



**Becoming a Better Mentor:
Strategies to Be There for Young People**

CHAPTER 10

GOAL SETTING AND SUPPORT

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MENTOR



What Does Supporting Your Mentee in Goal Setting Mean?

Goals give meaning and direction to life and are linked to well-being, health, and success across the life span. The process of helping young people set and pursue their goals is not only a central task of many mentoring programs, but it's also a common activity in the many natural (meaning outside of a program context) mentoring relationships adults have with young people. Mentoring relationships are well suited to support these goal-directed processes, as mentors often help mentees navigate the world by promoting skill development and self-confidence and encouraging mentees to focus on their futures. Indeed, high-quality mentor-youth relationships support a mentee's confidence in their goal-setting ability and goal-directed skills. Goal setting and support can structure the interactions and activities in mentoring relationships and gives mentors direction for working with their mentees; by helping their mentees set and pursue their goals, mentors are better able to identify where and how to focus their support. The process of supporting mentees as they set and pursue their goals is often labeled as “instrumental support.”

In this chapter, I will identify and describe three key skills youth use for setting and pursuing their goals, how mentors can support the development of these skills, and suggestions for how the characteristics of your mentee should be considered when fostering these skills. Promoting goal-related skills is relevant for all types of mentoring relationships — from short-term, highly structured academic-focused mentoring programs to more informal relationships where a caring adult helps a young person pursue their passion. Helping youth set and pursue their goals will not only help them on their life path, but also strengthen your relationship with them.

Other chapters in this resource can also help strengthen your ability to support your mentee's goal-directed activities. Chapter 4 on attunement and chapter 2 on cultural humility may be helpful in establishing a safe and supportive context for goal-directed processes. Chapters on empowering youth (chapters 8 and 9), expanding networks of support (chapter 12), and encouraging change talk in your mentee (chapter 11) may help with identifying strengths and resources mentees can leverage in pursuing a goal.

Why Goal Setting and Support Matter in Mentoring Relationships

As young people navigate increasingly complex worlds, setting and pursuing goals can help them in several ways. Goals help young people: (1) make sense of their world; (2) meet their needs in the face of changing demands and opportunities; and (3) promote their own positive development. Not only is making progress toward their goals linked to positive mental health, but just the process of setting and monitoring that progress also promotes positive outcomes in young people such as motivation, empowerment, and improved communication between youth and the adults in their lives.¹

Youth who are successful at achieving their goals have three separate but interrelated abilities. First, youth must be able to set, prioritize, and commit to a set of personally relevant goals that they want to achieve. Second, they are able to pursue these goals by developing strategies and leveraging resources. To achieve their goals, youth need to be able to make goal-directed plans and develop and tap resources — from practicing a skill to asking for help from others. Finally, youth must be able to “bounce back” from failure. If an initial plan doesn't work out, young people must be able to switch to a new

¹ Pender, F., Tinwell, C., Marsh E., & Cowell, V. (2013). Evaluating the use of goal-based outcomes as a single patient rated outcome measure across CWP CAMHS: A pilot study. *Child and Family Clinical Psychology Review*, 1, 29–40.

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strategy to achieve their goal. In some cases, youth may have to decide whether it's worth it to keep pursuing their original goal or if they should select a new goal.

A young person's abilities to select and pursue their goals, as well as their ability to shift gears if things aren't working out as expected, have important implications for their success in multiple areas, from earning high grades and getting a job, to balancing the stresses of family, school, and social obligations. In fact, an extensive body of research has linked a young person's goal-directed skills to healthy and positive development as well as making positive contributions to their communities. Higher levels of goal-directed skills are also linked with lower levels of depressive symptoms, delinquency, and risky behaviors such as smoking, underage drinking, and substance use (interested readers can find references to some of this research in the Additional Reading and Resources section at the end of this chapter).

Young people often need help in developing these goal-directed skills. As mentors, you can be real assets to helping your mentees learn to develop and apply these skills to succeed in their own lives. In the remainder of this chapter, I discuss some ways mentors can support their mentee's development of these three skills.

What Does Goal Setting and Support Look Like in Practice?

A helpful metaphor for understanding the three processes youth use to set and achieve their goals is the GPS navigation system on your smart phone. Youth enter their destination (Goal Selection), and the GPS provides them a route to reach their destination (Pursuit of Strategies). Note that the recommended route is only one of several potential

routes to the same destination. Sometimes when youth encounter traffic, construction, or a road is blocked, they are re-routed (Shifting Gears). For instance, a youth may select a specific goal (improve Spanish conversation skills) and pursue a strategy to achieve that goal (complete online Spanish modules). If that first strategy doesn't work, then the student may shift gears and choose a different strategy (communicate with native Spanish speakers on Zoom).



A well-functioning GPS leads youth to their destination (achieving a goal). Mentors might view themselves as driver's ed instructors providing support throughout the learning process as young people become more skilled at independently applying their goal-directed skills. How might a mentor support their mentees on this journey? How can mentors teach youth about the importance of selecting positive goals, guide them to identify and use effective strategies to pursue those goals, and support them when they need to shift gears, change directions, and move forward when things don't work out as planned?

First, it's important to recognize that supporting a mentee in setting and pursuing their goals is an iterative, back-and-forth, collaborative process between the mentor and mentee. There will be



starts and stops, and successes and failures, along the way. Below are general guidelines for how a mentor can support a mentee with developing their GPS skills along with several examples of how this process might look in a mentor's interactions with their mentee.

Goal Selection

To support a mentee's goal selection (G) skills, mentors can help them identify positive and personally relevant goals. These goals should challenge mentees, excite them, and put them on a path toward reaching their full potential. If you are mentoring in a program that offers a structured mentoring experience, your program may have domain-specific goals for mentees to set (e.g., academic or character-related goals) or may ask you to help your mentee set more broadly defined, open-ended goals. If you are not mentoring in a formal program, you may hear your mentee talk about their hopes and dreams, as well as the challenges and struggles they are facing in different areas of their life. Those revelations present natural opportunities to ask your mentee more questions about their aims in life and to see if you can apply the strategies suggested here. Remember, however, that regardless of the program's overall aims or the type of relationship you have with your mentee, youth should set goals they want to achieve, not what the mentor, program, or parent wants them to achieve. Mentee's voices should be heard and respected as mentors provide their guidance and advice to mentees to come to a shared decision (see chapter 8 on honoring youth voice and building power). Mentors can have youth prioritize the goals that are most important to them and discuss with mentees how they might not be able to do everything they want.

For example, Maria is 17 years old and just started her junior year in a new school in a new town. The first few months at her new school were difficult, as the classes were much more advanced than those at her prior school. She agrees to join a college and career mentoring program. After building a rapport with Maria, Latoya, her mentor, has Maria brainstorm a list of possible goals they can work on — both long-term and short-term, realistic and unrealistic. Listing out all possible goals, even unrealistic ones, during this brainstorm can help guide their discussion about what goals might be best to set and pursue. For instance, you may have heard of the acronym, **SMART** Goals (**S**pecific, **M**easurable, **A**chievable, **R**elevant, **T**imely). Latoya could use the idea of SMART goals to help Maria evaluate each of the goals she has listed. Her role as a mentor is to help Maria select a goal that is meaningful to her, realistic to her skill level and resources, and demanding of her focus and effort. In discussing these goals with Latoya, Maria identifies that her most important goal for this semester is to improve her math grade.

The types of goals your mentee selects are also critical. When youth set goals that are specific and well defined, rather than general, they are more likely to be successful. Therefore, mentors can help mentees select manageable yet challenging goals. Mentees may have really big dreams, such as opening their own restaurant, appearing on Broadway, or becoming an engineer. These dreams may be a long way away, separated by years of hard work, effort, and opportunities. And the path for reaching those dreams may be a little fuzzy. Goals should have clear steps that can be met along the way. Therefore, as a mentor, you can help your mentee break those big goals down into manageable steps to be completed within a realistic time frame. You may also have to help your



mentee fill in the “gaps” between the steps. These steps will allow your mentee to achieve success on smaller goals that will motivate them toward their destination and provide natural timepoints for you to provide feedback. For example, Maria and Latoya work together to set a realistic, meaningful, and demanding math goal for Maria to achieve. Maria generates the clear, action-oriented goal with a time frame that she “will earn an A in math at the end of first semester” and to achieve this, she will get A’s on most of her weekly homework assignments and improve her daily class participation score, which she had been struggling with in previous semesters.

Pursuit of Strategies

As mentees begin to plan out how to pursue their goals (P), the mentor can help them consider and identify the strategies and resources that can be used to help them reach these goals. For example, you can help your mentee identify, or even introduce them to, people and organizations that might be able to help them, or you might introduce them to people you know who have a career that interests them (see chapter 12 on expanding your mentee’s networks of support). Mentors can take their mentees to places with helpful information or links to other resources, like libraries, and work with them to develop a plan to use these resources. As mentees become more competent in identifying strategies to pursue their goals, mentors can teach help-seeking and self-advocacy skills, so youth feel empowered to recruit these resources themselves.

In order to reach her goal to earn an A in math at the end of the first semester, Maria works with Latoya to develop a step-by-step plan of strategies to improve her grade, each with clear deadlines and anticipated obstacles. Maria decides to meet with her math teacher every Wednesday at lunch to discuss where she is having difficulties, set up an

account with a virtual math academy to complete tutorials each Monday night, and complete the bonus math homework items each week.

A key support mentors can provide youth as they pursue their goals is to help keep track of their progress through regular monitoring and feedback. The schedule and process for checking a mentee’s progress toward their goals should be clearly laid out with the mentee during the initial goal setting and planning meeting(s). You want to be sure this process doesn’t become another stressor in your mentee’s life. Therefore, it’s important to approach this process with empathy and to let your mentee guide this feedback process. How often would they like you to check in on their progress? What role could you play that would be most helpful to them? Maybe your mentee can identify ways to make the process more enjoyable and motivating such as finding a workout or study buddy to check progress with or creating a map of their journey toward their goal. Several research-based tools exist such as goal-based outcomes² and GPS rubrics/growth grids³ that are helpful for monitoring progress and structuring mentor-mentee discussions of the goal pursuit process (interested readers can find links to these tools in the Additional Reading and Resources section at the end of this chapter). When there is a lack of progress toward a goal, the mentor and mentee should jointly revisit the goals that have



2 Law, D., & Jacob, J. (2015). Goals and Goal Based Outcomes (GBOs): *Some useful information* (3rd Ed.). London: CAMHS Press. Retrieved from <https://www.annafreud.org/media/3189/goals-booklet-3rd-edition220715.pdf>

3 Bowers, E. P., Napolitano, C. M., Arbeit, M. R., Chase, P., Glickman, S. A., Lerner, J. V., Lerner, R. M. (2013). On a pathway towards thriving: Evaluating the effectiveness of

the “GPS to Success” tools to promote positive development and intentional self regulation in youth. *Journal of Youth Development*, 8(3) 4 - 31.



been set. The mentor might discuss whether the goal is still relevant, whether the contexts around the youth have changed that make initial goals and/or strategies difficult to achieve or implement, or maybe initial goals were too ambitious.

Maria's mentor, Latoya, monitors and reviews Maria's progress with her each time they meet. They use a goals record sheet in which Maria self-rates her progress toward her goal. On the sheet, Maria scores her own progress from zero to ten, with zero indicating no progress and ten indicating that the goal has been reached. Maria and Latoya then discuss why Maria rates herself a particular score and how her progress can be maintained or improved. The discussion can help them identify which strategies are working or how Maria might make better use of the resources available to her. Two weeks prior to their current meeting, Maria rated herself a four on her progress because she had missed completing some bonus math homework items; however, Latoya made sure not to criticize Maria for missing the items and instead listened with empathy to why Maria struggled to complete them. Latoya also supported Maria's intentions to work harder to complete her bonus homework items going forward. At their current meeting, Maria has rated herself an eight because she earned full credit on each bonus homework she completed and earned an A- on the weekly math quiz. Latoya and Maria celebrate her success and discuss what she did to make this success possible and how she plans to continue making progress toward her larger goal going forward.

Shifting Gears

When mentors check in with mentees on progress toward their goals, they may discover it's best to shift strategies (**S**) because the original strategies weren't successful or a goal became blocked.

Mentors can work with mentees to identify potential barriers to reaching their goals and develop contingency plans in case they arise. Mentors can also share times they have struggled with meeting a goal or find stories of exemplars in the community who have overcome the odds to succeed. You might also look to the other adults in your mentee's life, such as their parents, teachers, or coaches, to identify real-world, relevant solutions (see chapter 7). In identifying exemplars and resources in your mentee's community, you are also extending and nurturing your mentee's networks of support (see chapter 12).

For example, during a discussion on her goal progress, Maria reported that her original plan to complete virtual math tutorials each Monday night was not working, as she was too tired after basketball practice and had other homework to complete. Therefore, Latoya set her up with another student in the program who could tutor Maria at the library on Saturday afternoons.

Sometimes a mentor may have to support a mentee in recognizing that no matter how hard they have been working, a goal may become unattainable. Recognizing the need to move to a new, more appropriate goal is about accepting loss as part of the learning process, analyzing options, and keeping an overall positive perspective. A mentor can help their mentee cope with the emotions that may come with giving up on a goal and help their mentee identify new goals that may still reflect their original "destination." Mentors can remind their mentee of all the hard work they've done along the way and celebrate how much they've grown through the process. In addition, they can work together to find new goals that are similar to the original blocked goal, but that also leverage the skills the mentee has been working to develop. Learning through failure is



key to life success, but you also want to remind your mentee of the accomplishments they have had and the resilience they have shown. When having these potentially difficult discussions with your mentee, advice from chapter 11 on conversations about behavior change may be helpful.

Contextual Considerations for Goal Setting and Support

It's important to have established an authentic relationship with your mentee marked by care, trust, and empathy before you introduce goal-directed activities to them. Mentors with cultural humility (see chapter 2) try to learn about their mentee's social identity and experiences, which play a substantial role in the types of goals mentees set and the strategies they may prefer to use to achieve those goals. Your mentee's parents, peers, and cultural norms may influence the types of goals they set (e.g., rural youth whose parents are farmers may set more agricultural-based goals) and ways to achieve that goal (e.g., getting a job versus joining an agricultural after-school program). Cultural humility can help mentors support their mentee's selection of goals given the contextual opportunities and barriers that are shaped by inequalities in society. For example, your mentee may want to apply to a top-tier college engineering program, but you are aware that their high school doesn't offer the advanced math classes needed to be accepted into that program. Therefore, you may suggest that they enroll in a local community college to build the math background they need to apply to the top-tier program later. Cultural humility and empathy can also help mentors build the trust necessary for mentees to share their goals, hopes, and dreams with them and the trust that's needed to kick off the goal-setting process and maintain mentee buy-in when things may not be going as planned.

It takes time to build trust and connection to a mentee in an authentic way; however, this time is important for laying the groundwork for working on goal-directed skills. There is no "right time" to start working on goals with mentees; some mentees may be ready to work toward a specific goal early on in your relationship and want your help immediately, or you may be in a mentoring program that has a specific curriculum in place to guide your interactions with your mentee and determine when goals become a part of your relationship. If the program is well structured with clear expectations for mentors and mentees and clearly identified goals, success in setting and pursuing those goals over a brief period is more likely.⁴ However, there are other factors at the program level that should be considered. For example, if a youth enrolls in a mentoring program because the program's aims and goals align with their own (e.g., a robotics program for a STEM enthusiast), they may be more motivated to develop their goal-directed skills and ultimately achieve their goal. However, if a youth is placed in a program with goals that are not well aligned with their own goals (e.g., a sports-based program for a STEM enthusiast), their motivation and goal pursuit may be tempered. For this reason, it's important to question the assumption that mentees want to set goals consistent with the mission and aims of the program they are participating in. By taking time to build



⁴ McQuillin, S. D., & Lyons, M. D. (2016). Brief instrumental school-based mentoring for middle school students: theory and impact. *Advances in School Mental Health Promotion*, 9(2), 73-89.



a relationship with your mentee, you can identify these potential concerns prior to setting goals together.

All young people use goal-directed skills. Research suggests, however, that a young person's ability to use these skills differs across childhood and adolescence. The goals young people have and the strategies they use to achieve those goals become more complex as youth mature. When working with your mentee, it's important for you to consider your mentee's age, maturity, and ability when working to support their goal-directed skills. For example, the best kind of goals help mentees out in many different areas of life. So, identifying the relations among one's goals is an important skill to learn. For example, a mentee may join a running club to get in shape, but through this activity, they can also improve their self-esteem and make friends — two other goals they were interested in achieving. However, the ability to consider and set more complicated “layered” goals like these, and the strategies needed to achieve them, may be too cognitively difficult for younger mentees to handle. You can help your mentee review their goals and adjust them to benefit more areas of their lives. Your mentee might also pick strategies to reach one goal (e.g., go to a party to make friends) that conflict with another strategy or goal (e.g., staying home to study to improve their grades). Your role as a mentor is to help them navigate these conflicts.

The content and time frame of goals will also differ for younger and older mentees. Younger mentees may set goals such as making friends or earning a high grade in the next semester. Older youth can think more about their personal futures and begin to set longer-term and more complex goals, such as improving their relationship with their parents, earning a scholarship to college, or getting an

internship. Even the concept of a “goal” may need to be illustrated for younger youth. Discussion around a mentee's “sparks” (activities or interests that bring them joy) may be particularly helpful to younger mentees. For younger youth and those having difficulty identifying a long-term goal, mentors might help to identify shorter-term achievable goals; these shorter-term goals may be easy “wins” that can enhance a mentee's confidence and motivation to set and achieve future long-term goals. Mentors who are well attuned to their mentee's needs and preferences are likely to provide more targeted and helpful support for their mentee's selection of goals, plan for initial strategies, and revision of strategies when things aren't going well.

Similarly, it's important to remember that the way teenagers set goals may look different from how adults set goals. Adults are more likely to face time and contextual pressures to decide which of their desired goals should take priority, so high-priority goals (e.g., finding a job, starting a family) must be given the most resources. Adolescents are still exploring multiple pathways to adulthood. In adolescence, being flexible with goal priorities may be adaptive. Mentors may find tips from chapter 11, on conversations about behavior change, helpful for guiding empathetic conversations with mentees on changing and reprioritizing goals.

Tips and Final Thoughts

Relatively structured goal-directed activities for mentors and mentees show promising benefits for mentees. Still, mentors (and programs) often worry that too much of a focus on goal setting and pursuit can get in the way of the relationship. The trick is to find a balance between relationship building and goal-support activities. Mentors are more likely to find that balance when they are responsive to their mentee's interests as they set and pursue personally



meaningful goals. You may want to consult chapter 3 on the importance of fun and play in your mentoring relationship to further strike a balance between goal-directed work and more fun, relational mentoring time.

As noted above, how younger versus older youth understand and apply goal-directed skills may differ. However, research points to six key goal-directed skills that are important to focus on for youth of all ages:

- 1. Select and prioritize a set of meaningful, realistic, and specific goals.**
- 2. Make and stick to a detailed, step-by-step plan.**
- 3. Stay focused and show persistent effort with using strategies.**
- 4. Keep track of goal progress and how strategies are working.**
- 5. Seek help from others.**
- 6. Substitute strategies when first-choice strategies are not working well.**

Be sure you are intentional about the ways you support your mentee as they set and pursue their goals. By being intentional, mentors will be better prepared to provide constructive feedback to their mentee to maintain positive progress toward goals, suggest additional activities or resources, and/or consider revision of their goals. In monitoring their mentee's progress, mentors should remember that bias may creep into their assessment. This bias could be positive, as mentors may be motivated to see positive change given their and their mentee's hard work, or it could be negative because their mentee doesn't appear to be making as much progress as the mentor hoped or expected. Mentors should remember that they should have high, but realistic, expectations of their mentee's progress

and to temper their own (and their mentee's) unrealistic expectations of goal attainment. Mentors should emphasize to their mentee the skills and connections they have built over the course of pursuing their goals and that these skills will support their success going forward.

In reviewing a mentee's goal progress, mentors should aim to collect additional information from relevant sources such as parents, teachers, or coaches (i.e., the settings in which the goals are relevant). For example, Latoya could ask Maria if it would be OK to talk to her math teacher to see if there were any ways that Latoya could better support Maria's progress. Latoya could also share Maria's goals and progress with her parents to build a broader system of support around Maria. Mentors might also consider using their own goal pursuits as a model to teach successful goal-directed strategies to their mentee. When mentors practice and apply goal-directed strategies themselves, they can benefit their mentee directly through modeling and by connecting their mentee to additional resources that could help them. For example, if Latoya had been pursuing her graduate degree as Maria was working on her math grade, Latoya could have shared the opportunities and obstacles she experienced along the way. Latoya might also have met students in her own classes that could have provided math support to Maria.

Finally, remember that your mentee may have well-developed goal-directed skills, but may be using these skills toward problematic or maladaptive ends. For example, your mentee may be popular among their classmates and seen as a leader but may often encourage their peers to act out in class as opposed to taking their classwork seriously. A more extreme example could be a mentee who has used their goal-directed skills to organize a successful



drug selling operation. Mentors should leverage the strengths of their mentee to motivate them in identifying positive and purposeful goals.

Working with your mentee to set and pursue goals is one of the most important activities you could engage in together. Goals direct the decisions we make, the actions we take, and ultimately, the

direction our lives take. Therefore, it is critical that mentors are intentional in providing goal support to their mentees. As a mentor, you will have the opportunity to provide your mentee with needed guidance and advice as they travel along their goal-directed journeys. It is an awesome privilege to be a passenger on your mentee's journey to fulfill their dreams, passions, and purpose.





Additional Reading and Resources

Most of the resources listed below can be accessed online at the links we have provided. The print title listed here should be available through local or online bookstores or through your public library.

- ***Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance***, TED Talk by Angela Duckworth – In this TED talk, Angela Duckworth describes her work studying grit (passion and perseverance for goals) as a key strength of success in youth and adults. Click [here](#) to access.
- ***GPS 2 Success*** project resources – This website provides an overview of GPS 2 Success, a suite of materials to help mentors guide their mentees in developing GPS skills. The materials include a handbook on the GPS skills as well as rubrics, activities, and videos to help promote and monitor these skills. Click [here](#) to access.
- ***The Mentor's Guide to Youth Purpose*** by Meghan Perry – This workbook guides mentors in supporting their mentee's exploration of purpose (a long-term intention to accomplish goals that are meaningful to the mentee and to the world beyond the mentee). Click [here](#) to access.
- ***My Life program resources – My Life*** is an evidence-based program aimed at supporting youth to achieve their educational and transition-to-adulthood goals. Click [here](#) to access.
- ***Discovering the Possibilities: "C"ing Your Future*** by MENTOR New York – This resource is a series of twelve modules designed to help mentees and mentors collaboratively explore college and career opportunities. Click [here](#) to access.
- ***Thriving in Childhood and Adolescence: The Role of Self-Regulation Processes***, edited by Richard M. Lerner, Jacqueline V. Lerner, Edmond P. Bowers, Selva Lewin-Bizan, Steinunn Gestsdottir,

& Jennifer Brown Urban. Special issue of *New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development*, Number 133 – This volume includes several chapters from scholars who have focused on the importance of self-regulation for success across the life span. The articles in this issue should be available through your local public library, as well as through the publisher [here](#).

If you are interested in measuring your mentee's goal-setting skills, abilities, and attitudes, the following tools may be useful to you. They can also help you think about various aspects of goal setting and concepts where your mentee may be struggling.

- ***Global Scale of Selection, Optimization, and Compensation*** – This scale is a nine-item measure that assesses a mentee's goal-directed skills. The GPS skills described in this chapter are based on the Selection, Optimization, and Compensation model. Click [here](#) to access.
- ***Youth-Centered Outcomes*** – This tool provides a way to help mentees and mentors collaboratively set goals and monitor their progress toward those goals. Click [here](#) to access.
- ***Assessing Self-Regulation: A Guide for Out-Of-School Time Program Practitioners*** by Tawana Bandy and Kristin Anderson Moore – This guide provides an overview of measures of goal-directed skills, including the items for the measures. Click [here](#) to access.