

Youth Culture

Many of the characteristics of adolescence are normal developmental traits and don't vary significantly from one generation to the next. Rebellion, for example, is a common trait of adolescents, although it may be expressed differently from generation to generation.

Take the time to remember what it was like to be your student's age, and see if you can answer the following questions:

When you were in your student's grade—

- What was a typical day like?
- What was really important to you at the time?
- What was your father/mother like? Did you get along? Were you close?
- Think of your friends. 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 do change dramatically and result in very different contexts and experiences from one generation to the next. Where you grew up and what you were exposed to play a role. There may be significantly more alcohol and drug abuse today. Crime and violence have increased. Ever-evolving technology has changed the way youth interact and view the world. Single parent and having both parents work outside of the home are more common. Yet, despite these challenges, the impact of mentoring is universally compelling. No, you won't fix significant societal problems, but you do give students hope for a better future and offer a different perspective on life.

Stages of Development

Every stage in a child's life brings different opportunities and challenges. While mentors are not expected to be experts in the different developmental stages, it is helpful to understand the different characteristics and abilities at different ages. For instance, speaking about career fields will look different to an elementary school student than to a high school student. You will use different language and the information that you share will also change depending on the age and cognitive level of the student.

Each youth, no matter the stage, require the opportunity to become independent and the chance to experience success in what they attempt to do. It is also important for them to give and receive attention. As children grow and learn, their personalities may change. Specifically, as youth enter their pre-teen and teen years, you may notice emotional changes. A child who was once easy-going and happy may become moody. This stage of life requires patience and understanding as youth develop.

Finally, remember that all youth grow and develop at their own pace. Certain characteristics are common to each youth at each age level, however, all youth may not reach these milestones at the same time. While we give tips for different age groups, these are generalized and your mentee may be ahead or behind their group. Consider each child's

needs, interests and uniqueness and be sure to adjust your expectations and goals accordingly for your mentee. As a mentor, your goal is to provide support and guidance for your mentee as they grow. Most importantly, each stage brings new and exciting changes.

Best Practices

Remember that you are the adult. Imagine what your student must be thinking and feeling. In general, young people of all ages, but particularly teens, believe they are not respected by adults and worry about whether a mentor will like them. They are coming to you for help and may already feel insecure and embarrassed about the problems in their lives. It is your responsibility to take the initiative and make the student more comfortable in the relationship.

Remember to be yourself. Sometimes with the best of intentions mentors try too hard to relate to young people, be the best mentor or imitate what other mentors are doing. Keep in mind that every match is unique and if you're not doing what the match next to you is, that is ok. . Students can see through this and may find it difficult to trust people who are not true to themselves.

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 student. Your student realizes you will never know exactly what she or he is feeling or experiencing. Your student may actually feel invalidated by your insistence that you "truly know where he or she is coming from."

Ask Questions and LISTEN

Students need someone to ask about their week—what went well and what didn't. Think about how good it feels when someone asks how you are doing and is genuinely interested in your response. Students need someone to recognize their accomplishments and cheer them on when they are struggling. Students also need somebody to ask bigger questions, "What do you want to do after high school?" and "What's your plan to get there?" Be prepared to help answer those questions (or contact LSS and we can give you some tips).

Have Fun

Mentoring relationships are most successful when they incorporate fun. Mentors and students should play and laugh together. Sometimes this is the outlet a student needs to regain a positive attitude and make it through the rest of the week.