



Ohio University Upward Bound T.I.M.E. E-Mentoring Program

Building Your Mentoring Relationship

A mentoring relationship is different from other relationships in your life. Most relationships occur naturally and are not formally arranged by another person. A mentoring relationship is created with a purpose in mind and has very specific goals. Because of this formality it may seem awkward and artificial at first, but if you take the right steps in the beginning it can build into a strong, comfortable friendship.

Because mentoring relationships take time to gain momentum, it is critical that mentors have patience and the ability to work through any difficult stretches.

The Beginning

The beginning of any relationship is often awkward, and mentoring relationships are no exception. Your first few emails will focus on getting to know each other, exploring similar interests, discussing expectations, and forming bonds that will shape the rest of your time together.

It is always important to email consistently, at least once a week. In the beginning it is even more critical, every missed email means less time you have to build your

friendship. The relationship has a better chance of getting off the ground if you email even more than the required amount in the beginning. This will establish a sense of trust for your mentee and will cause them to look forward to checking their email each day in the hopes of getting a message from you.

Not "Opening Up"

Another common issue mentors report early in the match is that the mentee will not "open up" or writes very little. This can be frustrating for you because it may seem like your mentees reserve is a sign of boredom, ambivalence, or even dislike for you. In fact, it's much more likely that your mentee is simply not yet comfortable with you and is guarded about expressing thoughts or sharing personal information. Many youth have good reason not to trust every new adult who enters their life, and any attempt to push them can have the opposite effect. As the adult and mentor in this relationship it is your responsibility to be open and conversational in your emails. Ask them questions about themselves that require more than a yes or no answer.

Conversation doesn't have to be "heavy". It's perfectly ok to write about neutral topics like favorite foods, movies, and so on. It can be a good way to build the rapport that's needed to address more personal or sensitive issues. Having many light friendly conversations can pave the way for being able to comfortably discuss more difficult issues.

Communication Styles

Mentees are going to take their emailing cues from you. This is also why it is important to write to them using correct grammar and punctuation. With young people spending so much time on the computer using programs like Instant Messenger, they often forget or not realize that they should be writing an email like a letter, not like an instant message. When they Instant Message they often write entirely in lowercase, with out punctuation or correct grammar. They also tend to abbreviate words and phrases such as; talk to you later (ttyl), laugh out loud (lol), you are (Ur).

Make sure you communicate the importance of writing correctly; explain to them that it is difficult for you to read their emails when they are written using incorrect grammar and punctuation. Express that you care about what they are saying and want to be sure to get the full meaning of what they are telling you.

High Expectations

A common early pitfall occurs when mentors expect too much too soon in a mentoring relationship. Be patient- your mentee may never have had an adult in his or her life who wants to listen to them and truly cares about what he or she has to say. Mentors volunteer to work with youth because they have a desire to see positive change in that young person; however, research tells us that positive change is most likely to occur when a youth feels supported by a friend rather than pushed to change a behavior. Instead of having high expectations for your ability to change your mentee, take the time to find out who they are.

Strategies

- Set goals for the relationship- decide together what you want to accomplish as far as career and college planning, study skills, life skills, friendship, etc.
- Empower your mentee to share his or her thoughts and feelings- A natural pitfall for mentors is that they feel obligated to impart wisdom or advice to their mentee, this is part of the relationship, but not all of it. Often, what adolescents need most is to have their mentors listen and empower them to work through problems on their own.
- Be sensitive to your mentee's developmental stage and personal story - Don't presume to know what is going on in your mentee's life. Today's young people are often dealing with a different set of issues than you may have faced in your youth. Things may be happening that are impacting how your mentee responds to your relationship. Let him or her know that you are there to support, not judge, no matter what.