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**Becoming a Better Mentor:
Strategies to Be There for Young People**

MENTOR

WORKING WITH OTHERS IN THE MENTORING RELATIONSHIP SYSTEM

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What Does Working with Others in a Mentoring Relationship "System" Mean?

A mentoring relationship typically doesn't operate in isolation. Even youth who want or need additional support from a mentor are bound to have many other important people in their lives, such as parents and other caregivers, siblings, teachers, and peers. Consequently, a mentor already may have or may need to establish relationships with other people in the mentee's network of support. Because these other individuals, and a mentor's interactions with them, have the potential to enhance or detract from the mentoring experience, they are all important parts of the "mentoring relationship system." This chapter outlines important considerations for how to approach these other people to create "working alliances" with them in which you communicate effectively, set appropriate boundaries, and agree on goals and activities in support of your mentee. Specifically, this chapter discusses:

- connecting with others in the youth's network while maintaining a focus on your mentee;

- respecting the priorities and values of caregivers, teachers, and other important people in your mentee's life and aligning expectations with them;

- appropriate sharing of information about your mentee (e.g., learning about your mentee, getting feedback on the mentoring relationship, informing others about your mentee while maintaining confidentiality); and

- clarifying boundaries and establishing expectations for your mentoring role.

Appropriate interactions with important people in your mentee's life can strengthen your mentoring relationship and help to avoid misunderstandings and complications. Furthermore, you can offer greater support for your mentee when you align your efforts with others who care for them. This chapter goes hand in hand with chapter 12, which provides guidance on how you can expand the supports your mentee has in their life by helping them strengthen existing connections and forge new ones.

Why Working with this System Is Important in Mentoring Relationships

A mentor and mentee are each embedded in their own networks of relationships.[1] A mentoring relationship may develop naturally when these social networks already share some overlap, bringing the mentor and mentee into contact — for example, when a youth begins to be mentored by the parent of a close friend or an adult they met through extracurricular activities. In mentoring that occurs in programmatic contexts, the introduction of the mentor and mentee creates new connections between their networks. A mentor should be aware of and effectively navigate important relationships in the mentee's immediate network because positive communication and coordination among network members generally supports youth development. A systems perspective helps to explain how the mentoring relationship can be influenced by individuals in the mentee's network and, in turn, how the mentoring relationship affects these other individuals in the network.[2] A systems view of mentoring emphasizes that separate relationships in the network are connected (e.g., mentor with youth, mentor with caregiver, caregiver with youth). A change in one relationship can have ripple effects on other relationships in the system. Research has shown, for example, that mentoring can improve the parent-child relationship,[3] that relationship difficulties between parent and mentor can contribute to the ending of an otherwise positive

[1] Keller, T. E., & Blakeslee, J. E. (2014). Social networks and mentoring. In D. L. DuBois & M. J. Karcher (Eds.), *Handbook of Youth Mentoring*, (2nd ed., pp. 129–142). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

[2] Keller, T. E. (2005). A systemic model of the youth mentoring intervention. *Journal of Primary Prevention*, 26, 2, 169–188.

[3] Rhodes, J. E., Grossman, J. B, & Resch, N. L. (2000). Agents of change: Pathways through which mentoring relationships influence adolescents' academic adjustment. *Child Development*, 71, 6, 1662–1671.

mentor-youth relationship,[4] and that the presence of a mentor can influence the mentee's peers in a way that improves the mentee's inclusion and social standing.[5] In mentoring programs, the mentoring system includes the agency staff member who supports the mentoring relationship and fosters communication and alignment among the key players (e.g., mentor, mentee, caregiver, teacher).

A mentor's collaboration with a caregiver or other important adult in the mentee's life can be described as a working alliance. This refers to a partnership with a purpose, in this case to support the development of the young person. A working alliance is characterized by three elements: mutual agreement on the goals being sought; understanding of each person's responsibilities and tasks to achieve those goals; and a personal bond (e.g., liking, caring, trust) that promotes continued collaboration.[6] For a working alliance to be effective, it's important for a mentor and caregiver to share a common understanding about the reasons for mentoring the youth and expectations for the mentoring relationship. Likewise, the mentor and caregiver should be clear about their respective responsibilities for supporting the mentoring relationship and making it successful. A positive bond between mentor and caregiver based on communication and respect supports the type of alignment, cooperation, and accountability that leads to ongoing commitment to the mentoring relationship by both parties.[7] These principles can serve as a model for coordination with other adults in the mentee's network, such as a teacher or coach, and they can even provide a useful guide for working with the young person in the mentoring relationship itself.

What Does Working Collaboratively with this System Look Like in Practice?

A caregiver shows a lot of trust in allowing a mentor to spend time with their child. A mentor who considers the perspective of a caregiver or teacher will appreciate that the adults responsible for the well-being and education of their child/student would want to know something about the mentor and the types of activities they are doing when they meet. Likewise, it may be important for the mentee to know that their caregiver or teacher approves of their mentoring relationship. Thus, especially early in the mentoring relationship, the mentor and key adults in the mentee's network should make a strong effort to get to know each other and discuss expectations for the mentoring experience. Such conversations also can be very helpful for the mentor to gain a better understanding of the mentee's needs and background. For example, a mentor can ask questions such as:

- What are the most important things you want me to know about your child?
- How do you want the mentoring relationship to support your child?
- How can I make sure I'm being consistent with your priorities and values in raising your child?

There is also value in talking about very practical matters, such as how and how often you will communicate with the caregiver, whether planned activities and outings should be discussed in advance, what procedures are best for scheduling and keeping appointments, how any costs for activities will be covered, and how feedback regarding the mentoring relationship should be shared. The beginning of the mentoring relationship is generally the best time to negotiate these arrangements to avoid making assumptions or

[4] Spencer, R., Gowdy, G., Drew, A. L., McCormack, M. J., & Keller, T. E. (2020). It takes a village to break up a match: A systemic analysis of formal youth mentoring relationship endings. *Child & Youth Care Forum*, 49, 1, 97–120.

[5] Pryce, J., Giovannetti, S., Spencer, R., Elledge, L. C., Gowdy, G., Whitley, M. L., & Cavell, T. A. (2015). Mentoring in the social context: Mentors' experiences with mentees' peers in a site-based program. *Children & Youth Services Review*, 56, 185–192.

[6] Bordin, E. S. (1983). A working alliance based model of supervision. *The Counseling Psychologist*, 11, 1, 35–42.

[7] Spencer, R., Basualdo-Delmonico, A., & Lewis, T. O. (2011). Working to make it work: The role of parents in the youth mentoring process. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 39, 1, 51–59

establishing patterns that need to be corrected later. Remember, however, these discussions should be negotiations, not informing your mentee's caregiver of what you intend to do. It's important they feel heard on these important aspects of the relationship. Trying to achieve clarity, transparency, and alignment regarding expectations is the goal, because too many mentoring relationships falter due to what are often simple misunderstandings!

Developing a relationship with your mentee's caregiver based on collaboration, respect, and regular communication can be helpful in navigating many situations that may affect your mentoring relationship. The same approaches you are encouraged to use in the mentoring relationship, such as being consistent, fostering collaboration, showing curiosity, and practicing cultural humility (see chapter 2), can be used with the caregiver to build a foundation of trust and facilitate your negotiation of roles, routines, and boundaries. For example, a mentor and caregiver can discuss preferences about visiting the mentee's home before or after an outing. One caregiver may expect the mentor to enter their home and greet family members as a social courtesy and may be offended if the mentor never does this; while another may want privacy and feel it's an intrusion for the mentor to enter their home. Likewise, a mentor can express expectations or preferences, such as stating they would feel uncomfortable picking up or dropping off the youth without the caregiver at home.

Similarly, there should be clear communication between the mentor and caregiver about goals for the mentoring relationship and the role of each in supporting those goals. For example, both may agree it's appropriate for the mentor to support the mentee's success in school. But this support could take many different forms, such as the mentor

showing interest in the mentee's school experiences, taking the mentee to the library to get books, or attending a school event. Would it also involve the mentor advocating on the mentee's behalf regarding a special need or a disciplinary action? In some cases, a caregiver may appreciate the mentor's support in talking with a teacher or helping to navigate the school bureaucracy. In other cases, a caregiver might feel full responsibility for addressing the issue and would view a mentor's contact with school personnel as interference or overstepping boundaries. By the same token, a mentor may want to establish boundaries to avoid getting too involved in a parental role if asked, for example, to attend parent-teacher conferences. Similar considerations might arise if the mentee's family is struggling financially. On one hand, a mentor may want to offer assistance or make a referral for services. One caregiver may be appreciative; another may feel the mentor has been presumptuous. On the other hand, a caregiver may ask for assistance, and the mentor may not be comfortable being put in that position. These scenarios highlight the importance of clear communication and coordination between the mentor and parent/guardian up front, before misunderstandings can happen, and if they do happen, open conversations to course correct. If

a disagreement with someone in the mentoring system does arise — which is likely to happen at some point — it's important to work constructively to a resolution that preserves the mentoring relationship. Problem-solving approaches might include trying to return to areas of fundamental agreement about supporting the mentee, practicing empathy, cultural humility, and attunement, (see chapters 1, 2, and 4 respectively) and consulting with others for perspective and advice (particularly agency staff who provide match support if you are in a mentoring program).

A mentoring relationship can benefit in several ways from the collaboration and support of important individuals in the mentoring system.

For example, the caregiver can provide the mentor with important background and context regarding the mentee's interests and needs, help the mentee to keep appointments with the mentor, and offer the mentor encouragement and appreciation. Similarly, a mentee's teacher can provide updates, recommendations, and reinforcement for work the pair may be doing during their time together. Likewise, for mentoring that occurs in programs, the agency staff member working with the match can be helpful in giving advice and problem-solving when kept informed of what is happening both in the mentoring relationship itself and in the mentor's relationship with the caregiver. For transparency, the mentee should

be aware when members of this network of adults (e.g., mentor, parent/guardian, teacher, coach, staff member) are communicating and cooperating with each other. At the same time, to ensure your mentee feels comfortable confiding in you, there should be clear understandings among these adults about the importance of your being able to maintain the confidentiality of conversations with your mentee (and/or to clearly specify the limits of confidentiality). In addition, a mentor is wise to encourage direct communications between the mentee and others and to avoid being the conduit of information, taking sides, or speaking for someone else.

You also should be prepared for potential interactions with the younger members of your mentee's social network, such as siblings, friends, and peers. Within the family, for example, a sibling may be jealous that your mentee has a mentor and may want to join your outings, or your mentee may want to invite friends to participate in your activities. Decisions about such scenarios should be made in consultation with your mentee's caregiver and should take into consideration the potential benefits and drawbacks in terms of building your relationship and supporting your mentee's development. If one of the goals for your mentoring is to model good relationships and help your mentee to develop social skills, then including their friends in activities could be very helpful. However, in other cases, having friends join may be counterproductive if they vie with the mentee for your attention, or vice versa (see chapter 6 on things to consider when meeting with your mentee in a group context).

Contextual Considerations for Working with Others in the Relationship System

The nature and extent of coordination with others in your mentee's network will depend on the age and maturity of your mentee. More interaction

with the caregiver is likely to be necessary and appropriate for younger mentees. For mentees in early elementary school, the mentor and caregiver generally have frequent contact because the caregiver likely will need to be involved in arranging outings, such as scheduling, approving plans, and making sure the mentee is ready for the activity. Likewise, because youth (especially young children) are not always the most reliable reporters, it may be important for the mentor and caregiver to check in after outings to recount what they did together. These conversations go both ways — the caregiver may be able to provide feedback to the mentor regarding what the mentee likes about the mentoring relationship and to offer thanks and appreciation that may not be forthcoming from the mentee. As mentees mature, they can take more responsibility for making and keeping appointments and communicating these plans to the caregiver, but periodic conversations between the mentor and caregiver remain valuable even as youth get older, to make sure both parties are staying well informed and that the mentoring relationship is on track.

Your mentee's age also may affect your potential interactions with their friends and peers. For instance, having a mentor may enhance social status for younger youth, and youth may want to show off their mentor to friends who are likely envious and eager to join in activities. However, older adolescents may be more reluctant to let their friends know they want, much less need, a mentor. Although mentee age may influence the inclusion of friends in mentoring activities, this is not always the case; it is more likely to depend on the mentee's individual circumstances and the general nature of the mentoring relationship.

One factor that could strongly determine how a mentor interacts with others in the mentoring system is whether the relationship developed naturally or was created through a structured mentoring program. Ideally, a mentoring program will provide clear guidance on its philosophy and policies regarding how a mentor is expected to interact with others in the youth's network. In addition, clearly stated goals for the mentoring program could help frame the goals agreed upon by the mentor and caregiver that create the foundation for the working alliance between them. In a program context, mentor training and agency staff support should provide advice and guidance in negotiating these new relationships. As noted, the agency staff member is an important part of the mentoring system who can monitor and facilitate communications among the mentor, mentee, parent/guardian, and other key people in the youth's life. In fact, you should recognize that volunteering in a mentoring program means establishing not just a mentoring relationship but also a relationship with the agency, which has responsibility and accountability for supporting the success of the mentoring experience for both your mentee and you.

In a mentoring relationship that develops outside of a program, the mentor doesn't have program professionals to guide their navigation of relationships with people in the mentee's network. For this reason, it may be even more important for the mentor to be proactive in meeting with the caregiver and setting clear expectations for the mentoring relationship. Establishing a strong working alliance with the caregiver may be especially valuable when there is no program for backup support. The mentor and caregiver already may be acquainted through mutual networks, which could mean a positive bond is already there, but it's still important to make sure there is common understanding about your role in the youth's life. Similarly, you already may be familiar with your

mentee's teachers and coaches or friends and peers through existing networks, but it still may be important to clarify with them any shift in roles that may result from designating yourself as a mentor to the youth.

Tips and Final Thoughts

The following tips can help you as you navigate the relationships your mentee brings to the table:

- Remember that other adults (e.g., parents or other caregivers, teachers) care for your mentee, and many individuals influence your mentee. You are not responsible for your mentee, but you are responsible to your mentee.

- Proactively communicating and collaborating with the other important people in your mentee's life can help prevent inaccurate assumptions and misunderstandings that could complicate or even threaten the success of your mentoring relationship.

- Aligning your expectations with these other important people is particularly relevant in the early phases of your mentoring relationship, although expectations may continue to evolve and be renegotiated throughout your mentoring experience.

- How you choose to interact with others in your mentee's network when you start your relationship can set precedents that may be expected to continue. Although you can always change course, make sure to consider the long-term implications of your choices.

- Remember that other people in your mentee's network are important to them, and what happens in your relationship could be shared with them. Don't say or do things that could diminish your mentee's relationship with these other people.

- Similarly, don't say or do things that could damage your own relationship with these other people. In particular, never ask a mentee to keep a secret from anyone else, especially a parent/guardian.

- Although you may interact with many people connected to your mentee, the mentoring relationship should always remain primary, and the mentee's trust should be maintained through as much consultation, information, and inclusion as possible.

- Your mentee should have no doubt that your focus is on them and not the other people in their life.

Other skills that will help you succeed in partnering with others in your mentee's network include practicing cultural humility, being attuned during your interactions, collaborating on goal setting, and helping youth develop their social networks and social capital — all are the focus of other chapters in this resource.

Additional Reading and Resources

The resource listed below can be accessed online through the link we have provided.

Starting Relationships Right: Topics and Questions to Align Participant Expectations in Youth Mentoring Programs Although originally written for program staff, this set of pre-match expectation-setting questions can help mentors, even those outside of programs, think about the expectations they have for the mentoring relationship, as well as questions to ask caregivers and other adults that comprise that relationship system, so that the mentoring relationship is one that effectively involves all the relevant stakeholders. Click here to access.