

Tools for Mentoring Adolescents:

Especially for
New Mentors!

#2 - Making the Most of Mentoring an Adolescent

So you're mentoring a teen? Well, congratulations! You've embarked on an important and potentially very fulfilling journey. You can be a good friend to a person at a critical stage of their development. And you can get a lot of it too.

But there will also be times when you'll think you were pretty crazy to take this on. Adolescents are by nature unpredictable. They can't help it—their brains are still developing, especially the parts that will eventually help them control their impulses and make consistently rational choices. Right now they are hard-wired to be reactive and emotional.

On the other hand, most teens have matured to the point where they have the capacity to at times be incredibly thoughtful, creative, compassionate, and sensible. And fun. They are beginning to understand themselves as individuals in relationships, their communities, and the world.

So, as with many of the potentially great experiences in life, you're probably in for a roller coaster ride. If you are ready and willing, you can hang on and enjoy the thrills and spills and steady times in between! Here are some tips to make it worth the price of admission.

A Place to Start:

Begin by building mutual trust and respect with your mentee. That includes setting reasonable boundaries and working on having good communication (See handouts #5 & 6). In addition, a study of adults who work with adolescents (that includes you, a mentor!) found that adults who are most trusted and respected do the following:¹

- Make it clear they see potential rather than problems in the young people they encounter.
- View the young person, not the “activities” they do with the young person, as the priority.
- Convey a sense of power and purpose for themselves and for the young people around them.
- Are described as authentic and real, not phony, with a genuine interest in and concern for young people.
- Are motivated to give back to their communities, neighborhoods, families, and organizations in return for the good things they received from caring adults when they were young.

Makes You Think -

Today's teens live in a very different world than those before them. But some things, like some adults having negative perceptions of adolescents, haven't changed much. Check out this quote from Socrates, a philosopher, mentor, and teacher from the 5th century B.C.E:

“Our youth now love luxury. They have bad manners, contempt for authority; they show disrespect for their elders and love chatter in place of exercise; they no longer rise when elders enter the room; they contradict their parents, chatter before company; gobble up their food and tyrannize their teachers.”

The truth is that adults and youth *are* different, but that doesn't mean adults are right and youth are wrong.

Try It -

Tell your adolescent mentee what makes life meaningful to you, and find out what's meaningful to your mentee. You may learn something interesting, and may each be pleasantly surprised by what you hear.

¹ Mclaughlin, M., Irby, M.A., & Langman, J. (1994). Urban Sanctuaries: Neighborhood Organizations in the Lives and Futures of Inner-City Youth (Jossey-Bass).

From Good to Great:

In order to be a great, and not just a good mentor to your adolescent mentee, you're going to have to take basic activities to the next level. You're going to have to give something of yourself, and expect certain things of your mentee. Here are some suggestions from *Mentoring for Meaningful Results* by Kristie Probst:³

- 1. Have a heart-to-heart about the ups and downs in every relationship, and stress that they are normal.** The key is to understand it and intentionally find ways to avoid a downward spiral from which it could be difficult to rebound.
- 2. Make plans together.** Brainstorm things that you'd like to do together. One match decided that at every visit they would take turns picking something totally spontaneous to do, and there could be no griping or whining about it.
- 3. Set goals for your relationship.** Make a timeline for all the activities you'll do over the next year. Throw in some really outrageous activities as well as some of your standard, tried-and-true activities. If you live in a rural area, consider an activity that gets you to a bigger city, or vice versa.
- 4. Empower your mentee to share her or his thoughts and feelings—it's crucial.** A natural pitfall for mentors is that they feel obligated to impart wisdom or advice to their mentee. Often, what adolescents need most is to have their mentors listen and empower them to work through problems on their own.
- 5. 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 her or him know that you are there to support, and not judge, no matter what.

What Can You Do Right Now?

Here are four "categories" of things you can do today, tomorrow, later this week, and beyond to strengthen your mentoring relationship:⁴

1. Academic Support

- Help with homework (but don't just do it yourself!).
- Work with your mentee's school or your mentoring program to find a tutor, if your mentee would like one.
- Help your mentee think about education beyond high school. Talk about and even visit places like trade schools, colleges, business schools, and other organizations.

2. Career Exploration

- Find out what your mentee is curious about in terms of careers.
- Help arrange job shadowing for your mentee or for both of you.
- Encourage and help with Internet research about various careers.
- Together with your mentee conduct informational interviews with people in careers of interest.

3. Social Experiences

- Take your mentee out of their neighborhood and into yours, be a tourist in your own town.
- Expose your mentee to as many cultural and recreational experiences as you can (explore each other's cultural background).

4. Emotional Support

- Show attention and concern—support that many mentees may lack in other parts of their personal environment.
- Be someone who will actively listen and give your mentee your full attention.
- Be someone your mentee can confide in (monitor your natural tendency to make assumptions- try to see things from your mentee's point of view).

³ Search Institute, 2005

⁴ *Spirit of Mentoring*, Robin Cox (2005)