



The Mentor's Role in Your Child's Life

So What's a Mentor Really Supposed to Do?

Finding a mentor for your child is a fantastic way to be a good caregiver. Mentors can provide positive attention to young people, expose them to new experiences, and model healthy behaviors. You have the wisdom to know that your child needs as many caring adults in her or his life as possible. All kids need that kind of support, and your child is

lucky to have a family who understands that and has made it happen.

But you might be wondering what exactly this new person in your child's life is supposed to do. Where are the lines between a mentor's responsibility and what you as a parent or caregiver should be doing? Below are some general guidelines.

A MENTOR IS . . .

. . . **a friend.** Like peer friendships, mentors and mentees do things together that are fun and engaging. They teach each other. They help each other. They're honest with each other. And sometimes they need to have hard conversations about concerns they may have.

. . . **a role model.** A mentor should try to set a good example for how your child can live his life. This is not the same as being perfect. Rather, mentors should admit their imperfections and share their strengths.

. . . **someone your child can talk to.** Your child may tell her mentor things she does not feel comfortable telling you or anyone else. Sometimes she may tell the mentor about hopes, dreams, or fears. Other times she may reveal mistakes she has made. The mentor's role is to be supportive of your child as a person with many life possibilities, regardless of the kinds of actions or attitudes she confides.

. . . **another person who is proud of your child.** Your child's mentor should be able to see all the gifts he has and help him learn and grow. The mentor can help him channel his gifts toward actions that make a positive difference to others in your family, neighborhood, school, or community.

CONTINUES →

A MENTOR IS NOT . . .

. . . **a mentor to the family.** The mentor's role is to provide special attention to one child, your child. While getting acquainted with you and your child's siblings can help the mentor better understand your child, his energy and attention should only be focused on your child.

. . . **a social worker or doctor.** If your child tells the mentor about experiences or health conditions that concern her, the mentor may turn to professionals for help. It is not a mentor's responsibility to try to address conditions or situations that require professional help.

. . . **a savior.** Certainly the mentor's support can help your child overcome hurdles. But mentors should know that all young people—regardless of their circumstances—have gifts and talents that make them more than just “receivers” of services. The mentor should treat your child as though he has much to offer to the world, because he does.

Your role in your child's mentoring relationship is also important. The more supportive you are, the more likely their relationship will be a healthy and successful one.

YOU CAN BE . . .

. . . **a good listener.** Share in your child's excitement and concerns about her mentor.

. . . **a schedule keeper.** Help your child plan time with his mentor, and find ways to remind him about upcoming meetings.

. . . **a voice of gratitude.** Help your child show her appreciation to her mentor. Find ways to show your appreciation.



Supporting Your Child's Relationship with a Mentor

What Can I Do to Help Make This Work?

By involving your son or daughter in a mentoring relationship, you have taken a very important step to making sure your child gets what he or she needs in life. Every young person benefits from having another caring adult in his life—someone who supports your child, believes in him, and can be another person your child turns to when he's having a tough time—so kudos to you for welcoming a mentor into your child's life!

A good mentor-mentee relationship takes time to develop. Just like the start of any friendship, the mentor and your child will need to spend some time getting to know each other. They may encounter difficulties or misunderstandings along the way. There will be ups and downs.

You as a parent or caregiver can play a very important role in helping their friendship grow and develop, regardless of whether or not you have much direct contact with the mentor.

Here are some tips to help you support your child's new mentoring relationship:

- **Be positive.** Let your child see that you are happy she has a mentor in her life. When your child tells you about her visit with her mentor, listen for the positive experiences, even if your child doesn't seem very excited about the visit. (For example, you might point out, "Well, it sounds as if you two have some things in common. Getting to know someone isn't always easy, but give it time.")
- **Tell your child the positive skills and behaviors you see her developing as a result of having a mentor,** and let him know that you are pleased with those changes. ("I've noticed that since you started hanging out with Joe, you've gotten your homework done on time more often. I'm proud of you!")
- **Let the mentor know how much you appreciate that she is a part of your child's life.** An occasional card or just telling her "thank you" can do much to make the mentor feel she matters.
- Encourage your child to **show his mentor that he appreciates him.**
- If you are present when your child and mentor get together (for example, during pickup and drop-off), **be available but not overbearing.** Show your interest by asking some questions, but try not to make demands.
- **Share feedback from your child with the mentoring program's staff.** If you are allowed to talk with the mentor privately, check in occasionally and see how the relationship is going.
- **Help your child remember when her next visit with her mentor is scheduled.** Help her use a calendar or day planner to keep track of visits with her mentor, as well as other activities going on in her life. Try to be as flexible as possible with the scheduling of activities.

CONTINUES →

- **Give your child's mentor copies of school calendars** so that he knows about time off for holidays, opening and closing days of the school year, special events, and other considerations.
- The program may take care of this, but it's always a good idea to **provide your child's mentor with emergency contact information** for someone with a phone, just in case something happens and the mentor cannot reach you.
- **Let the mentoring program's staff or your child's mentor know if there has been a change or incident in your child's home life that the mentor should know about.** Did you two have a particularly bad fight recently? Has there been a death in the family? Are there financial stresses in the household right now? Is one of her siblings in need of extra attention right now? This kind of information will help the program and the mentor to more effectively support your child. You may also want to make some suggestions about how the mentor can be supportive in these situations.
- **Be prepared in the back of your mind for the inevitable end to the mentoring relationship.** Every mentoring relationship ends at some point. Some mentoring programs are designed

so that the mentor and mentee are together for a limited time. If the relationship is strong and life remains relatively stable for the mentor and your child, it may not end until your child graduates from high school. The fact that your child's mentor has gone through a recruitment, training, and screening process is a good sign that she is committed to staying involved with your child over a significant period of time. Unfortunately, sometimes things change in either the mentor's or your child's life that are out of either one's control, and a relationship may need to end prematurely. Remember that sometimes a mentoring relationship ends in a healthy way for good reasons. For example, your child may get swamped with school activities like band and sports, or the mentor may be busy with a new baby. No matter what the reason, you can be ready to listen and provide extra support when the relationship ends.

- **Remember that the mentor is not going to replace you.** You are still your child's parent, and nothing will ever change that. The mentor can complement and reinforce what you are doing as a parent, helping you be even more effective.



Mixed Feelings

What If My Child Seems to Like the Mentor Better Than Me?

Sure, you're already convinced that having a mentor will be a wonderful experience for your child; however, you may also feel a little worried that the mentor has it easier than you, the parent or caregiver. The mentor's main role is to be your child's friend, someone who gets to swoop in for a few hours a week to have fun with your child. You are still left with the day-to-day necessities of being your child's parent, like making sure he does his homework, stays healthy, is well behaved, and completes household chores. Even when you know how important your role is, it can be difficult to feel like "the bad guy" who enforces all of the rules and doesn't get to have fun.

It's very natural that a parent or caregiver of a child who is involved with a mentor may feel a little jealous or worry about losing some of the child's affection to this new person in her life. Share your feelings with the staff at the mentoring program, and ask if they have any advice for you. If you start to worry that your child will like her mentor better than she does you, remind yourself of these things:

- **Young people who have more caring adults in their life do better in school, get involved in fewer risky behaviors, and are more likely to become caring, healthy, and responsible adults.** Research shows that your child's successful involvement with a mentor can boost her or his odds of becoming an adult who has numerous options in life, rather than one who
- has engaged in negative behaviors that close doors to future opportunities.
- **The mentor can never replace you.** You are still your child's primary caregiver, and nothing will ever change that. When your child feels affection toward another person, that doesn't mean his love for you is lessened. You and your child have a history together that cannot be replaced by someone, however caring, who spends a few hours a week with your child.
- **The mentor can actually strengthen what you are doing** as a family by reinforcing your rules, helping you be even more effective. If you don't communicate with the mentor directly, ask program staff to pass along your family's rules about curfews, eating sweets, watching movies, or other issues that concern you.
- **The mentor may improve the relationship between you and your child.** As your child talks things over with another adult, she may learn new communication skills. A caring mentor may also be able to help her recognize positive things about her family.
- **You can set aside your own special time together.** When you and your child find time to have fun with each other, you may feel better about the time he spends with his mentor. Even if you simply make dinner together, you can spend the time telling jokes and having meaningful conversations.



What Are Developmental Assets?

What Does My Child Need to Succeed?

People become parents or family caregivers in so many different ways: by chance or choice, by accident or against all odds, when very young or “well seasoned.” Regardless of your story, you have an opportunity to be a true hero—to have a positive influence that will last throughout your child’s lifetime. Welcoming a mentor into your child’s life is just one way in which you can make a difference.

Many of the small and big things you do for your child are included in a list researchers have defined called the Developmental Assets framework. The framework consists of 40 commonsense, positive experiences and qualities youth need to be successful. (If you haven’t received a copy of the

complete list and would like to learn more, you can visit www.search-institute.org/assets/assetlists.) Parents and mentors can be important partners in building assets with and for young people.

The Developmental Assets are divided into eight categories. Strong evidence shows that by focusing on these eight specific areas of development, you can help guide your kids on productive paths through life. As you read through the categories below, remember that, while you are critical to building these good things with your children, you do not have to do this all alone. Think of ways in which other adults, including your child’s mentor, can play a role in building these positive aspects of life with and for your child.

EXTERNAL ASSETS

SUPPORT—Kids need families who show that they love their children and will stand by them, no matter what. Children need to know that your love for them has no limits, that it is unconditional. Such love does not mean saying yes to whatever your kids want—you can still show your love by saying no. Instead, it means never withholding your love for them. Giving your children unconditional love shows them that they belong and are important.

EMPOWERMENT—Children need parents or caregivers who make it clear that children, especially their own, are valued and valuable just as they are. Make your home a safe place, and remind your children that they have something meaningful to contribute to the larger community as well as to the family.

BOUNDARIES AND EXPECTATIONS—Children need families who have high yet realistic expectations for their children, and who set and uphold clear limits about what is acceptable and unacceptable behavior. Kids do better in life when rules are clear, consistent, and fair. Setting limits is often hard; what parent doesn't dread being the target of a child's anger? But saying no at times can be an important way to help your kids learn how to succeed in the world. Similarly, you can more readily help children be the best they can be when your expectations for them are both high and reasonable.

CONSTRUCTIVE USE OF TIME—Children need families who help them balance school, activities, time with friends, and time at home. Constructive use of time means interacting with other supportive and caring people, including time at home just being with family. Constructive use of time is also about having chances to explore and express creativity, to learn and develop new skills, and to have fun with good friends.

INTERNAL ASSETS

COMMITMENT TO LEARNING—Young people need families who encourage and model a love of learning. A love for learning means the desire to succeed in school (and not just for good grades); it also means your children believe in their own abilities and want to do well.

POSITIVE VALUES—Kids need families who talk about and model basic values such as honesty, trust, and responsibility. It's part of a parent or caregiver's job to teach children how to treat other people. You can do this by letting your kids know what's important to you, what you value. The way your children think is also influenced by the actions of people they admire; in fact, they may be more influenced by the good things you *do* than by the good words you *say*.

SOCIAL COMPETENCIES—Young people need families who instill in their children an interest in and comfort with many kinds of people, and who help them develop strong skills to relate respectfully to everyone and show consideration for the rights of others. To help children learn how to enjoy and appreciate others day to day, whatever the circumstances, parents are wise to teach and model that *all* people matter. Children learn to care for others by learning what it means to care for themselves.

POSITIVE IDENTITY—Children need parents and caregivers who nurture their self-esteem, feeling of control over their own lives, and sense of hope. A young child's sense of happiness flourishes in large part from seeing herself or himself as a reflection of the adults in the family. What are your children seeing when they look at you? If your children see you as a parent who lives each day full of hope, striving to be your best, they will begin to develop their own sense of personal power and happiness.



Staying in the Loop with Your Child's Mentoring Experience

How Can I Stay "In the Know" with My Child and Her or His Mentor?

Hopefully you and your child communicate well, but sometimes you may find that it is not always easy to get information out of a young person. Have you ever had this conversation with your child?

"How was school?"

"Fine."

"What did you do?"

"Nothing."

"Did you learn anything new?"

"No."

"What are your friends up to these days?"

"Nothing."

Even if your child is willing to communicate, there are things you can do to make your conversations more effective. Here are a few ideas for finding out more about your child's relationship with her or his mentor.

- **Ask your child questions.** Whether or not your child acts as if she wants to talk to you, asking her about what is going on in her life shows her you care.
- **Keep asking.** If you ask after every visit your child has with his mentor, regardless of the reaction you get, your child will at least know you care about what is happening in the relationship.
- **Talk about safety.** Check to be sure that your child's mentoring program conducts background checks on volunteers. Once your child has been matched with a mentor, ask the program staff to share information about seat belt use during car trips, alcohol consumption in front of your child, or any other specific issues that concern you.
- **Use open-ended questions or statements** when talking with your child about what's going on with her mentor. These are questions or statements that can't be answered with just a yes or a no. Use statements like these in your conversation:

 - What did you do with your mentor tonight?
 - What was the best part of your visit with him or her?
 - What kind of person is your mentor?
 - What are you planning to do the next time you get together?
 - That sounds interesting. Tell me more about . . .
- If you see the mentor, **ask for her or his perspective on what the pair has been up to.** You might learn different details your child didn't think to share.



Supporting Your Child through the Phases of a Mentoring Relationship

WHAT CAN I DO TO HELP?

Every relationship—friendships, parent-child, siblings, marriage—goes through different stages or cycles. The same holds true for the friendship between a mentor and your child. At each stage, mentors and mentees may be experiencing some common anxieties and behaviors that reflect what is happening in their relationship at that stage. By understanding what children might be going through at each stage, you can help them experience fewer bumps in the road.

The Big Brothers Big Sisters program of the Greater Twin Cities in Minneapolis, Minnesota, outlines four stages in the growth cycle of a mentoring match, as well as some helpful strategies for successfully navigating each stage.

1 Beginning the relationship—In this stage the mentor and your child are testing the waters with each other. Your child may feel nervous or wary, and she may be on her best behavior for her mentor. She may also get frustrated if things don't go as expected. Your child's mentor may want to "fix" everything. The mentor may also be finding himself adjusting his initial expectations about being a mentor, once he's experienced it for real. Both of them may be trying to bridge age, cultural, and lifestyle differences in each other.

Strategies for this stage:

- Show you are willing to listen to your child about what's happening in the mentoring relationship.

- Be aware of your own feelings about age, cultural, and lifestyle differences. Try to avoid stereotyping people or making assumptions about what they must think of you.
- Try to be nonjudgmental.
- Reach out, be available.

2 Building trust—Now that the two of them know each other better and have some shared experiences under their belts, the mentor and your child will feel greater trust. Your child may be coming out of his shell, feeling better about himself, or simply more confident because the mentor has demonstrated that he cares. As a result, your child may share more information with his mentor. He may start to rely on his mentor more for support and validation in this stage, possibly to the point of becoming overdependent. At this stage, the mentor may be experiencing more satisfaction with the mentoring relationship. However, he also may be feeling overwhelmed by the extent of the issues faced by your child.

Strategies for this stage:

- Be patient, and encourage your child to be patient as well.
- Expect some setbacks.
- Set limits.
- Continue to be consistent and reliable.

CONTINUES →

3 Testing the relationship—Now that rapport and trust are built, it is typical for your child to start testing boundaries in the relationship. Deep down, she may still want to see just how much staying power this relationship really has. Your child may make inappropriate requests of her mentor. She may even show resentment or hostility toward her. The mentor may start resenting what seems like negative behavior, and she might also feel caught in the middle between your child, your family, or other service providers.

Strategies for this stage:

- Remind your child about appropriate behaviors and limits when he is with his mentor.
- Continue to treat your child as capable.
- Let your child's mentor know how much you appreciate all she does for your child. A call or card may be just what she needs to help her through what might be a more difficult time in the mentoring relationship.

2 Increasing independence—Having come through the trust-building and the relationship-testing stages, you may find your child becoming less dependent on his mentor and finding other sources of support. On the upside, you might also see increased feelings of self-worth in your child by now. However, setbacks are still possible during this stage as your child may take bigger risks in his life and in his relationship with his mentor. As a result of all of this, your child's mentor may feel discouraged or less needed during this stage.

Strategies for this stage:

- Point out the shifts in behavior you are observing and reinforce your child's efforts to seek support from others.
- Continue to support your child while encouraging independence.
- Expect some setbacks as a natural part of this stage.
- Continue to let your child's mentor know how much you appreciate all she does for your child. Assure her that she is making a positive difference in your child's life.



Helping Your Child Say Good-Bye to a Mentor

HOW SHOULD I HANDLE THIS SITUATION?

It is important to remember that every mentoring relationship will end at some point in time. In fact, the mentoring program may set a limited amount of time for your child's mentoring relationship. Although you may not be able to make this transition completely easy or painless for your child, below are a few things you can try to make the situation as smooth as possible.

In General

- **Avoid the blame game.** Remember that most relationships change over time, and that sometimes it is healthy to end a relationship and move forward. Acknowledge that this may be hard and sad for your child, but remember to focus on the positive things that have come out of the relationship. Modeling this positive focus will help your child do the same.
- **If appropriate, encourage your child to invite her mentor to continue to be in her life.** Encourage her to write letters, visit, and invite the mentor to participate in future milestones (a recital, game, graduation ceremony). Try to encourage your child not to cut ties with her mentor completely after the formal relationship ends. Encourage your child to send letters and e-mails, and to make calls to stay in touch with her mentor and remind her how important she still is to your child.
- **Encourage your child to talk** about what he found most important and satisfying about his relationship with his mentor.
- **Let your child's mentor know how much you appreciate what she has done for your child.** Do this even if the mentor is the one initiating the end of the formal mentoring relationship.
- **Encourage your child to let his mentor know how much he means to him.** Have your child thank his mentor for the opportunity to get to know him, and let him know how he has helped your child change for the better.

If Your Child Is the One Who Needs to End the Relationship

- **Make sure you and your child are certain that ending the formal mentoring relationship is the only workable option.** Talk to your mentoring program staff about options to reduce the number of visitations or other ways you can work in visits.
- **Coach him to be honest but careful.** For example, if lack of time is the issue causing the need for change, you don't want to leave the mentor thinking your child doesn't have time for him. Rather, help your child talk with his mentor about the good things he has liked about him, the positive changes he has made in your child's life, and the other responsibilities your child is facing (homework, school, other activities, time with friends and family).

CONTINUES →

If the Mentor Initiates the End of the Relationship

- If your child is feeling badly, remind your child that **this outcome is not her fault.**
- Remind your child that **he is a worthwhile person with gifts and strengths.**
- Explain that **sometimes the ending of a relationship can be a healthy thing in the long run.** It may hurt to end the mentoring relationship right now, but he will get through this in time. Learning to handle these situations positively is a valuable part of growing up.