



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

CHAPTER 6

FACILITATING GROUP INTERACTIONS

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MENTOR



Almost everywhere you look, you'll find a group of young people. Maybe you see a few friends just hanging out, or a group of youth attending a camp or an after-school program, playing on a sports team, or participating in a club. Increasingly, mentoring programs are adopting a group model in which one or more mentors interact with multiple youth on a regular basis. The whole program can be built around group activities, or programs can bring together several matched pairs of mentors and their mentees for some group activities as part of the larger program. Some youth programs, like sports teams or arts clubs, make intentional efforts to incorporate mentoring into their ongoing activities. And even in the mentoring relationships that spring up in schools or community settings, there is always the possibility that other young people will be around when a mentor and mentee are meeting and may want to be involved in what they are doing.

The possibilities for mentoring in groups are almost endless, but regardless of the specific framework, there are some common things mentors should keep in mind when facilitating group interactions. This includes being aware of the predictable ways groups develop and change over time and the inevitable conflicts that are likely to arise. This chapter will discuss potential advantages of mentoring in groups, social processes that can make or break the ability of a group to promote healthy youth development, strategies that facilitate the development of a productive and positive group experience over time, and some common pitfalls and mistakes to avoid. The term "mentor" will be used throughout the chapter, but it's important to recognize that mentoring can happen in many contexts. For example, mentoring can happen spontaneously in a moment when a group of youth are figuring out what to do, or can happen as part of coaching a team. Also, mentors aren't always adults

— just being a bit older and more experienced than a group of youth might be the basic qualifications.

What Does Facilitating Group Interactions Mean?

Group facilitation is the art of "making it easy" for a group of people to interact and work together to achieve goals. Facilitators pay attention to the process of what is going on in a group and how group members are interacting. Good facilitators are more like coaches than directors; they help guide the group to keep it on track by sharing their experience and encouraging group members but refraining from directing the group's activities. Facilitation skills come in handy for one-time activities (e.g., an afternoon group project or even just a group of youth hanging out) and for longer-term activities (e.g., a club, team, or mentoring group) where the same group of young people meet together over a period of time.

Why Good Group Facilitation Is Important in Mentoring

When we think of mentoring, we usually think about one-to-one mentoring, where a caring adult meets regularly with a young person to give advice and encouragement and just have fun together. In addition to these more traditional ways that a relationship with a mentor can foster positive development, mentoring in groups can expand the opportunities for young people to learn important skills. Research shows that the two main pathways for this to happen include opportunities to learn new skills through group interactions and social processes of the groups themselves.

First is what we might call the skills pathway. Being part of a peer group gives young people a chance to learn valuable skills, like making new friends, resolving conflicts, and standing up for oneself. A



supportive mentoring group can be a safe place for youth to try out a new skill or to learn by watching how other youth do it. Mentors can also help by modeling ways to use those skills in the ways they interact with group members. In cases where there are two or more mentors in a group, the way the mentors interact with each other can also serve as a model for youth. Another important part of the skills pathway is that being part of a group gives youth a chance to be a helper, not just a person who receives help. By focusing on ways that mentors provide help and support, it can be easy to forget what young people bring to the relationship. Mentors can encourage group members to share their thoughts and experiences in ways that can help the group develop a sense of mutual support. By guiding the group through intentional group-based activities and discussions, mentors can help keep group interactions positive and keep problems in the group from getting out of hand.

Second is what we might call the mattering pathway. Groups can provide young people with a sense of belonging to something important, feeling engaged and emotionally safe, and having a place to contribute. In one-to-one mentoring, interactions happen between a mentor and a youth. In a group, youth become part of a web of relationships and interactions: ones that occur between mentors and youth, between two mentors (when more than one is present), and between two or more young people — both those in which a youth is participating and those in which the youth is an observer. All of these relationship “layers” can be going on at the same time: the youth can benefit not only from what their mentor(s) says and does, but also from being embedded in a supportive peer context. Groups also can take on a life of their own by building a cohesive group identity. You know that a group is becoming cohesive when the members choose a name for it,

design a logo or a T-shirt, or develop a unique ritual.

Research on group mentoring supports both of these pathways to a successful group: Youth in group mentoring programs learn problem-solving and other social skills, and these skills lead to gains in “hard” outcomes like academic performance. In one group of studies,^{1,2} for example, 9th graders who reported having a positive relationship with their group mentors showed increases in their sense of school support, school grades, and earning credits toward high school graduation. When those same youth reported a positive group climate (sense of cohesion, engagement, mutual help) they showed increases in self-efficacy, self-awareness, support from adults at school, and school grades. Importantly, the increases in problem-solving skills and school connectedness that youth experienced through their participation in the mentoring group helped to account for their improvements in academic achievement.

Peers are a powerful influence! We usually think of the negative ways that peer pressure operates — that “bad kid” influencing a “good kid” to smoke a cigarette because everyone’s doing it. But research shows that peer pressure works both ways — young people can also be influenced by their peers to do better in school, get involved in community service, and engage in other positive behaviors.³ In addition, young people may sometimes be more open to taking advice from a peer than from an adult, and this can create opportunities not only for group members to receive support from their peers, but also to be in the role of giving support. Research further shows that effective group facilitation can limit the possibilities for negative peer pressure to take hold and increase the likelihood that peer groups will influence their participants in positive ways.

¹ Kuperminc, G. P., Chan, W. Y., Hale, K. E., Joseph, H. L., & Delbasso, C. A. (2020). The role of school-based group mentoring in promoting resilience among vulnerable high school students. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 65, 136–148. doi:10.1002/ajcp.12347

² Chan, W. Y., Kuperminc, G. P., Seitz, S., Wilson, C., & Khatib, N. (2020). School-based group mentoring and academic outcomes in vulnerable high school students. *Youth and Society*, 52, 1220–1237. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0044118X19864834>

³ Animosa, L. H., Johnson, S. L., & Cheng, T. L. (2018). “I used to be wild”: Adolescent perspectives on the influence of family, peers, school, and neighborhood on positive behavioral transition. *Youth & Society*, 50(1), 49–74. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0044118X15586146>



What Does Good Group Facilitation Look Like in Practice?

There are a few things you can do that will help groups of youth find their footing and have more effective (and fun) interactions:

Make Sure Expectations for the Group Are Clear

A critical task for group facilitators is to help everyone get on the same page. Group members need to know what they're supposed to be doing and what to expect from the group. Don't worry — this doesn't happen all at once! Encouraging group members to collaborate in setting expectations is a great team-building approach. When group members feel a sense of ownership, they are more likely to meet group expectations and to feel able to revisit them and make needed adjustments over time. Here are a few ways an effective group facilitator can help the group get there:

- **Create ground rules and group agreement** – Helping group members decide how they want to interact and develop agreements that everyone can live with is a critical early step that can ease concerns group members might have about being part of a group and build a sense of mutual trust. Some common ground rules include things like ensuring that everyone gets a chance to talk without interruption and agreements that “what’s said in group stays in group.” Developing ground rules can be turned into a fun activity, perhaps using a free brainstorming or polling app to collect ideas anonymously. Group members could vote on which rules to keep or could create a graphic that illustrates the most important ideas to keep in mind. Many groups will write up a formal agreement and hold a signing ceremony.

- **Establish group rituals and routines** – Developing a regular sequence of activities can help structure the group’s time together as well as create a sense of ownership and belonging. For example, some groups will select a favorite icebreaker to start every meeting, or may assign a different group member to bring a new icebreaker to each group session.
- **Make sure everyone is participating fully and fairly equally** – It can be off-putting if one group member consistently talks more than everyone else, and a lack of participation by one or two members may be a sign that they are disengaging or that things aren’t going well. Some youth may be more vocal or shier and more reserved, but a good facilitator makes sure everyone gets what they need and contributes in ways that are meaningful to them and to the group, even if not identically. For example, some groups may use an object like a talking stick to designate who has the floor, or use a popcorn sharing method, where a group member shares an idea and then calls on the next speaker. When using methods like this, it’s important to allow youth to pass if they want to, so that they don’t feel pressured.
- **Foster a group identity** – As group members develop a sense of how to work together and who they are as a group, it’s common for them to develop symbols of membership. Some groups choose a name for themselves, develop a logo, or make T-shirts. Group facilitators can foster a group identity by encouraging members to collaborate on developing these symbols, promoting healthy competition, and helping the group secure resources they might need (e.g., a fundraiser).



Recognize the Predictable Stages Groups Go Through

Development is not only happening with the youth who make up the group's membership, the group itself is also developing! If you're working with a group that's going to be together for more than a few sessions, it's important to realize that groups go through a predictable series of stages. Note that even in informal or one-time groups, the first two stages are important to be familiar with as they can help mentors understand what process the group is going through and offer some guidance on how to facilitate the process.

1. The **Forming** stage is when the group is starting to come together. Nobody knows quite what to expect or what to do. Group members may rely on the mentor to help explain the group's purpose, help the group set ground rules, and delegate responsibilities.
2. The **Storming** stage begins when group members start to define their position in the group — personalities start to show, and group members may come into conflict with each other. This can be a stressful time, but it's also an opportunity for the mentor to help group members focus and start taking responsibility for getting along and supporting one another.
3. The **Norming** stage is when the group starts working as a unit. Group members learn they have to trust each other to be effective. Members are taking ownership of the group and starting to take on and share leadership roles.
4. The **Performing** stage is the most productive. Group members are truly depending on each other and have learned to be flexible to meet everyone's needs. They are in the groove. Not every group reaches this stage.

5. The **Adjourning** stage begins as members start to acknowledge that the group will come to a close. It's a time of transition as some group members might leave early, causing changes in how the group is structured and even what it's trying to accomplish. The group might continue to perform, but group members need time to manage their feelings of termination and transition.

Recognize When It's Working

Group facilitators can use the stages above to help them understand where the group is and how it's doing (refer to resources below for more in-depth descriptions). For example, it's perfectly normal for a little conflict to emerge after a few sessions — it doesn't mean things are going badly, but just that they are going through a predictable phase. Eventually, group members will usually settle into a routine that shows they have bought into the group's rules and expectations. They may start to remind each other what is expected (showing that it's not just the mentor's job to enforce the rules). Another sign that the group is working is when mentors start to find they are not always responsible for starting or moderating group discussions: group members are talking among themselves and making group decisions and plans.

As an example, one group of eight students was formed as part of a school-based mentoring program to support students who were struggling in school. These students had shown poor attendance, were earning poor grades, and generally felt disconnected. Early in the school year, the two co-mentors suggested that they spend a few minutes of each week's meeting doing homework checkups. The idea was to hold students accountable for keeping up with their work. The group members reluctantly agreed, with some of them saying that they wanted to improve their grades but worried



the checkups would be stressful and embarrassing. After talking it out, everyone agreed that homework checkups could be a way to help them keep up their motivation as long as it didn't feel punitive. The mentors agreed to keep it positive and focused on students helping each other develop strategies to succeed. Within a few weeks, group members were coming to group meetings asking for the chance to show their work and giving each other advice and encouragement. Grades were getting a little better, and group members were attending school more regularly, especially on the days they had group meetings.

A Note about One-time or Short-term Groups

Some of the practices noted above take some time to come into focus. They are for longer-term situations where the group has time to build and grow. But many of the practices in this section can be used even if you are working with a shorter-term group, such as a one- or two-day camp. It may not be as important to do things like naming the group and forming a deep group identity. However, in short-term groups, success might look a lot like the themes discussed above: We got through the activity, there was little conflict (or we were able to resolve it), the youth led the “doing” of the activity, all youth participated fully, and they respected the ground rules set up at the beginning of the day.

Contextual Considerations for Group Facilitation

The basic elements of effective group facilitation — **share**, **encourage**, and **refrain from directing** — are the same regardless of the age of the young people or whether working with a spontaneous (one-time) group or a formal group that meets repeatedly over a period of time. It's important, however, to pay attention to the age(s) of youth in the group you are working with, how well-established the group is,

how the group is structured, and what the group's goals are.

Tailor Group Activities to the Age of Group Members

It's important to account for the ages of youth in your group. For all ages, it's important that the youth feel a sense of “we” — a sense that the group is their own and they belong to it. But that might look different for youth in elementary school compared to youth in middle or high school. Mentors need to know when to offer options that group members can choose from and when to hand over the keys. For example, in the elementary grades, youth may be most likely to feel engaged with group activities when they have a say in choosing what to do or what to talk about in the group. By high school, teens might not be content with being able to choose among options. Instead, they might prefer to come up with their own ideas and carry out their own plans, discussions, or activities. (See chapter 8, “Honoring Youth Voice and Building Power,” for additional information on how to help youth sit “in the driver's seat” of the relationship.)

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Realize that Size Does Matter

Face it — it's hard to keep everyone engaged when there is one group facilitator and many, many youth in the mix. But what is the right size for a group? While research hasn't definitively answered that question, there is a growing consensus that the



group needs to be manageable in size and allow for all members to contribute meaningfully. A group that is too large might splinter out into cliques that include some youth and exclude others. The right size for a group might depend on who the youth are and what the group's goals are. A large group that comes together just to hang out and have fun might work just fine, but a project-based group might be more effective if you keep the numbers relatively small. It might also be advisable to limit the size of groups when working with youth who have behavioral challenges. Common group configurations typically look like one mentor working with four to six youth or perhaps a team of two to three mentors working with 10 to 12 youth. There is no magic ratio, but those types of models will not overwhelm most mentors and will allow all the young people to play a part and not get lost in the shuffle.

When possible, a rule of thumb is to try to keep the overall group size to 10 or fewer youth, and to keep the ratio to about one mentor for every four youth. Of course, some activities, like sports teams, lend themselves to fairly large groups. But notice that in sports, everybody has a role to play: basketball has forwards and guards; baseball has pitchers, catchers, infielders, and outfielders. Even large groups can often be broken down into smaller,

more manageable groups where everyone has an important part to play. Two or three mentors can work together to facilitate groups that might be too large for one mentor to handle alone. The important point is to find a balanced group size that enables the group to do what it has to do (you need at least nine players to field a baseball team!) while making sure nobody falls through the cracks.

Bring It Together: Watch How the Group and the Youth Are Developing

Notice how the role of the group facilitator changes as the group moves from one stage to the next. Experts use the term “developmental relationships” to describe a process in which mentors help members gradually take ownership and responsibility for the group: Early on, the mentor is in the driver's seat and gradually moves to the passenger seat and maybe even a back seat. As groups move through the stages from Forming to Performing, the group process mirrors the healthy changes that occur as children grow into adolescents. Just like young people grow to become more independent, groups themselves take on greater responsibility. Keep in mind that things can change. Imagine someone leaves or a new member joins the group. In order to adapt, the group may need to revisit one or more of the earlier stages, and mentors temporarily may need to take on a more directive role.

Keep Your Eyes on the Prize: Program Goals

Group mentoring programs, teams, and clubs often have a job to do. A sports team needs to practice to be ready for the next game. A group program might have a curriculum designed to teach group members important skills. The challenge for the mentor is to help the group accomplish what it needs to do, while making space for important conversations to happen and relationships to





develop. Imagine that as part of a group mentoring program, you have a planned activity to discuss current events in the news. However, one of the group members was wrongly accused of stealing from another student and was suspended from school earlier in the day. Mentors need to know when to back off from planned activities and allow the group to process what has happened and work out a plan for supporting their peer. Mentors who keep the overall goals of the program in mind can continue to work with their group toward those goals, even when it means being flexible with plans.

Tips and Final Thoughts

Many group programs are formed for a reason. Mentoring programs may seek to help youth improve their academic performance or learn new social skills. Sports teams, youth clubs, and camps are formed for recreation, competition, and learning. Even a bunch of friends hanging out has a goal of relaxing and enjoying friendship. Facilitating a group in any of those circumstances requires finding a balance between meeting the goals of the group and keeping it engaging.

Balancing Control and Facilitation

If you are mentoring in a program that has a curriculum you need to follow, how do you do that while making room for youth to bring up the issues that are important in their lives, or to plan and carry out projects on their own? Here are some tips that group facilitators can use in striking that balance of giving away control of the group while keeping it on track:

- Get comfortable with silence. If you are feeling uncomfortable that nobody is speaking up, you can bet they are feeling it too. Wait it out and someone will eventually speak up.

- If they are talking more than you are, it's probably a good thing. If you aren't feeling the weight of keeping the conversation going, it means the youth are engaged in the topic.
- If they are bringing up difficult topics, it probably means they trust you and trust each other enough to come out with the important things in their lives.
- If you've got plans for the day, but they've got something else on their minds, maybe it's time to drop the plans and go with what the group needs. You can always come back to it later.

Be Prepared with the Tools and Materials Needed for a Successful Group Meeting

Some programs have a set curriculum that mentors are expected to follow. A good curriculum should not only provide guidance on what to do but also the materials needed to do it successfully. Whether you're following a curriculum or improvising as you go, it's important to use the group space to foster interaction and inclusion. You might not need any special materials at all. For example, it might be as simple as forming a circle so that group members are facing each other. As mentioned above, it's important to establish a routine, ground rules, and regular opening rituals and to close each meeting with goals for the week.

Groups need something to do. The last thing you want is to bring the group together and find they have nothing to talk about and nothing planned. It's better to have a carefully crafted plan that you drop at the last minute because something more important comes up than to leave it up to chance. Luckily, resources with ideas for icebreakers and group activities are easy to find in your local library or are just an internet search away.



Questions to Contemplate

Finally, group facilitation works best when it is a reflective practice. Take the time to reflect on how you're doing and how the group is progressing. Ask the mentees to reflect also: Are they getting out of the group what they had hoped for? How might things be changed to help them get more out of it? Keep asking yourself questions: What stage is my group in? What can I do to facilitate movement to the next stage? Are group members feeling a sense of ownership? Is anyone dominating or being left out? How effectively are my co-mentor and I working together?

We hope the advice and practices provided in this chapter help you in managing group mentoring interactions. Everything you can do to help build a sense of community, belonging, and shared experience will be helpful to the young people you are mentoring. The more they can collaborate and form positive relationships with one another, the more they will grow and the more they will value the partnership with you and other adults in their lives. Check out the resources below to further build your skills in this critical aspect of mentoring.





Additional Reading and Resources

The resources listed below can be accessed online through the links we have provided.

Learn Group Facilitation Skills:

- **Group Facilitation and Problem-Solving (The Community Toolbox)** A nice tutorial that can help you build your understanding of group facilitation. Click [here](#) to access.
- **Developmental Relationships: Helping Young People Be and Become Their Best Selves** This Search Institute resource describes how all adults can step up to help groups of young people grow in developmentally appropriate ways. Click [here](#) to access.
- **A Framework for Effectively Partnering with Young People** This Annie E. Casey Foundation resource offers a great primer on adult-youth partnerships that will be helpful to mentors. Click [here](#) to access.

Work with the Stages of Group Development:

- **The Five Stages of Group Development Explained** A great overview of the group stages discussed in this chapter. Click [here](#) to access.
- **Stages of Group Development: Tuckman's Stages** A simple handout that details Tuckman's concept of group stages. Click [here](#) to access.

Learn about Group Mentoring More Broadly:

- **Group Mentoring Supplement to the Elements of Effective Practice for Mentoring™** This resource, written for those designing mentoring programs, also has information that might be useful to you in your mentor role. Click [here](#) to access.
- **Reflections on Research (Podcast): Season 2, Episode 1** Mike Garringer and Gabriel Kuperminc discuss recent research on group mentoring. Click [here](#) to access.
- **Group Mentoring, National Mentoring Resource Center Model Review** Gabriel Kuperminc and Nancy Deutsch's comprehensive review of what research tells us about group mentoring. Click [here](#) to access.
- **Designing Group Mentoring Curriculum (webinar)** This webinar focuses on how to conceptualize and sequence activities for group mentoring programs and should be useful for mentors who are tasked with figuring out what a group should do together over time. Click [here](#) to access.