



MENTOR

THE MENTOR'S GUIDE TO YOUTH PURPOSE:

The art of helping a young person find meaning, a sense of self, and ways of giving back to their world

Staff Considerations for Using this Guide in Your Program

The Mentor's Guide to Youth Purpose offers a comprehensive resource that can get any youth mentor thinking about what it means to have purpose in life and how they might be able to help a young person understand, identify, and explore purpose through their mentoring relationship. And while the guide and accompanying worksheets can be used by mentors on their own, mentoring programs may choose to utilize the guide in a more formal way by asking all or some of their mentors to use the content of the guide as an intentional and planned part of program activities.

But which mentoring programs should consider utilizing the guide in this way? And what are the circumstances, opportunities, and challenges they should consider when using this resource? The pages that follow are designed to answer questions such as these and help youth mentoring programs determine how to get the most out of the resource.

BASICS OF THE GUIDE

The Mentor's Guide to Youth Purpose consists of a guide written directly for mentors to read and explore, along with a set of 15 worksheets that they can use not only for their own purpose exploration but, in many instances, also directly with young people as they help them think about and explore purpose, often for the first time. For mentors in your program to use the materials, they will need copies of both the guide and the accompanying handouts.

The guide is divided into four main sections, each offering a sequential topic about purpose:

Section 1: Understanding Purpose
– This offers a clear definition of purpose and related terms that will be referenced throughout the guide, as well as information about why mentors might be especially useful in helping youth explore purpose.

Section 2: Laying the Foundation for Purpose Exploration – This chapter reviews strategies for mentors to build trust and mutu-

ality with their mentee as a way of laying the foundation for any purpose discussion or exploration. This will allow mentors to communicate more effectively, empower youth, and create the conditions where purpose can be pursued.

Section 3: Exploring Purpose Together – This offers some beginning strategies to start doing purpose exploration with young people. Mentors will learn to explore meaning and values with youth and plan intentional, youth-led activities that can identify purpose or spur action to explore a purpose more deeply.

Section 4: Engaging and Sustaining Purpose Over Time – This chapter teaches mentors how to support youth in the ups and downs of purpose exploration, with an emphasis on reflection, reframing disappointments, and going deeper into civic engagement and activism for youth whose purpose is oriented around social justice and the well-being of the larger community.



Each of these chapters is supported by a selection of worksheets, mostly to help the mentor themselves understand concepts of purpose and to get them reflecting on what they bring to this work. As the guide progresses, the worksheets go deeper into the concepts presented and offer strategies for also using the content with youth themselves. Worksheets that can be adapted by mentors for direct use with their mentee are noted with an asterisk at the beginning of each section.

PHILOSOPHY OF THE GUIDE

One of the core principles of this guide is that the role of the mentor is one that should be highly developmental and in service of youth-identified goals, values, and activities. Much of the content tries to get mentors to understand how to communicate in ways that are empowering to youth and to resist the urge to slip into “adultism” and

prescriptive actions when working with a mentee—something that many mentors in many programs struggle with, despite their best intentions to let the youth lead. It can be hard for any adult who engages with a young person they care about to learn to check their own biases, to reflect on their own motivations and approaches, and to step out of the way so that youth can truly grow by taking the lead.

But this approach is critical to doing purpose work with youth. Purpose cannot be imposed, it must be discovered by the young individual based on their values, their ways of understanding, their passions, and their desire to see change in the world and serve others. Mentors play an absolutely critical role in this process for youth, by sharing their power and resources, by offering encouragement, and by facilitating opportunities for learning and reflection.

But all that work is fairly nuanced and personal and it's easy for mentors to make mistakes along the way. Thus, much of the content and the worksheets that accompany this guide are designed to get mentors reflecting on their role, how they show up in the relationship, and the things they do (or don't) that facilitate a young person's ability to identify and engage in purpose in ways that are safe and reaffirming.

The working group of expert practitioners and scholars who supported the development of this guide were adamant that purpose exploration must be done in ways that are youth-led, positive, and that do no harm. This work may not be for every relationship in your program and certainly isn't something that mentors should start exploring right off the bat before trust and strong communication patterns are developed in the mentoring relationship.



If your program thinks that these types of advanced mentoring skills are a good fit for some or all of your matches, and that purpose exploration is a good fit with the overall goals and emphasis of the program, then this workbook may be a valuable tool that will further enhance mentor skills and the depth of their work with young people. Example Approaches for



CONSIDERATIONS FOR USING THE GUIDE IN YOUR PROGRAM

There are several factors to consider when thinking about using this guide in your program:

- **The age of the youth you serve**

- While there is no “right” age to begin exploring purpose with young people, this work does lend itself to work with youth who are middle school age or older. Developmentally, this is around the age when they acquire more advanced perspective-taking and problem-solving skills and when they start to contemplate their place within the ecosystems they inhabit (e.g., school, family, peer groups), as well as the broader community, nation, and even world. High schoolers may be especially attuned to political or aspects of their community and may be desiring more of a voice in facilitating positive change. They are also on the precipice of adulthood and may be wondering how to find “their place” in an intimidating adult world. None of this is to say that younger children can’t start thinking about and exploring purpose, but they may have a harder time wrestling

with abstract concepts or feeling like they can contribute to the broader world immediately.

- **The focus and outcomes of your mentoring program** - Some mentoring programs have very focused missions, working with youth to achieve a limited set of goals, often in a punctuated period of time. Purpose exploration, as noted earlier, can really only happen in relationships with established trust, strong communication, and shared power and decision-making, all of which can be difficult to establish in shorter-term programs that have a more instrumental focus to the relationships. Purpose exploration can also be a slow process, with lots of trial and error, reflection, and course correction. Once again, this may be challenging to weave into shorter-term programs. And, simply put, your program may have very specific outcomes that are not necessarily aligned with a longer, more philosophical exploration of something as profound as purpose. It’s perfectly fine and reasonable for a mentoring program to have a narrower focus and to deploy mentors in service of youth outcomes

that are achievable with focused effort in those relationships. But if your mentoring program takes a more holistic view of supporting youth, or thinks that exploring purpose may allow for other program objectives and outcomes to be met, then exploring purpose is a truly amazing gift for both adults and youth and can deepen both the relationships they participate in and the impact of your program on the community.

- **The setting of the program** - Programs that are purely site-based may have a harder time supporting purpose work by their participants. Often, purpose involves getting out into the community where the youth can engage in that “contribution to others” that separates purpose from just a hobby or skill. While mentors and youth can certainly have conversations about purpose and help the mentee figure out how to apply their passions to the world around them, programs that don’t allow for trips or contact away from the program location may have a harder time supporting mentors and youth in this work.



- **The commitment of your mentors to learn new skills** – As noted previously, this guide takes a particular stance on how to best explore purpose with young people, and a lot of it revolves around mentors being willing to explore their own histories and biases, reflect on their own lives, and learn and practice new ways of communicating and offering support. Not every mentor will be willing to work with a young person in this way or will be open to this much self-reflection and skill-building effort. But if you have a group of mentors that is eager to learn, and who have mindsets and attitudes that lead you to believe they will take this work seriously, seize the opportunity to learn new ideas and skills, and approach this work in ways that will be positive and affirmative for youth, then you have the right mentors to task with exploring purpose. So think carefully about which of your mentors seem like a good fit for this work.
- **Indicators that your mentees are ready for this work** – In addition to the age-based considerations noted above, there are other signs that your mentees are

clearly ready to explore purpose with the help of a mentor. If your mentees are open about sharing their passions, their talents, and their values in the context of the program, they may be very open to conversations and experiences that will unlock purpose. If they are already expressing an interest in civic engagement or activism, and demonstrate a keen understanding about the world around them, then weaving purpose work into the mentoring program might further engage them in mentoring relationships and strengthen their connection to your program.

- **Your staff capacity to prepare participants for this work** – Below we discuss some options for using this guide to do purpose work with the youth in your program. All of them require some intentional effort on the part of staff to teach skills, provide opportunities for discussion and reflection, and coordinate some level of support for the purpose work that mentors and youth engage in. This also means that your staff members will have to become knowledgeable about purpose and may need to do

many of the reflections recommended for mentors in the guide. If your staff already feels maxed out and the thought of having to become an “expert” on yet another mentoring topic seems daunting, it may not be the right time to weave this into your program. Similarly, if you know you lack the financial or other resources to support youth civic engagement out in the community, that lack of resources also might be a barrier that needs addressing before starting this work. We mention this only to note that a program does need to bring some staff time and capacity to bear on this work and that not all programs are in a position to “do it right” at a given time.





USING THE GUIDE IN YOUR PROGRAM

While there is no “right” way to use this guide in your program’s work, there are a number of options programs may want to consider. The three examples below offer a few possible approaches to integrating this guide into an existing program. Feel free to be creative in how you integrate it into your work, but please note that there should be staff buy-in and understanding for whatever path you take.

Example 1: Integrated into Pre-Match and Ongoing Training

This might be a good option for programs that already feel like purpose work fits nicely with what they do and wants to use this guide to deepen work that might already happen for many or all matches. In this scenario, the program might weave content from this guide, especially from the first section defining purpose, into pre-match mentor training to give mentors a sense of what this purpose work is all about and get them thinking about their role in supporting a youth in that way. Then, later in the year, as the relationships mature and it seems like they may be at a place to explore purpose, the program offers ongoing training covering the rest of the guide’s content and utilizing the worksheets, either within the trainings or as “homework” in between trainings. The program may also

want to provide some of the content and worksheets to youth as well, so that they understand some aspects of purpose and can bring their ideas and perspectives to the work to make it truly youth-led.

Example 2: The Mentor Discussion Group

This approach might only be offered to a smaller subset of mentors in the program who are working with youth who show indicators of readiness, and have strong enough relationships, so that purpose work might be a good fit. In this approach, a program staff person would distribute copies of the guide and handouts to the subset of mentors and lead a series of book-club-like discussions with the group over time. These discussions might go section by section so that mentors can read the content, engage with the worksheets, and then come together to ask questions, share insights, talk through challenges, and build their skills as a learning community. This is an excellent way for staff to ensure that mentors are understanding the content and approaching conversations with youth about purpose in the right ways.

Example 3: The A La Carte Approach

This approach leaves it up to mentors or mentees to tell the program that they would like to do some work around purpose, although this is also something that staff

could suggest to mentors and mentees based on what they are hearing during check-ins and conversations about the match. In this scenario, individual matches would decide to move in this direction and the program would provide copies of the guide and handouts (either to just the mentor or both mentor and mentee) and provide some guidance about how to move forward as part of their regular case management. This approach is the safest in that it is only offered to matches that say they want to, or are ready to, engage in purpose exploration. This ensures that no mentors or youth are pressured into doing purpose exploration when they don’t want to or before the time is right. This leaves it as something that matches can work on once they reach an advanced stage and the program thinks they are ready. But it also offers the least amount of teaching, supervision, and involvement of program staff.

As noted above, programs should be creative in how they utilize the guide. What is most important is that they don’t just hand the guide out to all mentors and set an expectation that all of them will build this into their matches with no guidance from the program or an understanding of how purpose work fits the mission and other goals of the program.



NEXT STEPS

The best way for your staff to figure out the best use of this guide is to simply read through the material and have some discussions to determine how it might fit best. The authors of the guide simply ask that you keep the following considerations in mind:

- Not every mentee will be ready to, or will even want to, explore purpose. Some may have much more immediate goals or things they want to work on. Part of doing youth-centered mentoring work is to listen to youth when they say they want to move in a certain direction.
- These conversations can do harm if not handled appropriately by mentors and staff. Imagine being a young person and having a mentor tell you that your purpose is incorrect or a bad idea. Imagine them insisting that you engage in that purpose in specific ways. Think about how it would feel if a mentor didn't see the value in your purpose because of their politics, or their own upbringing, or they couldn't understand the experiences of your race or ethnicity. These are all scenarios that can play out when mentors approach purpose from a place of control, ignorance, or cultural misunderstanding. This can clearly do harm to the young person and their sense of self and can even undermine a relationship that may have been working well together. Ensure mentors understand the role they play in purpose exploration and how they can first do no harm.
- Remember that this work does not replace your program's mission or focus. It may offer a wonderful capstone to a relationship that has already done the core work of the program or offer a new pathway to achieve the outcomes you have always aimed for.
- Know that there are many other resources to draw on this work. The last pages of the guide offer links to a wealth of online resources and program examples that can give you additional ideas and ways of thinking about integrating this into your work. While this resource is a good starting point, and approaches purpose exploration from the right philosophical lens, there are many other resources that can help you make this type of work a good fit for your program.
- Listen to what the young people in your program want. As caring adults, listening can be the hardest aspect of our work. Learning to let go and let young people lead is a challenge for most adults. But if your youth participants are exploring identity, expressing a desire to help others, and wanting to find meaning in a crazy world, we hope this resource will help lead the way.