

The following chapter is an excerpt from the manual "Running a Safe and Effective Mentoring Program" written by Elsy Arévalo and Rebecca Cooper and published by the Friends for Youth Mentoring Institute. This how-to manual is designed to help readers increase the effectiveness of their mentoring programs by providing a systematic way of implementing mentoring best practices into their services. For more information on this and other products and trainings, go to www.friendsforyouth.org.



VOLUNTEER SCREENING

Volunteer screening is critical to ensure the safety of every child and the success of your mentoring organization. Regardless of the type of mentoring model (i.e. email mentoring, school-based, on-site only, etc.) the same depth of screening standards should apply to all programs.

As child advocates, our first priority is to maintain the safety of children in our programs. At all times, remember that although supporting volunteers and keeping them motivated is important; serving youth is our ultimate and primary goal. A well-developed screening process must include:

1. A written application
2. Research on child molester profiles for every facet of the screening process
3. Fingerprinting for both federal and state levels
4. Megan's Law screening
5. Interview at applicant's home
6. A minimum of three character references from friends, family members, and co-workers
7. DMV record and proof of insurance
8. Acceptance criteria based on the program's goals and objectives
9. Completion of orientation and training
10. Ongoing monitoring and support
11. Workshops on child abuse prevention for youth

Step 1: Written Application

The application, which can be distributed during orientation, should include contact information, past work history, place of residency during the past three years, experience working with youth, interests, and mentoring philosophy. This application help you check for the accuracy and consistency of the information shared throughout the screening process. It can also be a helpful tool for those individuals who may express themselves better through writing.

Action Plan

1. What does your program need to know about your mentors?
2. What qualities/skills do the youth you serve need?
3. Design mentor application.

Step 2: Child Molester Profiles

Incorporating research on child molester profiles into every facet of the screening process will help you to understand the mentality of child molesters and learn how to recognize the warning signs. Tragically, child molesters and child predators do apply to mentoring programs with the intent to molest children.

Action Plan

1. Review profiles of child molesters
2. Review forms, applications, and procedures and identify how to incorporate current research on child molester profiles into every facet of the screening process.

Step 3: Fingerprinting

All potential volunteers must be screened through both state and federal level fingerprinting. This step will help you screen for individuals with serious criminal history. Remember that fingerprinting is just one of many tools used to identify those individuals who have actually been caught by the law. Fingerprinting clearance does not guarantee the safety of the youth in your program.

Action Plan

1. Review the cost involved with fingerprinting and the time required to obtain fingerprint clearance.
2. Identify when and where fingerprinting will take place.
3. For more information on fingerprinting laws in California, go to www.caag.state.ca.us/app/geninfo.htm or call (916) 322-2209.

Step 4: Megan's Law Registry

Megan's Law allows individuals to verify if an applicant is a registered sex offender. Many of the Police Departments maintain a database which is accessible to the public. Again, remember that Megan's law registry is only one more tool and not a guarantee of safety.

Action Plan

1. Contact police department in your area to find out how to make use of the registry.
2. For information on Megan's law, go to www.caag.state.ca.us , www.klaaskids.org , or www.sexoffenders.net.

Step 5: Interview

The interview is an opportunity to cover the potential mentor's life from birth and childhood to present, and encompasses all facets of their experiences (i.e. history and current status of employment, education, social activities and relationships, legal status, substance abuse, personal crises, family relationships).

The interview will give you a sense of the applicant's personality, living environment, hobbies, preferences, and strengths as a potential mentors. Program counselors should trust their intuition in this step of the process. Both verbal and non-verbal communication will be helpful in determining a possible match or the appropriateness of the potential volunteer. Rushing through this interview is a disservice to the mentor, mentee, and the quality of the match.

Ideally, the interview should take place at the volunteer's house. This visit will add depth to your understanding of the volunteer. Attend closely to what you see. Be sure to note if there is any aspect to the environment that would make a child uncomfortable or unsafe (i.e. guns).

Remember that whether or not you are an on-site mentoring program, you really have little to no control over whether your volunteers meet with their mentee outside a supervised environment.

Action Plan

1. Consider what questions will give you a clear understanding of your volunteers. (If you are interested in sample mentor interview questions go to www.friendsforyouth.org and look up Document Kit under products).
2. As you develop questions, consider the needs of your mentees.
3. Develop mentor interview.
4. Role-play questions.

Step 6: References

Reference checks can ideally be accomplished through a telephone conversation. Although some programs conduct their reference checks in writing, a telephone conversation allows more flexibility. You can attend to important factors such as tone of voice, level of nervousness, etc. Reference checks are your opportunity to understand the applicant's personality traits as seen through the perspective of different people. Throughout the reference check clearly emphasize that the conversation will be kept confidential and that their input will help keep the children safe.

Action Plan

1. Develop the reference check questions.
2. Conduct a mock phone interview.

Step 7: DMV Record and Car Insurance

A review of an applicant's driving record is important not only for insurance and liability concerns, but also to insure the safety of the youth. The most important item to be checked is a DUI. When reviewing the applicant's driving record ask yourself whether there is any doubt that the mentee will be safe.

Action Plan

1. Discuss possible scenarios and brainstorm ways to handle various situations (i.e. 40 year old was drinking and driving at age 16, recovering alcoholics, etc.).

2. Obtain a book of Vehicle Code Violations at the DMV offices for \$3. The California DMV web site is www.dmv.ca.gov. Other states have similar information available on the web.

Step 8: Assessment of Skills

A component of the screening process is the assessment of traits, proven by research to be conducive to successful mentoring relationships (e.g., flexible, non-judgmental, low expectations, low personal needs). As you get to know the potential mentor determine whether he/she has the necessary skills to be a nurturing, caring, flexible, yet strong role model.

Action Plan

1. Brainstorm: Who is the ideal mentor?
2. What do the youth in our program need?
3. Review the literature that sites successful mentoring practices: realistic expectations, open to support, have fun.

Step 10: Completion of Orientation and Training

Use both the orientation and training as unique screening opportunities. Pay close attention to the applicant's concerns, questions, and the way they interact with others. During the training take note of the way each volunteer responds to discussion of the typical scenarios they will encounter. For more detailed information review sections on Orientation and Training.

Action Plan

1. Develop a process for ensuring that the volunteer has completed each step of the screening process.
2. Discuss the type of responses and behaviors seen during an orientation or training that would raise red flags about a volunteer

Step 11: Ongoing Monitoring

The screening process does not end once a volunteer has been accepted into the program. Attending to an ongoing friendship is just as important as the initial screening. Research shows that child molesters wait to abuse youth until they have developed a close bond; that takes time. Some of the components of ongoing monitoring include:

1. Weekly or bi-weekly counselor contacts
2. Three month reviews during which both mentor and mentee are interviewed separately
3. Attending to behavioral changes on the part of the child
4. Group activities
5. Parent contact
6. Year end friendship review
7. Alumni tracking

For more detailed information on monitoring and support review corresponding sections in manual.

Action Plan

1. Review nature of counseling contacts and tracking system.
2. Review 3 months interview and year-end interview.
3. Brainstorm ideas for alumni tracking.

Step 12: Child Abuse Workshop

Educating mentees on child abuse is an investment worth making. Participating in a workshop on the topic can empower youth to recognize warning signs, increase their awareness, and speak out against abuse. Create an environment of trust in which mentees come to experience the program and program staff as allies.

Action Plan

1. What format can this workshop take?
2. Do you have any internal resources you can rely on?
3. What is the extent of desired mentor involvement for this workshop?

Checklist

- ✓ We have a strong commitment to put the safety of the children in our program first
- ✓ We have incorporated current research on child molester profiles into every facet of screening
- ✓ We conduct an extensive face-to-face interview that covers the potential mentor's life from birth and childhood to present, and encompasses all facets of their life (e.g. history and current status of employment, education, social activities and relationships, legal status, substance abuse, personal crises, family relationships)
- ✓ We conduct a home visit
- ✓ We conduct reference checks from volunteer's friends, family members and colleagues
- ✓ We conduct child abuse registry and fingerprinting/criminal record check
- ✓ We require driving record
- ✓ We require proof of automobile insurance
- ✓ We screen for suitability criteria that relate to the program's mission statement and needs of the clients; could include some or all of the following: personality profile; skills identification; gender; age; language; cultural experience; academic history; career; motivation for volunteering; stability in the community
- ✓ We conduct assessment of traits proven by research to be conducive to successful mentoring relationships (e.g., flexible, non-judgmental, low expectations, low personal needs)
- ✓ We require the successful completion of pre-match training and orientation
- ✓ We conduct ongoing monitoring and support of the friendship
- ✓ We educate youth on issues related to child abuse