



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



MENTOR

CHAPTER 5

UNDERSTANDING EFFECTIVE ONLINE COMMUNICATION

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What Does Effective Online Communication Mean?

Online communication is communication between people using a computer or mobile device (e.g., cell phone, tablet, video game console). This form of communication is increasingly common in our modern world and in the world of mentoring, as well. The incorporation of online communication into mentoring is often referred to as **e-mentoring, digital mentoring, or online mentoring**.

Although we tend to think of mentoring as an inherently in-person, intimate activity, there are many mentoring contexts in which matches may communicate frequently, if not exclusively, using online technology. For instance, a youth may need support from someone with a particular skill, set of characteristics, or shared lived experience who doesn't live in their nearby community; e-mentoring can make a mentoring relationship for this youth possible. This chapter will discuss how to have a mentoring relationship — or enhance your mentoring relationship — through online communication.

Online communication can take many forms. It can include video calls through platforms such as Zoom, FaceTime, or social media applications (apps). It can also include text messaging or direct messages (DMs) through social media apps. Online communication can be conducted through online gaming where players talk via headsets and interact within the game while competing against each other from different locations. It can include joint use of mobile apps or interacting through social media such as sharing content or responding to each other's posts through "likes," "loves," comments, or shares. Online communication may also include phone calls, although technically not "online" so they are not described in detail here. Similarly,

although email is another common form of online communication, it's becoming less popular with youth, so it's not discussed here.

The online communication practices and tips discussed in this chapter can be helpful when considering almost any aspect or type of mentoring described in this resource. In fact, developing online communication skills in young people — and providing them with opportunities to watch you model such practices effectively — is crucial as they move toward adulthood in a digital world.

Why Online Communication Is Important in Mentoring Relationships

For decades, social psychologists have been studying how friendships, romantic relationships, and professional connections are built online. Research shows that strong, successful online relationships are possible. The strength of such relationships depends on many factors, such as how often and for how long relationship partners connect online, the quality of their interactions, the extent to which more personal information and thoughts are shared by the partners, and what each partner gains and gives in such a relationship.

In mentoring, the strength of relationships that are developed entirely online depends on many of the same factors that are important in other types of online relationships. In addition, successful online communication between you and your mentee depends on your mentee's developmental stage (e.g., age, maturity level), the types of activities you do together online, the depth of your interactions, and your and your mentee's comfort level with a given technology platform. We advise you (and mentoring programs) to keep these factors in mind when communicating online with a young person.



There are many potential benefits to online communication in mentoring. First, in many ways, this approach meets young people where they are, as most youth are very comfortable communicating with their peers and others using these modes.

Today's young people are "digital natives," meaning they have grown up with the internet, smartphones, social media, and various forms of online communication and have learned how to use these technologies from a very young age.

Second, in-person mentoring relationships can be strengthened using online communication. For example, it can allow you and your mentee to keep in regular contact even when you can't see each other in person. This can help with consistency in the relationship and contribute to building trust and rapport between you. This may be especially true if you are mentoring in a program where meeting times are limited, such as in a classroom context or for set hours after school. Being able to reach you remotely outside of in-person activities can be of great benefit to a young person in times of crisis.

Third, online communication can be used in mentoring to talk about more sensitive topics that you or your mentee may be more hesitant to discuss when face-to-face. Such sensitive topics may include substance use, mental health challenges, sexual exploration, or anything else a young person may find difficult to discuss when facing an adult in person. Chatting online about such topics may be easier for you as well, as it will allow you time to be thoughtful in crafting your response.

Fourth, online communication can expand the reach of mentoring more broadly. For instance, some mentoring matches may communicate entirely online, which was a necessity for many programs during the COVID-19 pandemic. This allowed mentoring pairs to continue their relationships

and maintain social connection at a distance. Even as the pandemic subsides, remote learning and work, and networking across the globe will remain. During non-pandemic times, online communication can be used to link more youth with mentors who fit their needs. For example, if a young person is looking for a mentor who has a specific career (e.g., a female environmental engineer) or a specific health condition (e.g., organ transplant recipient), but there are few such mentors in the youth's local community, online mentoring can help that youth connect with a mentor in an entirely different geographic location.

Learning about effective online communication is a good life and career skill for young people to develop.

Finally, learning about effective online communication is a good life and career skill for young people to develop. Youth will be entering a technology-driven world as they transition to adulthood, and using online communication will be important in their higher education, career, and simply in their everyday interactions with family, friends, colleagues, and their broader communities. By incorporating online communication into your mentoring relationship, you can guide and model how to communicate effectively in this way, including safety in online interactions. For instance, you can guide your mentee on digital skills, such as how to monitor their online presence (given that



any text and video created is a permanent fixture in the broader internet), safe communication with strangers, and avoiding online content that may not be age appropriate. If you are unfamiliar with a given form of online communication, learning how to use it with your mentee could be beneficial for you in everyday life as well.

A Note about Online Exploitation of Youth -

Research shows that online exploitation of young people is not as common as the media may lead us to believe, and youth are more likely to be exploited in person by someone they know than by someone they meet online.¹ While such scenarios are certainly something for those working with or caring for youth to be aware of, the concern should be tempered by the fact that it is fairly uncommon. An online mentor who is connected with a structured program will likely be subjected to the same screening and background-check procedures as they would if they were applying to be an in-person mentor. If you are part of a program, serving as an online or in-person mentor, make sure you understand what online communication with your mentee can entail (e.g., what kind of platforms you can use, whether the program needs to review your exchanges, etc.). If you are working with youth outside of a program, it is recommended that your mentee's caregivers provide permission for you to communicate online with your mentee and outline the parameters of this communication.

What Does Good Online Communication Look Like in Practice?

There are many different forms online communication can take. Here we summarize them, discussing potential benefits and challenges of each mode. One overarching challenge to note is that many of these forms of communication require a sufficient and stable internet connection. For some

mentees, particularly those in less-resourced or rural settings, this may be a challenge. Some types of online communication also require certain devices (such as a specific video game console) or a paid subscription (in the case of many apps).

Regardless of the mode, conversations around expectations for online communication are key to ensuring you and your mentee are engaging in ways that are acceptable to both of you. This could include expectations for communication frequency, hours of availability, response time, and what activities you'll engage in using online platforms. Younger youth may feel overwhelmed by too much online interaction, whereas teens may be tempted to engage in continuous texting throughout the day like they do with peers. Likewise, you may need to limit online interactions to certain hours or specifically scheduled times, and your mentee should not be distracted by text messages or their next move in a joint gaming app during school hours.

Video calls are phone calls that include a video image. These can be held on a number of platforms, such as Zoom, Skype, FaceTime, or through social media video calling features.

Benefits:

- Allows you and your mentee to have a face-to-face conversation without having to be in the same place.
- Allows you to see each other's facial expressions and body language and to read emotions accordingly.
- Can be used for joint activities that may typically be done in person, such as drawing, cooking, or playing a game like charades or Pictionary.

¹boyd, d. (2014). *It's complicated: The social lives of networked teens*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.



- Enables you and your mentee to show each other your surroundings, pets, and other possessions, or to introduce each other to important people in your lives.

Challenges:

- Requires extra creativity when working with younger children, given their attention spans are still developing.
- Requires more bandwidth from an internet connection.
- May take some extra coordination to ensure privacy during the call, especially if the mentee is living in close quarters with other family members. While privacy may not be an issue for younger mentees, it may be a challenge for older (teenage) mentees if you or your mentee want to discuss a sensitive topic.
- Power imbalances may be more apparent in video calls. For instance, calling your mentee from a balcony overlooking a pool or having a big-screen television in the background may make a mentee with fewer resources feel self-conscious.

Texting/DMs include short snippets of conversation that happen synchronously or asynchronously. For instance, you could send an encouraging text to your mentee the morning of a big exam or sports match. Or a full conversation could occur over text if both you and your mentee are engaged at the same time, mimicking an in-person conversation.

Benefits:

- Allows you or your mentee to share GIFs (animated images), memes (a static image, video, or piece of text that is shared repeatedly across the internet and can be used to quickly relay information, a sentiment, or an idea —

click here to see an example), or emojis (a small digital image used to express an emotion or idea) to emphasize a point or quickly relay an emotion, joke, or idea.

- You can take your time crafting a thoughtful response to an important question from your mentee.
- These can be used to have more in-depth conversations that may be awkward for a mentee in a face-to-face situation, such as feelings around their parents' recent divorce.

Challenges:

- Even though this can be used as an asynchronous form of communication that doesn't require you both to be "on" at the same time, a response is often expected quickly, especially by young people. If a mentee sends a text and the mentor can't respond immediately, a mentee may feel ignored or neglected. Likewise, if a mentee doesn't respond in a timely manner or with an expected level of engagement, you may feel the mentee is disinterested and that you're not achieving your mentoring goals. For this reason, it's important to set expectations with your mentee around responsiveness and engagement level, including when texts can be sent/received, and what it might mean if a response is not immediate (e.g., the mentee is in school or you're putting your own children to bed).
- Nuance can sometimes be lost in text. For example, sarcasm or humor may not be apparent in a text conversation; this is why emojis are often helpful to include to fully illustrate your intended meaning (e.g., 🤔 to indicate "I'm teasing you.").



Gaming involves using the internet to play a game together or as a team if in a small group mentoring setting. We recommend this form of online communication for mentors and mentees with gaming systems and experience, as there are usually costs and a steep learning curve involved.

Benefits:

- Gamers can use a headset to talk even when playing from different locations, or they can interact through the game without talking, depending on the type of game being played. Some examples of online games that can be played from different locations include checkers, Clue, UNO!, Minecraft, Among Us, and Mario Kart.
- Many online board games are free or very low cost.

Challenges:

- Different rules and controls are needed for each game and may require some patience while learning.
- Some games require an expensive console, purchasing the game itself, or upgraded account memberships for each mentoring partner.

Joint app use involves using a mobile app together from two different locations. This is similar to the setup for gaming, but can involve activities other than playing video games.

Benefits:

- The possibilities with this form of communication are endless. Mentoring pairs can participate in TikTok social media challenges or dances. They can watch movies or shows together on TeleParty, which

synchronizes video playback and adds a group chat to streaming platforms such as Hulu, Netflix, or Disney+. They can create a virtual universe where they can play, create, or do other activities together on Roblox.

- Many of these apps allow for multiple users at one time, which makes them ideal for small group online mentoring interactions.
- Social media apps can be used to share information with each other (and other social connections) about your likes and dislikes, and snippets of each of your daily lives. In the past, all of this information could only be shared verbally. These apps make it possible to get to know each other in a more passive way through quick photos, video clips, and musings about any topic of interest. Mentees may divulge information in this way that they may not feel comfortable chatting about in person.

Challenges:

- Some apps come with a small cost or may have charges to unlock additional features.
- Social media apps with many “friends” or “followers” means that everyone in your network will see what you post, unless your settings are adjusted otherwise.





How do you determine which form of online communication or activity is best? Start by asking your mentee.

Chances are mentees have already used several of these platforms or activities, especially as a result of remote learning and virtual social interactions during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Generally, young people will let you know if they are (un)comfortable with online communication by how engaged they are. If conversations are forced or engagement falls off quickly during an activity, that may signal this is not the right mode or that your mentee isn't enjoying the activity. It may be helpful to check in with your mentee on a regular basis to see whether they are enjoying the online activities, whether their expectations are being met, and if there are other modes they want to try.

Contextual Considerations for Online Communication

While online communication is now ubiquitous, and there are dozens of options for ways to engage a young person in online activities, there are several considerations to keep in mind. They include the programmatic context (if any), your mentee's age or developmental stage, where in the relationship cycle you are, and the role of your mentee's family.

Research has not yet revealed a definitive "right" or "wrong" way to incorporate online communication into mentoring. For instance, we don't know how often you and your mentee should communicate

online (if the relationship is completely digital) or the right blend of online and in-person communication. We also don't know which mode is best for different types of mentoring goals. How often and in what ways you should interact will vary depending on your goals and your mentee's specific needs. Regardless, we offer some suggestions below that may help prevent online communication from becoming unhelpful or even harmful to your mentee.

Programmatic Context

Some mentoring programs may place limits on the types of platforms that can be used with a mentee due to concerns with safety, information security, or even the program's own comfort level with a given technology. For mentors not tied to a specific program, it's best to start with a technology with which you and your mentee are already comfortable. For example, if you both use FaceTime to talk with other friends and relatives, you might want to start with that. You can always learn new apps and platforms later as your mentoring relationship grows. Check with your mentee's family (and your program, if relevant) to make sure they are comfortable with interaction on a given platform.

Developmental Considerations

Deciding on the type of online communication you will use and the length and context of your interactions depends on the youth's age and maturity level. For instance, a mentor would be unwise to force a 90-minute video call on an 8-year-old with a limited attention span. Texting with a teenager may come naturally, but for a younger mentee just learning to write, it may be too frustrating. Keep in mind your mentee's age and level of socioemotional development when choosing how to communicate online and how long you want each online interaction to be.



Timing in the Relationship Cycle

Getting to know each other's online style and interests should come early in an online mentoring relationship, just as a mentor and mentee would get to know each other's hobbies, interests, and mannerisms if meeting in person. Our online persona is a part of our identities now, and this should be explored for both you and your mentee at the beginning of the relationship. Are you and your mentee comfortable on camera? Are you comfortable using social media platforms? Is communicating through text too much work, or does it feel less intimidating than staring at each other on video? Online communication styles should be explored early on, but joint activities can adapt to these technologies throughout the mentoring relationship and may, in fact, change over time as your relationship — and your mentee — grow.

The Role of Family/Caregivers

Online communication may require coordinating with a mentee's family or caregivers to schedule a video call or establish limits on what hours an online interaction can occur (both for your mentee's and your own sake). Some mentees may be sharing electronic devices with others in their household, limiting their ability to send sensitive texts or to use the technology during certain times. Some families may also place limits on their children's use of certain types of technology, such as social media platforms.

Tips and Final Thoughts

Online communication can open up a world of possibilities for creative interaction using technology. It can also greatly expand the reach of mentoring to youth who may not have access to the type of mentoring they need. But online communication can also be challenging. First, it requires sufficient access to technology tools, internet service, and bandwidth. The COVID-19 pandemic revealed that many young people are living in areas where access to WiFi is difficult, making their access to online learning extremely challenging. Both you and your mentee must have a reliable device and reliable internet. While the infrastructure to provide universal internet access is continually improving, this remains a challenge for many.

Another major challenge is that online communication, while in many cases a great substitute for in-person interaction, is not entirely "natural," and adjustments have to be made accordingly. For instance, staring at ourselves in a video call or having intense eye contact at close range on video can be more intimate and therefore more uncomfortable than having an in-person conversation where we can lean back, avert our eyes, or look at other things. For young people, especially teenagers who are adjusting to a developing body and the self-consciousness that comes with it, this awkwardness can be difficult to manage.





A third challenge is finding what works for a mentoring pair or group in the online space. Since online communication does not come as naturally as in-person socializing, it requires that you try many different types of communication, lengths of time per session, and activities to see what grabs and holds the attention of your mentee. Below are some suggestions for initiating and strengthening online communication as part of your mentoring relationship.

Get to know your mentee's online capabilities.

As a first step, consider your mentee's age, maturity level, and attention span, and which kinds of technology are best given these characteristics. Find out whether they are most comfortable with video chats or texting, and try not to force one mode of communication over another, at least in the beginning. Also make sure this mode is in line with program expectations if you are working with one. Start small and with realistic expectations. If possible, use their favorite platforms or apps; follow your mentee's lead in what they are most comfortable with or enjoy the most. If your mentee seems uncomfortable with certain aspects of online communication, you can model how to make it more effective, such as turning on your own camera during a video call even if your mentee prefers not to turn on theirs.

Ensure privacy.

Will anyone else be sharing your mentee's device? Will this impact what text conversations or data can be stored on it? Ensure that your mentee has access to a private location in their home or other setting so that more sensitive conversations are possible. Mentoring in an online space requires particular attention to privacy for all parties involved, as any written text or recorded video becomes a permanent fixture in the online space. In that same

regard, be careful what you choose to share with your mentee, always considering the possibility that it could be shared with or viewed by others. The same respect should be given to mentees themselves — never share with others the online content your mentee shares with you without their permission. Make sure to discuss these kinds of privacy issues at the beginning of your relationship, or when you begin using online communication.

Get to know your mentee's online persona (and double check your own).

If your mentee is old enough to be on social media (many young people start around age 10), your mentoring program (if you are part of a program) allows for it, and your mentee agrees, follow them on social media. What do they post? What do they “like” or share with their followers? How often are they online? Which social media influencers do they follow? It's helpful for mentors to follow those same influencers so they can become familiar with the messages and images their mentee is exposed to on a daily basis.

It's also important for you to monitor your own online presence, especially if your mentee will be following you. This includes the need to be judicious in the photos you post, the language you use, and the content with which you interact, as certain social media settings allow other users to see your activities. With some social media platforms, you can block your mentee from seeing specific pieces of content. Allowing a mentee to see your online presence is a great opportunity to model how to be engaged online in a safe, appropriate way.

Learn the latest digital discourse styles.

Stay current on the meanings of emojis and the latest acronyms. For instance, eggplant 🍆 and peach 🍑 emojis are often used to refer to body parts. Acronyms are also used frequently in



online communication, especially in spaces where character limits are in place. Also, make sure to keep up to date on online lingo, especially if you see your mentee using it.

Be aware of how digital communication is different from email or in-person communication. For instance, text communication is often short, frequent, and timely. If you write very long texts, you will likely find a teenage mentee is less engaged than if you write texts that are short, to the point, and use acronyms when possible. Mentees will also likely expect quick responses, otherwise they may think you are “ghosting” them. Again, make sure to discuss your and their expectations for communicating in this way.

Use online-specific techniques for increased engagement.

Communicating online via text using a relaxed, conversational style can be beneficial in a mentoring setting. (Don’t use all capital letters unless you want to indicate you’re SHOUTING!) It may also be helpful to ask your mentee specific, direct questions to get the conversation going. Some mentors may be disappointed to get one-word responses to a text or DM. Some youth may need coaxing with more open-ended questions (“How did that math quiz you were dreading go? What sort of questions were on it?”). You may also want to have icebreakers ready when early in the relationship (“Would you rather...”). Temper your expectations of how long or detailed a response you should expect from your mentee. Some mentors feel gratified by crafting careful, witty texts, only to feel disappointed by a mentee who doesn’t engage at the same level. This is OK! You should keep modeling what an engaging online conversation looks like.

Stay up to date on the latest tech and apps of interest to youth.

While several of the latest forms of online communication are mentioned here, the technology is constantly changing. Make sure to keep up to date on the latest trends in online spaces, such as hashtags, social media challenges, or online movements, especially those relevant to your mentee’s age. Doing so shows an interest in your mentee and will help you understand youth growing up as digital natives.

Self-disclosure is important.

When communicating online, we can’t see many of the social cues we have access to in person, such as nervous fidgeting, facial reactions (if not on video), and filler words. Therefore, online communication sometimes requires more directness and disclosure of emotions. This can be done on a video call (e.g., “You probably can’t see my foot nervously tapping right now.”), in a text using words or emojis, and through exaggerating emotions, for example, texting, “ROFL” (for “rolling on the floor laughing”), and clear facial expressions if on video. Sarcasm and jokes are often hard to interpret in online communication and may not be read as intended without these additional disclosures. You can model this disclosure until your mentee feels comfortable doing so themselves.

Consider the special dynamics of mentoring a small group online.

Online communication with one person can be challenging, but trying to manage the dynamics of several people in a mentoring group requires even closer monitoring and additional skills. If you are working with a group of youth online, get to know each member and have them get to know each other. Pay attention to group dynamics: Who is particularly chatty? Who holds back? Who seems



distracted or irritated? Breakout room features in video conferencing platforms and group chats can be a great way to keep all group members engaged. It may also be helpful to encourage your mentees

to keep in contact with each other so they can get to know their peers in the group in addition to the mentor(s) (see chapter 6 for more information on managing and facilitating groups of young people).

Additional Reading and Resources

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

While resources on e-mentoring are still largely under development, there is plenty of content available regarding how young people manage online spaces. There are also several resources for parents, teachers, and others involved with youth that may be helpful for mentors. Here are just a few:

Online

- ***Common Sense Media***

Common Sense is an independent nonprofit organization focused on helping youth thrive in a rapidly changing digital environment. They provide age-based media reviews, conduct surveys on youth's media usage, and host online events for people working with youth. Click [here](#) to access.

- ***Children and Screens: Institute on Digital Media and Child Development***

The institute seeks to understand and address questions regarding the impact of media on youth development. They conduct research projects and offer several online resources and a virtual workshop series called, "Ask the Experts" for general audiences on various timely questions related to young people and their online communication and digital media use. Click [here](#) to access.

- ***Parenting for a Digital Future: How Hopes and Fears about Technology Shape Children's Lives***

(2020) by Alicia Blum-Ross and Sonia Livingstone – This book uses research evidence to guide parents and other caring adults on how to successfully raise youth in a technology-driven world. The book discusses how using socially connected media can create opportunities for youth and how digital media can be used to teach values and healthy boundaries.

- ***iGen: Why Today's Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy – and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood***

(2017) by Jean Twenge – This book describes data from more than 11 million survey respondents over multiple decades showing how social technology has created a generation of youth that are more tolerant and safe, but also more anxious and lonely.

In print:

- ***It's Complicated: The Social Lives of Networked Teens***

(2014) by danah boyd – This book, written by an academic researcher with technology expertise, unpacks what it means for teens to grow up with social media. It also discusses the myths about social media that frighten caring adults and how young people form communities online.