

# About Your Student

## Taboo Topics – Socio-Economic – Poverty – New Americans – Children of Prisoners – Youth in Foster Care

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Sensitive issues may come up when mentoring. It is important to treat each issue in a respectful way. If at any time your student brings a conversation you are not comfortable discussing, call LSS. In the moment, it is fine to tell your student you need to think about the answer and will get back to them at your next meeting. You can also suggest their question might be better answered by their parent, teacher or counselor.

### **Delicate Topics**

Delicate topics should be discussed only when initiated by the student. These topics can be difficult and strongly affect the relationship. Confidentiality takes on greater importance with these topics. Issues include poor choices related to behavior (being disruptive in class, running in the hall, etc), self-image, peer pressure, school performance and general insecurities about their life.

### **Issues of Concern**

Issues of concern may have lifelong implications for the student. The mentor needs to report them to LSS and we will relay the message when needed. These issues do not necessarily require direct intervention. Because these issues may be part of ongoing situations and conditions that students face, mentors should not pass judgment on the youth. Such issues include depression, anxiety, fighting at school or home, bullying and harassment.

### **Crises Requiring Immediate Intervention**

Crises can be brought up that require direct and immediate intervention. Some of these issues, like child abuse and neglect, are mandated by law to be reported; others may require a referral or a direct intervention by LSS or the school. These include abusive relationships, suicidal behavior, substance abuse or serious delinquency.

### **Diversity**

One of the most critical training needs for mentors is help in dealing with diversity. Some mentors talk about “culture shock” when they first meet their student. This is often due to a lack of familiarity (or perhaps understanding of) the student’s world. It is normal to feel a certain amount of apprehension about meeting someone new. Add to that a significant difference in age, socioeconomic status, and/or racial and ethnic background, and it’s easy to see why this is such an important issue for mentors.

Mentors may be matched with youth whose backgrounds and lifestyles are very different from your own. Culture is more than race or ethnicity. It encompasses values, lifestyle, and social norms, including communication styles, mannerisms, ways of dressing, family structure, traditions, orientation to time, and response to authority. These differences may be associated with age, religion, ethnicity, and socioeconomic background. It is important

to accept and embrace this difference rather than attempt to change it or worse yet, misunderstand your student.

A way to work around this is to talk to your student about his or her background, about what life is like at school or home or with his or her friends. As you begin to learn and understand more about your student, you will be less likely to make assumptions.

### *Socioeconomic Diversity and Poverty*

Many mentor-student pairs may come from very different socioeconomic backgrounds. The mentor may have grown up on a farm, while the student has never been outside of the city. The mentor may own a house, while the student may not know anyone who owns a house. A student's family may move frequently, perhaps every few months. A student may have to share a very small apartment with many people. Most mentors report that many things he or she took for granted are not necessarily common to all.

Poverty is relative. It occurs in all races and countries. Generational poverty is when two or more generations have experienced poverty. With this, being in poverty is the norm and what kids know as their reality. Situational poverty is caused by circumstance such as illness, divorce or the death of someone close. People living in situational poverty work to get back to "normal" and often have an attitude of pride and refusal to accept assistance.

Many people living in poverty get their primary information from other people and do not always take the time to research what might be best for them. They also look for quick fixes to solve any problems – without taking time to learn of the lasting implications of their choice.

Although it has gotten better in the past few years, schools tend to operate from a middle class norm. For example, homework is given with the expectation that the student will have a place to do it, the necessary supplies, and help from an adult. These expectations can put children of poverty at a further disadvantage and cause them to feel more alienated from peers and school.

As a child....if I am concerned about where my next meal is coming from or if I will be safe at home tonight... is my priority that math worksheet in front of me and am I able to focus on it?

If your student talks about a lack of resources or an inability to do something because they are lacking something, mentors can introduce this student to potential help or alert LSS and/or the school of issues and we might find a way to help. Sioux Falls is a resource rich community and help is available to students. Do not expect students or their parents to know what may be obvious to you. It is best to not judge the family's situation or behavior. Rather, strive for understanding.

### *New Americans (Refugees or Immigrants)*

New Americans may face unique challenges including stress related to previous trauma, discrimination, poverty, and separation from family members. If at any time you have

questions about this, please contact LSS and we will consult with the Center for New Americans staff.

### *Incarcerated Parents*

Children of incarcerated parents may struggle with issues of trust and social stigma. Often times, these children believe that no one trusts them because of their parent's criminal history and have trust issues themselves due to their unstable family situation. They may also feel embarrassed about their parent's incarceration. Keep in mind that criminal activity, police presence and family members in jail may be the norm in your students home life.

### *Foster Care*

Youth in foster care face an array of challenges like placement changes and moves. A recent study found that relationships with mentors provided foster youth with emotional support, better planning and problem-solving skills and a higher self worth.

Kinship is a term used in social services that encompasses care takers other than biological, adoptive or foster parents. There are many students who may live with grandparents or other extended family members. Oftentimes a mentor's definition of family may be quite different from that of a mentee's family. Keep in mind blended families and extended family living together is typical.

Again, LSS offers Foster Care Services and has a staff of experts available to rely on for support and answers.

Below are some helpful hints in working with youth who might be in a special population reference above.

- Nurture feelings of safety, inclusion and belonging. Remember that many have experienced constant instability and nothing is consistent – everything is temporary.
- Support and encourage cultural, religious, and family values while helping youth adapt to cultural norms.
- Foster youth prefer mentors who display patience, persistence, genuine affection, authenticity, respect for the youth's past, as well as shared characteristics such as interests and communication style. Also important are flexibility to their changing needs, consistency, accountability, letting them have a voice in the relationship, clear expectations about the relationship length, and regular contact.
- Remember to rely on help from LSS for any concerning behaviors or when you feel stuck.

Again, long-term, positive mentoring relationships develop through demonstrating positive relationship behaviors such as authenticity, empathy, collaboration and companionship.

Building trust as we discussed previously is one of the best ways to develop a positive relationship and one excellent way to show students what trust is by consistently following through with plans and showing up every week.