

#5 – Let’s Get Real: Promoting Positive, Honest Communication with Your Mentee

Good communication is key to a successful mentoring relationship, and it starts with listening. It is sometimes said that most of us only listen with part of our attention because we are so pre-occupied by waiting for our own turn to talk! The ideas in this handout will help you give 100 percent to communication with your mentee...whether you’re speaking, listening, watching, or just being quiet together.

Engaging in Good Conversation-

Conversations are the foundation of strong relationships, and strong relationships are the goal of meaningful mentoring. Engaging in the art of conversation does not always come naturally to people, and for many adolescents it can be a territory in which they have yet to build skills. Below are some tips for making conversations work.¹

Keep it Going. Asking follow-up questions or providing open-ended responses to questions are great ways to keep a conversation going. The idea is not to debate a topic, but to learn more. Try, for example, simply saying, “...tell me more about that.”

Conversation Doesn’t Have to be “Heavy.” It’s perfectly okay to talk with your mentee about neutral topics like favorite foods, the weather, movies, and so on. In fact, it can be a good way to build the rapport that’s needed to address more personal or sensitive issues. Having many light friendly conversations can pave the way for being able to comfortably discuss more difficult issues.

Be Prepared for the Unexpected Answer. You may ask a question and get an answer you did not want or expect. Try to suspend your own judgment and let young people express their ideas and opinions.

Listening is Most Important. Conversations with young people are better when mentors practice the art of listening—it shows that we care about them.

Timing can be Everything. If you ask a question that is met with silence or “the look,” maybe this isn’t the best time for a conversation. Or it could be that the specific question triggers a bigger issue and the timing isn’t right yet to “go there.”

If You Ask a Question, Answer the Question. By sharing your own answers to the questions that you ask your mentee, you equalize the boundaries in your communication. If, in contrast, you are always the one eliciting information from your mentee, he or she might feel “in the hot seat” and become less comfortable opening up to you.

Trying Walking or Driving and Talking.

Sometimes the physical movement, repetition, and quiet companionship of walking together make it easier to talk together too. Similarly, riding in the car provides a quiet, protective environment where eye contact isn’t necessary, but where you are in close proximity in a fairly comfortable setting. All of these factors can help the conversation flow.

² Adapted from *Conversations on the Go: Clever Questions to Keep Teens and Grown-Ups Talking* (Minneapolis: Search Institute, 2004).

What Can You Do Right Now?

There are simple techniques you can start using right away to promote positive communication with your mentee without necessarily showing that you agree or disagree with what you are told.

For example:²

Encourage—Show interest (*Can you tell me more?*)

Clarify—Get all the information and clear up any confusion. (*How did you react when that happened?*)

Restate—Check meaning and interpretation by repeating back what you think you've heard. (*So what you are telling me is...*)

Reflect—Help sort through feelings. (*It sounds like you feel pretty angry about what happened.*)

Summarize—Put together key ideas and facts. (*These seem to be the key ideas you've expressed...*)

Validate—Acknowledge the worthiness of your mentee. (*I'm glad you are willing to talk about this.*)

Encourage fantasy—Encourage your mentee to develop a vision. (*Forget the rules for a moment. If you had a magic wand, what would you do?*)

Try It!

The next time you are with your mentee, see if you can listen twice as much as you speak!

Makes You Think

“We have two ears and one mouth so that we can listen twice as much as we speak.”
—Epictetus, Greek philosopher

Talking about Tough Stuff:

Most mentors find that at times they need or want to talk with their mentees about sensitive topics like sexuality, alcohol and other drug use, school concerns, hygiene, and others. It's important to be aware that both you and your mentee might feel anxiety in these situations. You'll want to take things slow, realize that you don't have to address all issues or questions at once, call on your mentoring support person if you need to, and do your best...no one expects you to be perfect. Here are some other tips that might help:

- ◆ Use “I” statements to express your feelings without blame or judgment. For example, *I feel sad that we are arguing about this because I'd really like to work with you to help you figure this out.*
- ◆ Listen; really listen by asking open ended questions, clarifying things that are confusing, paraphrasing to make sure you understand, and letting your mentee tell “the whole story”.
- ◆ Show your engagement and openness through your body language. Face your mentee, make eye contact, and relax your body.
- ◆ Stay focused on what's happening now and what you hope will happen in the future. The past is done.
- ◆ Keep the conversation about the problem at hand and the needs and issues of the situations. Avoid making the conflict about certain people or their “positions” in the disagreement.

² Cox, Robin (2005).