**. Mentors volunteer to work with youth because they have a desire to see positive change in that young person; however, research tells us that positive change is most likely to occur when a youth feels supported by a friend rather than pushed to change a behavior. Instead of having high expectations for your ability to change your mentee, take the time to find out who he is. Your mentee needs to know that you appreciate him for who he is, not who you think he should be. By initially keeping things light in your interactions with your mentee, you will show him that you are there to support him unconditionally and you will discover the many strengths he already has.

Phase 2: Building

Now that you have been matched with your mentee for a couple of months, the relationship is starting to build momentum and trust. The awkwardness of the first few months has passed and the friendship is really starting to develop. This phase of the relationship involves deepening your friendship and the experiences you are sharing.

What it feels like:

At this stage you and your mentee are learning more about each other as you both open up, and you are starting to understand what really makes your mentee “tick.” You may both feel more comfortable disclosing the type of information that builds trust and understanding among friends. Now that you have been meeting for a while you have established routines and rituals for your match, and you may have found shared interests that you really enjoy doing together. As a mentor, you may feel like you are ready to help your mentee set some goals and focus your activities on helping her achieve them.

Common pitfalls:

During this phase **your mentee may start to become dependent** on your support and caring. You may be getting more calls at home or work, requests for additional meeting times, or invitations to attend unapproved activities, such as a sister’s birthday party. While it’s great that your mentee trusts you and seeks your advice and attention, you need to set or reinforce the boundaries that were laid out in the beginning of the match to avoid hurt feelings on her part and resentment or discomfort on your own. When setting boundaries with your mentee be honest with how the behavior affects you. Use “I” statements and your own feelings as the basis for the discussion. “I care about you and am happy you feel comfortable calling me when you want to talk. But I feel overwhelmed when you call me every day at work. It would be better for me if you can call me at home in evening or on week-ends.” Give your mentee a chance to express her feelings, too, and use these conversations to remind her about when and how you can be part of her life, and to find out if there are any specific things that are concerning her.

Once your mentee does open up to you, you may hear a lot about the problems and issues she faces in her life. It is not uncommon for mentors to feel overwhelmed by the problems or circumstances their mentee is facing. **You may feel that you have to try to “fix” your mentee’s life**, that you need to be a counselor or social worker in order to

really make a difference. In these situations, remember the information and advice you received in your mentor training about your role as a mentor. As a friend and champion of your mentee, you can do a lot to make your mentee feel better about herself and her situation. But many of the youth in the program are there because they come from tough situations, and your mentoring program staff can help locate professional help for mentees and families facing serious difficulties. If your mentee is unloading her problems on you on a regular basis, talk to your program staff about getting some extra help. And always alert program staff immediately if you believe your mentee is in danger.

Mentors may also start to feel underappreciated by their mentee at this stage of the relationship. Often mentors feel that they are giving up a lot of their time and energy and are never thanked for their efforts. Don't expect to be thanked for your dedication by your mentee. Most mentees don't have the maturity to thank their mentors nor do they even realize until years later the impact their mentor had on them. Sometimes it is a shyness issue; she may talk highly of you with program staff or other youth but feel embarrassed to express her feelings directly. Your mentee may not tell you, but she appreciates you more than either of you know. Try modeling courteous behavior when you are with her and tell her how much you appreciate her.

During this phase you may also encounter some **boundary issues with parents**, especially in programs that are community-based and contact with other family members is more frequent. Sometimes the mentee's family may begin asking for favors or assistance, such as asking you to take a younger sibling with you on an outing. You may get invited to family gatherings, and your mentee's parent may want to spend hours talking to you about her child's life. You may find it hard to refuse such requests, but it is important for mentors to set clear boundaries with parents just as they do with their mentee. As with other boundary issues, ask your match support staff for help, and encourage parents to contact the program for assistance if they need some additional resources for themselves or other children in the family.

Phase 3: Testing

Once the mentoring relationship is off the ground, it is normal for your mentee to start testing boundaries of the relationship. Though you've spent time affirming that you appreciate and enjoy your mentee, he may still want to see how far your commitment really goes. Because mentees often come from situations in which adults can't always be relied on, trusting another adult is difficult for them, and they may even try to sabotage the relationship by "acting out."

What it feels like:

This can be a confusing time for mentors, especially if the testing occurs after a period of trust-building and increasing rapport with the mentee. When your "perfect" mentee starts missing appointments, shows resentment, tries to get away with things, or has a hostile or sullen attitude, it's easy to take their behavior personally. You may feel that your mentee is avoiding you or does not like you anymore.

Common pitfalls:

It's natural for mentors to respond to this testing phase by feeling **less interested in continuing the relationship**. Your mentee is making you feel less competent and you may begin to doubt your ability to make a difference in your mentee's life. This is a time when some matches fail, so it's important to recognize the testing behavior for what it is: a signal that your mentee wants you to "prove" that you are committed to the relationship.

Rather than taking your mentee's behavior personally, remember that it has nothing to do with you, but rather is a manifestation of his fear of being rejected one more time by one more adult. Stick by your mentee through this tough time and continue to reaffirm your commitment to the relationship. Reinforce the limits and boundaries you've established, if needed, but be sure to find new and ongoing ways to show your mentee that you think they are capable. Sometimes, testing can be a signal of other issues that are going on in your mentee's life, so be sure to keep the communication doors open.

Quick Tips for Getting the Help You Need

Attend ongoing training offered by the program and offer ideas for additional training

Take advantage of the ideas, suggestions, and support of other mentors in the program

Actively participate during check-in phone calls and/or mentor support groups

Honestly report how your match is going during check-in calls and on match logs

Don't be afraid to contact program staff for any reason at any time

Ask program staff to make contact with parents or guardians if needed

Educate yourself about issues that face your mentee

Remember that asking for help from program staff is a sign that you care about your mentee and are finding the best ways to make your relationship successful

Additional Reading and Resources

Handbook for Mentors, by Sharyl Adams (Communities in Schools of Chesterfield, 1998).*

"Learn To Mentor" Online Training, by The National Mentoring Partnership (MENTOR). (A resource page for new mentors, including an online tutorial and a list of activity links. Available online at: <http://www.mentoring.org/mentors/support/index.php>).

Mentoring Answer Book, by Cyndi Klapperich (McHenry, IL: Big Brothers Big Sisters of McHenry County, 2002).*

Mentoring for Meaningful Results: Asset-Building Tips, Tools, and Activities for Youth and Adults, by K. Probst (Minneapolis, MN: Search Institute, 2006).*

Stand by Me: The Risks and Rewards of Mentoring Today's Youth, by J.E. Rhodes (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002).*

Training Guide for Mentors, by Jay Smink (National Dropout Prevention Center, 1999).*

* Available to your program from the Mentoring Resource Center Lending Library at http://www.edmentoring.org/lending_library.html

Seek Out the Help When Needed

Any time that your mentee exhibits a period of challenging behavior, seek help from your program staff to get guidance and support. They may be aware of other issues in the mentee's life that could be contributing to the problem, and they can access school or community resources to help. Talking with other mentors about your experiences can also be helpful—it's likely they have experienced similar issues and may have some helpful tips. Get the help and support you need to get through the rough spots and keep working toward your mentee's goals.

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