

The Mentoring Partnership  
of Southwestern Pennsylvania

# Peer Mentor Handbook

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# What is Peer Mentoring?

A mentor is a wise and trusted friend and guide.

**Mentoring** is a structured and trusting relationship that brings young people together with caring individuals who offer guidance, support and encouragement aimed at developing the competence and character of the mentee.



## Types of Mentoring:

- Traditional mentoring: one adult to one young person
- Group mentoring: one adult to up to four young people
- Team mentoring: several adults working with small groups of young people
- **Peer mentoring: caring youth mentoring other youth**
- E-mentoring: mentoring via e-mail and the internet



Peer mentors are **close in age** to their mentees – for instance high school students mentoring elementary or middle schoolers, or college upperclassmen mentoring incoming freshmen.

Although peer mentoring often takes place in a **school setting** the focus of mentoring is on building a relationship, not on academics.

## A Peer Mentor Is A...

- Friend
- Coach
- Companion
- Supporter
- Advisor
- Role model
- Resource for new ideas and opportunities
- Person to talk to

## A Peer Mentor Is Not A...

- Social worker
- Parent
- Super hero
- Parole officer
- Source of money
- Therapist
- Solution to all problems

## Why Peer Mentoring?

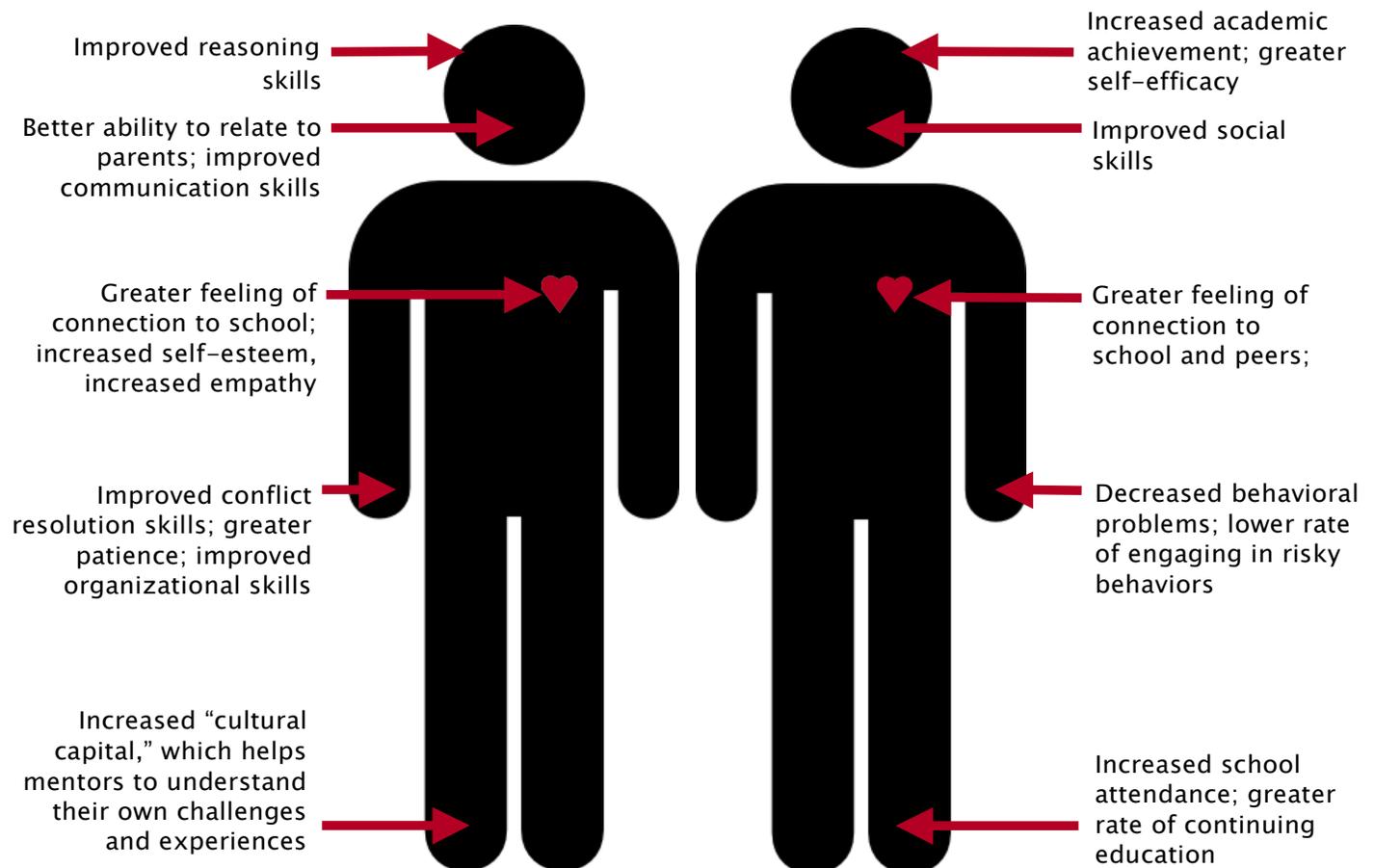
In general, people take their peers' perspectives very seriously. This means that a positive peer mentoring relationship can have profound effects on a mentee's sense of self-worth.

Due to the similarity in age of peer mentors to their mentees, mentees might also feel more comfortable sharing concerns and problems with their mentors. This increases mentee access to appropriate support and resources during times of struggle.

## Benefits of Peer Mentoring

### For Mentors

### For Mentees



Research in Action, Issue 7: Cross-Age Peer Mentoring; Michael Karcher, Ed.D., Ph.D., University of Texas at San Antonio

# Great Expectations

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While it's great to have goals that you and your mentee can work towards, it's important to remember that the purpose of mentoring is to **build a relationship**. Your primary mission should be to establish trust and to be a supportive role model in your mentee's life.

It's also important to keep in mind that the goals you work toward should come from your mentee. If you have goals for your time together, try to focus them on yourself within your role - to improve your listening skills, to become solution-oriented, or to be the best mentor you can be.

## As a Peer Mentor...

### Do Expect...

- To be a positive role model to your mentee
- The relationship to be one-directional, at least to start
- Some change to happen
- To support your mentee in reaching their goals
- To experience some frustration as a mentor
- To be busy
- To make some impact in your mentee's life

### Do NOT Expect...

- To "reform" or "save" your mentee
- Your mentee to confide in you or trust you, at least to start
- Great change quickly
- Your goals to mirror your mentee's goals for themselves
- That you will be "best-friends-at-first-sight"
- Your mentee to schedule meetings or to develop plans
- To know about or understand the impact you have made



# Your Role as a Peer Mentor:

## Model Behavior



What you do is as important as what you say. Use your behavior to promote learning and positive development in your mentee.

## Create Learning Experiences



Keep an eye out for teachable moments. Take advantage of local resources to cultivate their existing interests.

## Focus on the Positive



Approach challenges from a place of optimism and possibility.

## Encourage



Help your mentee build self-esteem and self-confidence.



## A Note On Self-Esteem

Self-esteem is a sense of confidence in oneself, and a feeling of connectedness to others. A person's **emotional well-being** is often built upon their level of self-esteem. Self-esteem is an internal negotiation between our own self-image, our beliefs about how others view us, and the ideal version of the self we would like to be.

Building self-esteem is a crucial part of being a peer mentor. Try to pay attention to your mentee's self-esteem throughout your relationship, particularly when tough issues arise.

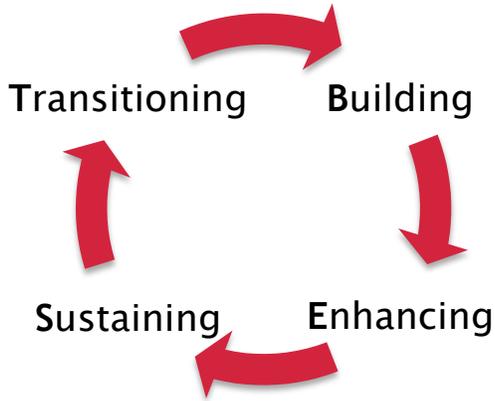
## Signs of Healthy Self-Esteem

- Enjoys interacting with others/comfortable in social settings
- Ability to voice discontent without belittling themselves or others
- Work towards solving issues that arise
- Generally optimistic
- Realistic grasp of their own strengths and weaknesses
- Usually happy and content
- Can laugh at themselves
- Makes realistic goals
- Actively participates in conversation and stands up for what they think
- Cooperates easily with others

## Signs of Low Self-Esteem

- Resistance to change - unwilling to try new things
- Negative self-talk - "I'm stupid," "I can't do anything right"
- View setbacks as permanent and unchangeable
- Generally pessimistic
- Lack of self-confidence and a negative self-image
- Prone to anxiety and depression
- Needs constant reassurance
- Prone to perfectionism
- Trouble communicating needs and feelings
- Overly aggressive, trouble sharing

# The B.E.S.T. Model



All relationships go through stages. The B.E.S.T. model demonstrates the typical lifecycle of mentor relationships: building, enhancing, sustaining, and transitioning.

These stages are not always clear-cut and frequently overlap. Sometimes, relationships return back to an earlier stage and cycle through more than once. Read on to learn more about each stage individually - what it is, what you can expect, and some tools and tips for making the most of the relationship in each stage.

## Stage One: **Building**

The first stage of the mentoring lifecycle is building the relationship - meeting your mentee for the first time, **establishing trust** (more on page 8), **clarifying roles**, and **agreeing on boundaries** (more on page 9) are all part of this stage.

You and your mentee will both have some anxiety and/or excitement about building this new relationship. **Take the initiative** to explore mutual interests and find common ground.

Because trust is so fragile at this point, it is extremely important to **be consistent, authentic, and open-minded**. What you do now will set the tone for the rest of the mentoring relationship.



### Your First Meeting

- Introduce yourself with confidence and a smile!
- Learn how to pronounce your mentee's name
- Tell your mentee about yourself and ask questions about your mentee
- Your mentee may take a while to warm up to you. Be patient, nonjudgmental, and open
- Remain positive and end on a good note!



## Stage Two: **Enhancing**

Stage two involves enhancing the mentoring relationship. This means **exploring interests** in depth, **setting goals**, and offering yourself as a resource to your mentee.

The goals you set can be personal in nature, career-oriented, academics-focused, or anything else that your mentee has in mind. Remember – this is a time for your mentee to talk about their ambitions; not an opportunity for you to impose your goals onto them. See page 14 for tips on setting goals.

## Stage Three: **Sustaining**

In the third stage of the mentoring relationship, trust has been established and conversation is more **comfortable, personal, and open**. Working on goals might be a central focus of the relationship.

While this new level of comfort is wonderful, it also might come with some new challenges. **You and your mentee may struggle** to live up to the expectations you agreed to at the start of the relationship. If this happens, you might re-negotiate the terms of your relationship by evaluating what you have accomplished, what **new goals** you have, and how you would like to work on them together.



## Stage Four: **Transitioning**

Change can be a scary thing, but they can be made easier by preparing for them. A good way to prepare for relationship transition with your mentee is to **talk about it!** Celebrate how much you have accomplished, and remind your mentee how much time remains. Part of these discussions should include what you want your relationship to look like once the program ends.

No matter when you decide to transition out of the mentoring relationship, be sure to **give yourself and your mentee closure**. Closure means ending the relationship on a good note, celebrating the time you have spent together, and clarifying your relationship moving forward. **Make sure you are both on the same page.**



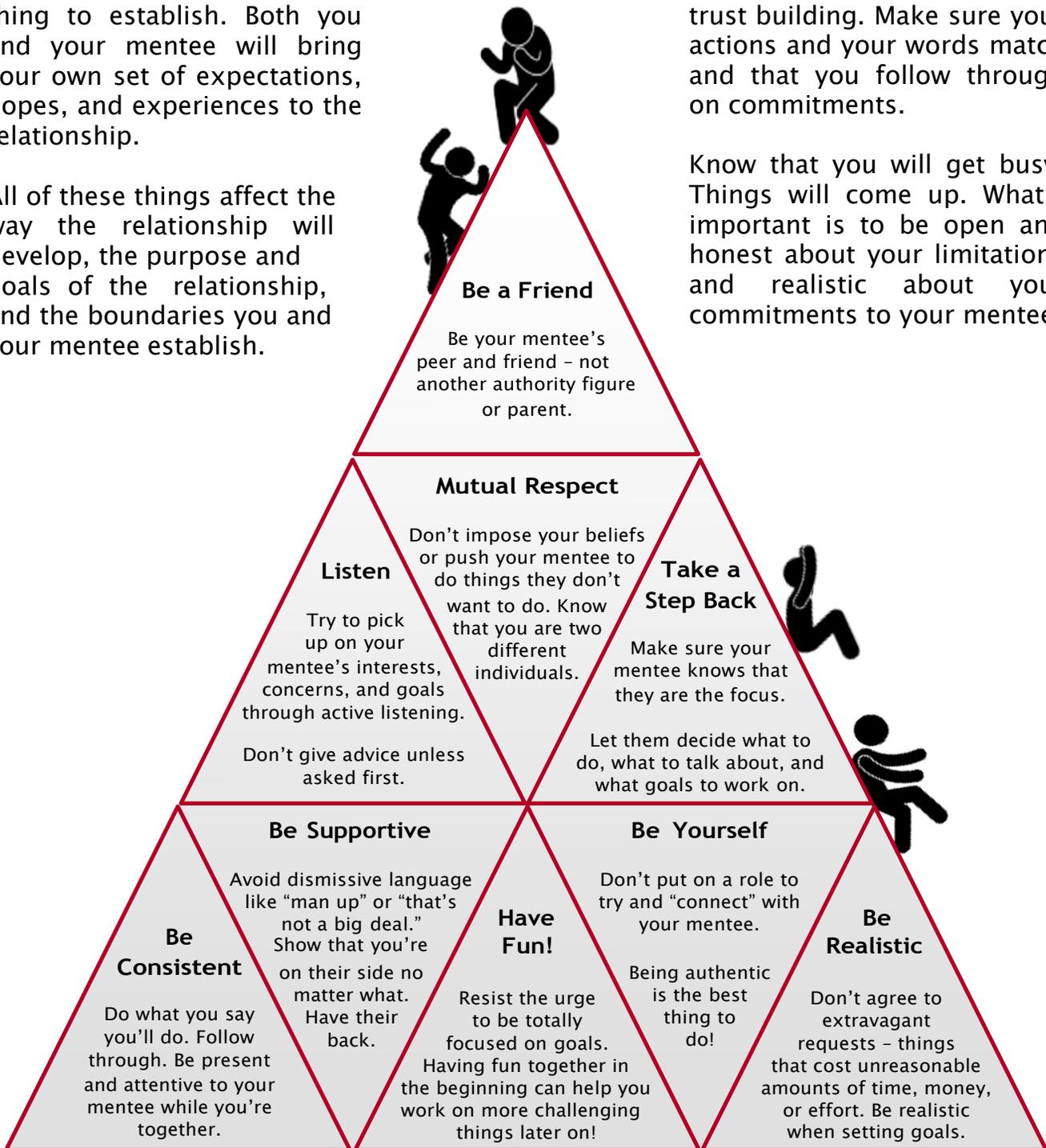
# 9 Tips for Establishing Trust

Trust can be a very difficult thing to establish. Both you and your mentee will bring your own set of expectations, hopes, and experiences to the relationship.

All of these things affect the way the relationship will develop, the purpose and goals of the relationship, and the boundaries you and your mentee establish.

Consistency is a big part of trust building. Make sure your actions and your words match and that you follow through on commitments.

Know that you will get busy. Things will come up. What's important is to be open and honest about your limitations and realistic about your commitments to your mentee.



## Setting Boundaries

Setting boundaries in the mentoring relationship will help to ensure that you and your mentee have realistic expectations of one another and can also help you to avoid some awkward situations.

Some good boundaries to set up with your mentee might include:

- What conversation topics are off-limits
- Language/words that are off-limits
- The kind of relationship you develop with your mentee's family
- How much money you are willing to spend on your mentee
- What ways are appropriate to communicate with one another, at what times of day, and how frequently
- Types of behavior that are off-limits
- Defining your role – what you can and cannot reasonably do with and for your mentee



### A Note About Families

Having a good relationship with your mentee's family can help you monitor some of the things your mentee is struggling with or trying to work on.

If you pursue a relationship with your mentee's family, however, setting boundaries will be extremely important. Remember that your mentee is your primary focus; so, avoid taking sides with your mentee's parents.

Finally, never criticize the family of your mentee. While your mentee might benefit from venting to you about issues at home, many awkward situations will be avoided by remaining neutral.



## Setting a Good Example

As individuals, we juggle many different parts of our lives. We all go through life with different experiences and face different decisions. We all make mistakes and we all have our own hurdles to overcome.

Setting boundaries enables you to separate your personal life from the relationship you have with your mentee. Be mindful about which types of personal information, experiences, and stories to share with your mentee. Keep in mind that the struggles you are facing relative to your age may not be appropriate or practical to share with your mentee.



# Communication Tools

## 1. Open and Close-Ended Questions

It might be a little tough to get conversation started when you are first getting to know your mentee. Asking open-ended questions is a great way to get the ball rolling.

A **close-ended** question is a question that can be answered very simply – generally with just **one word**, such as ‘yes’ or ‘no’.

Example: Do you like ice cream?

**Open-ended** questions, on the other hand, tend to elicit lengthier responses. They help us ask others about their **opinions** and **feelings** and they can often lead the way to deeper conversation.

Example: How did you meet your best friend?



## 2. Active Listening

Active listening is a way of listening that affirms the speaker and lets them know that you are interested and that you understand.



To practice active listening, try out the following tips:

- **Paraphrase** what your mentee has said to make sure you understand. Say, “What I’m hearing is... Do I have that right?”
- Lean in, nod, and maintain eye contact. Use appropriate facial expressions and gestures. Keep a calm and **composed posture** and don’t fiddle with anything that could distract you (phone).
- While your mentee is speaking, don’t think about your response or the next question you want to ask. **Just listen.**

## 3. Body Language

Body language refers to all of the ways that we communicate with others without using words. According to research, nonverbal (body) language accounts for up to 70% of all communication! It is very important, therefore, to make sure you are sending the right messages to your mentee with your body language.

A few good tips for good body language are listed under “Active Listening,” such as leaning forward and maintaining eye contact. Also **pay attention to your posture** when interacting with your mentee, which might send them signals about your mood, your interest in them, and your trustworthiness. Try to keep your body open and relaxed, with arms loose and uncrossed.



## 4. “I” Statements

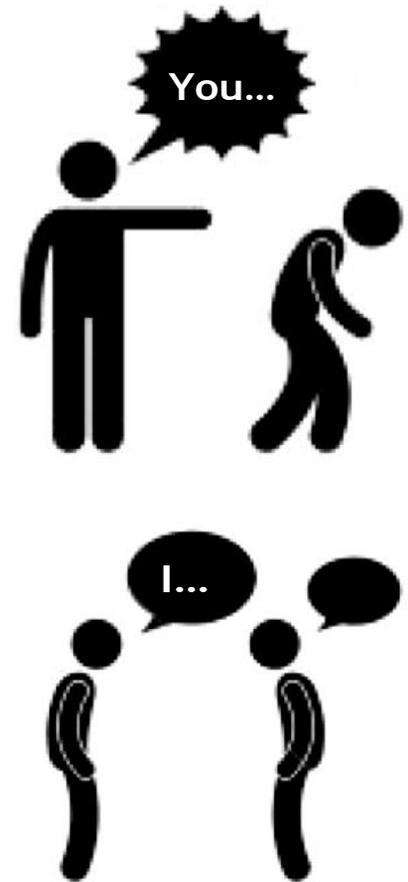
“I” statements are sentences that start with an expression of your **personal opinion or experience**. You can only be sure of your own experiences and feelings – never those of others. Using an “I” statement to clarify where your opinions come from **ensures that you don’t offend anyone** by speaking *for* them.

Example: Instead of saying “You hate math!” try saying something like “I noticed that you seemed frustrated while doing your math homework the other day, could you tell me about that?”

Using “I” statements can be particularly useful during a conflict. Instead of sounding accusatory, which could make things worse, it will help you **understand your mentee’s perspectives**.

Example: Instead of saying “You’re so irresponsible! You let me down,” try saying “I was really looking forward to spending time with you the other day and I was upset when you didn’t show up. Why weren’t you able to make it?”

As you can see, “I” statements enable you to learn about your mentee. The first “you” statement in each example only shows the mentor’s assumptions about the mentee. Nothing is learned and conversation is turned into a conflict.



## 5. Giving Feedback

Feedback is an observation or opinion communicated from one person to another. Feedback can be positive or negative, and when done appropriately both types can be constructive and useful.



When providing feedback to your mentee, try to follow these guidelines:

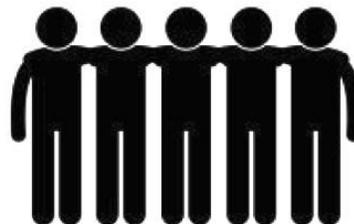
- **Be honest and respectful.** Keep in mind that it can be difficult to hear negative feedback.
- **Make observations, not evaluations.** Provide examples of what you have observed when you give feedback – don’t evaluate or provide personal judgment. Observations will help your mentee replicate good behaviors and recognize behaviors that aren’t constructive.
- **Provide empathy.** Try your best to put yourself in their shoes to understand their perspectives.
- **Be timely.** Give feedback privately when you won’t be disturbed or distracted and your mentee won’t be embarrassed.

# Finding Support

As a peer mentor **you do not need to have all of the answers**. One of the most important skills you can learn from mentoring is how to ask for help. For some issues, you can find ways to respectfully and confidentially trouble-shoot with others you trust.

**Remember** – you can ask for help from:

- Teachers
- Program staff
- Other mentors
- Mentors in your life



While the information your mentee shares with you should generally be kept private, there are some situations that merit full-disclosure of information – as in **situations where your mentee is a risk to themselves or others**.

## Handling Tough Issues

While together, you and your mentee may encounter some difficult issues such as:

- Substance use and abuse
- Abuse, violence, and bullying
- Mental health issues
- Peer pressure
- Puberty, sexuality, and relationships
- Death

With many of these issues, engaging in open and honest conversation about the problem is an important way to learn more and determine the best course of action. As a peer mentor, **your role is to direct your mentee to the appropriate resources**, whether that is a referral to a professional or sharing a good news article. When discussing these issues remember to remain calm and nonjudgmental.



Just because one of these issues comes up in conversation does not mean that your mentee is in imminent danger. For instance, if your mentee is curious about using illegal substances, talking about it encourages your mentee to ask questions and learn information about the risks of these activities.

Sometimes, just having a trustworthy friend to talk to about these issues can help enormously. Show your support by using active listening skills, affirming their feelings, and empathizing with their struggles. After having that moment of affirmation, you can move on to exploring options and pursuing the best solution.

## Deciding to Report a Problem



If you decide that it is best to report the problem, tell your mentee immediately prior to the report and talk to them about why you made your decision. Make sure they know that you are on their side and that you want what's best for them. Offer to support them in any way that you are able to, but don't make promises you can't keep.

The following list can help you identify whether or not your mentee has a problem that should be discussed and/or reported.

### Warning signs

- General warning signs
  - Loss of interest in school
  - Spending a lot of time alone
  - Severe mood swings
  - Sleeping a lot or very little
  - Eating a lot or very little
  - Turning away from adults for support
  - Increase in behavioral problems at school
  - Engaging in risky behaviors
- Substance abuse
  - Irrational, clumsy, or “spaced out” behavior
  - Lying
  - Secretiveness
- Abuse, violence, and bullying
  - Injuries that can't be accounted for
  - Physical defensiveness; getting jumpy or nervous
  - Sudden onset of compulsive or self-destructive behavior
- Mental health issues
  - Becoming withdrawn
  - Talking about death or dying
  - Prolonged sadness; expression of hopelessness
  - Prolonged nervousness or anxiety
  - Severe insecurity
  - Inexplicable and irrational behavior
  - Unhealthy coping mechanisms – sexual activity, drug use, self-harm, etc.



# Mentoring Activities

During the mentoring relationship, you and mentee will spend a lot of time together doing fun activities. Depending on your program, these activities might be planned for you by the staff or you may have to come up with ideas with your mentee.

**Give your mentee a voice** in this process and avoid planning every activity for them. Let them tell you what they would like to do. If they're having trouble thinking of ideas, give them a few different options based on their interests. Alternatively, you and your mentee could develop a long list of ideas early on to choose from throughout the relationship.

If you're having trouble coming up with ideas, visit The Mentoring Partnership's Pinterest page, where you can find fun outings and easy activities for every season.



## Setting Goals

Beyond having fun with one another, setting goals with your mentee and working towards them together will be your primary activity. When setting goals, make sure they are S.M.A.R.T.

### Specific

Answer the “who, what, when, where, why, how, and which” questions

### Measurable

Create benchmarks to check your progress  
Determine how exactly you will know when your goal has been attained

### Achievable

Make sure that it is realistic to attain the goal within your timeframe keeping other responsibilities in mind

### Relevant

Does the goal matter? How will it create positive change?  
What will be the impact of reaching the goal?

### Timely

Create a timeframe for the goal to be achieved  
Have a due date and check-in dates to measure progress

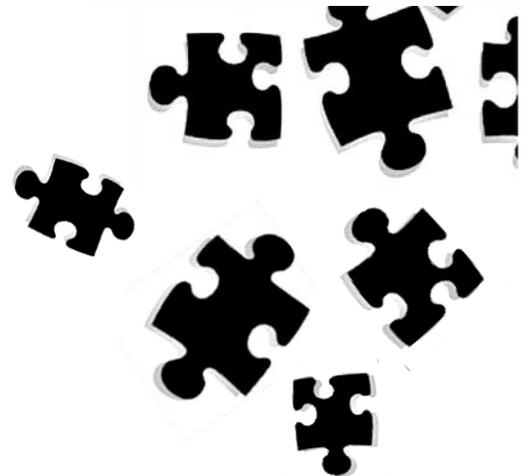
# Cultural Diversity

**Diversity** is the vast possibility for differences among all of us. Since every person is an individual, with individual differences, humans are about as diverse as the number of people existing on this planet at any given time!

To make things easier, we tend to group commonalities into different identities or **cultures**. All of us have a variety of cultures and identities and experiences that make us who we are. This combination of culture, identity, and experience is different for each person we meet!

Take some time to think about your culture and identities, which may include:

- Your age
- Your race or ethnicity
- Your gender
- Your sexual orientation
- Your religion or personal philosophy
- Where you go to school
- Where you live
- How much money your family has
- The number of people in your family
- The hobbies you have and your personal passions
- MUCH MORE!



## Sharing Culture With Your Mentee

What's important to remember about diversity is to be **inclusive** – be respectful and welcoming of all of the differences you encounter. Your mentee will undoubtedly have culture, identities, and experiences that differ from your own. **Explore those differences** with your mentee and also **find commonalities**. Ask about your mentee's family, their traditions, and what's important to them. Share with your mentee about your culture and identity, and perhaps how things were for you at their age. You'll be surprised at how much you can learn!



The diversity among us helps us to learn more about other ways of life and provides the opportunity to share the wealth of experiences each of us has with one another.