

How to Be a Great Mentor



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MENTOR/National Mentoring Partner*

WHAT MAKES A GOOD MENTOR?

Many people feel that being a mentor requires special skills, but mentors are simply people who have the qualities of good role models.

Mentors listen.	They maintain eye contact and give mentees their full attention.
Mentors guide.	Mentors are there to help their mentees find life direction, never to push them.
Mentors are practical.	They give insights about keeping on task and setting goals and priorities.
Mentors educate.	Mentors educate about life and their own careers.
Mentors provide insight.	Mentors use their personal experience to help their mentees avoid mistakes and learn from good decisions.
Mentors are accessible.	Mentors are available as a resource and a sounding board.
Mentors criticize constructively.	When necessary, mentors point out areas that need improvement, always focusing on the mentee's behavior, never his/her character.
Mentors are supportive.	No matter how painful the mentee's experience, mentors continue to encourage them to learn and improve.
Mentors are specific.	Mentors give specific advice on what was done well or could be corrected, what was achieved and the benefits of various actions.
Mentors care.	Mentors care about their mentees' progress in school and career planning, as well as their personal development.
Mentors succeed.	Mentors not only are successful themselves, but they also foster success in others.
Mentors are admirable.	Mentors are usually well respected in their organizations and in the community.

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QUALITIES OF SUCCESSFUL MENTORS

- **Personal commitment to be involved with another person for an extended time — generally, one year at minimum.** Mentors have a genuine desire to be part of other people's lives, to help them with tough decisions and to see them become the best they can be. They have to be invested in the mentoring relationship over the long haul to be there long enough to make a difference.
- **Respect for individuals and for their abilities and their right to make their own choices in life.** Mentors should not approach the mentee with the attitude that their own ways are better or that participants need to be rescued. Mentors who convey a sense of respect and equal dignity in the relationship win the trust of their mentees and the privilege of being advisors to them.
- **Ability to listen and to accept different points of view.** Most people can find someone who will give advice or express opinions. It's much harder to find someone who will suspend his or her own judgment and really listen. Mentors often help simply by listening, asking thoughtful questions and giving mentees an opportunity to explore their own thoughts with a minimum of interference. When people feel accepted, they are more likely to ask for and respond to good ideas.
- **Ability to empathize with another person's struggles.** Effective mentors can feel *with* people without feeling pity *for* them. Even without having had the same life experiences, they can empathize with their mentee's feelings and personal problems.
- **Ability to see solutions and opportunities as well as barriers.** Effective mentors balance a realistic respect for the real and serious problems faced by their mentees with optimism about finding equally realistic solutions. They are able to make sense of a seeming jumble of issues and point out sensible alternatives.
- **Flexibility and openness.** Effective mentors recognize that relationships take time to develop and that communication is a two-way street. They are willing to take time to get to know their mentees, to learn new things that are important to their mentees (music, styles, philosophies, etc.), and even to be changed by their relationship.

BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS: Helping You Get Started

The beginning of any new relationship can be awkward. We don't know what to expect, although we certainly have expectations or a set of preconceived notions. We have ideas about the other person, either from stereotypes or from things that we've heard about people with similar circumstances, or we have ideas from our own experiences about how relationships work.

As you are preparing to enter the mentor/mentee relationship, you will probably be both apprehensive and excited about the adventure to follow. Here are some things to keep in mind as you begin your journey.

1. **You will both be nervous.** You will each feel as though you are expected to perform in a particular way or to achieve a particular goal or set of goals. You are each likely to feel as though you are a title, mentor or mentee, rather than a person. You will also be wondering what the other person expects from you.
2. **You are both valuable to the relationship.** Although it is true that both participants will be working to help the mentee reach his or her goal, the mentee and the mentor are on equal footing within the relationship. Together, you have a much wider perspective and a greater set of resources with which to work than either of you had on your own.
3. **You do not yet trust each other.** Trust comes from a sense of comfort with another person, and comfort comes from repeated experience. Trust is developed over time, once we have a good idea of who the other person is, what he or she values, how he or she responds in particular situations and how he or she feels about us.
4. **Keep a positive outlook.** This relationship is new for both of you. There will be all kinds of new experiences that arise because you are in this new relationship. If you look for the positive aspects of situations as they occur, you will keep yourself and your partner moving forward.

GUIDELINES FOR MENTORS

It's not possible to anticipate every situation and the appropriate behavior to apply when one is mentoring. However, here are a few suggestions to use as general guidelines:

Do:

- Be positive, patient, dependable, honest and sincere.
- Be consistent, but flexible. Expect changes in plans.
- Encourage, praise and compliment – even the smallest of accomplishments.
- Use language that's easy to understand.
- Ask for opinions and participation in decision-making.
- Work with your mentee. Share your knowledge rather than giving advice.
- Be firm. Have your mentee assume responsibilities and hold him or her accountable.
- Help your mentee use mistakes as learning experiences.
- Help identify your mentee's talents, strengths and assets.
- Tell your mentee about yourself, especially what you remember from your high school years.
- Have activities planned in advance.
- Take the initiative. A mentee who fails to call or attend must be pursued and the coordinator notified of the situation so that issues can be resolved and sessions can begin again, if applicable.
- If you're going to miss a mentoring session, call the coordinator and leave a message for the mentee. Let your mentee know well in advance if you know you will miss a session.
- Be open to what your mentee can teach you or share with you.
- **Honor Your Commitment – This is extremely important! You'll hear this over and over again!**
- **HAVE FUN!**

Don't:

- Expect to have instant rapport with your mentee.
- Be lenient in order to be liked – it won't earn their respect, and they need consistency and structure.
- Lecture, moralize or preach.
- Tell them what to do (instead, you should suggest, invite, encourage).
- Share personal problems unless it is to explain your current disposition (e.g., tired or irritable).
- Make promises you can't keep.
- Be convinced that what mentees say is always what they mean.
- Pry into the young person's life. If a mentee pries into your affairs, it is okay to say that some things in your life are private just as they are in his or her life.
- Be afraid to admit that you do not know an answer or that you have made a mistake. Find the correct answer and learn together. It helps the mentee to see that you are learning too.
- Interpret lack of enthusiasm as a personal rejection or reaction to you.
- Be sarcastic or use excessive teasing.
- Refer to youths that reside in public housing as being from "the projects."
- Lend money.
- Violate confidences, with the single *exception of crisis intervention situations*, in which case you must contact the coordinator privately and immediately

WHAT WILL WE DO EACH WEEK?

Below is a partial list of some tips and strategies for your mentoring sessions. Check to see that they are age appropriate. Remember to ask youth what they would like to do. Plan together. Don't be too structured, though. Spontaneity is important! Add some good ideas of your own. Make a list of the ideas that you really liked and share them with other mentors. Good luck!

1. Start by telling your youth why you decided to become a mentor.
2. Engage in games such as chess, checkers, Monopoly and crossword puzzles.
3. Select books you like and read them together. Get to an exciting part and finish it next time you are together.
4. Start a book club.
5. Exchange favorite recipes. Put them in a book and use it as a neighborhood fundraiser for the program.
6. Research the history of music and learn to play a musical instrument together.
7. Create a scrapbook of memories that last the entire year.
8. Use a disposable camera to capture special moments.
9. Work on the computer. Create calendars, write poems and search the Web.
10. Create a design and carve a pumpkin on Halloween.
11. Help research and design an extra credit project.
12. Create a time capsule and bury it. Determine when it should be opened.
13. Create a holiday, get well, or greeting card for a special occasion.
14. Discuss safety precautions such as wearing helmets when riding bikes and fire safety in the home.
15. Write an original storybook together.
16. Discuss personal hygiene, health, exercise and healthy habits. Remember that we are what we eat! Manage a diet plan together.
17. Teach how to give a good handshake. Practice makes perfect!
18. Connect with the community. Research what after-school programs are offered in the community in which youth might engage.
19. Encourage your youth to try out for school activities such as the band, chorus, drama and sports.
20. Play sports. Shoot basketballs in a school or organization's gymnasium.
21. Plan for a sound financial future. Discuss opening savings and checking accounts and the concept of good credit and the meaning of credit cards. Invite a banker to speak with youth.
22. Plan for future careers. Conduct mock interviews for a job, read the want ads, discuss dress codes and fill out a sample job application.
23. Discuss opportunities for post-secondary education. Research two- and four-year colleges and technical schools and the meaning of financial aid. What does it take to get to college? What high school courses should be taken? It is never too early to begin.
24. Take a career interest inventory. Discuss entry-level positions.
25. Decide on a community service project together with mentors and youth and carry it out. Plant a garden in front of the local school, remove graffiti from school walls or collect food and deliver it to the homeless. Take credit for the project as part of your mentoring program. Ask the program what their needs are.
26. Start a pen pal project with a group of young people in another country.
27. Talk about friends — those that your youth has and those he or she would like to have.
28. Decorate T-shirts and wear your creations proudly.
29. Discuss what your youth wants to be when he or she grows up. Invite guest speakers in who represent the careers of choice.

30. Arrange to shadow corporate executives on Groundhog Job Shadow Day, a national event in February.
31. Have a game of basketball, football or volleyball with mentors playing against youth.
32. Help your youth to craft a personal mission statement.
33. Design and paint a mural on the wall of the school.
34. Act out a scene from a favorite book and make a production out of it. Invite the school to attend.
35. Discuss the positive activities youth can get involved in during the summer.
36. Walk outside on a nice day; sit under a tree and just talk.
37. Research and talk about famous people who use their abilities to get ahead.
38. Read the newspaper and discuss current events.
39. Share your life experiences.
40. Share your career experiences. How did you get to where you are today?
41. Remember your youth on his or her birthday with a card.
42. Share your school experiences when you were the same age as your mentee is now.
43. Share a proverb each time that you meet.
44. Build a model.
45. Swap photos of youth and mentors.
46. Bring a scrapbook or photo album from home and share photos of your family, travels and pets.
47. Share thoughts and feelings between meetings in a small journal.
48. Practice the answers to the questions for a driver's license.
49. Help your youth write a resume.
50. Discuss people you admire. Compare heroes and research your favorites.
51. Plan a leadership project with your youth and carry it out.
52. Tell your youth – if you could go back to high school, what would *you* do differently?
53. Complete a personality inventory to find out who your youth is.
54. Help your youth to design a unique and original calling or business card.
55. Ask your youth where they hope to be in five years and in 10 years.
56. Help your youth to get organized. Write out what your youth does every day and what he or she would like to change.
57. Practice how to get a point across.
58. Research volunteer opportunities and adopt a project. Giving back through community service is so important.
59. Discuss travel and dream vacations.
60. Discuss the pillars of character including pride, punctuality, honesty and responsibility.
61. Explore careers over the Internet.
62. Share your dreams.
63. Plan a random act of kindness.
64. Learn about how newspapers write the news and invite a reporter to a session.
65. Usher at the school play or musical concert.
66. Hold a spelling bee and crown the winner.
67. Try clay modeling.

GETTING TO KNOW YOU

Ask your mentor these questions and share your own answers too so that you can both get to know each other and find out what you have in common.

1. What do you /did you like most about school?
2. What do you /did you like least about school?
3. What class is/was most challenging for you?
4. What is/was your favorite class?
5. What do you enjoy doing during your leisure time?
6. If you could learn one new thing, what would you learn about?
7. Do you have any pets? What are their names?

What is your favorite:

- Food
- Place
- Sport
- Indoor activity

Who is your favorite:

- Friend
- Relative
- Movie Star
- Hero/Heroine

Complete this sentence:

- Happiness is...