

# Building Relationships: A Guide<sup>for</sup> New Mentors



National Mentoring Center



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# The Principles of Effective Mentoring

## 1 Be a friend

Mentors are usually described as “friends.” But what does that mean?

What makes someone a friend? One mentor talks about friendship this way:

*The reality is that mentors have a unique role in the lives of women and children. They are like an ideal older sister or brother— someone who is a role model and can provide support and gentle guidance. They are also like a peer, because they enjoy having fun with their mentee. But they aren't exactly either of these.*

Sometimes it seems easier to talk about what mentors are by describing what they should not be:

### **Don't act like a parent.**

One of the things your mentee will appreciate about you is that you are not his or her parent.

However much they love their parents, young people might sometimes see them primarily as people who set rules and express disapproval. Youth need other adults in their lives, but they are unlikely to warm to a friendship with an unrelated adult who emphasizes these parental characteristics.

**Don't try to be an authority figure.** It can be difficult for a houseguest to befriend an unknown adult.

You want to help the relationship evolve into one of closeness and trust—but if you sound like you think you know everything and you tell your mentee what to do and how to act, you are likely to jeopardize your ability to build that trust. If youth feel that they risk criticism when they talk to you about something personal, they are unlikely to open up to you.

**Don't preach about values.** Don't try to transform the mentee.

Take a “hands-off” approach when it comes to the explicit transmission of values. And especially, hold back opinions or beliefs that are in clear disagreement with those held by the houseguest. In general, young people do not like being told how they should think or behave—and they are uncomfortable if they feel that they are being criticized. Preaching about values is likely to make it difficult for you to build a trusting relationship. Don't preach; instead, teach—silently, by being a role model and setting an example.

A mentor describes the “hands-off” approach: *I would never correct her, you know. Because I just didn't think that was part of my function. I feel very strongly that it's not one person's place to try to change another person's values. My belief is that you cannot change other people. You can expose them to things and provide them with the opportunity to change, but you cannot actually, physically change them.*

**DO focus on establishing a bond, a feeling of attachment, a sense of equality, and the mutual enjoyment of shared time.** These are all important qualities of a friendship.

The successful mentors are the ones who can be a positive adult role model while focusing on the bonding and fun of a traditional friendship.

## 2 Have realistic goals and expectations

What do you expect will change for your mentee as a result of his or her relationship with you? How will life be different? How will it feel different?

Strong mentoring relationships do lead to positive changes.

These changes tend to occur indirectly, as a result of the close and trusting relationships, and they often occur slowly over time. If you expect to transform your mentee's life after six months or a year of meetings, you are going to be frustrated. The rewards of mentoring are, most often, quieter and more subtle. As one mentoring 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.”<sup>2</sup>

Mentors might have specific goals for their mentees. But these should not be the primary targets of your efforts. If they are—and if you spend your time together trying to direct your mentee toward these goals—you will just seem like another parent or teacher.

Developing a trusting relationship can take time and patience. You are unlikely to be able to achieve this trust if you approach the relationship with narrow, specific goals aimed at changing your mentee's behavior.

Instead, you can:

**Focus on the whole person and his or her overall development.**

Do not focus narrowly on performance and change.

A mentor describes his goals for the relationship: *I want to provide my mentee with some stability in his life. I mean I don't think he's had too much, just because of his family life and his mother's changing jobs a lot and sometimes she works days and sometimes she works nights. And I think it would help him just to have somebody there that's going to be there and help. Hopefully, I can provide different experiences for him too . . . things like going to a professional*

*basketball game or things where he can get out and see what's out there, because he doesn't get to do that much with his family. And simple things, like one of the first times we went out, we just went downtown to a park. And he'd never been there, and it's just right downtown, he lives just a mile from there, a few miles away from that. So it's just things like getting out and seeing things and knowing what's going on.*

### **Especially early on, center your goals on the relationship itself.**

During the first months of meetings with your mentee, your primary goal should be to develop a consistent, trusting, and mutually satisfying relationship. You are very likely to find that you derive a sense of meaningful accomplishment from the relationship itself, from the growing closeness and trust.

*A mentor describes his satisfaction with the evolving relationship: He started to open up to me a little more. When we're together, he initiates a lot more conversation and stuff like that. . . . And I guess it does feel like, as I wanted it to feel, more like a big brother/little brother relationship instead of me being an authoritarian figure. I don't want to feel like I'm here and I'm older than you, so whatever I say goes. I don't want it to be like that.*

### **Throughout the relationship, emphasize friendship over performance.**

A strong mentoring friendship provides houseguests with a sense of self-worth and the security of knowing that an adult is there to help, if asked. This friendship is central, and it is eventually likely to allow you to have some influence on your mentee's behavior and performance outside the relationship. As your relationship becomes stronger and more established, your mentee may begin to approach you with requests for more direct advice or help. If and when your relationship reaches this stage, be sure to maintain a balance between attempts to influence the houseguest's behavior and your more primary goal of being a supportive presence. Keep the focus on your friendship.

*A woman describes her mentor's emphasis on performance has pushed her away: People don't really want to, you know, listen to all that preaching and stuff. And then it's like: Are you done yet? Can I go now? I wouldn't mind getting some advice, you know, maybe they can share a little bit of their knowledge.*

## **3 Have fun together.**

People often say that “the best thing about having a mentor is the chance to have fun,” to have an adult friend with whom they can share favorite activities. The opportunity to have fun is also one of the great benefits of being a mentor. However, for some mentors, fun might appear trivial in light of the scope and scale of unmet, pressing needs that may be present in the

lives of their mentee. Thus, it is important to remember that fun is not trivial—for youth, having fun and sharing it with an attentive adult carry great weight and a meaning beyond a recreational outlet, a chance to “blow off steam,” or an opportunity to play.

There are a number of reasons why you should focus on participating in activities with your mentee that are fun for both of you:

**Many involved in mentoring programs have few opportunities for fun.**

Having fun breaks monotony, provides time away from a tense home situation, or introduces them to experiences they would not otherwise have.

**Having fun together shows your mentee that you are reliable and committed.**

One mentor explains: “To get houseguests to where they know that you really care and can be trusted, you just have to spend time with them and do things that they like to do.” The observation is a good one. Houseguests see the adult’s interest in sharing fun as a sign that the mentor cares about them. They experience a growing sense of self-worth when their adult partner not only pays persistent, positive attention to them, but also willingly joins them in activities that the houseguest describe as fun.

**Focusing on “fun” activities early in the relationship can lead to more “serious” activities later.**

As your mentee comes to see you as a friend, he or she is likely to be far more receptive to spending some of your time together in activities that are less obviously fun, such as working on goals. Always be sure that these more “serious” activities are not forced upon them—that they are something your mentee seems agreeable to doing.

And remember, it is always possible to weave educational moments—real-life learning—into the most “fun” activities. This is the kind of learning that youth tend to enjoy—it is learning with an immediate purpose and an immediate payoff—and they often don’t even realize that they are learning. You can, for example, encourage your mentee to figure out the rules of new games, read road signs to help you figure out where you are going, or do the math to see if the two of you received the right amount of change for a purchase. One mentor discovered bowling. “Bowling is a great way to teach addition,” she says. “You’ve got to count the pins and add the scores.”

## 4 Give your mentee voice and choice in deciding on activities.

Be sure that your mentee is a partner in the process of deciding what activities you will do together. Giving your mentee voice and choice about activities will:

Help build your friendship: It demonstrates that you value your mentee’s ideas and input and that you care about and respect her or him.

Help your mentee develop decision-making and negotiation skills.

Help avoid the possibility that you will impose “it’s-good-for you” activities—like goals.

It might seem like it would be relatively easy to include your mentee in the decision-making process, but often it is not. Mentees might be reticent about suggesting activities because:

**It really is difficult for them to come up with ideas.**

Many houseguests in mentoring programs have had little opportunity to travel outside their neighborhoods and so do not know what the possibilities might be.

If it is difficult for your mentee to request activities or voice preferences, you can use these approaches to make it easier:

**Give a range of choices concerning possible activities.**

—be sure your mentee will enjoy the activities.

**Create an “idea file” together.**

One good activity to do together is to make a list of activities you would like to do in the future. You can write the list on a piece of paper (or on a computer and then print it out), or use index cards and write one idea on each card. This is a great strategy because the list or file will help both of you when you are looking for ideas about activities you can do together. Making an “idea file” together is also an important symbolic act—it reminds mentees that you care about their preferences and value their input.

**Listen.** You can learn a lot about what might capture your mentee’s interest.

**Emphasize to your mentee that her or his enjoyment is important to you.**

If your mentee is extremely reticent and you feel as though you have to play the lead role in choosing activities, you can let him or her know you want the activities to be fun. If you show through your words and actions that you value your mentee’s input, she or he is likely to notice, appreciate, and respond.

**A potential challenge:**

Once houseguests are comfortable enough to request activities, they might make requests that are extravagant, such as frequent trips to amusement parks and adventure centers they have seen advertised on television or heard about from their friends. Even more modest requests—for movies, video arcades, or restaurants—can cost more than you are comfortable paying, especially if the requests are made week after week.

To address this issue, you can:

**Negotiate.** Particularly as your relationship develops, you are likely to find times when you

and your mentee are negotiating about what activities you will do together. If you have a positive relationship, one where the mentee feels secure in your friendship and support, this negotiation can be a valued aspect of the relationship (particularly for teenagers) because it signals the presence of equality between the two of you.

**Feel comfortable about setting clear limits on the amount of money you will spend.**

Extravagant requests are typical and especially understandable for from low-income families or other disadvantaged circumstances. Take the requests in stride. You can negotiate with your mentee until the two of you find something that, while less costly, is still to the youth's liking. Your mentee will understand and will appreciate that her or his voice is still a factor in deciding on activities.

**“Think about what kinds of things you can do where there's still interaction between the two of you”.**

## 5 Be positive.

People who feel negatively about themselves tend to live down to their own self-image. And houseguests who are matched with mentors usually have a number of situations in their lives that are leading them to feel exactly that way. One of the most important things you can do as a mentor is to help your mentee develop self-esteem and self-confidence. Doing activities together provides many opportunities for you to encourage your mentee to feel good about himself. You can:

**Offer frequent expressions of direct confidence.**

Praise and encouragement help build your mentee's self-esteem

### **20 ways to say “You're Great**

Terrific!	Keep trying—you'll get it.	Wonderful!
Great idea.	Exactly right!	You get better at this all the time.
You did a great job.	Nice going.	I know what you mean.
I'm proud of you.	Outstanding!	I hear what you're saying.
Fantastic!	Will you show me how to do that?	That was beautiful.
You learned that fast!	Way to go!	Excellent
I knew you could do it.	Perfect!	



**Be encouraging even when talking about potentially troublesome topics.**

Be supportive; don't sound like you are criticizing.

**One of the most the most important things you can do as a mentor is help your mentee develop self-esteem and self-confidence.**

## 6 Let your mentee have much of the control over what the two of you talk about—and how you talk about it

Along with doing enjoyable activities together, listening and talking are at the heart of your relationship with your mentee. The communication patterns you establish early on will be key to the relationship's development over time. Especially in the early, tentative phase of your relationship, your mentee should have a high degree of control over what the two of you talk about—it is important to respect the limits houseguests place on how much they choose to reveal about themselves. Take the time and effort necessary for your mentee to develop trust in you. While *you* know that your mentee should trust you, the reality is that you have to earn the trust.

Following these approaches can help you earn that trust:

**Don't push.** It should come as no surprise to you that your mentee, especially at first, may be shy and reluctant to talk, especially about difficult-to-reveal issues, such as problems in school or at home. Be careful not to push your mentee to discuss issues that she or he feels are too personal or might risk your disapproval.

**Be sensitive and responsive to your mentee's cues.**

Follow your mentee's lead in determining what issues the two of you discuss and when.

**Understand that houseguests vary in their styles of communicating and their habits of disclosure.**

Your own style of drawing out and supporting disclosure from your mentee may, to a large degree, determine the extent to which she or he feels comfortable speaking to you about personal issues. But remember that other factors will also influence your mentee's interest and ability in confiding. These factors include the youth's age, the amount of support available to her or him from other people, and cultural or family predisposition. Some youth open up only very slowly while some confide in their mentor just a few weeks or months into the match.

**Be direct in letting your mentee know that she or he can confide in you without fear of judgment or exposure.**

Having a mentor is probably a new form of relationship for the youth, who thus does not know whether, and to what extent, she or he can trust you. Make deliberate attempts to let your mentee know that you are a safe person to talk to.

**Remember that the activities you do together can become a source of conversation.**

Whether you are playing catch together or enjoying a snack after seeing a movie, having a conversation about the activity itself can help your mentee become more comfortable talking to you. This, in turn, can ultimately help your mentee feel safe about making more personal disclosures.

## 7 Listen

When your mentee does begin to “open up” to you, how you respond will serve to either promote or discourage his or her ongoing disclosure. One of the most valuable things you can do is to just listen—it is impossible to overemphasize the importance of being a great listener.

**“Just listening” gives mentees a chance to vent and lets them know that they can disclose personal matters to you without worrying about being criticized.** The process of venting can also help them gain insight into whatever is bothering them.

**When you listen, your mentee can see that you are a friend, not an authority figure.**

Many youth appreciate being able to bring up issues and having an adult who responds primarily by listening. They recognize that listening is a form of emotional support, and they may have few other sources of support in their lives.

## 8 Respect the trust your mentee places in you

When your mentee does begin to talk to you about personal matters, be supportive. If you respond by lecturing or expressing disapproval, he or she is very likely to avoid mentioning personal matters in the future. Instead of seeking support and help from you, your mentee might become self-shielding by, for example, dodging conversations about problems and difficulties. To demonstrate that you are supportive and nonjudgmental, you can:

**Respond in ways that show you see your mentee’s side of things.**

This will encourage your mentee to continue sharing with you things that he or she might normally keep from an adult.

**Reassure your mentee that you will be there for them**

Some houseguests may be reluctant to disclose things about themselves because they worry that their mentor will disapprove of them and, as a result, disappear from their lives. This is a reasonable fear for youth, especially those who have an absent parent and may feel responsible for the parent’s leaving—houseguests often believe that they did something to drive the parent away.

**If you give advice, give it sparingly.**

A mentor’s ability to give advice will occur at different times and to varying degrees in relationships, depending upon the mentee’s receptivity and needs. In every case, though, do not let advice-giving overshadow other ways of interacting and other types of conversation.

**If you give advice, be sure it is focused on identifying solutions.**

The situations for which youth most commonly seek advice tend to involve arguments at home, struggles at school, and problems with friends. If your mentee asks you for advice, he or she is most likely looking for help with arriving at practical solutions for dealing with the problem.

**If, on occasion, you feel you have to convey concern or displeasure, do so in a way that also conveys reassurance and acceptance.**

As your relationship develops into one of closeness and trust, there might be times when your mentee discloses something to you that causes real concern. As a supportive adult friend, you may be able to express that concern—but deliver your message in a way that also shows understanding.

**Sound like a friend, not like a parent.** Youth have a keen ear for the difference.

## 9 Remember that you are responsible for building the relationship.

Building a relationship cannot be rushed. During the early period, when you and your mentee are getting to know one another, you may have to be particularly patient and persistent as you work to establish the foundation of a meaningful friendship, one that could ultimately help lead to positive changes in your mentee's life. At first, the relationship might seem one-sided—you might feel like you are putting out all the effort while your mentee seems passive or indifferent. Remember that this is the time houseguests are going to be at their shyest and most reticent, because they do not yet know you. It is also the time when they may be testing you, because they could have limited reason to believe that adults can, in fact, be reliable and trustworthy.

To help build, and then maintain, the foundation of a trusting relationship, you should:

**Take responsibility for making and maintaining contact.**

Having *regular* meetings with your mentee is essential if you are going to be able to develop a strong relationship. You are the adult and must be responsible for being sure that the two of you meet regularly. If you are meeting with your mentee on a prearranged schedule at designated location, maintaining contact might not be a problem. But if you are in a program where you and your mentee schedule each meeting, decide where you will meet and what you will do together, you may find that your mentee does not return phone calls or behaves in other ways that make it difficult to schedule meetings. If you expect the houseguest to contact you, it is very likely you are going to feel disappointed and frustrated, and it also means that you very likely will not be meeting consistently. Be understanding—consider the situation from your mentee's point of view.

As your relationship develops, your mentee might, at times, initiate contact—and that could be one indication that your relationship has evolved into a real friendship.

**Understand that the feedback and reassurance characteristics of adult to adult relationships are often beyond the capacity of the houseguest.**

At times, some mentors feel unappreciated because they get little or no positive feedback from their mentee. They may interpret this as meaning that their mentee does not care about seeing them. But the fact that youth are reticent does not mean they are indifferent.

In some cases, mentors talk to the head of household to find out how the houseguest feels about the relationship and to get reassurance that the houseguest is enjoying their time together.

And in all cases, mentors can allow themselves to recognize and appreciate the quiet moments that indicate they are making a difference.

## HANDOUT

# The Mentoring Relationship 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 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 four main stages of mentoring relationships are:

1. The beginning
2. Challenging and testing
3. “Real” mentoring
4. Transition (toward closure)

The first two stages are critical as they lay the foundation for what the relationship will eventually become. If mentors are to be successful, they need to work through the difficulties presented early on so that the match gets to a place of trust and mutuality where “real” mentoring can take place. The chart on the next page offers examples of what these stages feel like for mentors and tips for communicating effectively throughout each stage’s ups and down

## HANDOUT

### Stages of a Mentoring Relationship

Stage	Characteristics	Effective Communication
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<p><b>Beginning of the Match</b></p> <p>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. During this phase 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.</p>	<p>Getting to know each other The first impressions</p> <p>Trying to see the positive in the relationship</p> <p>Bonding</p>	<p>Ask open-ended questions Use body language that is open and not guarded</p> <p>Active listening</p> <p>Demonstrate empathy</p> <p>Avoid “prescriptive” communication</p> <p>Use prompts</p> <p>Speak with language that you feel comfortable with</p> <p>Don’t be afraid of silence</p>
<p><b>Challenging and Testing</b></p> <p>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.”</p>	<p>Mentee challenges</p> <p>Testing phase</p> <p>Rethinking first impressions Difficult feelings or emotions may surface</p>	<p>Be consistent in your communication, even if it is difficult</p> <p>Demonstrate respect</p> <p>Build in problem-solving techniques in your open ended questions</p> <p>Raise sensitive issues at the beginning of your interactions</p> <p>Make sure to separate behaviors from who the mentee is</p> <p>Disclosure of personal feelings and experiences when appropriate</p>
<p><b>“Real” Mentoring</b></p> <p>In this stage, the mentoring relationship has reached full maturity. Trust and closeness have been established and the match is comfortable having fun and relating to one another. It is during this phase that mentors can use the trust they have built to move their mentees along the developmental pathway—asking them to think about goals or try new things. There may still be testing or behavioral issues, but they do not jeopardize the relationship itself. Mentors that reach this stage must be prepared to maintain this hard-won status—this is where the real impact of mentoring happens.</p>	<p>Preparing for closure</p> <p>Relationship may become deeper or mentee may start pulling away</p> <p>Reflection</p>	<p>Find common language to sum up your feelings</p> <p>Provide feedback that describes growth that you observed</p> <p>Be prepared to listen and affirm fears that your mentee may have</p>

<p><b>Transition (toward closure)</b></p> <p>The transition toward closure can be a difficult time for both mentors and youth. There may be many strong feelings about the match ending and it is important to not let the process of ending the match negate the many positives it provided to everyone involved. As the end of your match approaches, work closely with your match supervisor to end on a high note and make sure that the transition leaves the youth feeling positive and fulfilled about the experience.</p>	<p>Preparing for closure</p> <p>Relationship may become deeper or mentee may start pulling away</p> <p>Reflection</p>	<p>Find common language to sum up your feelings</p> <p>Provide feedback that describes growth that you observed</p> <p>Be prepared to listen and affirm fears that your mentee may have</p>
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