



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



MENTOR

CHAPTER 8

HONORING YOUTH VOICE AND BUILDING POWER

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What Does Honoring Youth Voice and Building Power Mean?

Honoring youth voice and building power can mean many things, from taking a step back and letting youth take charge in planning activities and discussions, to listening to youth interests and stated needs then making connections to broader contexts for them, to intentionally creating a relationship dynamic that gives youth a sense of agency. At their core, mentors need to have an unconditional positive regard (a term taken from the humanistic psychologist, Carl Rogers, that we will describe in more detail in this chapter) for their mentee and a belief that all youth are poised for greatness. These are skills and attitudes that can be learned to create environments where youth can be their authentic and full selves.

Your role as a mentor then becomes a knowledgeable navigator, a nonjudgmental sounding board, and a partner whose goal is to affirm, support, and encourage. This is the foundation to developing young people who have confidence in their voice and can affect positive change in our society. But, knowing when to lead and when to follow, when to share your point of view, and when to open yourself to a different way of thinking, requires practice and skill. This chapter will describe how mentors can honor and cultivate their mentee's voice and build power in youth, as well as the skills needed to successfully navigate this role.

Why Is Honoring Youth Voice and Building Power Important in Mentoring Relationships?

"There was a lot of distrust between me and adult figures, I always felt beneath and belittled by authority figures. By having that trusting

relationship with my mentors, it taught me to have better relationships with adults later on in life. Now I'm more assertive and more comfortable with adults . . . Even though there is a certain level of respect I need to give [adults], [I learned that] I also demand a certain respect that young people aren't given just because we are younger." —Sesha, 18, Maximizing Youth Voice, January 2021

"Young people constantly have to battle to be heard properly." —Meg, 22, Black Youth Town Hall, June 2020

"The relationship that my mentor and I have has taught me that collaboration is important and sharing power is even more [important]. I think it's important that adults and elders and mentors guide us, don't suffocate us, and join us as we are going through this. Support us." —Aniya, 18, Black Youth Town Hall, June 2020

As you can see in the quotes above, taken from a variety of youth-led webinars focused on mentoring, viewing youth as partners allows youth to build confidence in themselves and in their voice. They become more comfortable in spaces with adults, which gives them a sense of agency. Youth need and want to know they have power and can leverage the confidence they are building in their mentoring relationships toward achieving their broader goals. They are looking for partners and guides who see the greatness within them and are committed to nurturing that greatness.

Aniya talked about sharing power, which is a key component in how relationships support positive youth development. In 2013, the Search Institute released the Developmental Relationships Framework (click [here](#) to access), which highlights the characteristics of relationships that help young



people succeed. Since its release, this framework has been used in several research studies that have found sharing power is the strategy most strongly associated with multiple positive outcomes. According to the Search Institute, “Sharing power involves specific actions such as showing mutual respect, giving young people a voice in decisions, collaborating in solving problems, and creating leadership opportunities for young people.”¹

Dr. Torie Weiston-Serdan in her book, *Critical Mentoring: A Practical Guide*, describes the importance of being youth-centric. She speaks to the tradition of youth voice in youth movements. Without hearing and lifting youth voice, we might not have had a civil rights movement or current-day social movements like Black Lives Matter. While mentoring programs and mentors may not see themselves as part of social movements, it’s clear that in order to make space for youth to grow as socially conscious beings, mentors need to be ready to create this kind of environment.

Before we move into practical application — the how-to of this chapter — let’s look a little more closely at why bringing *unconditional positive regard* into the mentoring relationship as a foundational attitude will help create the conditions needed for honoring youth voice and building power.

Unconditional Positive Regard

“My mentor did a great job breaking down those boundaries . . . Every time I would greet [my mentor], she would greet me with ‘Hello, my friend.’ Just her letting me know that we were in fact friends and that she wasn’t just an adult telling me what to do, that meant a lot to me.” —Kyndall, 17, Maximizing Youth Voice, January 2021

Psychologist Carl Rogers asked the question: How can we encourage our youth to grow into healthy and happy people with a positive sense of self-worth? He shares that having an unconditional positive regard is a powerful attitude to adopt. It can have a huge impact on how youth feel about themselves and others, and set them up for success. So, what is unconditional positive regard?

When you have unconditional positive regard for someone, nothing they can do could give you a reason to stop seeing them as human and lovable. It does not mean that you accept everything they do, but that you accept who they are as a person. A young person who is worried about their mentor being judgmental will most likely withhold information or parts of themselves, which can have a negative impact on the relationship. The mentoring relationship may be one of the few places a young person can be their authentic self with an adult. We want them to feel safe and be accepted for who they are.

As a mentor, you have the privilege of bringing out the best in your mentee, but that often requires you to be intentional and prepared. The following describes what you need to do to prepare and is followed by the next section discussing what it all looks like in practice.

Are You Ready to Be a Youth-Centered Mentor?

“Actively seeking out insight from the youth is what helps make the most out of the [mentoring] relationship and will cultivate that trust and that bond, rather than taking the wheel yourself and doing what you think you need to do as an adult.” —Kyndall, 17, Maximizing Youth Voice, January 2021

¹ Search Institute. (2016, July 13). 11 ways to share power with youth. Search Institute Blog. <https://blog.search-institute.org/11-ways-share-power-youth>



As you take on the role of a youth-centered mentor, you should start by taking stock of yourself. Why do you want to be a mentor? What motivates you? Take a moment to reflect on your goals for mentoring, because those reflections will help you identify whether you are ready to have an authentic partnership with youth. Here is a personal assessment to consider [adapted from *Youth Service America's Youth and Adults Working Together: Integrating Youth Voice and Leadership into Programs*].² Ask yourself whether you:

- appreciate and seek to understand different perspectives, especially when they are unlike anything you have personally experienced;
- respect adults and youth equally;
- are willing to learn from young people, acknowledging they have knowledge to impart;
- focus on potential rather than what youth can already do; and
- recognize that young people can be — and are — leaders in their communities.

Your responses to these questions will help you determine where you are. If you have never been in situations where you learned from youth, for example, that's fine, but can you see yourself letting youth share their truths and knowledge? If you have never seen youth lead, can you acknowledge that youth have already been leading in many areas of our society?

You also need to examine your motives for wanting to be in a mentoring relationship. If you are doing this to feel better about yourself, then you may be disappointed. If you have chosen to mentor because you believe youth are our future and need our guidance to be the best they can possibly be, then you will come across that way when interacting with young people. Youth can tell when an adult is there

for them or there for some other reason, so it makes sense for you to first examine your readiness to share power with youth through mentoring.

What Does Honoring Youth Voice Look Like in Practice?

"We're looking for adult allies who can elevate our voices and get us into rooms that we are often pushed out of. We no longer want to be a generation that is seen but not heard. Let us into these rooms, give us a platform to speak, and also provide us with the resources that we need to elevate these voices and these visions we have in our head." —Meg, 22, Black Youth Town Hall, June 2020

The beginning of this chapter describes why youth voice is important and gives you some things you can do to prepare for elevating "the visions youth have in their heads," as Meg so beautifully noted in her quote. Now you may be asking yourself, "How do I do this? What can I do to lift my mentee's voice and build their power? How can I become a trusted navigator and advocate for my mentee's voice and vision?" Below are some helpful reminders and practical tips you can implement in your interactions with your mentee to honor their voice and work in partnership together.

Provide your mentee with choices and respect those choices.

Give your mentee options in deciding how you will spend your time together and what activities you will do. Whether your mentee is 8 or 16 years old, offering them choices is an important action. However, the way you do it may look different as your mentee grows. For example, for younger mentees, consider providing a menu of options, as it can be harder for younger children to think about what they want to do without some direction or

² Youth Service America (2014). *Youth and adults working together: Integrating youth voice and leadership into programs*. Retrieved 6/8/21 from <https://ysa.ispringcloud.com/acc/Yvsm3YAxMzg5MA/s/13890-a7cYg-PtLDf-hcHo2>



structure. Older mentees may want to co-construct their choices with you. As a young person navigates the transition to becoming a young adult, you want to allow them to develop a stronger sense of agency and have greater decision-making power. Encourage them to be independent thinkers while also offering diverse opportunities to be challenged and successful. If your mentee makes a choice you question, respectfully ask them questions to help you understand their reasoning.

Be open to learning from your mentee.

As discussed earlier, in assessing your readiness to be a youth-centered mentor, it is essential for you to recognize that young people can and have been leaders in their communities. They are full people with knowledge to impart, and you must enter the relationship with the mindset that you can learn just as much from your mentee as they can learn from you. Initially, young people may feel intimidated when interacting with adults as there is an unequal power dynamic and a learned assumption that it is the adult's job to "teach" the young person things they don't know about or have not been exposed to. As a mentor, expressing your genuine enthusiasm and openness to learn from your mentee helps break down this power dynamic. It shows that everyone — adults and young people alike — are continually growing and bring unique experiences to their relationships that we can all learn from. Young people, especially, have tremendous potential to be teachers and leaders. Mentors can cultivate this power by listening to youth's thoughts and ideas. Mentors can use the resources, platforms, and networks to which they have access to connect their mentee, elevate their mentee's voice and ideas, and encourage their mentee to lead in actualizing and implementing their ideas and goals.

"[What] means a lot [to me] is asking a young person's insight on something. [It shows that] you really care about their perspective and what they care about, and that you're willing to have those conversations with them and willing to learn from them. Showing them that you're viewing them not only as a young person [to whom] you're teaching things, but [as] a young person who can teach you things. That's an extremely important and crucial way to really make your mentee feel like they also have a say in the relationship."—Kyndall, 17, Maximizing Youth Voice, January 2021

"What do we have individually and what can we bring to this relationship together as two separate people?"—Sydney, 22, Maximizing Youth Voice, January 2021

As mentioned in the Introduction to this resource, building trust takes time in any relationship, but this trust is the foundation to a successful relationship. When interacting with your mentee, don't push them to talk or expect that they will open up right away, as they may be struggling with a history of feeling distrustful of, and unheard by, adults. A part of building trust requires mutual respect, honesty, and being vulnerable to share who you are authentically with your mentee. As with any other personal relationship, you can't expect your mentee to share about themselves without sharing about yourself as well. Address gaps in knowledge and be sensitive to the different identities and experiences you both bring to the relationship (see chapter 2 on cultural humility). At the same time, you should not only center yourselves on how you feel or what you think in your interactions with your mentee. Give youth the opportunity to talk and share their ideas and thoughts, and recognize instances where you may talk over or talk at your mentee about your



ideas and how this may come off as patronizing. Test yourself: Who is talking more — you or your mentee? How much time are you spending asking questions and responding versus imparting information?

“My relationship with my mentor has taught me and inspired me to be a mentor as well.”
—Kyndall, 17, *Maximizing Youth Voice*, January 2021

Practice proactive listening and actively ask questions and seek insights.

Listening proactively and asking questions to learn about your mentee’s perspective will keep you from assuming what is best for your mentee and telling them what to do. Remember this is not about doing what you may feel is best, but rather doing what is best for your mentee’s specific needs and goals and supporting them by listening, asking questions, and validating what they are feeling and what they hope to accomplish. Some questions to consider asking include:

- What do you need?
- What do you want to do?
- What do you care about?
- What is something you’re struggling with right now, and what can I provide for you?
- What would be most helpful for you at this moment, and how can I help?

When your mentee is sharing something, ask them, “What would you like me to provide? Would you like my honest feedback? Or do you just want someone to be a listening ear or someone to vent to?”

Remember to validate your mentee when they are confused, are questioning, or don’t know what they want or what to do next.

As an advocate and supporter, it’s important to always practice active listening and give honest recognition and specific (as opposed to overly general) praise for your mentee’s successes, good decisions, and actions. At the same time, while we want to create space for youth voice and respect their decisions, mentors also can’t expect that mentees will have all the answers and know what decision to make. This is where you come in as a navigator and nonjudgmental sounding board to provide your feedback, share any relevant past experiences, and work with your mentee to problem-solve and talk through next steps. Offer options or multiple potential solutions and get their feedback, rather than just suggesting one way of figuring out or solving a problem. Consider asking, “What do you think about this Option A or this Option B?”

Hold yourself and your mentee accountable for next steps.

Be sure to follow up with your mentee after you’ve worked together to discuss a problem or have decided on a course of action. Consider asking, “Last week, we talked about X being a potential way to help you. Were you able to get a chance to do X? How did it go?” In addition, if you promised you would help with reaching out to someone in your social circle for your mentee or researching some materials or resources they could use, hold yourself accountable to that promise. As Ivette says in the quote below, creating a plan together and then implementing it based on your mentee’s feedback helps them feel respected because it shows that you value what they have to say and will go beyond simply validating, to also taking action to support them.



“When the mentee speaks or the mentee suggests something, give some type of input and not only say ‘Yes, we can consider it,’ but actually flesh it out with ‘I want to know more,’ ‘What else do you think should come after,’ and being the listening ear and have the mentee speak . . . Give the mentee an environment where what they have to say is welcomed and if anything is important, then just writing it down or making a plan [with the mentee] ... it really does make the young person feel like what they have to say is important and is respected because something is being done about it, it’s actually being considered. Rather than ‘OK, I’ll keep that in mind.’ but actually fleshing it out and being proactive about it [together].” —Ivette, 21, Maximizing Youth Voice, January 2021

beginning how to best communicate and set goals . . . Mentees all have different personalities. Some mentees will want the mentor as their friend and have someone to vent to and be a resource. Some mentees won’t and are only there for the goals that were established. It’s part of the role to be sensitive to one another, not only to the mentee, but the mentee to the mentor as well . . . Be open to change as the relationship develops.” —Ivette, 21, Maximizing Youth Voice, January 2021

“Young people don’t just want a seat at the table, we want our own table and our own seats and we’re inviting adults to come onboard.” —Meg, 22, Black Youth Town Hall, June 2020

Regularly check in and encourage mentee feedback.

As a mentor, you should frequently check in, both directly and indirectly, on what is working and not working in your mentoring relationship. Being a mentor is a learning process for you and what better way to evaluate yourself than to ask your mentee? Provide opportunities for your mentee to give you feedback on how you can be a better mentor, whether that is during your meeting or in a written format (e.g., through email/texting). Without ever forcing them to respond, give your mentee time to process how they may feel and check in to see if there was something they had been thinking about but needed more time to process. Once you get this feedback, show your appreciation for your mentee’s honesty, and act on it! Do your best to improve whatever your mentee feels may need improvement. This shows them that you respect their opinion and will honor (and act on) their voice.

“Figure out and communicate clearly in the





Pitfalls to Avoid

“Adults don’t know what it’s like to be a young person in today’s world.” —Aniya, 18, Black Youth Town Hall, June 2020

When a young person feels comfortable and willing to be their authentic selves, situations may arise that give you pause. Here are a few things to expect:

- 1. Be prepared to be challenged by youth.** As youth find their voice, they will demand to be heard — which is the point! As long as there is mutual respect, it’s OK to disagree on approaches or goals. Being an active listener and guide will help. If you are working on a project, creating norms for decision-making may help mitigate any challenges.
- 2. Check your biases.** It’s important for young people to know that their voice, culture, and identity are of equal importance to those of anyone else, including their mentors. If you

are in a program, ask your program leaders for extra training, or visit chapter 2, “Practicing Cultural Humility,” for more information.

- 3. Don’t patronize.** In other words, don’t pretend you’re interested in learning more when you really aren’t. Youth can tell if you’re patronizing them. Always be authentic, and ask if you’re unsure.

So, what does this look like in the real world? The case studies below illustrate some common pitfalls mentors may experience around supporting youth voice and provide suggestions for how mentors can approach their interactions to ensure youth are meaningfully engaged and that they feel their voices and opinions are valued. Though the strategies in this chapter are not always easy to put into practice and require continuous practice and self-evaluation, these examples are a good place to start to reflect on your mentoring journey so far, and how you would respond in situations where there may be a disconnect between you and your mentee.

Case Study 1

Marie is a first-time mentor who has been matched with Sandy, a 13-year-old in middle school. Marie is a young lawyer and is very excited to be a mentor, as she feels like she has a lot of experiences and knowledge that could help a young person. Marie has met with Sandy a few times now and usually comes into their interactions with a lot of excitement. She always starts by asking Sandy a bunch of questions, such as, “How was school today?” “What do you like in school?” “What are some things you enjoy doing?” After a long day at school and having to take care of her siblings at home, Sandy is overwhelmed by all of Marie’s questions and her enthusiasm feels fake to her. Sandy responds either with short, one-sentence responses or “I don’t know.” Marie isn’t sure what to do now or how to get Sandy to elaborate, so instead of asking more questions, Marie jumps right into the next activity, without asking Sandy what she would like to do today or what would be most helpful.

In actuality, Sandy is intimidated by Marie and sees Marie as another professional authority figure who is hard to relate to, as Marie hardly ever shares anything about herself other than stuff about her job and her academic experiences. Sandy feels uncomfortable asking Marie any questions or sharing that she would actually like to work on her public speaking skills as she is terrified of presenting in



class. In one instance, when Sandy did mention that she really disliked her English class, Marie was adamant that Sandy should speak to her English teacher to let him know how Sandy was feeling, as from Marie's past experiences, this has always helped Marie feel more comfortable. Sandy wasn't sure if this was the best thing to do and felt like it was already difficult to speak to her teacher because he held views different from hers. However, Sandy just agreed and told Marie she would talk to her teacher. Marie later checks in with Sandy and asks her if she talked to her teacher. Even though she hadn't, Sandy says, "Yes" because she doesn't want to disappoint or upset Marie.

Analysis:

In this case study, Sandy, the mentee, does not feel comfortable enough with her mentor, Marie, to open up about her life, including the things she is struggling with in school and at home, because there is a lack of trust and relationship building. Marie, the mentor, approaches their interactions in a friendly way, however, does not realize her overexcitement comes off as being fake and inauthentic to Sandy. Marie asks a lot of questions and is unaware that she is doing more talking than listening, and she doesn't give Sandy enough time to answer truthfully and elaborate. In addition, Marie doesn't share anything about herself, which makes Sandy feel like all the attention is on her and that she doesn't feel like she knows who Marie is. When meeting, Marie doesn't give Sandy the opportunity to choose how they will spend their time together or ask her what she wants to do. When Sandy does express that she's having difficulty in her English class, Marie doesn't ask about what it is that Sandy is struggling with, but rather assumes that Sandy's experiences will be similar to her own past experiences in the classroom; if Sandy just talks to her teacher and communicates that she's having a hard time, this will fix the problem.

Marie doesn't see that Sandy isn't getting what she needs out of the relationship. As further discussed in chapter 4 on attunement, some key clues that any mentor, like Marie, can pay attention to include: Marie is doing most of the talking and talking more than listening; Sandy's short one-word answers suggest she doesn't feel like more "real" answers would be heard; Sandy doesn't liven up when she sees Marie, but rather folds in and closes up more as their meetings continue. Marie could consider doing an icebreaker activity with Sandy where they both share things about themselves such as their likes, dislikes, and hobbies, their families, who they live with, and what feels like home. Creating a list together of things they would like to do during their meetings or goals and things they would like to improve on would also create more structure, set expectations, and provide opportunities for Sandy to weigh in with her input, all the while getting to know Marie a bit better and her intentions for entering this relationship. When Sandy brings up disliking her English class, Marie could ask for more information about why Sandy doesn't like the class and any aspects that Sandy may like. If Sandy currently feels uncomfortable with her teacher, what other supports, such as other school staff, counselors, or supportive adults, exist at school who could help advocate for her or help Sandy with working through her class assignments? Marie should recognize that Sandy may have a different way of approaching a problem that is preferable to her personality and comfort level — just because something has worked for you in the past, doesn't mean it'll work for your mentee.



Case Study 2

Jordan is a mentor and has been paired with Cameron for two years since Cameron was a sophomore in high school. Cameron feels comfortable talking with Jordan about the stresses and pressures associated with school, especially as Cameron thinks more about college and options after high school. Cameron is now a rising senior, and over the years, Cameron has developed a greater understanding and self-awareness of his personal views, passions, and the change he wishes to see in his community and broader society. The continued violence against the Black community in the United States has taken a toll on Cameron's mental health, but has also ignited his drive to take action and raise awareness, specifically awareness of the daily challenges and issues faced by Black and Brown youth in Cameron's own city.

Cameron, along with a group of friends, want to organize a rally against police brutality and racial injustice at his high school, but they don't know where to start nor do they know if the school administration or the teachers will be supportive. Cameron tells Jordan he hasn't been able to focus on his college applications and homework lately and then mentions his idea to organize a rally. Jordan immediately responds that Cameron and his friends will get in trouble and questions if he should hold an event at this time because the issue is "controversial." Though Jordan agrees with the message behind the protests, he mentions that a lot of protests recently have become violent and have led to looting and property destruction. He then expresses worry for Cameron and how it might look for Cameron on college applications if Cameron is arrested or suspended.

Cameron is surprised and extremely hurt by Jordan's response. Cameron feels unheard and misunderstood and now feels that he doesn't want to share what's really important to him with Jordan. Cameron is determined to move forward with this event, regardless of what their school may say or if he gets in trouble.

Analysis:

In this example, Jordan's response dismisses and invalidates Cameron, especially when the event Cameron wants to host pertains to an issue that is deeply important and personal to him. When Cameron mentioned that he had been having trouble focusing on school work, Jordan could have responded first by acknowledging what has been going on in the world, checking in on how Cameron is feeling lately and why it has been hard to focus. When Cameron brought up the idea of planning a rally, Jordan could have given Cameron space to elaborate on what his vision is as well as talk more about his school's culture in allowing students to rally, while also making sure he was not bombarding Cameron with questions to discourage him or make him feel like his plan or lack of a plan is bound for failure or punishment from the school. This would have provided a safe space for Cameron to think and talk through his plans and the school's potential reaction without Jordan explicitly raising these issues/concerns himself. Instead of expressing his views so quickly, Jordan could ask Cameron what would be most helpful and how Jordan could be supportive in the moment. Would Cameron like to hear Jordan's opinion on the event? Would Cameron like more guidance on organizing an event? Or would he simply like a sounding board to brainstorm some ideas with Jordan providing his honest feedback on what Cameron is thinking about doing?



While Jordan may have been genuinely concerned for Cameron's safety, Cameron was hurt that Jordan did not acknowledge why this idea matters to Cameron in the first place. Hearing Cameron's initial ideas first and doing some brainstorming would have provided a better context for Jordan to ask Cameron if Jordan could share some of his questions and concerns as some things to consider moving forward, such as whether the school has rules and policies around protests. Regardless of what Jordan may think on the issue or the protest itself, Cameron is not asking for permission from Jordan to host it. A mentor should recognize they are not in the position to persuade a young person to act or do something in a way that they completely agree with, but rather to listen to what the young person has to say, empathize with what they are feeling in the moment, ask what they need, and offer their honest feedback on ways to approach a situation if the mentee is looking for more support.

Part of building youth voice and confidence involves giving your mentee the agency to make their own informed decisions. In order for them to do that, as mentors, we have a role in equipping them with information they may not have known, and sharing different points of views and perspectives with respect and genuine care that can help inform their decisions. At the same time, we must acknowledge that we also do not have all the answers, and there is never one "right" way to answer or respond. Acknowledging our own gaps creates space for mentors and mentees to learn and grow together. Mentors should also recognize that their knowledge and views are largely shaped by their own personal and lived experiences. It is essential to be sensitive and empathetic to what young people are feeling, especially when there are traumatic and violent events that directly impact them. Though we may have our mentee's best interest in mind, just as Jordan does for Cameron, we should continuously practice checking in with ourselves as people who have individual biases and varying experiences in a world that is constantly changing. The young people we want to support are just as multifaceted and have their own experiences, views, and passions that may not always align with what we feel is "best" or "accepted."

Of course, there may also be situations when your mentee is engaging in clearly dangerous behavior. As discussed later, honoring youth voice and building power doesn't mean sitting by and watching them go down a harmful path. Instead it's ensuring that your mentee feels heard and is acting in line with their own values (see chapter 11 on conversations about behavior change), and offering your own thoughts and experiences when your mentee is ready to hear them.



Contextual Considerations for Honoring Youth Voice

Honoring youth voice and building power can look different depending on your mentee's age as well as the program or community context. If your mentee is still in elementary school, providing choices in activities and asking questions are ways to honor youth voice, gain their trust, and gauge their interests. Part of this involves letting them sit in the driver's seat and giving them some directions to help guide them in figuring out their goals, likes, and dislikes. As your mentee develops over time, their needs and interests will undoubtedly change, which may require a change in your approach, especially as they begin to form more of their own views and sense of self. Identifying and naming emotions, identifying potential options, and making decisions or acting toward a goal are all important skills to cultivate as a young person develops.

For older youth, it's important to move from not only providing options or asking questions, but also to actually allowing your mentee to ask their own questions, make their own decisions, create their own plans, and execute these plans as the main driver. Adolescence is a critical time for young people to have these experiences to build their confidence and leadership skills. Make efforts to cultivate their self-advocacy skills, give youth space to identify issues that matter to them, and brainstorm with them how they can achieve their goals or work to create change. See chapter 9, which discusses how mentors can build critical consciousness in youth and serve as “co-conspirators” in helping them take action, which will deepen your skills as someone who can partner with youth to cultivate their voice and power.

The context of your mentoring work also matters. We acknowledge that mentoring happens both in

structured mentoring programs and naturally in communities. Depending on your particular context, you may approach the relationship differently. If you are mentoring through a program, you have program staff who can help you navigate issues or provide training and support in how to build rapport with, and learn about, your mentee. However, no program can prepare you for all situations, and you may find yourself in the moment and realize you have to think on your feet. Your first priority should be to ensure that your mentee feels heard. This is the best way to empower them and strengthen their voice. As things come up, make sure you are consistently creating a safe space for them using all of the skills and suggestions noted in this chapter.

This is also true in mentoring relationships that form naturally, outside of programs. For example, you may have a young neighbor who seeks you out for advice. Sometimes, you feel confident in your counsel, but other times you may need more reflection. In either case, your goal is the same. Do not stifle, overwhelm, or judge. Instead, listen and get additional support if needed. See below for a few tips for applying the skills discussed in this chapter.

Tips and Final Thoughts

“A lot of times, naturally adults try to help and guide but will accidentally suffocate us or try to take control, take the lead, be in front.” —Aniya, 18, Black Youth Town Hall, June 2020

When we are unsure of ourselves (or too sure of ourselves, in some cases), we may inadvertently stifle, or as Aniya describes it, accidentally suffocate or try to take control. It is helpful in those moments to pause, listen, and ask clarifying questions. One of the ways you can get more comfortable with listening and asking questions is to do some



homework. Read about the issues affecting youth. Specifically, ask young people about the issues they care about without overwhelming them with questions. If your mentee mentions that they are curious about issues related to food insecurity, you might ask some general, clarifying questions then do some research on your own to understand the issue more broadly. That way, you can help your mentee process questions and maybe even do a volunteer project together to help address the issue.

You may find yourself in a situation — particularly early on in your relationship — where the young person is not used to being asked questions and may not have much to say. In that case, ask them what they like doing or if they have a desire to learn something new. Maybe mention hobbies or skills you have, to see if they spark interest. There are other chapters in this resource that speak to establishing a relationship with a young person, but, ultimately, you have the privilege of building a relationship with your mentee, so you should be as prepared and intentional as possible.

Projects are an excellent way to establish relationships while doing something meaningful for the community. Programs may help set the stage for projects to occur or provide set projects that you can participate in with your mentee. Establishing partnerships with youth toward a common goal has proven to be an excellent way to connect with young people.

The term **youth-adult partnership** (Y-AP) refers to youth and adults who are working together for a common purpose. In the Y-AP model, youth and adults jointly identify a problem in the youth's life that they are trying to solve or work through or a broader community or societal issue. They then work together to design possible solutions and implement those solutions. Within programs, Y-AP

can focus on governance and program planning, co-delivering workshops, collaborating on research, and fundraising. Within schools, Y-AP can focus on redesigning curriculum, school policy revisions, and school-community collaborations. These types of projects are typically geared toward older youth, but projects like these can be done with your mentee at any stage of their development. We should never assume that elementary-school-aged youth, for example, would not want to positively impact their communities. Younger mentees can participate in book drives or make gift boxes to deliver to food pantries or even make cards for service people who are away from home.

As you prepare to mentor, remember that honoring youth voice and building their power is about being a trusted guide. That doesn't mean that you sit silently by and let youth go down paths you know are problematic and unhealthy in the mistaken belief that this is how to raise youth voice. Being prepared to mentor youth means being willing to work in collaboration with them and to have high expectations for performance. Mentoring works when adults teach young people things, be it new skills or viewpoints, they didn't know before. At the same time, all youth also have the potential to teach adults things they didn't know before. If this is happening in an authentic way, your mentoring relationship will be successful.



Additional Reading and Resources

If you want to learn about a few youth activist leaders, here are three to explore:

- **Mari Copeny**, 13-year-old activist, philanthropist, and “future president,” is on the front lines helping youth to embrace their power through equal opportunity. She is also known as Little Miss Flint because of her leadership around clean water in Flint, Michigan. Click [here](#) to access.
- **Greta Thunberg**, 18-year-old Swedish environmental activist who has worked to address the problem of climate change, who founded a movement in 2018 known as Fridays for Future (also called School Strike for Climate). Click [here](#) to access.
- **Lonnie Chavis**, 12-year-old antibullying advocate, has launched a campaign, IGTV show, and hashtag around #FixYourHeart. Click [here](#) to access.

Other Online Resources:

- **“Why Youth Voice Matters,”** Blog posted by the Birmingham City School of Education and Social Work – This article highlights some of the promise and tension around youth voice. Click [here](#) to access.
- **“Here’s Why It’s So Important to Create Opportunities for Youth Voices to Be Heard,”** by Jaclyn Cirinna, published by The Juvenile Justice Information Exchange – An article written by a formerly incarcerated young person speaking to the importance of youth voice. Click [here](#) to access.

- ***The Developmental Relationships Framework***

The Search Institute has identified five elements, expressed in 20 specific actions, that make relationships powerful in young people’s lives. Click [here](#) to access.

- **“What is Unconditional Positive Regard in Psychology?”** by Courtney E. Ackerman, published by Positive Psychology – A detailed article about unconditional positive regard. Click [here](#) to access.

- **“12 Community Service Projects for Kids”**

An article highlighting different projects to do with youth of all ages. Click [here](#) to access.

If you are interested in viewing recordings of the events where the youth quotes in this chapter originated, you can find them here:

- ***Black Youth Town Hall Webinar***

Click [here](#) to access.

- ***Maximizing Youth Voice Webinar***

Click [here](#) to access.