Handout – How To Be a Great Mentor

All mentors can have anxiety about how well they are filling their role or concerns that their efforts are not making a difference. They may also worry about how well they will bond with their mentee and how they will address challenging moments. All of these concerns are perfectly normal and simply part of forming a relationship with anyone, but they can be amplified in the context of a mentoring program, especially one that emphasizes real, tangible outcomes for youth.

Mentors should keep the following principles in mind as they enter and progress through their mentoring relationships:

- **Be consistent and reliable** – Research shows that mentoring relationships are most impactful when mentors and youth meet frequently and predictably over a specified period of time. Meeting regularly maintains momentum in the relationship, aids the pursuit of goals, and keeps the pair from “drifting apart” and needing to reconnect emotionally. Research has also demonstrated the harm that can happen when mentors don’t show up to meetings, don’t keep promises, or communicate inconsistently with youth. Many mentees have been let down by numerous adults in their lives and may be particularly sensitive to the feelings of rejection or unworthiness that can bubble up when a mentor does not keep a commitment. So be a reliable, stable presence in the life of your mentee, not another source of confusion and doubt.

- **Take a developmental approach in working with the mentee** – Research has found that developmental approaches to mentoring, which take a strengths-based approach to nurturing the development of the whole child, produce the strongest results. They allow the pair to form a close personal bond and balance social-emotional development with more instrumental activities that can teach a new skill or address a challenge. Mentoring should never be presented as a way of “fixing” something with the youth. It’s about developing the whole person and maximizing their potential.

A good framework for thinking about developmental relationships can be found in [this framework from the Search Institute](#):

1. **Express Care** - Show me that I matter to you.
2. **Challenge Growth** - Push me to keep getting better.
3. **Provide Support** - Help me complete tasks and achieve goals.
4. **Share Power** - Treat me with respect and give me a say.
5. **Expand Possibilities** - Connect me with people and places that broaden my world.

- **Expect some ups and downs (and stick with it)** – Mentoring relationships, like all human relationships, will have their moments where communication is hard or it feels like progress has stalled. Mentees may be prone to withdrawing from the relationship at various points, especially as difficult topics arise or the closeness of the relationship begins to expose vulnerabilities. Alternatively, youth may also suddenly cling to the
mentoring relationship, especially if it offers stability in a suddenly chaotic circumstance. These ebbs and flows are natural and should be expected by mentors. In fact, many mentors report that for long stretches of their relationships, that they didn’t feel like their mentee was benefitting from their support or did not seem invested in the relationship. But this is also to be expected. Youth are often not as skilled or comfortable expressing some emotions or complex feelings like gratitude or trust.

So don’t expect to hit a “home run” with your mentee right off the bat and recognize that they may not always outwardly express the meaningful changes you are providing them internally. The worst thing you can do is withdraw yourself or walk away entirely when things get tough. Talk with your program staff about how to manage your expectations and keep little disappointments from taking you away from your mission.

- **Believe in yourself, but also be willing to learn** – Research has shown that mentors’ feelings of self-efficacy—the belief that they can and will succeed in their role—are predictive of how long they stick with their commitments, how often they seek out support from staff, and, ultimately, how strong and impactful their relationships become. So a healthy dose of confidence goes a long ways toward mitigating those aforementioned ups and downs. Participate fully in the training offered by the program to build your mentoring skills and seek the advice of other mentors when faced with a specific challenge. The more you can learn from others, the more you will understand about how to be the mentor your mentee needs you to be, and the more confident you will feel in filling this role long term.

You can find other resources about being a good mentor on the [MENTOR website](https://mentor.org) and in the Resources section of OJJDP’s [National Mentoring Resource Center](https://mentoring.org).