

Guide to Becoming a Mentor

WHAT MAKES A GOOD MENTOR

There are a few things to understand before deciding to become a mentor. Most of us have had a teacher, supervisor, or coach who has been a mentor to us and made a positive difference in our lives. Those people wore many hats, acting as delegators, role models, cheerleaders, policy enforcers, advocates, and friends.

Mentors assume these different roles during the course of a relationship, and share some basic qualities:

- ★ Cultural competence
- ★ A sincere desire to be involved with a young person
- ★ Respect for young people
- ★ Active listening skills
- ★ Empathy
- ★ Ability to see solutions and opportunities
- ★ Flexibility



GETTING STARTED

Before you start to look at the programs that are available, think about and identify your own interests and needs. Finding a mentoring program that you are excited about and comfortable with can require some time and thought, but the good news is that there's something for everyone. The following questions will help walk you through the process of choosing a

mentoring program that is right for you. To help you decide which type of mentoring program you want, ask yourself the following questions:

- ★ What time commitment can I make?
- ★ What age of youth would I like to work with?
- ★ Would I like to work with one child or with a group of children?
- ★ Would I like to team with other adults to mentor a child or a group of children?
- ★ What types of activities interest me? Do I want to help a youth learn a specific skill, pursue an interest, help with schoolwork, or just be a caring adult friend?
- ★ What mentoring location would I prefer?

While thinking about these questions, remember to be open and flexible to all the different mentoring programs and focus areas that are out there.

FIND THE RIGHT PROGRAM

As you start to review the mentoring programs available to you, be sure to consider at least three different organizations. You are offering to make a substantial commitment of your time. Be thorough in investigating your options before you choose the program that best suits your needs.

- ★ After you have selected several possible programs, talk to each organization's volunteer coordinator (or other appropriate point person).
- ★ Tell them you are thinking about mentoring a young person—or a group of young people—and would like to know if their organization offers volunteer opportunities for adults.
- ★ Describe the amount of time you have, the types of activities you are interested in and the number of children you would like to mentor.
- ★ Ask about the process the program uses to match young people with mentors.

- ★ Identify the different mentoring options the program offers (one-to-one mentoring, team mentoring, short-term mentoring, one-time projects, etc.).
- ★ Ask the coordinator about training and support for volunteers and about the application and screening process.

The application process can include a written application, personal and professional references, a background check, and a personal interview. Don't be discouraged if the first program you select doesn't match your needs or you don't match its needs. If that happens, try again!

COMMONLY ASKED QUESTIONS

1. How much time does it take to become a mentor?

- a. Many mentoring organizations require that volunteers commit to the program for one year, usually for about an hour per week. Research demonstrates that a longer-term commitment provides the most benefits to the young person. That said, most mentoring programs will work with volunteers to find the most convenient time for mentor-mentee meetings. Schedule and time commitment also depends on the type of program that you volunteer with. For example, school-based programs meet at the school, during the school day, while site- or community-based programs may meet at a community center after school or on the weekends.

2. Do mentors need any special skills?

- a. In general, being a mentor does not require any special skills. In fact, you probably already have what it takes! The most effective mentors are those who are patient, committed, and passionate about offering extra support to a young person. Successful mentors are consistent and caring, and help their mentees problem solve, practice good communication, and explore new experiences and ideas. Some programs may recruit mentors from specific industries, such as STEM fields, to help achieve the program's goals. Additionally, some programs may recruit mentors with specific lived experiences, such as former involvement in the foster care system. The majority of mentoring programs recruit mentors from all backgrounds and experiences.

3. What if we don't hit it off right away?

- a. It's not easy to trust a stranger, especially if you're a young person who's had a lot of bad experiences with adults in the past. It may take a while to build trust. Don't interpret caution as rejection. A young person may not show it – in fact, he or she may not even know it fully – but your help is definitely wanted.
- 4. What if something extremely serious comes up?**
- a. While most mentoring relationships develop and flourish without serious problems, things do happen. Mentors have an important role, but that role does not include family counseling or medical or psychological treatment. There are support systems in place for real emergencies. Contact your mentoring program coordinator for information. The most a mentor is expected to do – and should do – is to help guide a young person to the appropriate source of professional help.
- 5. What if we don't have anything in common?**
- a. Many first-time mentors worry that differences in age, race, religion, education, or gender will be insurmountable barriers. Actually, most experienced mentors report that mentoring a young person from a different background broadened their own horizons and deepened their understanding of other people and cultures.
- 6. Does mentoring make a difference?**
- a. 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. A mentor can become a friend who can provide opportunities for gaining new skills and experiences that will help your child learn, grow and be successful. All children have the potential to succeed in life and can benefit from the demonstrated effects of mentoring. [Check out some of the facts about quality mentoring.](#)
- 7. What if I can't mentor anymore?**
- a. This is a very serious concern. Mentoring is a deep commitment. There are times, however, when uncontrollable things happen – perhaps a job relocation or sickness – and you simply must withdraw from your mentoring relationship. If that happens, you need to talk with your program coordinator and discuss the best way to end the relationship. Except for such unavoidable circumstances, it's best to stay in a mentoring relationship. You could do far more harm than good if you enter a young person's life, build trust and then abandon the relationship. Be honest with yourself when committing to be a mentor. If you aren't sure about in-depth mentoring, try one of the many shorter-term alternatives, such as tutoring or one-time projects.