

MENTORING FACT SHEET



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

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A Mentor's Guide to Youth Development

This is the last in a three-part series of fact sheets on incorporating youth development principles and practices into youth mentoring programs. To provide background to this discussion, you can read the first two parts of the series at: <http://www.edmentoring.org/pubs/factsheet13.pdf> and [/factsheet14.pdf](http://www.edmentoring.org/pubs/factsheet14.pdf).

What Is Youth Development?

Youth development is an approach to working with youth that believes they are best able to thrive when they are supported across all sectors of the community—by individuals, family, schools, youth agencies, faith organizations, community governance, business, and more. Youth development focuses on activities that nurture the youth's assets rather than on reducing particular risks or preventing specific problems. Its ultimate goal is to help youth become successful adults—not just problem free, but fully prepared to be responsible, contributing, and healthy adults.

Your mentoring relationship offers many opportunities to nurture your mentee's assets. In fact, youth development advocates know that positive relationships with caring adults are essential ingredients in helping youth develop their assets. (See sidebar.) As a mentor, you can encourage your mentee's strengths and abilities and provide opportunities for him or her to develop new assets. In turn, you will also learn and grow as a result of the relationship as you and your mentee share new experiences together.

Putting Youth Development Into Practice Through Mentoring

Youth development researchers have come up with five key qualities, or outcomes, that they believe are

What Are Developmental Assets?

The Developmental Assets Framework began with a simple question: "What is it that young people need to grow up healthy?" To answer that question, the Search Institute reviewed over 1,200 studies on resiliency, prevention, and adolescent development. They also conducted their own research, including surveying hundreds of thousands of young people during the past decade.

This research led the Search Institute to identify 40 developmental assets that help adolescents grow into healthy and stable adults. These include internal assets (such as motivation level, resistance skills, and personal power) and external assets (such as family support, school boundaries, and parent involvement). Since the Developmental Assets Framework was first released in 1990, it has been used by schools, youth-serving organizations, and local communities in planning policies, activities, and services to help young people thrive. The Search Institute has recently developed asset frameworks specifically for early and middle childhood.

For more information and a full list of the 40 developmental assets, visit the Search Institute at www.search-institute.org.

very important for youth to develop in order to become healthy and successful adults. These attributes are known as "The Five C's of Youth Development": Competence, Confidence, Connection, Character, and Compassion. Although these are very broad qualities,

there are many specific things mentors can do to help their mentee build assets in each of these key areas. Suggestions, tips, and activities you can use to help nurture these five attributes in your mentee are offered below.

1 **Competence:** *Positive view of one's skills and abilities, including social, academic, cognitive, personal, and vocational*

Having a foundation of *competence* helps young people navigate the world successfully, opening the door to educational and career opportunities. Youth who have this foundation take pride in their abilities, see the possibilities that lie ahead, and are motivated to take on new challenges and learn new skills.

What you can do to nurture competence:

Help your mentee recognize the strengths and abilities she already has. Your mentee may not hear a lot of positive feedback from parents and teachers. Chances are that she is struggling in one or more subjects in school and she may be at an age where teachers, parents or guardians, and even peers are more likely to be correcting her than pointing out her abilities. As an adult embarked on a new volunteer activity, you may also feel the need to remind yourself of your own strengths and skills.

You and your mentee can support each other by spending time each week talking about your strengths. Try self-identifying at least one positive skill, action, area of knowledge, or other success and then tell each other about it. Then turn the tables and identify a skill or ability you admire about your mentee and ask him to do the same for you. These don't have to be serious conversations, but are rather a way of getting used to praise and recognizing accomplishments.

Help your mentee build competencies that enrich his experiences in school, in social settings, and in the community. As a mentor in a school-based program, you will likely focus some of your time on helping your mentee do homework, study for tests, and build basic

skills. If you are newly matched, it's important that you first spend time just getting to know each other, finding your mutual interests and having fun together, rather than jumping into academics. Mentoring research shows that developing a strong *relationship* is the key to a successful mentoring experience. Through the positive relationship the mentee is motivated to improve skills and abilities.

As your relationship develops your mentee will no doubt seek your help with academic studies as well in as other areas, such as problem solving, finding community resources, or getting along with peers or family. Regardless of the topic, let your mentee take the lead in asking for help and follow his verbal and nonverbal cues to decide how you can be most helpful. Encourage your mentee to set personal goals for improvement that are really meaningful for him, rather than those his teachers or parents want him to do. Talk about future goals and how they might relate to the skills he is currently building. Don't be afraid to challenge your mentee to do well in whatever goal he sets, but make sure he is equally invested in the goal or you may meet with resistance.

Building non-academic competencies are equally important for healthy development, so look for ways to engage your mentee in learning of all kinds. Reading together, playing math games, playing a sport, learning a language, talking about current events or social issues are just a few ideas for activities that build skills. Be sure to let your mentee teach you new things, too. Not only will you learn something new but you will also show him you appreciate his abilities.

2 **Confidence:** *The internal sense of overall positive self-worth, identity, and belief in the future*

Having a strong sense of self-worth is a vital part of healthy development. Youth need constant reminders that they are valued and have great things to offer, that the skills they have are meaningful, and that they have the potential to make a difference in the world. Youth who are confident are able to set goals because they believe in their ability to achieve them.

What you can do to nurture *confidence*:

Encourage your mentee to dream about her future and to plan for it by setting personal goals. One of the most valuable motivators for young people is having goals for their future that they believe they can achieve. Your mentee may not have thought much about her future; perhaps she has not felt much control over her life and hasn't had much practice making decisions or earning recognition for her abilities or actions.

As you get to know your mentee, spend time each week playing "what if":

- What if you could be anything you want?
- What if you had a million dollars and you had to give it all away?
- What if you could live in another country, where would that be?
- What if you had a full scholarship to college, what would you study?

You can use the Internet, books, maps, or other tools to guide your conversations if your mentee needs some examples. Talk about the skills, abilities, and prerequisites that might be needed for some of the ideas you come up with. If your mentee becomes interested in a particular idea, try to find a local resource—a teacher or other community member—who has had experience in this area and can spend some time talking with you and your mentee.

Help your mentee turn daydreams into goals. Having the ability to identify and carry out personal goals is a valuable tool for lifelong success. You can introduce the concept of goal setting by talking about what your goals are for the time you spend together and coming up with some shared goals, such as learning a new skill together or always being on time for meetings. As you continue to learn about your mentee's interests, you help her begin to turn dreams into concrete goals, with interim goals that will help her see progress over time. Provide support and encouragement to help her reach those interim goals. Let your mentee be in the driver's seat when setting goals while you provide encouragement, guidance, and feedback on her prog-

ress. Ask your mentor coordinator for tips on goal setting, or access the online resources listed below.

Nurture your mentee's talents and strengths through praise and practice. Think about what makes you feel self-confident and valued. You have probably accomplished things that others have noticed and praised. Perhaps you have taken leadership roles at work or in the community, or maybe you have special skills and interests that allow you to express yourself and share your talents with others. As you grew up you may have been encouraged to complete school, continue your education, and think about career possibilities. You learned that your long-term goals could best be achieved by meeting shorter term goals along the way.

As you get to know your mentee's skills and interests, think of ways that these can be nurtured to increase self-confidence. Start with praise and reinforcement when you see him excel or take a positive action in something. Then find ways to get him to think beyond the immediate moment. For example, if your mentee is really good at drawing or painting, find out what opportunities there are in the school or community to use that talent. Ask him for help on a project of your own that requires an artistic mind. Or simply work on an art project together, letting your mentee take the lead in designing and carrying out the project. You might also look online at art schools and scholarships, or careers that require artistic talent. Whatever your mentee's special strengths are, find opportunities for him to shine, receive praise and recognition for a job well done, and be a leader.

3 Connection: *Positive bonds with people and institutions, including peers, family, school, and community, that provide a sense of membership, safety, and belonging*

Developing strong, positive connections with people and institutions is an important developmental task for young people. These bonds create a sense of membership and belonging that increases self-confidence, encourages community participation, and offers safe-

ty and support. Young people need many opportunities to develop positive relationships with adults and institutions, especially those in which the young person contributes to the relationship.

What you can do to nurture a sense of connection:

Develop a positive relationship with your mentee in which both of you are contributing and growing. The most important thing about mentoring is the actual *quality* of the relationship, rather than the activities you do, the goals you set, or the amount of homework that gets done during your time together. Qualities such as mutual trust, respect for each other's interests and values, and the ability to share thoughts and feelings with each other can help build the relationship over time. Once you have such a relationship, your mentee will be more likely to be open to your guidance and will value your opinions, advice, praise, and support.

A good relationship is a two-way street, in which both people contribute to making it work and both gain from the friendship. Here are some ways in which you can encourage your mentee to be an equal partner in the friendship:

- Be sure that your mentee is involved from the beginning in the process of deciding what activities you will do together. Give a range of choices if your mentee has trouble coming up with ideas or seems reluctant to offer opinions.
 - Talk about your likes and dislikes and then take turns pursuing each other's interests.
 - Let your mentee set some of the rules and expectations of the relationship with you. While your program will have certain rules and boundaries already established, you can work together on how you want to be with each other in such areas as language, familiarity, talking about personal issues, being on time, and so on. If you disagree, come up with compromises rather than laying down the law. If either one of you has "bottom lines," make those clear from the beginning.
- Find out what your mentee thinks about subjects that come up, and be willing to share your opinions, even if you disagree. You have a wonderful opportunity to hear opinions that may be very different from your own, and also to offer ideas that your mentee may never have considered before.
 - Show your appreciation for your mentee's skills, abilities, and qualities. As you encourage him to speak his mind and share his interests with you, let him know that you value his trust in you.

Help your mentee feel more connected to school and community. School-based mentoring research often cites "connectedness"—the sense of belonging to something and having a role in it—as being an important outcome for mentoring programs. Connectedness to school, for example, can result in lower rates of absenteeism, reductions in negative behaviors, and even improvements in academic performance, due in large part to improved relations with peers, school personnel, and family members.

You can help your mentee feel more connected to school and community and develop your relationship with him at the same time. Here are a few examples:

- Take part in school activities together, such as a science fair or clean-up event.
- Learn about your community online and through books or old newspapers. See who can come up with the most interesting facts about your town.
- Identify volunteer service opportunities that you can do together.
- Visit youth-friendly organizations to see what they are doing in your community and how your mentee might get involved.
- Take part in a neighborhood or citywide event.

The relationships your mentee develops with peers and adults in school and community settings are a vital piece of her sense of connectedness and belonging. These could be the teacher who offers extra encouragement, the staff person at a community-

based program who “is really cool,” or members of a club or sports team your mentee is involved in.

You can encourage these relationships by:

- Taking an interest in the people your mentee talks about who are important to her
- Encouraging her to participate in group activities at school or in the community
- Helping her connect with teachers or counselors about school-related issues
- Praising your mentee’s accomplishments and abilities to family members and teachers

4 Character: *Recognition of societal and cultural rules, a sense of responsibility and accountability for one’s actions, personal values, spirituality, and integrity*

Young people develop character through their connections with individuals and groups that provide examples and lessons for them. Young people receive many messages about right and wrong, responsibility, integrity, loyalty, faith, and social and cultural expectations as they develop. Their developmental task is to decide which messages have the most meaning for them and how to internalize a set of personal values they will live by.

What you can do to nurture *character*:

Talk with your mentee about personal values and beliefs. Talking about societal rules and personal values can be tricky in any friendship. It’s important for you to first learn about, and respect, your mentee’s cultural, family, and personal values, and to avoid imposing your own beliefs on him. However, as a mentor you can expose your mentee to different ways of thinking or behaving and different cultural beliefs and values. You can also encourage him to learn how to think for himself about what is important to him, rather than simply following others.

These may be areas that your mentee has not thought or talked about much, so your conversations may start off on a fairly general level. You might, for example:

- Talk about where your families originated, what your backgrounds are, what traditions you have had
- Learn about other cultures within your community and how their values or traditions influence where you live
- Read books or watch movies together about people who have lived lives of integrity and courage, and have conversations about them

Your conversations may become deeper over time as you explore each other’s views about these topics and learn more about what character traits you value and why.

Let your mentee know that you are there to listen and help with moral or ethical issues. As you get to know your mentee better and have established some trust, he may tell you about difficult situations he is facing involving issues of right and wrong, courage, character, and responsibility. You can act as a caring, nonjudgmental listener and offer ways for him to think through the situation. Don’t push your opinions onto him, but do listen and let him know what you think if asked, and make sure that he knows your own expectations for his behavior. Remind him of times he has exhibited positive character traits or made good decisions, and encourage him to think about how he would like others to see him.

5 Caring and Compassion: *A sense of sympathy and empathy for others, leading to a desire to contribute*

As youth develop positive bonds with family, friends, community members, teachers, and others in their lives, they begin to empathize with others and to have compassion for people in difficult circumstances. Youth develop their ability to empathize over time, as a natural part of their physical and emotional develop-

ment. Care and compassion are important motivators for becoming involved in community life, volunteering, and offering support to friends and family in times of need.

What you can do to nurture *caring and compassion*:

Learn together about community needs and social issues and what you can do about them. As children move into adolescence, they begin to see beyond the confines of their immediate family and friends and start being interested in bigger societal issues. As a mentor, you can talk with your mentee about some of the significant issues in your community or around the world. Some tips for starting these conversations include:

- Find out what your mentee cares about, whether it's animals or the natural world, being around little children, or having a favorite grandparent. You can use her personal interests and experiences to talk about broader issues, such as animal rights, environmental quality, or how older people are treated in your community.
- Read articles together about local community or world issues, and see if your mentee is interested in learning more about a particular social issue. Find local organizations that work on these issues and learn how you can get involved, and encourage your mentee to express herself about these issues.
- Tell your mentee about volunteer experiences you have had or are currently doing (other than your important role as a mentor!), or any causes that you feel particularly strongly about. Don't pressure your mentee to share your interests but rather use your experience to highlight some of the rewards and challenges of getting involved.

Encourage your mentee to see other people's views and situations, to "walk in their shoes." Adolescents are not always fully able to empathize with others, especially when they feel like someone has been unfair or treated them poorly, or when they are faced with a

situation that is unfamiliar or uncomfortable for them. Try to help your mentee see the other side of every situation, to help them think about why other people act the way they do, or how someone might view their own behavior. You can also practice empathy in a more general way by talking about movie or book characters or public figures, asking such questions as:

- "How do you think that person felt when . . . ?"
- "What was it about that person's background that made him . . . ?"
- "What would you have done if that had been you?"

Be open to talking about serious feelings and emotions.

Your mentee may have personal experiences with family or peers that elicit feelings of caring and empathy, such as an illness or death in the family or a friend who has a difficult home life. He may also be in situations where he sees displays of injustice, insensitivity, bigotry, or bullying. As you develop a trusting and caring relationship with your mentee, you can let him know that you are available to talk about difficult situations and that talking about emotions is OK. If you are comfortable sharing your own experiences that have involved the need for compassion or empathy, your mentee may find it easier to approach you when he needs to talk about his feelings. The following tips may be helpful when talking with your mentee about serious feelings and emotions:

- Acknowledge that your mentee is experiencing a difficult situation
- Remain calm and compassionate about what your mentee is telling you
- Use open-ended questions to allow the youth to continue expressing feelings if she is comfortable, but don't push for more information than she is ready to share
- Don't make judgment statements ("How could they . . . !" or "Why didn't you . . . ?")

- Tell your mentee that you are glad she trusted you to share the experience
- Reflect back to the youth about what she is expressing (“That sounds difficult”)
- If the issue requires it, brainstorm options for what to do or how to seek help

(Adapted from “Ten Hints for Helping Someone in Crisis,” by Mija Ryan in *Ongoing Training for Mentors*, p. 30).

Resources

If you would like to learn more about youth development, visit any of the following links:

Act for Youth, a project of the New York State Department of Health, offers a variety of guides, resources, and ideas for working with youth: <http://www.actforyouth.net/>

National Clearinghouse on Families & Youth (NCFY) offers resources on youth development and other youth issues: <http://www.ncfy.com/yd/index.htm>

National Youth Development Information Center is a resource center for youth workers and others who work directly with youth: <http://www.nydic.org/nydic/index.html>

Search Institute has a host of publications and online resources in the area of youth development: <http://www.search-institute.org/>

Ongoing Training for Mentors: Twelve Interactive Sessions for U.S. Department of Education Mentoring Programs, a publication of the Mentoring Resource Center, includes training sessions on goal setting and how to plan activities together. Downloadable free at: http://www.edmentoring.org/pubs/ongoing_training.pdf

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U.S. Department of Education Mentoring Resource Center
771 Oak Avenue Parkway, Suite 2
Folsom, CA 95630
MRC Hotline: 1 (877) 579-4788, fax: (916) 983-6693
E-mail: edmentoring@emt.org
Web: <http://www.edmentoring.org>

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