

10 Ideas for Building Meaningful Mentoring Relationships

By searchinstitute

January 20, 2016

Sometimes people say they can't be mentors because they don't know what to do. Here are ideas you can use to build positive mentoring relationships that will have a lasting impact on kids' lives. The ideas build on Search Institute's research on essential actions that deepen developmental relationships and help young people become their best selves.

1. **Follow your mentee's interests.** When adults willingly participate in activities or conversations chosen by the young person, not only will the young person be more engaged, but the adult can also see and experience what really matters to the young person. This builds a stronger connection.
2. **Listen to understand.** Make an effort to understand your mentee's point of view when he or she shares ideas or opinions. Rather than immediately dismissing an idea, ask questions to learn more about the thinking behind the idea. (Remember that adolescents sometimes need to "try on" ideas as they sort out what they really think or believe.)
3. **Highlight future goals.** Talk with your mentee about their future possibilities, particularly the things they look forward to or dream about. This future orientation can motivate young people to keep moving forward when they encounter obstacles or distractions.
4. **Help your mentee work through failures.** The ways adults respond to failures can either help or hurt motivation and self-confidence. Emphasize that failure and mistakes are a necessary part of learning. We can't grow without reaching beyond our grasp, and we don't always make it on the first try.
5. **Break it down.** Sometimes young people (and adults) get overwhelmed with major tasks or problems. Break down bigger problems, challenges, or tasks into more manageable pieces. Then the young person can develop a plan to accomplish one step at a time—with your encouragement, feedback, and problem-solving help along the way.
6. **Shift levels of support.** Provide more support when your mentee is struggling and less when he or she is succeeding or making progress. Pull back as your mentee improves so he or she gains more control and confidence. Doing too much for young people takes away their opportunity to grow. In each case, keeping a warm and positive attitude boosts motivation, whereas becoming irritated or critical of the young person's performance or abilities can shut it down.
7. **Make decisions together.** Whenever you can, make choices together, rather than just deciding on your own or turning the responsibility for deciding over to your mentee. In the process, they learn how to articulate what's important to them, they practice decision-making skills, they learn to work with others, and, in the end, they develop self-confidence and their sense of responsibility.
8. **Learn from them—and show it.** Young people have a lot to teach adults—whether it's about youth culture, technology, a subject they're mastering in school, or an activity or talent they are cultivating, such as music, art, or sports. As you discover things that really interest you, let your mentee know. For example, if your mentee introduces you to a new artist you enjoy, let her or him know you've added that artist to a "favorites" playlist.
9. **Inspire your mentee to see future possibilities.** As you learn about your mentee's interests, talents, hopes, and dreams, float ideas about education, activities, or careers they might explore as they grow up. Instead of saying, "You should be a dentist," try something like, "Have you ever wondered what it would be like to be a dentist? What do you think you might enjoy about that?"
10. **Introduce new ideas and experiences.** Young people shape who they are and who they are becoming by trying out different ideas and experiences. Find ways to expose your mentee to people, belief systems, places, cultures, vocations, and opportunities that may not have ever occurred to them. Start with low-risk and low-commitment introductions. For example, you might begin by watching a good movie about an important political or social movement, then talk together about how it compares to the young person's own beliefs or experiences.