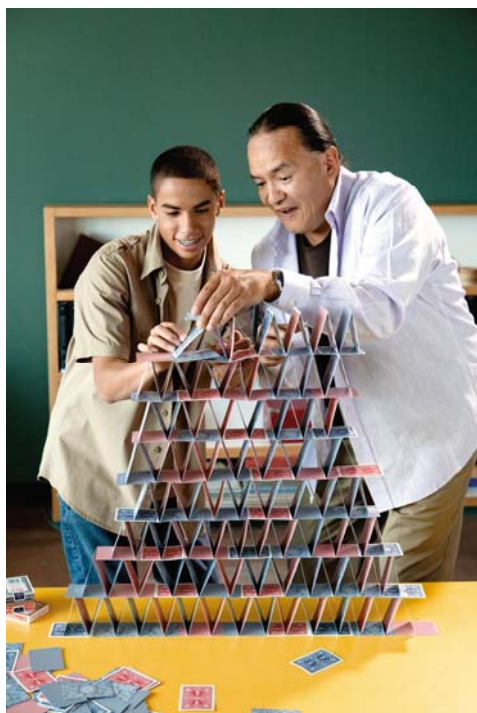




Alberta Mentoring Partnership



Strength-Based Mentoring: *Nurturing the social capacity of children and youth to thrive*

Introduction

What enables some children and youth to do well in life, to successfully navigate life's challenges and to feel hopeful about the future in spite of adversity, while others are over-whelmed or uncertain? Research has determined that the one clear difference between these two categories of young

people is the presence of a significant mentoring or supportive adult influence in their lives that enhances their strengths, resources and ability to thrive in the face of life's inevitable challenges.

The role of mentoring

Mentoring has the potential to bring about positive change for children and youth. Like adults, children and youth are social beings who live their lives in the context of relationships with others. The goal of mentoring is to make connections with children and youth, forming a positive relationship based on empowerment, altruism and mutuality. These qualities lay the foundation for young people as they work to succeed and develop life skills.¹

The Alberta Mentoring Partnership (AMP) has defined mentoring as “the presence of a caring individual(s) who provides a young person with support, advice, friendship, reinforcement and constructive role modeling over time.”

In many ways, effective mentoring embraces the goals and focus of positive youth development. As in mentoring, positive youth development uses strength-based approaches that promote healthy child and youth development by building relationships with caring adults within supportive community environments.²



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The goal of positive youth development is to nurture and enhance young people's ability to be resilient. A resilient person copes effectively with or adapts to stress and challenging life situations in ways that address the current situation and prepare them for managing future challenges successfully.

A resilient child or youth:

- feels appreciated and valued for their individual gifts and strengths;
- has an understanding of how to set realistic expectations for themselves and others;
- possesses positive problem-solving skills;
- employs productive coping strategies when they encounter challenges or areas of vulnerability;
- seeks assistance from others when they need it;
- experiences positive support and interactions from peers and adults.³

What is strength-based mentoring?

A strength-based mentoring approach has as its focus the identification, exploration, and use of strengths in children and youth to foster positive mental health outcomes at school, at home and in the community. Those supporting a strength perspective view children and youth as having "self-righting potential." In other words, they can draw on their strengths to constructively navigate life challenges with resilience. Positive youth development is viewed, therefore, not as the absence of risk behaviour, but rather as the presence of positive attributes and relationships that support children and youth in reaching their full potential.



Principles of strength-based mentoring

1. The focus of the mentoring process is on the mentee's strengths, interests, abilities and capabilities, not on their deficits, weaknesses or problems.
2. All mentees learn, grow and change through their strengths and capacities.
3. The mentor-mentee relationship becomes a primary and essential partnership.
4. The mentor is viewed as the facilitator and the mentee as the director in their own social capacity building story.
5. Continuity, trust, respect, compassion and acceptance are essential traits for promoting strength-based mentoring.
6. Involves a collaborative and participatory process that continually builds upon strengths with realistic expectations and clear boundaries.

Strategies for strength-based mentoring

- **Know your mentee:** Good mentors engage in ways that allow them to learn about their mentee from the inside out. They discern the mentee's distinct mix of strengths and limitations, listen to them and show interest in their dreams and aspirations.
- **Expect excellence:** Mentors should set high, but realistic expectations and communicate them clearly to their mentee. Mentors need to demonstrate confidence in the mentee's ability to meet age appropriate expectations and model the same excellence expected of the mentee.
- **Affirm, affirm and then affirm some more:** Mentees need to feel good about themselves, and affirmation is the key to their sense of well-being. Always and unconditionally affirm your mentee's uniqueness and great value. Be sure to gently shed light on unrealistic aspirations and find ways to affirm mentees even in the face of short-term challenges.
- **Be a teacher and a coach:** What you teach, mentees will learn. Effective mentors are dependable, provide knowledge, make recommendations, offer consultation, and stimulate motivation with encouragement.
- **Offer counsel in difficult times:** Although mentoring is not about being a professional counsellor, be open to discussing and exploring a mentee's concerns and difficulties. Actively listen, reflect feelings and clarify alternative options. Know and accept your limitations and refer mentees to an appropriate resource when serious mental health or safety issues emerge.



- **Protect when necessary:** Respond quickly and calmly to situations where the mentee may be unfairly treated or is at risk. Use protection wisely, as being overly protective reduces the opportunity for the mentees to learn the skills of successfully navigating those developmentally appropriate challenges in life.
- **Stimulate growth with challenges:** Purposely support mentees in exploring developmentally appropriate challenges tailored to their strengths and capabilities. Nurture their sense of confidence, optimism and self-efficacy through successive episodes of accomplishments - leading to greater successes.
- **Narrate growth and development:** Attend carefully to your mentee's small gains and important milestones. Reflect to the mentee their achievements and highlight their constructive steps towards their goals.
- **Nurture creativity:** Encourage innovative thought and creative problem-solving strategies. Create a safe place for learning from mistakes and model innovation as well as persistence.
- **Be an intentional model:** Invite the mentee into various aspects of your life where you want them to learn through direct observation. Model excellence and moral directedness. Once observed, require increasing participation in, and ownership of, their own process.

Traits of strength-based mentors ^{1, 4, 5}

- **Exude warmth:** Radiate warmth with an attitude of friendliness, approachability, and kindness. Consistently offer verbal and nonverbal expressions of sincere interest, acceptance and genuine positive regard.
- **Listen actively:** In reasonable ways, make yourself available when your mentee wants to talk. During those conversations, give them your undivided attention. Ensure your verbal and non-verbal messages are similar and you reflect (accurately paraphrase) your mentee's primary concerns.
- **Show unconditional regard:** Show that your mentee is a person of great value and potential by being consistent in your commitment of time, being dependable and by making an effort to genuinely understand.
- **Embrace humour:** Laugh at yourself often as a way of modelling humility and perspective. Use humour to engage and teach mentees how to balance life's stressful moments with laughter.



- **Do not expect perfection:** Expect excellence without perfection. Model how life's mistakes are opportunities for exploring other options and pathways to success. Serve as an intentional and transparent model of imperfect excellence.
- **Attend to interpersonal cues:** Pay attention to your own emotional life and demonstrate emotional self-awareness. Model a range of emotions in constructive ways and work at an accurate understanding of the emotional states of the mentee.
- **Be trustworthy and dependable:** Demonstrate trustworthiness as well as consistency, reliability, and integrity. Keep promises, maintain confidence and adhere to professional and organizational codes of behaviour.
- **Respect values:** Do not pretend to be "value neutral" – acknowledge your core beliefs and values. Respect the mentee's values and provide a safe place to discuss value differences when appropriate.

Matters of integrity and self-care for a mentor ⁶

- **Consider the implications of mentoring:** Mentoring is a responsibility not to be taken lightly. Although one may be motivated to influence the life of a child or youth in a positive way, engaging in a mentoring relationship is a purposeful journey that requires giving of oneself in many ways. One must recognize and accept the potential challenges of being a mentor and constantly assess one's motivations.
- **Practice self-care:** It is important to understand that caring for a mentee means caring for oneself by modeling a responsible balance across all areas of one's life, including mentoring life. Follow through with commitments to family, friends and mentees.
- **Make sure you are competent:** Work at developing your own resilience and relational mentoring skills. Evaluate your own experience, expertise and confidence before and during your time as a mentor.
- **Hold yourself accountable:** Ensure your mentoring activities are characterized by honesty, consistency and integrity. It is important to have a trusted friend or organization that provides a safe place to routinely confer about your mentoring and your relationship with your mentee.
- **Practice Humility:** Practice humility through non-defensiveness and transparency with respect to faults and weaknesses. Understand that by authentically being open about one's limitations, you give your mentee



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permission to be human as well. Understand and appreciate your own strengths and accomplishments while using them to support your mentee.

- **Welcome Change and Growth:** Believe that your mentoring relationship will positively enhance the social capacity of your mentee and therefore, change in positive ways over time. Understand the common phases of mentoring development and how your mentee might need different things from you at each phase. Narrate, welcome and even highlight evidence of your mentee's growth and positive youth development.
- **Mentor as a way of Life:** Remember that if you are drawn to mentoring, you probably have gifts in this area that will be best served by frequent use. Embrace the rich rewards associated with mentoring, but take care to protect yourself from being overextended.

For more information about mentoring, please visit albertamentors.ca.

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