

#6 - Setting Mentoring Boundaries

It is extremely important for mentors to think in advance about setting appropriate limits with their mentee. It's good for the adult, the young person, and the relationship. Adolescent mentees are at a phase of life where they can and should be involved in discussions about those boundaries. However, there remain some things that you as a mentor will need to determine. Boundaries for adolescents need are different than with younger children, because adolescents are beginning to develop autonomy, a strong sense of personal identity, and more emotional, physical, and social maturity.

A Place to Start:

Though there isn't one set of boundaries that can be applied to all mentoring relationships, there are some minimums that are absolutely clear:

- ◆ Violence in the relationship is never okay.
- ◆ Romantic relationships between mentor and mentee are unacceptable.
- ◆ Mentors and mentee must never knowingly be put in danger.

Beyond these basics, the lines are less clear. Think, for example, about the following questions:

- ◆ Would you spend time in your home with your mentee?
- ◆ Would you bring your mentee to an R-rated movie?
- ◆ Talk with your mentee about sex?
- ◆ Tell your mentee about your own experiences using alcohol or other drugs?

The answers may be obvious to you...or maybe not. Mentors responses vary as much as mentors themselves vary. Know when and where you can go for help, talk to fellow mentors and/or program staff.

Try It

The next time you are with your mentee brainstorm a list of general "friendship guidelines." You may include things like: don't talk behind friend's backs, if a friend asks for help do what you can, show respect by showing up when you have plans, and so on. Then talk about whether some or all of these guidelines also apply to your mentoring relationships. You may also want to talk about when you should keep confidences and when you should ask for help (e.g., when someone may get hurt).

What to Consider:

If you are mentoring through an organization, your program staff may have provided you with clear guidelines regarding some boundaries. But even that won't help you "in the moment" when you're trying to deal with a specific situation. Here are five things you can consider as you make decisions about what is or is not acceptable in your mentoring relationship:

1. Is it safe? Is it legal? Is there potential for harm (physical, social, or emotional)?
2. Is it within the rules and guidelines established by your mentoring organization?
3. Have your mentee's parents told you what they expect and will accept, and is it within those guidelines?
4. Will it build Developmental Assets, positive internal and external strengths that help young people thrive, including:
 - a. Support
 - b. Empowerment
 - c. Boundaries and expectations
 - d. Constructive use of time
 - e. Commitment to learning
 - f. Positive values
 - g. Social competencies
 - h. Positive identity

(There are 40 Developmental Assets in all. For more information about how assets work, see www.search-institute.org.)

5. Does it fit your comfort level and expectations of your mentoring relationship?

If the answer to any of the five is no, this may be a sign of a potential boundary conflict. In any case, you must weigh the pros and cons and decide if potential benefits outweigh the potential negative consequences. If you have any concerns about an activity or decision then you should follow up with your program coordinator, your mentee's parents/guardians, or your mentee to clarify any gray areas.

Makes You Think

Adolescent brains are still in development and therefore they depend on adults to help them establish healthy, appropriate behavior boundaries and expectations. As noted by psychologist David Walsh, author of *Why Do they Act that Way? A Survival Guide to the Adolescent Brain for You and Your Teen* (2004), "Adolescent brains get the gas before the brakes. Puberty gives adolescents a body that looks like an adult's and a brain that is prone to wild fluctuations and powerful surges. The brain's gas pedal is ready for a NASCAR-paced adulthood. But...the brain's got the brakes of a Model T.... Impulsiveness and risk taking come with the adolescent territory. So [supportive adults] have to function as the brakes—in part by setting and enforcing reasonable boundaries—until the teen brain installs its own set."