

It may not be easy and please stick at it!

“I wish they’d turn up more often. Most of the time, I never knew if they’d come or not”

“They didn’t come and it was... really horrible. I don’t know what I did wrong”

Young people reflecting on their failed mentoring relationships

Mentoring may not be an easy or even rewarding task, as international mentoring researcher Jean Rhodes says:

‘Even the most dedicated mentors are likely to feel exasperation, ambivalence, anger and regret at various points... If mentors were told that the road to establishing this connection [between mentor and mentee] could be a tough one – that the adolescents might very well spend the first six months testing them before offering even a shred of appreciation or authentic disclosure – many people would probably examine their motivations and commitment more carefully before volunteering.’

That sounds quite harsh, but it is better to go in knowing what you may face. Over the years we have seen some common problems that can occur in any match.

We’ve collected some examples of these common problems and included them for you in the next three pages, including some tips on how to handle them. After your match gets going, if you are experiencing one of these challenges, you can bring the issue up with your supervisor and discuss in more detail how to proceed in a successful way.

“My Mentee doesn’t show appreciation.”

- Coming into the match with a preconceived notion of how your Mentee should show appreciation will set you up for a letdown. Your Mentee may not say “please” and “thank you” when you first start meeting, and even after many times together he/she may still not respond in a way that you deem appropriate.
- “I had a good time” may eventually be a response, but may be a long time in coming. Sometimes he/she might only say, “It was o.k.” Be sure you model the behavior you would like your Mentee to demonstrate, and be consistent.

“My Mentee doesn’t share feelings and/or initiate conversation.”

- You may feel that your Mentee is not putting as much into the relationship as you would like. The relationship may seem one-sided for a long time with you doing the talking, and your Mentee not saying much.
- Eventually your Mentee may well respond in a more open and honest way, trusting you and confiding in you as an adult who will not disappoint or walk out on them. Conversation between you will grow and your Mentee may share more feelings with you. There are no guarantees and often it is important to lower your expectations.

“My Mentee doesn’t act the right way.”

- Your Mentee may come from a family with a very different value system than yours. It is not your responsibility or role to try to change the values of your Mentee. Your match is a learning experience for both of you.
- Try to be content with the understanding that, through your example, your Mentee may come to respect values that are more positive. But this may be a long process.

“My Mentee doesn’t seem to need me.”

- Every child should have someone to bring a little magic to them, but your Mentee may not respond in a way that makes you feel you are needed. Feeling needed may be expressed by your Mentee in small ways, and may be non-verbal.
- In time, you may learn to recognize small signs that your Mentee needs you. This will help you in being content with the knowledge that you are making a difference and are a much-needed part of your Mentee’s life.

“My Mentee doesn’t seem to want to meet with me.”

- Your Mentee may seem to have little interest in spending time with you, but be assured that your Mentee is benefiting from the interest and involvement of a caring adult friend. You are the person spending one-on-one time with your Mentee; listening; sharing, and showing your desire to be together on a regular basis.
- No group activity, school event or other commitment can take the place of your special relationship with your Mentee. If you recognize the importance of what you are doing, it is likely that your Mentee will recognize this too.

“My Mentee doesn’t seem interested.”

- Keep in mind that we all demonstrate interest in different ways, and your Mentee may not know how to communicate that he/she is interested.
- Be sure you do not make assumptions based on your Mentee’s behaviour, and talk to your Supervisor if you have questions.

“My Mentee doesn’t want to improve.”

- Your Mentee may have many adults eager to tell what she/he is doing wrong.
- What your Mentee will respond to is someone who will point out and praise strengths. These strengths (assets) can range from the values that the child holds to things he/she is good at doing. If your Mentee knows that you are going to be positive, give encouragement and compliments, and appreciate the unique person that he/she is, change will happen in very positive ways, and your Mentee will grow in confidence, competence and caring.