



## EXPLORING AND VALUING DIVERSITY

This guide addresses the critical need to help mentors deal with diversity. Some mentors have reported experiencing “culture shock” in reference to their initial apprehension and lack of familiarity with, and/or understanding of, the world from which their mentees came.

Many mentor programs prefer to match mentees with mentors who come from similar backgrounds in terms of race, socioeconomic status, etc., but this is not always possible.

### **Toward a broad definition of cultural diversity**

Cultural diversity refers to more than race or ethnicity. It encompasses values, lifestyle and social norms and includes issues such as different communication styles, mannerisms, dress, family structure, traditions, time orientation and response to authority. These differences may be associated with age, religion, ethnicity and socioeconomic background.

Knowledge is the key to understanding. Below are descriptions and examples of different diversity issues. Each has the potential to cause misunderstandings between a mentor and a mentee. However, cultural understanding is not something you can learn exclusively from a textbook. Have a conversation with your mentee about their culture.

### **Ethnic Diversity**

If your mentee comes from a different ethnic background, learn about the values and traditions of that culture. Such things as the role of authority and family, communication styles, perspectives on time, ways of dealing with conflict and marriage traditions vary significantly among ethnic groups. Some examples of ethnic norms include:

- People from Scandinavian and Asian cultures are typically uncomfortable dealing directly with conflict. Their approach to problems or disagreements is often more subtle and indirect.
- Many Asian and Hispanic families emphasize respecting and obeying adults, such that disagreeing with an adult (i.e., family member, teacher, mentor) is forbidden.
- The role and style of communication of some African Americans is direct and assertive.
- Many Asian cultures have unique courtship and marriage traditions. For example, a Hmong girl typically marries before age 18 and most often is expected to marry a Hmong man of her parents' choosing.
- Some Native Americans may follow an inner clock, which they believe to be more natural, rather than adhering to a predetermined agenda or timetable.
- Children of recent immigrants typically react negatively to their parents' insistence that they follow the “old ways.” Mentors can help their mentees celebrate the uniqueness of their culture by showing curiosity and interest in the history and traditions of their mentees' cultures.

Obviously, these examples are stereotypes. They are used here to demonstrate the range of diversity among different ethnic groups. It is your task as a mentor to learn about ethnic diversity from your mentee.

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### **Socioeconomic Diversity**

A mentor must learn that many things s/he may have taken for granted are not necessarily common to all. These types of cultural differences are common between mentor and mentee and require time and understanding for an appreciation of their significance.

It is important to realize that there are psychological effects of chronic poverty. Some mentees may develop a short-term “culture of survival” attitude. Poverty often prevents people from believing that their future holds any promise of getting better. Saving money and investing in the future is a luxury they don’t believe they have.

### **Youth Culture**

Many of the characteristics of adolescence are normal, common, developmental traits and consequently don’t vary significantly from one generation to the next. Many adults believe that, in general, teenagers are exceedingly more rebellious than they themselves were as young people, but rebellion is a common (and perhaps necessary) ingredient in an adolescent’s transition into adulthood.

Take the time to remember what it was like to be your mentee’s age. For example, when you were in \_\_\_ grade:

- What was a typical day like?
- What was really important to you at that time?
- What was your father/mother like? Did you get along? Were you close?
- Were friendships always easy or were they sometimes hard?
- In general, did you feel as though adults typically understood you well?

It is also important to remember that some things, particularly sociological trends, do change dramatically and result in very different experiences from one generation to the next. There is significantly more alcohol and drug abuse today than in previous generations. Sexually transmitted diseases are more common and more dangerous, crime and violence have drastically increased throughout the country (particularly in urban areas), and single-parent families have become more common and greater demands are being placed on all families.

### **Remember. . .**

The following are some suggestions that may help you successfully handle diversity:

- Keep in mind that **you are the adult**—you are the experienced one. Thus, it is your responsibility to take the initiative and make the mentee feel more comfortable in the relationship.
- It’s also important to remember to **be yourself**. Mentees can see through the facade of trying to relate to youth (i.e., using their slang) and may find it difficult to trust people who are not true to themselves.

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- You may learn a lot about another culture, lifestyle or age group, but you will **never be from that group**. Don't over identify with your mentee. There is a big difference between the statements, "I know exactly what you're feeling" and "I think I have a sense of what you're going through." It is helpful to paraphrase what you think your mentee has said or is feeling and to give examples of similar situations that you have experienced.

### **Troublesome Behavior**

If something about your mentee is bothering you, first determine whether the behavior is simply troubling to you because you would do it differently or it is truly an indication of a more seriously troubled youth.

If, in fact, you feel that a troublesome situation is harmful to your mentee or others, you have an obligation to discuss this with your program coordinator.

Some behavior is not necessarily indicative of a serious problem but can nonetheless be troublesome. For example, being chronically late for appointments, adopting certain styles of dress or excessive swearing may have negative consequences. While your mentee has the right to make decisions about dress, speech and other behavior, you can help by letting him or her know:

- How the behavior makes you feel
- What judgments others may make about the mentee as a result of the behavior
- The reactions and consequences s/he might expect from others

You may want to discuss ways in which your mentee could keep his or her individuality and identity (both very important needs in adolescence) yet fit their behavior into adult norms. Don't mislead or misrepresent the truth — the fact is, like it or not, there are standards and norms in certain situations with which one is expected to comply.

### **Cultural Reciprocity**

An important but often forgotten aspect of cultural diversity is the mutuality of the mentoring relationship, which is what we call cultural reciprocity. This phrase refers to the fact that mentors and mentees alike can benefit from their increased understanding of others who may at first seem unfamiliar.

**Remember: Our lives are enriched by diversity!**

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