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

MENTOR

EXPANDING NETWORKS OF SUPPORT

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What Does Expanding Your Mentee's Support Network Mean?

Youth mentoring has traditionally focused primarily on the development of a one-to-one relationship between a mentor and a young person. Yet, the impact of mentoring can be stronger when a mentor actively helps their mentee build and strengthen connections with other supportive adults and organizations. Importantly, this does not replace building a strong relationship with your mentee and all the practices described in this resource, but instead builds on the strength of that relationship to help mentees cultivate connections and ask for support from others as well. While chapter 7 in this resource focuses on how the mentor can work with others within the mentoring relationship "system," this chapter describes how mentors can help youth expand their networks beyond that system — supporting mentees in identifying and strengthening relationships with other caring adults and programs and in developing robust networks of support. Building these support networks can not only expand your mentee's "social capital" but also develop their capacity to identify and reach out to supportive adults now and throughout the rest of their lives.

Why Helping to Expand a Youth's Network of Support Is Important in Mentoring Relationships

Social capital is often defined as the resources, information, support, and opportunities that we have access to through our social interactions and relationship networks.[1] Different people and organizations in youth's lives can provide different types of support. In fact, research increasingly points to the importance of "webs of support."[2] Mentors can both recognize existing supports in their mentee's lives — an important component of a strength-based approach — and they can help mentees identify and reach out to new supports.

Before going any further, it's important to note that too many conceptualizations of social capital have focused narrowly on career and economic achievements, valuing the kinds of support provided by people with privilege (for example, based on wealth, race, or gender), while dismissing the kinds of support provided by people from marginalized communities. Scholar Tara Yosso's model of community cultural wealth provides a different perspective, emphasizing the valuable forms of capital, including cultural knowledge, skills, abilities, and connections, within marginalized and oppressed communities.[3] Helping youth build networks of support means recognizing the many types of support that enable youth to thrive — even those that may be different from the types of support you may have found valuable in your life or those you have seen valued in society.

Moreover, as much as an individual mentor can provide, they will never be limitlessly available or all-knowing. By explicitly and intentionally helping mentees to strengthen existing relationships or form new connections with people and programs, mentors may help their mentees expand and diversify their networks of support — and even access types of support outside of what a volunteer mentor can provide. For example, many young people in mentoring programs are experiencing unmet mental health needs, and mentors may be able to help facilitate engagement in formal mental health services.[4] Helping your mentee to build their support network is also an opportunity to help them develop their capacity to build supportive relationships and draw on that support — a skill they can use throughout their lives. In fact, research

[1] Bourdieu, P. (1986). *The forms of capital*. In J. G. Richardson (Ed.), Handbook of theory and research for the sociology of higher education (pp. 241–258). New York, NY: Greenwood Press.

[2] Varga, S. M., & Zaff, J. F. (2018). Webs of support: An integrative framework of relationships, social networks, and social support. *Adolescent Research Review*, 3(1), 1–11.

[3] Yosso, T. (2005). Whose culture has capital? A critical race theory discussion of community cultural wealth. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 8, 69–91.

[4] Browne, R. & Schwartz, S. (2020, November). *Changes in the Utilization of Psychological Services in a Diverse Youth Population*. Philadelphia, PA. Poster presented at the Association of Behavioral and Cognitive Therapies Annual Convention, Philadelphia, PA (Virtual).

indicates that mentees with mentors who actively connect them to other people, programs, and settings are more likely to show improved parent-child relationships, increased involvement in extracurricular activities, and greater help-seeking behavior. Other research on underrepresented students' transition to college suggests that teaching students about the importance of social capital and providing opportunities to practice support-seeking behaviors can increase their willingness to seek help, which in turn, can result in improved relationships with their instructors and better grades. Particularly in the context of time-limited mentoring relationships, mentors may be able to increase their impact by helping their mentee connect with other people, programs, and organizations, and ideally help them feel comfortable seeking support throughout their lives, even after their relationship has ended.

What Does Expanding Your Mentee's Support Network Look Like in Practice?

There are several steps that will help you build and strengthen your mentee's network of support. It should be noted that many of the strategies described here, particularly those that include connecting youth to new people outside of their social network, are a better fit for older youth.

First, take time to get to know your mentee.

Before trying to help your mentee expand their social network, it's important to get to know your mentee and develop your relationship with them. What are their interests, values, worldviews, goals, strengths, wants, and needs? Are they introverted or extroverted? What makes them light up? What makes them shut down? Are they more comfortable in group or one-on-one settings? Who are the important people in their lives? Caregivers and program staff can also be helpful in getting a

fuller picture of your mentee. Make sure you aren't making assumptions about what your mentee wants or needs without first getting to know them. See the "Introduction" of this resource, along with the chapters on empathy, cultural humility, attunement, and working within the relationship system (chapters 1, 2, 4, and 7 respectively) for more details on this crucial first step.

Help your mentee identify and reach out to existing supports.

Developing your mentee's network of support is not just about connecting your mentee with new people, it's also about recognizing, honoring, and supporting their existing relationships. This not only shows respect to the people already in your mentee's life who have been supporting them in countless ways, but also encourages your mentee to draw on the existing supports in their lives that, in many cases, will continue to be in place even after your mentoring relationship has ended. In some cases, this may also help youth recognize support they may have but may not be aware of (e.g., extended family members, neighbors, members of a religious community, former teachers, or after-school staff).

One way to identify the people in your mentee's network of support is to create an "eco-map" of the relationships in their lives and the types of support they provide (see the video on creating an eco-map in this chapter's Additional Reading and Resources section). It's important to note that your mentee will need you to support them in this process of identifying people to include on their eco-map, particularly in identifying those who may not be close relationships but do have the potential to provide support. Additionally, depending on your mentee's relationship history and current relationships, this process may bring up

uncomfortable feelings (for example, concerns that they don't feel supported by many people), which is why it's very important to first have a trusting relationship with your mentee before embarking on this process. Once you have created the eco-map, you can explore the different types of support provided by different people in their lives, as well as the areas in which they feel well supported and those that are lacking. In addition to more formal strategies like eco-mapping, you also can informally ask your mentee about the different people in their lives, or simply express interest and ask about relationships as they are brought up in conversations with your mentee.

Once you have a sense of who is in your mentee's life, help them identify how they can draw on that support and strengthen those connections. For example, you could suggest that your mentee text their aunt to share with her the problem or accomplishment your mentee shared with you. You can also think about how your mentee may be able to leverage other supportive adults in their lives to help them move toward their goals. For example, for academic goals, you could encourage your mentee to ask their coach about scholarships or to reach out to their teacher for extra help. Remember that asking for help or reaching out to adults may be hard for your mentee and part of your job is to support them in this process. Your mentoring relationship can be a safe place to practice these kinds of skills. Take the time to help them plan when and how they could make these requests and explore what might get in the way. You can also role-play and discuss different scenarios that might occur to help them feel more confident. More generally, as various issues, challenges, or goals come up in your mentee's life, help your mentee identify who they could go to for different types of support (in addition to you) and how they could go about reaching out.

Connect your mentee with services, programs, and other community resources.

In addition to strengthening individual relationships, you can build your mentee's social capital and networks of support by connecting them and their families with services and programs that reflect their interests and expressed needs. While helping to connect youth and families with other organizations can be a powerful intervention, it's important to remember that this should be driven by what the youth and their family see as their needs, rather than by your assessment of their needs based on your values and worldview (see the Contextual Considerations and Tips sections below for further discussion).

To make effective referrals to services and programs, it's important to be familiar with the resources, services, and programs in your mentee's neighborhood, school, and community. If you are part of a program, staff can help you with this, especially if you're coming from a different neighborhood or community. For some mentees, it also could be helpful if you talk with them about how they could reach out to and ask others in their networks, such as teachers, friends, or family members, about programs and opportunities that might benefit them. This can both allow your mentee to gain valuable knowledge of resources and to practice the skill of reaching out to people in their network (as discussed previously, be sure to provide individualized support in this process, as needed). Then, try to connect your mentee and their family with relevant programs and services. For example, if your mentee likes to dance, share information about local dance programs (with thoughtful attention to transportation needs, cost, etc.) and talk to your mentee and their caregiver about the possibility of joining an after-school

dance group. If your mentee is experiencing mental health challenges, explore the possibility of formal mental health services (e.g., counseling, therapy) with your mentee and their caregiver. For any of these referrals, it's important that this be a collaborative process with caregivers.

Connect your mentee with people from your own social network.

You also bring with you your own social capital that you can leverage to support your mentee. You can use your network to gather information about summer jobs or internship opportunities for youth. Or, with your mentee and their caregiver's permission, you could invite a friend who has a similar interest or life experience as your mentee to one of your meetings with your mentee. You also could connect your mentee with someone in your network who works in a career in which your mentee is interested. In addition to providing the connection, you can support the process by helping your mentee write an email asking for an informational interview, helping them prepare for the interview, and debriefing with them afterward. As with connecting with new services or programs, it's important that both your mentee and their caregiver are on board before moving forward with new connections.

It's critical to remember that you are responsible for the connections you make. Make sure anyone you connect to your mentee is safe, appropriate, and well-vetted. Are there ways you can prepare those coming in contact with your mentee to be responsive to your mentee's strengths, needs, and goals? It's also important to consider safety precautions when connecting your mentee with a new adult, such as attending the meeting with them, scheduling a meeting in a public space, and/or debriefing with your mentee afterward. Additionally,

if you are part of a mentoring program, talk with program staff to ensure that the program supports these practices.

Help your mentee develop positive relationships with peers.

In addition to helping your mentee create supportive relationships with adults, you can also take steps to foster positive peer relationships in your mentee's life. This may be particularly relevant for those in mentoring programs that are based in schools or after-school programs. Make space for conversations about peer relationships with your mentee, including what they are looking for in peer relationships, what comes more easily to them in their interactions with peers, what is more challenging, how they feel with different friends, and how they act with different friends. Based on those discussions, if your mentee is open to it, you could encourage them to invite a peer to one of your meetings. Spending time with your mentee and their peers may benefit mentees by improving peer relationships[7] and can give you a new "window" into your mentee's life by allowing you to see them in a new context. Although bringing peers into the mentoring relationship can have important benefits, it also can bring new challenges to navigate for both the mentor and the mentee (see chapter 6 on mentoring in groups).

Contextual Considerations for Expanding Networks of Support

Many of these strategies are more relevant for older youth (middle and high school) and less relevant for younger children (elementary school). In particular, connecting youth to new people outside of their social network is recommended primarily for older adolescents. For young children, this practice may focus primarily on acknowledging and

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[7] Elledge, L. C., Cavell, T. A., Ogle, N., & Newgent, R. A. (2010). Lunch buddy mentoring as selective prevention for bullied children. *The Journal of Primary Prevention*, 31(3), 171–187. https://doi.org/10. 1007/s10935-010-0215-7

supporting existing relationships (e.g., extended family, teachers, peers) and providing referrals to caregivers as needed.

As discussed earlier, it's important to take the time to get to know your mentee before working with them to expand their networks. The practice of expanding your mentee's social capital typically should be integrated later in the relationship, after a trusting relationship with your mentee has already been established. At the same time, taking the time to ask your mentee about existing relationships in their life can be one way to get to know them and their world.

Importantly, research shows that well-meaning mentors may employ a strength-based orientation for their individual mentee (i.e., focusing on the mentee's strengths), but this may not extend to other people in the mentee's life.[8] By acknowledging the strengths and supports within your mentee's existing social network, you can help your mentee identify and draw on those supports and avoid potential harm by unintentionally giving the impression that you are dismissing or judging important people in your mentee's life. To do this, it's necessary to first examine and reflect on how your own biases may be influencing how you see your mentee's family or community (see chapter 2 on cultural humility for some excellent strategies for doing this reflection).

When connecting youth with new people or organizations, make sure to involve your mentee's caregiver. This is important both from a liability standpoint and for your relationship with your mentee and their caregivers, as it shows your respect for their role and authority. Moreover, when mentees and caregivers feel more invested in the relationship or referral, it's more likely to "stick" or be maintained. Although there may be

times when caregivers prefer to be less involved, generally, the more you can collaborate with your mentee's caregivers on these efforts, the better (see chapter 7 on working with others in the mentoring relationship system). Additionally, if you are part of a mentoring program, be sure to keep program staff informed and follow their policies. And of course, even if you are not working with a program, be thoughtful about who you are introducing to your mentee to make sure that the new connection is a safe and appropriate one. Finally, strengthening your mentee's social network may be especially important in time-limited relationships in youth programs, mentoring, or otherwise.

For example, many of these strategies could be part of preparing for closure in the last few months of a relationship. Mentors may work with their mentee to identify and strengthen connections with other important adults in their life (i.e., those mentoring relationships that form naturally in settings outside of programs), specifically thinking about how these people may be able to provide some of the supports after the programmatic mentoring relationship has come to an end. Conversations can include how youth may know if they need additional support, who they can reach out to, and specifics about how they could reach out. Developing youth's help-seeking skills, including their comfort with

Lakind, D., Atkins, M., & Eddy, M. (2015). Youth mentoring relationships in context: Mentor perceptions of youth, environment, and the mentor role. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 53, 52–60.

asking for help, can increase the likelihood that they will be able to access support throughout their lives. Additionally, in mentors can help youth explore if and how they will stay connected with the program or program staff, even after the mentoring relationship has formally ended. This may also be an important time to provide "soft hand-off" referrals to other school or community-based programs. For example, you could work collaboratively with your mentee and their caregivers to identify their interests and needs moving forward and how to find other programs and supports that could address those needs and interests. Then, make sure to support your mentee and their caregivers in establishing those connections before your relationship comes to an end.

Tips and Final Thoughts

Make sure your approach to expanding your mentee's network is a good fit for your mentee and their family, and take the time to listen to and validate any concerns they have. There may be a range of reasons they are uncomfortable with bringing new people into their existing network. Make space for exploring with your mentee what may be challenging for them about expanding their networks — for example being shy, valuing independence, family concerns about connecting with people outside the family, experiences of discrimination, fear of being rejected, previous negative experiences asking for help or networking, just to name a few. While some of these challenges may be helpful to explore with your mentee and help them to overcome, it's also okay if your mentee isn't open to expanding their network at this time.

Mentees and their caregivers also may be more open to building social capital and expanding their networks when this process is explicitly connected to helping them to advance their goals (see chapter 10 on goal setting). Taking the time to discuss your mentee's values and goals first and then exploring how different types of relationships can support them in reaching those goals can make this process more meaningful and empowering, especially for older youth.

Finally, as discussed earlier, it's critical to avoid making assumptions about which relationships or types of social capital are valuable. In fact, this skill is really about acknowledging that we all need a range of types and sources of support to develop and thrive. By recognizing and honoring the different types of support that different people in your mentee's life can provide, as well as helping your mentee identify, draw on, and expand their networks of support, you can also expand your impact as a mentor.

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.

- *Finding Mentors, Finding Success* A great guide for mentees from YouthBuild USA about how youth can recruit mentors and get help with specific areas of their life. Click here to access.

- *Brokering Youth Pathways: A Toolkit for Connecting Youth to Future Opportunities* Resources for adults working with youth on how to broker connections for youth that includes practice briefs and research reports (primarily geared toward out-of-school learning). Click here to access.

- *Who You Know: Unlocking Innovations that Expand Students' Networks* by Julia Freeland Fisher – This book, and accompanying website by the Christensen Institute, offers great advice for adults and students on how they can build social capital (geared primarily toward college students). Click here to access the website.

- *Ecomap Animation* YouTube video describing eco-mapping. Click here to access.