

# INTRODUCTION

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Welcome to this resource, which we hope will be a valuable source of information and inspiration on your journey as a mentor. Whether you have been engaged as a mentor to young people for decades or are just now thinking about how you can be more supportive of a young person in your life, everyone at MENTOR thanks you for stepping up to make a difference in someone else's life.

The role of “mentor” is a very special one, not just in our modern world but since the dawn of civilization and in every culture and community. Mentors have come in many forms — as wise elders, as part of extended kinship networks, as spiritual leaders, as teachers and coaches, and as everyday citizens who simply want to offer a helping hand. But regardless of who has stepped into that role, all of these caring adults have played an important part in helping the next generations thrive. Young people experience many caring relationships with adults, from their own parents and families to the adults they meet at school and out in the world. But the role of *mentor* is unique, as it speaks to a relationship that is grounded not only in love, but also in common purpose and with an eye to the future. We *all* need mentors throughout our lives, and regardless of who you are mentoring, we sincerely hope this resource helps you be the best mentor you can be.

## What You Will Learn in this Resource

One of the realities of being in a mentoring relationship is that, like all human relationships, it will have its ups and downs, moments of joy and moments of challenge. Mentors are not simply friends to young people, nor are they simply “authority figures.” They show up to these relationships with purpose and a desire to help that young person explore possibilities, have conversations of learning and healing, set a course for their future, and overcome any challenges that

pop up along the way. Because this is a complex role to play, there are skills and approaches mentors may need to bring to a mentoring relationship to enable that young person to get what they need from the experience.

This resource will teach you about several key aspects of being a mentor:

- the mindsets and attitudes that lay the foundation for a strong mentoring relationship;
- basic information about youth development and the typical relationship cycle you might experience while mentoring; and
- critical skills and competencies you may need to grow and refine so you can meet the needs of the young people in your life.

All of these are explained in detail in the pages that follow. This information will help you fill your mentoring “toolbox” with the skills and attitudes that can help a young person (often referred to as a “mentee” in these types of relationships) on their journey. Because every mentoring relationship is unique, you likely won't apply *all* of these skills to every relationship. But the topics highlighted in this resource are the ones that research suggests are extremely valuable in a wide variety of mentoring contexts.

You should also know that your growth and learning as a mentor should continue well beyond the information in these pages. We encourage you to seek out additional knowledge, training, and tools, as well as the wisdom of other mentors. Here we offer information about, and links to, many other resources you can turn to if you want to go even deeper in building your ability to be an effective mentor.



So whether you are a new volunteer in a mentoring program, an extended family member who wants to better support a child you love, a neighbor who wants to support youth in your community, or a teacher, coach, or other youth-serving professional who wants to make a bigger impact on those you encounter in your work, we encourage you to dive into the content of these pages and remember to never stop learning, growing, and having fun as a valued mentor to the youth in your life.

## Adopting a Foundational Mentoring “Mindset”

While the later sections of this resource highlight a number of skills and strategies that research suggests are important to mentoring relationships, there are also some critical attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors that serve as the foundation of being an effective mentor. It may be helpful to think of these as contributing to a “mentoring mindset”—a way of thinking and interacting that places young people at the center of this work and allows those of us serving as mentors to be true partners in a young person’s journey.

Take some time to reflect on the components of a mentoring mindset described below and do an honest assessment of whether and how these beliefs and principles show up in your work with young people. It may be challenging to be the impactful mentor you’d like to be if you are struggling to bring these types of core values to your relationship. Think of them as the foundation that you build on in this role. There are four main components to this mindset:

### 1. *Be Intentional (“I see you”)*

**Always prioritize youth’s needs** – Though you may get a lot out of the experience of being a mentor, the aim is to support youth by keeping *their needs*

top of mind (read more on this in chapter 8). Be curious! Make an effort to get to know the young person — their dreams, goals, skills, interests, personality — and, importantly, their history and context. We all come to relationships with our own unique biases and ways of seeing things, but it is important as adult mentors to spend time reflecting on our own biases about what we want to see happen for the youth. We need to get past these biases to effectively center what the *youth* wants from the relationship.

**Have a positive and respectful view of youth and their families** – This work is not about “fixing,” “saving,” or having all the answers. Although there is space to bring your story, skills, resources, and expertise into the relationship in a way that can support youth on their journey, it’s important to provide this support without judgment. Check your biases and motivations, and be able to make the decision not to mentor if your beliefs and motivations are grounded in negativity. This is particularly important when you engage with the families, communities, and cultures of the young people you mentor (see chapter 7). Take the time to create a climate of mutual respect — your mentoring will not be valued without this.

**Honor the young person’s full self** – Recognize and appreciate the youth’s culture, identity, life experiences, and trauma, as they all contribute to how youth see the world and themselves. Don’t make youth have to fit your worldview or disregard things that make them “whole.” There is space for disagreement, difference, and challenge — with humility and openness to learning, and without rejecting or ignoring important aspects of young peoples’ identity. And by “full self” we mean every aspect of that young person. No one’s identity is comprised of just one or two factors (race, gender,



etc.). Honor all the identities that a young person may have (see chapter 2 for more on learning about and honoring youth's identities). Some of those may be strongly formed when you meet, while others may be emerging and can become stronger or healthier with your support.

## **2. Be Supportive (“I got you”)**

**Commit fully to the relationship** – It is very important to commit and follow through on being there for the young person you are mentoring, and not back out even when the role becomes challenging. Being consistent and curious, checking in and communicating regularly, and being fully present in your interactions is essential. Communicate ahead of time with youth about the “cycle” of your relationship, especially if it is time-bound with an agreed-upon closing point (such as those created in structured mentoring programs). And aim to celebrate your experience together when closure is needed. (See the next section for tips about how mentoring relationships typically progress.)

**Be authentic and honest** – Act with integrity. There is no room for coercion or deceit when working with a young person. You are enough and you can do it! Be yourself and share your story and life lessons. Just remember that anyone you mentor deserves your truth, your respect, and your real self.

**Do no harm** – Above all else, leave this young person at least as well as you found them. This is the most important foundational element in any mentoring relationship. Although mentors can do great good for young people, those who are inconsistent or disappear when things get tough can also do great harm. It's important to create a safe and healthy space for youth through boundary setting, appropriate disclosure, respecting privacy and confidentiality, and following through

on promises to let the young person know they will always be safe in their interactions with you and you won't let them down. Incorporate and model wellness, mindfulness, and coping skills to demonstrate the importance of taking care of oneself and others.

## **3. Take a Developmental Approach (“I'm here to help you grow”)**

The bulk of the remainder of this resource covers strategies for offering your mentee what we call “developmental” experiences. You could even think of the whole relationship as being “developmental” in that the core purpose is the healthy and positive development of this young person. There are endless ways a mentor can support development, but a few, further detailed in later chapters, include:

**Consider a goal-orientation** – If the young person has shared concrete goals and aspirations with you, place them at the center of your relationship and think about how you might leverage your skills, knowledge, or network to strategically support their steps. If the young person hasn't set any concrete goals, that's okay too — they might be able to with your help. It's also just fine if your relationship simply provides things like emotional support, love, hopefulness, and a sense of identity. But at some point, you will likely help this young person figure out what's next in their journey (see chapter 10 on goal setting).

### **Honor and strengthen the youth's web of support**

– You are only one person contributing to a web of supportive relationships for the young person you are working with. This web can include guardians, family, peers/near-peers, coaches, supervisors, teachers, and more. Take some time to get to know and work with the other caring members of this group (see chapter 7 for helpful tips in this area). This can help you gain insights into the youth you're



working with and can help the entire web support them better. You can also facilitate adding new people to this group over time, broadening the caring adults in their life in meaningful ways (see chapter 12 for more information on how to expand your mentee's support network).

**Take a “critical mentoring” approach** – Young people know that they occupy a world full of challenges among all of the opportunities, and they may need your help in learning to question and understand the world around them. Youth need support in navigating, shaping, and improving the spaces and broader culture they encounter. As a mentor you can be a major asset in helping youth move from surviving to *thriving* by helping them turn spaces shaped by oppression, bias, prejudice, and injustices into spaces rooted in liberation, empowerment, belonging, and equity (see chapter 9, which is devoted to critical consciousness-building).

**Be willing to grow and learn** – All mentors grow as people through the experience, but only if they are willing to be open to new experiences and ideas. You may find you are gaining as much from being in the young person's community and circle of support as they are in yours. Be sure to seek out additional resources, tools, and programs in their community to support your relationship. Every person is a teacher and a learner. The young people in your life are sources of knowledge, skills, and information that can be greatly beneficial in your own growth. Take the time to both teach and learn, investing in a bidirectional relationship. Allowing youth to “give back” in this way can be a gift to you both!

#### **4. Be Communal (“We are in this together”)**

##### **Leverage community resources and role models** –

Look for resources, role models, and opportunities in both of your communities to support your relationship and the goals of your mentee (see chapter 12 for tips on how to do this). One of the key skills a young person can learn is how to identify and sustain supportive relationships — engaging in your communities provides a rich context for experiences and connections.

##### **Care about *all* young people's circumstances**

– Whether you are mentoring for a season or a lifetime, a mentoring mindset can strengthen your interactions and relationships because it is oriented toward thinking about, and acting on, what is best for youth. It involves not only caring about individual young people you meet, but also contributing to the policies, practices, and contexts that allow young people to thrive wherever they live, work, play, and learn. Ideally, adults with a mentoring mindset will help turn these spaces into mentor/relationship-rich environments. So, try to think beyond just your role with specific youth, and contribute to making the world around you more supportive of young people on a broader scale. And once you have adopted this mindset and transitioned into a mentor role, use your abilities to wholeheartedly support the goals, dreams, vision, and abilities of youth through honoring their sense of agency and making a meaningful contribution to the process of their growth and progress. Consider this mindset to be the starting point on your journey to help all young people have the meaningful relationships they need to thrive.



## Mentoring Relationships 101

In addition to this mentoring mindset, there are some things you should know about working with young people of different ages, and some basic principles on how mentoring relationships tend to develop over time. This information will help you tailor your mentoring relationship to the needs and development of the young person you are working with, while also providing you with an understanding of what to expect as your relationship evolves over time.

### ***A basic understanding of child and adolescent development is helpful***

Although every child's development is somewhat unique, and youth will enter and exit "stages" of development at different ages, all youth will have distinct needs and challenges as they age. Knowing broadly what these needs are will help you understand how to support the young person you're mentoring and what they may be ready to work on with you. Below, we discuss a few broad stages of youth development and the chapters in this resource that explore specific topics in more detail.

**Early elementary school** – As children start elementary school, they are just beginning to explore the social world outside of their families and are full of wonder. They may occasionally struggle with managing their emotions and behavior and tend to be very self-focused — they can't yet see things fully from others' perspectives and can have difficulty holding two-way conversations. Engaging them in activities that let you play alongside and with them is a great way to enjoy your time together and help them build "people" skills that will benefit them far into their future. Young children "learn by doing" rather than listening or reading (as older children can do), so they will benefit most from

hands-on learning through play. Young children also have fairly short attention spans. Try to get them involved in brief, fun activities that can hold their attention and provide opportunities for them to grow and take pride in their own growth (see chapter 3 on the importance of play in mentoring youth of all ages). Young children are very curious about the "hows" and "whys" of the world around them. Offering children a wide range of new activities — from sports, music, and games to arts and crafts — is a great way to help them explore and learn from activities they may grow to love. Make sure to "tune in" to their engagement level to understand what they enjoy and shift to other activities as needed (see chapter 4 on the art of being attuned to the young person you are working with).

Although children in this stage often have a best friend at school or in their neighborhood, they are still very much based in their family, with "right" and "wrong" defined by their families. Developing a positive, respectful relationship with your mentee's family and taking time to understand how they would like your relationship to unfold can strengthen your mentoring relationship at every stage, but it is particularly important with very young children, as your activities will depend on your mentee's family's schedule and needs (see chapter 7 on working with central players in your mentee's world). Although children in early elementary school are still very much based in their families, they can also become very attached to adults outside of their family, will try very hard to please them, and may compete for their attention — something to be aware of in group settings (see chapter 6 on mentoring in groups).



**Late elementary and middle school** – In early adolescence, the conversations young people have are becoming more “two-sided.” Youth are gaining a sense of humor (and are better able to understand your sense of humor). They can think more abstractly, make plans, and focus their attention for longer periods of time. They can also be emotional and argumentative. As peers gain importance, youth may worry about fitting in and may benefit from joining school or community groups to help develop a sense of connection to their peer group and larger community.

A particularly difficult phase for youth is the transition from elementary school, where there is only one teacher and set of classmates, to middle school where there are several teachers and new peer groups to engage with. Many youth struggle academically and socially during this time, so having access to a consistent, emotionally supportive adult can be crucial (see chapter 1 for more information on the art of offering empathy and emotional support). Some youth may want to talk about their social or academic challenges. But don’t expect your mentee to want or need a sounding board. Sometimes just providing a consistent presence and fun (or focused) activities can be a huge support. Finding and encouraging your mentee’s interests, talents, and passions, or “sparks,” is important in all phases of development but can be especially helpful during this time when school and peer groups can be difficult, and youth can benefit from finding activities that bring them joy and build feelings of competence.

**Late middle school and high school** – During this stage, youth are more comfortable being on their own in the community, without their family. Youth’s peers take on an even bigger role in their lives and adults may not be as sought after as they were at

earlier ages — particularly in contexts where peers are present. Chances are the youth you’re working with may not think you’re “cool” at this stage, but they may value your guidance more than ever. Youth may start to be attracted to other youth, and you may see your mentee less often as they get more involved with their peers and in school. Their use of social media is also likely increasing, so your communication may begin to shift to online outlets (see chapter 5 for tips on how to engage with your mentee online). Youth may also develop strong interests that they spend a lot of time on. Leadership experiences and other opportunities to make decisions and shape their world are important during this time (see chapters 8 and 9 for more information on how you can support their learning about the world around them and developing their agency to change it).

Youth may also become more interested in thinking about next steps in life and may have very specific ideas about activities they want your support in — for example, getting better at a sport or hobby, becoming more active in community issues, doing better in school, or planning for life after high school (see chapter 10 on how to help your mentee set and achieve goals). Adolescents’ schedules can, in fact, get very full with peers and activities. It’s important to follow your mentee’s lead and let them direct the course of the relationship, potentially thinking about ways you might be able to connect your mentee with other adults who could provide support in areas of interest to them but in which you don’t have expertise (see chapter 12 on helping youth build their social network). Remember, to be a great mentor, you don’t have to provide all of the specific supports your mentee needs — connecting them with others who could enrich their life in these ways is just as powerful!



As youth move further into adolescence, they are continuing to develop their self-concept (how they define and describe themselves broadly). Youth have a greater awareness of their own values and opinions as well as those of others. They can think more about their future and what might be possible for themselves. They may begin to explore or even question their sexual orientation and gender identity. Their ethnic and racial identity are also taking shape. Understanding how young people see themselves can help you get to know what's important to them and how you can be most supportive. For example, learning about their cultural background is important for mentees of all ages, but particularly adolescents, as this is a time when you can support youth in developing a positive and meaningful racial and ethnic identity, whether you identify with the same group or not (see chapter 2 on this important practice). Your mentee's self-esteem (what they think of their own abilities and worth) is also continuing to develop and continues to be linked with how well they feel they fit in with their peers. Supporting youth in feeling good about themselves in a variety of ways (for example, doing things they are good at and further developing those skills, engaging in behaviors that help others, and learning about the power of their own actions) is one of the most important roles you can play as a mentor.

Youth will also begin to want more independence from adults, which, for some, can show itself in increased misbehavior. Youth may get in trouble more often. And many adolescents — particularly young women — struggle with depression. During this time, you may find yourself helping youth through situations you don't feel prepared for. If so, you may need to get support from other trusted adults in the youth's social network and/or professionals who can help. You may also feel

that your mentee is pulling away from you. This is a natural part of development, as youth begin to move away from the adults in their lives and chart out their next steps in life. However, adolescents benefit greatly from structure and the continued guidance of trusted adults. Letting your mentee guide when and how you can support them is especially important during this time.

### ***Mentoring relationships also have their own stages of development***

Just like all relationships you have in your life, your mentoring relationship will have a beginning, middle, and end. You may find that your role shifts over time and that you need to pay attention to different aspects of your relationship at various stages. But most mentoring relationships go through a sequence that includes the following:

**Relationship formation** – In this phase, you and your mentee are getting to know each other and beginning to understand what both of you enjoy, what your personalities are like, and what kind of relationship you want to build together. If you are in a mentoring relationship outside of a structured volunteer program, chances are you went through this phase without even knowing it.

Wanting to change or “improve” your mentee as a person is never a good foundation for a relationship. Make sure to follow your mentee's lead throughout your time together, but especially as you set the tone for your new relationship. Your mentee might not be forthcoming in letting you know exactly where their interests lie, so discussing this with your mentee's parents or others in their network and “trying things out” is likely your best bet during this phase. For relationships that aren't structured around a specific purpose, it can help to try out a wide range of different activities to see what your



mentee might be interested in and find new interest areas they may not have explored yet.

This phase, particularly if your mentee has experienced disappointing relationships with other adults, can include trust building and “testing” in which youth are trying to understand your intentions (“What does this adult want from this relationship?”) and whether you will hold up your end of the bargain (“Will this adult follow through on promises?”). Your mentee may be clingy or may even show initial disinterest in the relationship or miss meetings to test whether you’ll sustain your interest. It’s always important to be consistent as a mentor. This is particularly true during this early phase when your mentee may need reassurance that you will stick around.

**Relationship building and maintenance** – Most of this resource is devoted to the “middle” phase of the relationship — helping you build and sustain a positive, meaningful relationship with your mentee. This phase can be very short — for example, in some very short-term, focused programs — or last several years or an entire lifetime, as is true for many mentoring relationships that develop naturally.

Like all relationships, as you spend more time together, you will grow to understand your mentee more — what they like and dislike, how you interact with each other, and what works in your relationship. You will further explore activities that you both enjoy and that can build your mentee’s confidence and skills. Over time, your mentee may also confide in, and rely on, you more. Your ability to be attuned to your mentee’s needs both more broadly and in everyday interactions is critical in developing and sustaining a positive relationship (see chapter 4 on developing “attunement” skills). It is also important during this time, to keep the following basic principles in mind:

- **Let the youth lead** – As noted when discussing a mentoring mindset, your job is to guide and support the youth, not boss them around, and the best mentors combine practical help on goals (see chapter 10) with a developmental approach that emphasizes youth learning and growth (see chapter 8). Make sure you share power in this journey!
- **Set boundaries as needed** – No two mentoring relationships are alike, and each will need to find the right balance in how the participants interact. Although you should share power in the relationship, that doesn’t mean you can’t have boundaries as to how and when you engage with each other and how you and your mentee hold each other accountable. Be sure you both know that this is a collaborative process, not a unilateral one.
- **Be consistent** – While there may be times your mentee needs more support from you than others, they will certainly value your being consistent and reliable in your communication and interactions. Research suggests that mentors can really harm youth when they blow off meetings, are late in replying to messages, and aren’t clear about planning or their expectations. A “flaky” mentor is one with no hope of providing meaningful support to a young person.
- **Expect ups and downs in the relationship** – All mentoring relationships have natural ebbs and flows. Expect occasional conflict or disconnection, and remember that youth often don’t express how meaningful these relationships are to them. If your mentee tests you or acts out, it may not be a sign that your relationship isn’t working. In fact, it can signal that trust is being built and that your mentee may be wanting you to step in even more.



- **Assume that the relationship will develop and change over time** – As discussed above, the needs of your mentee may shift over time, especially as the youth matures and can engage in more complex thinking and activities. It's important, especially in longer-term relationships, to pivot responsively during these changes and ensure that your mentee is continuing to get what they need from the relationship.
- **Know the limitations of your role and temper expectations** – Mentors can't — and shouldn't try to — alleviate every problem a young person faces. Mentoring can transform a youth's life, but even if not transformative, for most youth, another caring adult who can help them learn about themselves and the world around them is enough to positively affect their life. Make sure to allow serious issues to be addressed by appropriate professional supports (you can guide them to these); don't try to be "Superman" or expect immediate transformations. If you are mentoring in a program, the staff should provide clear information about where your role begins and ends with a young person. If your mentoring relationship formed naturally, you may have to figure some of this out on your own. Just know that you don't have to, and likely shouldn't, address every challenge a youth is facing. Get help when needed and focus on support in the moment, not on altering the trajectory of the youth's entire life. They may not need or want that type of support!
- **Practice self-care** – It can be hard being a mentor; make sure you are in a good place so that you can maximize your support of your mentee. Ask for help when you need it. Get advice from other mentors and your own

mentors. And be clear — both with yourself and your mentee — about what you can and can't give to the relationship. But whatever you do, don't give up on the relationship because you burned yourself out unnecessarily.

**Relationship ending** – Mentoring relationships can end for many reasons. Some end because they are a time-limited component of a program or because the mentee has gained what was intended from the relationship. Others end because something has changed in the mentor or mentee's life — for example, a move or a change in life circumstances. And still others end because the relationship simply isn't providing the mentor or youth with what is needed to maintain a relationship over time. In cases where you need to end the relationship, it is very important to let both your mentee and their family know that you need to end the relationship and why, giving them as much time to prepare as possible. If you can, plan a final meeting to say goodbye in which you discuss the end of the relationship and share what you both gained and how much you care about your mentee. Some programs have this expectation built into their requirements for mentors. Even if your program doesn't, or if you are ending a relationship that developed naturally, carving out time to say goodbye is critical. If you both plan on having a next "phase" to your relationship (for example, communicating long distance), it is important to discuss exactly what that will and won't look like, and make sure to never promise an outcome that you can't deliver!

Many mentors disappear from relationships because they don't feel needed or appreciated, and thus don't think their mentee will mind if they simply stop showing up. Some may feel embarrassed or ashamed because they aren't able to follow through on their original commitment. Regardless of the quality of your relationship or why it's ending, it is



crucial to thoughtfully end the relationship to give youth and their families closure. Without this, youth may blame themselves for the relationship's end and wonder what they did to cause you to leave. Just remember, how you end your mentoring relationship can be even more important than how you start it!

## The Importance of Mentor Confidence

This introductory chapter has included a lot of basic concepts and mindsets that should give you a solid grounding in what being a mentor is all about. But there is one last aspect of being a mentor that we hope this Introduction and all the chapters that follow help you understand: the importance of being *confident* in your ability to be a mentor.

Research suggests that many mentors don't listen as well as they could to the needs of the young person they are serving. They may miss signs that the young person (or their caregivers) are unhappy with some aspect of the relationship. They can also be stubborn in the approaches they are using, too often expect immediate success, and can often feel disappointed when mentoring doesn't go as smoothly as they hoped. We call this the *overconfident* mentor.

Alternatively, mentors who are lacking in confidence tend to doubt their ability to help and feel overwhelmed when they hit a rough patch or need to rethink an approach. They may interpret a lack of enthusiasm in their mentee as reflecting a failure on their part, and often feel like they are not needed or are not making a difference when they likely are.

Unfortunately, research suggests that both of these types of mentors are more likely to quit their mentoring relationships early, often suddenly, leaving the young person not only without support, but also feeling like they are to blame. Thus, a mentor can shift from a very positive new presence

in a youth's life to yet another adult who has let them down or done them harm.

Your goal, both in reading this resource and beyond, is to gain enough knowledge that you feel like you can step up and do this kind of work with a young person, but at the same time, ensure that you enter your relationship understanding that you don't have all the answers and will need to learn and grow along with your mentee. Like any relationship in your life, mentoring relationships take patience, some humility, and a healthy belief in yourself. So, remember to take stock of how confident you are feeling while you serve as a mentor and be sure to process any feelings that may indicate your confidence level is off target. Talking about these things with other mentors (or program staff if you are in a program) can help you process these feelings and align your expectations in a way that is healthy for both you and the young person you are working with.

## How to Use the Remaining Content of this Resource

Each of the 12 chapters that follow represents a core skill or practice that research (and practitioner wisdom) suggests is important for mentors to bring to their relationships with young people. As noted earlier in this Introduction, not *all* of these may be relevant to your current mentoring relationships. But a good mentor has lots of "tools" in their toolbox and the ability to have effective conversations or engage in meaningful activities at the right moment in time to meet the needs of the young person they are working with. Each relationship is unique, but the practices here should form a solid foundation for much of what you will do as a mentor. Some of these skills may also prove valuable in other relationships in your life.



Each chapter provides a brief overview of the mentoring “skill”, including a short summary of why research suggests it is important in relationships with a young person. Each chapter then describes how mentors apply this skill, when and how it might be needed, and examples of what it will look and feel like when this is being applied well in your relationship.

And while these chapters offer a wealth of information, we certainly don’t expect your learning on these topics to end here. Each offers additional links and references to other resources, trainings, and online tools where you can further explore these practices and deepen your understanding. We encourage all mentors to have a mindset of continuous growth and improvement around the art of mentoring. We hope the resources we highlight here point you to a lifetime of learning and personal growth on these topics.

You may notice that these skills and practices are loosely grouped into two categories. The first, *Relationship-Building Practices*, consists of six skills that will help you and a young person build trust and engagement with one another, primarily through effective communication and cooperation (chapters 1-6). The second, *Practices for Supporting Youth*, emphasizes practices that may be useful in connecting with others in the youth’s life and in identifying and working on specific goals and tasks with the young person (chapters 7-12). These behaviors and practices have a more practical “action” or “helping” focus. But it’s important to remember that all of these skills and mentoring practices offer opportunities for both relationship building and helping youth grow and develop in some way. So, don’t be surprised if you start to notice how these skills overlap and complement each other.



# IF YOU ARE MENTORING IN A PROGRAM CONTEXT

It's important to keep in mind that young people can get the mentoring they need in several different ways. Various research studies<sup>1,2,3</sup> have found that about 70 percent of all young people in America report having had a mentor during their childhood, adolescence, or young adulthood, with the vast majority of those relationships coming through what might be called “natural” relationships — those forged with aunts and uncles, teachers and coaches, neighbors, coworkers and bosses, and other people they meet in the community. But youth in the United States also have access to millions of mentors through programs. In fact, you might be a volunteer in one of those programs right now! If so, you might be wondering how this resource applies to the work you'll be doing in that program.

Almost all high-quality mentoring programs offer their volunteer mentors several hours of focused training on the types of strategies and activities that align with the goals of the program. This is very important, especially for programs that are trying to achieve specific outcomes for youth. Mentoring relationships that form naturally (outside of programmatic contexts) often have more flexibility and can shift their focus more easily over time.

If you are volunteering in a mentoring program, chances are some of the content in this resource will echo or even expand on some of the training and instruction you have already received. That's great! But your primary source of guidance if you are mentoring in a program is from the staff, particularly the person assigned to support you and your mentee. Those dedicated mentoring professionals should be able to help you identify meaningful activities to do in your relationship, suggest key skills or tools that can guide your work, and help troubleshoot any challenges that emerge in your relationship. They will also offer you lots of support that will help you feel confident and effective as a mentor. Please listen to, and rely on, those program staff.

Even when things are going well, the best mentors are those who take a continuous improvement approach to their own skills and abilities. The information in this resource can help further expand your mentoring abilities and may come in handy in other relationships in your life, either now or in the future. If you have questions about how a skill or concept in this resource applies to your mentoring in a program setting, please talk to your program support person and see if what we suggest here is right for your relationship and the goals of your program. At the same time, you should know that the skills discussed in this resource are widely believed to be applicable to a variety of mentoring settings and age ranges of youth. We think most of what you'll find here will complement the training and guidance of your program well.

And on behalf of all of us at MENTOR, thank you for formally volunteering in a program and stepping into the life of a child.



<sup>1</sup> Bruce, M., & Bridgeland, J. (2014). *The mentoring effect: Young people's perspectives on the outcomes and availability of mentoring*. Washington, DC: Civic Enterprises with Hart Research Associates for MENTOR: The National Mentoring Partnership.

<sup>2</sup> DuBois, D. L., & Silverthorn, N. (2005). Characteristics of natural mentoring relationships and adolescent adjustment: Evidence from a national study, *Journal of Primary Prevention* 26(2), 69-92.

<sup>3</sup> McDonald, S., Erickson, L. D., Johnson, M. K., & Elder, G. H. (2007). Informal mentoring and young adult employment. *Social Science Research*, 36, 1328-1347.



## Final Thoughts

We also hope that the content of this publication, and the many additional links and resources we've provided, supports the young people in your life and encourages you to go even deeper in your learning. Remember, the work of a mentor in a community is never really complete — we hope that you continue to grow as a mentor and keep stepping up for the young people in your community. You will always have something to offer them if you bring a mentoring mindset to your relationships and have a few of these mentor skills up your sleeve.

And more than anything, just know that your work as a mentor is grounded in love and caring and it is in service of a better future. It shows that you have a purpose beyond your own life and a desire to make the world a better place. We encourage you to embrace that idea and make it part of your identity. You are a mentor — that means a lot, especially at this moment in time. Be strong on that journey so that the youth you support can also be strong. And stick with it! Mentoring alone can't solve every issue facing our nation, but none of those issues will get addressed as well as they could without caring mentoring relationships ensuring a brighter future for all. Thank you!

## 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.

- ***Children and Youth: Their Growth and Development***, adapted by Anne L. Heinsohn from *Children—How They Grow: Elementary School Children Ages 6 to 8 and 9 to 12*, Bulletins GH 6230 and GH 6231, by Mary McPhail Gray and Terry Foltz — A helpful summary of child development, delving into the topics discussed in this chapter in more depth. Click [here](#) to access.
- ***Identity Formation*** – A description of adolescent identity development, self-concept, and self-esteem. Click [here](#) to access.
- ***The Developmental Relationships Framework*** by Search Institute – A description of five elements (and 20 actions) that make relationships powerful in youth's lives. Click [here](#) to access.
- Keller, T. E. (2005). The stages and development of mentoring relationships. In D. L. DuBois & M. J. Karcher (Eds.), *Handbook of Youth Mentoring* (pp. 82–99). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE. — A chapter exploring the development of mentoring relationships in more depth.