

Mentoring and Positive Childhood Experiences: The Power of Caring Adults

Children and adolescents benefit tremendously from having stable, supportive relationships with caring non-parental adults. These relationships, often referred to as mentoring relationships, can provide guidance, encouragement, and connection at critical junctures in a young person's life. Mentoring relationships with teachers, coaches, religious leaders, and others in the community have the power to shape positive childhood experiences that can last a lifetime.



What is Mentoring?

Mentoring is a dynamic, reciprocal relationship between a young person and an adult outside the family that fosters caring, commitment, and joint learning. An effective mentoring relationship is built on trust, respect, and authenticity. The mentor takes an active interest in the mentee's growth and development, challenging the mentee to reach their potential while providing encouragement and support along the way.

Quality mentoring relationships share several defining features, according to the Developmental Relationships Framework developed by the Search Institute:

- Express care: The mentor shows the mentee that they matter through dependability, listening, believing in them, warmth, and enjoyment of the relationship.
- Challenge growth: The mentor pushes the mentee to keep getting better by expecting their best, stretching them, holding them accountable, and reflecting on failures.
- Provide support: The mentor helps the mentee complete tasks and achieve goals by navigating tough situations, empowering and advocating for the mentee, and setting healthy boundaries.

- Share power: The mentor treats the mentee with respect and gives them a say by respecting them, including them in decisions, collaborating, and letting them lead.
- Expand possibilities: The mentor broadens the mentee's horizons by inspiring them, exposing them to new ideas and experiences, and connecting them with helpful people.

Within this framework of expressing care, challenging growth, providing support, sharing power, and expanding possibilities, each mentoring relationship unfolds in its own unique way based on the individuals involved. Mentoring is not a one-size-fits-all endeavor. At its best, it is an intentional, collaborative partnership tailored to the mentee's interests, needs, and goals.

Mentoring and Positive Childhood Experiences

Positive childhood experiences (PCEs) are a powerful counterweight to adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) like abuse, neglect, household dysfunction, and other traumatic events. PCEs such as feeling able to talk with family about emotions, feeling supported by friends, having at least two nonparent adults who take genuine interest in the child, and feeling safe and protected by an adult in the home have been linked to resilience and well-being later in life.

Caring mentors can play a pivotal role in shaping positive childhood experiences. By providing developmental relationships characterized by expressed care, challenged growth, support, shared power, and expanded possibilities, mentors become part of a child's relational support system. They augment the care provided at home and model positive ways of relating. Through consistent meetings over an extended period, mentors have the opportunity to demonstrate unwavering care. They listen deeply, believing in the mentee's inherent worth. Warmth and encouragement from an adult outside the family conveys to a young person: You matter; you are not alone.

Beyond expressing care, great mentors challenge their mentees to grow. They see past limits and push mentees to meet high expectations. By reflecting on failures and insisting on accountability paired with compassion, mentors teach resilience. With the security of the mentoring relationship, youth are free to take risks and learn from mistakes without fear of losing care and connection.



In the context of a secure bond, the mentor's high standards communicate to the mentee: I believe you can reach your potential, and I will help you get there. The resulting self-efficacy and growth mindset have far-reaching benefits for health, relationships, and achievement throughout life.

By empowering youth, advocating for them, setting boundaries, and navigating systems, mentors provide instrumental and emotional support. Knowing someone has their back emboldens kids to imagine and pursue goals. Having a savvy, caring adult to help map the way engenders hope and confidence.

Effective mentors go beyond doing things for their mentee, instead shifting to sharing power. They treat even young mentees with respect and include them in decisions, building leadership muscles. By creating opportunities for mentees to take action and lead, mentors put into practice: You have unique gifts and contributions to make right now.

Finally, mentors expand possibilities by exposing youth to new ideas, experiences, and connections. Inspiration together with expanded horizons allows mentees to envision a future self not limited by current circumstances. Linking mentees with people and places that broaden their world says: There are so many ways your life can unfold; go explore! Through caring relationships characterized by expressing care, challenging growth, providing support, sharing power, and expanding possibilities, mentors sculpt positive experiences that shape youth development in ways that last.

Benefits of Mentoring for Youth

Decades of research reveal powerful benefits of mentoring for children and adolescents. These benefits span emotional well-being, social skills, academic achievement, and future success.

Youth with mentors report improvements in self-esteem, self-efficacy, identity development, and life satisfaction. Across studies, mentored youth consistently demonstrate better attitudes toward school, parents, peers, and community institutions compared to their non-mentored counterparts.

Having a mentor buffers youth against the risks of emotional and behavioral problems. In



one large study of at-risk youth, those with mentors were 52% less likely to skip school and 37% less likely to start using drugs. Access to mentoring has been linked to reduced rates of depression, social anxiety, and feelings of hopelessness.

Mentored adolescents show enhanced social skills including cooperation, assertiveness, and communication skills. Mentors model prosocial behavior and healthy relationships as an alternative to antisocial peer groups. Especially for youth without strong nuclear families, non-parental mentors provide a proving ground for building relationship skills.

The academic benefits of mentoring include better school attendance, engagement with school, and motivation to achieve. One meta-analysis found that youth who participated in mentoring programs saw measurable gains in academic, social-emotional, and prevention-related outcomes compared to non-mentored peers.

The long-term impacts of mentoring can extend well beyond the mentoring relationship. Having a mentor predicts positive outcomes across the transition to adulthood including college enrollment, employment opportunities, leadership development, and reduced criminality.

Effective mentoring provides a corrective experience for youth who have lacked stability or adequate role models. Through consistent, caring connection with a non-parental adult, young people gain skills, confidence, and social capital that unlock their potential.

Finding Mentors in Idaho

For children and youth across Idaho, access to quality mentoring provides a pathway to resilience and thriving. Idaho is home to a range of mentoring programs cultivating positive developmental relationships between youth and caring adults.

Big Brothers Big Sisters of Idaho has been facilitating community- and school-based mentoring since 1977. Serving youth ages 5-18, their mission is to create and support one-to-one mentoring relationships that ignite the power and promise of youth. Programs like Community-Based Mentoring, School-Based Mentoring, and Bigs in Blue match youth with volunteer mentors who meet regularly over an extended period. Big Brothers Big Sisters



carefully screens and trains mentor candidates, matching mentors and mentees based on compatibility and developmental needs. Their evidence-based approach has reached over 22,000 Idaho youth with measurable positive outcomes.

The Mentoring Network, created in 2014, provides infrastructure to expand quality mentoring across Idaho. As an affiliate of the National Mentoring Partnership, the Mentoring Network helps programs start and scale with training, resources, and funding. Their website offers a mentor program locator allowing Idahoans to search for local mentoring opportunities. Both rural and urban areas benefit from networking and capacity building through the Mentoring Network.

Many Idaho schools connect students with mentors as part of dropout prevention and college/career readiness efforts. For example, the WISE Program through Treasure Valley Family YMCA provides one-to-one mentoring for at-risk students in several local high schools. School-based programs leverage existing resources and conveniently provide mentoring where youth spend much of their time.

Faith communities often facilitate caring connections between youth and adults that nurture faith and character development. Churches, synagogues, and mosques can support intergenerational relationships through formal and informal mentoring. Providing training and infrastructure while building on shared values strengthens mentoring through religious institutions.

The workplace also offers mentoring possibilities. Internship programs like Idaho's Workforce Development Training Fund apprenticeships pair students with professionals. Employees can volunteer as career mentors, and youth mentoring benefits businesses by building community and developing future talent.

Many other youth-serving organizations embed mentoring in their programming, from Boys and Girls Clubs to 4-H to the YMCA. Idaho communities have a wealth of existing mentoring relationships that can be strengthened by using evidence-based practices. Expanding mentoring networks and improving quality allows more youth to benefit from life-shaping developmental relationships with nonparental adults.

The Power of Presence

At its core, mentoring provides sustained presence. During tumultuous adolescent years, a consistent caring adult embodies stability. By showing up week after week, year after year, mentors demonstrate follow-through. This commitment conveys care beyond what words can express.

All youth need to know is that their presence matters to someone. Mentors perpetuate this truth by making their mentee a priority. Setting aside regular time and making the mentee feel seen teaches their time together has inherent worth. For youth starved of attention at home or marginalized among peers, having an adult's undivided focus is transformative.

Beyond just being present, great mentors are emotionally available. They listen deeply and observe closely. Mentors tune in to mentees' verbal and nonverbal cues, showing investment in understanding their experience. This sends the message: You are worth understanding. With openness and empathy, mentors bear witness to the joys and sorrows of mentees' inner lives. During the tumult of adolescence, a safe non-judgmental space for reflection and revelation encourages healthy identity formation. By creating space for authentic sharing, mentors affirm the fundamental human need to be known.

Presence coupled with vulnerability forges connection. When mentors share stories and struggles from their own lives, they build trust and rapport. Rather than speaking from a position of superiority, mentors walk alongside mentees as fellow travelers. This peer-like mutuality makes wisdom more accessible.

Beyond just talking, shared activities expand mentoring's possibilities. Doing things together—everything from shooting hoops to visiting museums—cements bonds. Mentors get to model healthy hobbies and expose youth to new experiences. These active connections reinforce care through action, not just words.

At times, consistent presence means persistence. When youth pull back out of discouragement or distrust, mentors gently remain engaged. They keep showing up with the understanding that building relationships requires weathering storms. This tenacity communicates care without conditions.



By being dependably present, mentors embody the unwavering care that every child deserves. Their sustained commitment, emotional availability, and engaged persistence plant seeds of resilience. Regular deposits of attention yield compounding interest over time, helping mentees thrive now and into the future.

The invitation to presence is open to everyday citizens, not just professional counselors. Though mentoring has structure, at its foundation is the profound power of one human being focused on another. This quality of presence—being fully there with and for another—could transform society if we each embraced our calling to care.

Imagine what the world would be like if each of us resolved: I will nurture presence. I will listen deeply, share vulnerably, persist gently. I will be fully here for someone who needs me.

By passing on the gift of presence, we take part in that ancient and sacred work of guiding the young. We light the way so they can discover who they are meant to be.