

Developing Trust

Successful mentoring relationships are built upon a foundation of trust. Few individuals enter a new relationship without reservations, and students may be especially shy or fearful. Keep in mind – they are kids! You should not have the same expectations as you would with an adult. Mentors should be patient and recognize that trust may take weeks, and in some cases, months to build.

Establishing communication and developing a relationship can often be a difficult process. Learning to trust, especially for youth who have been let down before, requires time. Students cannot be expected to trust or communicate freely with their mentors simply because they have been paired together.

The key to creating effective mentoring relationships lies in the development of trust between two strangers of different ages. Volunteers come to mentoring programs because they want to help youth. Without establishing trust, mentors may experience difficulty supporting the youth with whom they interact.

The most critical factor in determining whether matches develop into satisfying and effective relationships is the approach of the mentor. Mentors who follow a gradual path in trust-building find that the types of support they can offer broaden considerably once trust has been established. The gradual establishment of trust also increases the likelihood that the support will be accepted.

The Test

When students are slow to trust their mentor, they often display low expectations of adult behavior. They may come to the relationship expecting inconsistency and a lack of commitment. The mentor's trustworthiness and commitment may be tested, particularly if students have experienced disappointment. During the testing period, mentors can expect:

Student forgetting meeting with you
Unreasonable requests
Indifference
Periods of silence
Student appearing uninterested or wanting to be with their friends

The test can come and go throughout your relationship with your student and oftentimes have nothing to do with you. Remember, the issue is not whether the student likes you. Students are protecting themselves from disappointment. From their perspective, having no relationship at all seems better than trusting and subsequently losing someone. Mentors should realize that predictability breeds trust. With that in mind, strive to be consistent and accountable by:

- Being on time for meetings.

- Following through on promises, no matter how insignificant.
- Following up with any issues previously discussed.

Effective Trust Building Practices for Mentors

Be a “friend” rather than a teacher or parent; define the role of “supporting the youth” in a variety of ways.

Commit to consistency, dependability, and to maintaining a steady presence in the student’s life.

Understand that the relationship may seem fairly one-sided—that you are doing all the work—but take responsibility for keeping the relationship alive.

Involve the student in deciding how to spend time together. Successful mentors take the time to learn about the student’s interests and provide options for how to spend their time, rather than planning everything without input from the student.

Pay attention to kids’ need for fun. Having fun together is a key part of building relationships, and it also provides youth with valuable opportunities that might be otherwise unavailable.

Seeking and utilizing the help and advice of LSS staff. Successful mentors recognize that they don’t have all the answers and they value the support and guidance that program staff can provide.

Discuss confidentiality early in the relationship and provide reassurance that the sensitive things you discuss will not be shared with family, friends, coworkers, etc. If there is a threat of physical harm to the student or to others, the mentor must break confidentiality to seek protection for the person in danger.

Avoid Practices That Can Sabotage Trust

Avoid practices such as these, which are less likely to build and maintain trust.

- Not being your genuine self when mentoring.
- Approaching the relationship with narrow, specific goals aimed at changing behavior.
- Failing to meet on a regular and consistent basis.
- The attempt to instill a set of values that may be different from or inconsistent with those the youth is exposed to at home.
- Attempting to transform or reform the student by setting tasks and adopting a parental or authoritative role in their interactions. For youth, the value of a mentor is often in having a supportive adult who is not a parent or teacher.
- Emphasizing behavior changes over developing mutual trust and respect.
- Attempting to force youth to change.