

Evidence Brief

Eight Promising Practices to Engage Youth in an Academically-Focused Mentorship Program Using Online Platforms

How Did We Compile This Evidence?

We searched YouthREX's online Knowledge Hub, Google Scholar, and Google using the following key terms: "e-mentoring", "online mentoring", "youth", and "best practices".

Definition of Key Terms: Online Mentoring

Online mentoring (also known as e-mentoring or electronic mentoring, digital mentoring, and virtual mentoring) refers to mentoring that incorporates a digital technology. This can include the sending of emails between a mentor and mentee, texting, chatting using a messenger program or social media, video conferencing, and posting messages to forums (Garringer et al., 2019).

Summary of Evidence: Eight Promising Practices

1. Provide structure.

Evidence suggests that there may be a trade-off between the perceived success of a mentoring program (i.e., mentees' satisfaction) and the achievement of intended program outcomes (O'Neill et al., 2011). Programs that have a career or academic focus should provide appropriate structure, allowing mentoring pairs to organically develop their relationship while also working toward program goals (Rockwell et al., 2013). Practitioners agree that online mentoring benefits from structure, including **clear guidelines** and **organizational tools** (Kaufman, 2017). Consider the use of activities and discussion prompts to promote engagement, when appropriate.

2. Foster effective communication.

Evidence shows that effective communication is key in the development of online mentoring relationships. This includes sustaining a frequent **pace of communication, mutuality, trust, responsiveness, and empathic communication** (Hooley et al., 2016; Shpigelman & Gill, 2012). Effective mentors use a **warm, conversational style** (including emoticons and emojis, slang, nicknames, and humour), while their less effective counterparts use a formal and distant tone (Shpigelman & Gill, 2012).

Lack of responsiveness and infrequent communication are particularly detrimental to the relationship, and can leave both mentors and mentees feeling rejected (Wallis et al., 2015). When the time comes, programs should support participants in ending the mentoring relationship on a

positive note (Hooley et al., 2016; Shpigelman & Gill, 2012). Ideally, mentors and mentees should perceive online mentoring as a **two-way developmental and supportive process**, rather than unidirectional and instrumental (Shpigelman & Gill, 2012).

3. Consider different group sizes.

Online mentoring can take many forms, including one-to-one, group, or some combination of mentoring pairs and other groupings (Garringer et al., 2019). In some cases, group mentoring may be more effective than a one-to-one model (Radlick et al., 2020; Stoeger et al., 2017). Creating opportunities for connection beyond the mentor-mentee pairing may promote **a sense of community** and **foster social capital**.

4. Ensure that mentors and mentees feel supported.

Online mentoring may require more planning and support than traditional mentoring (National Mentoring Resource Centre, n.d.; Kaufman, 2017). Some evidence suggests that even experienced mentors might struggle to develop an online mentoring relationship (Coleman & Broderick, 2013). Program staff play an important role in **preparing participants** for online mentoring, **monitoring relationships, fostering engagement, providing technical support**, and **addressing communication issues** (Garringer et al., 2019; Kaufman, 2017).

5. Choose an appropriate communication/technology platform.

When choosing a communication/technology platform, organizations should consider (Garringer et al., 2019):

- program goals
- access to technology and internet
- literacy skills needed to effectively use the technology
- accessibility for users living with disabilities
- ease of use and familiarity with the platform, including mobile-friendliness
- capabilities for data protection and online safety*
- user management (e.g., creating new accounts, managing email and passwords, ease of enforcing platform rules, purging former participants)

The use of platforms or networks that youth are already familiar with may promote engagement and reduce training time (Coleman & Broderick, 2013). Organizations should ensure that the program is flexible and can be adapted to new technologies and young people's changing needs.

* Note that this is different from, though possibly connected to, a consideration of privacy and confidentiality (for example, whether both the mentor and mentee have access to spaces from which they can communicate privately), and to the need for parental/caregiver consent or engagement (depending on the age of the mentee); these considerations would pertain more to practice #6.

6. Outline policies and procedures.

Programs should develop clear, written, and accessible policies and procedures that cover a variety of aspects specific to online programming (Coleman & Broderick, 2013; Garringer et al., 2019), including:

- appropriate use of technology and other guidelines for communication
- guidelines for in-person contact and/or online communication between participants outside of the program platform
- privacy and confidentiality, including steps that the program will take to monitor matches and ensure the safety of participants
- how to access technical or online relationship support
- post-program contact, both in-person and online

Program staff should ensure that policies and procedures are clearly and consistently communicated to mentors and mentees (and possibly parents/caregivers) before the start of each mentor match (Schwartz et al., 2014). This may help to prevent challenges before they arise, and protect the evolving mentoring relationship.

7. Engage in evaluation.

Online mentoring may be particularly well-suited for evaluation, as it offers a unique opportunity to collect data and share results with stakeholders (Coleman & Broderick, 2013; Garringer et al., 2019). Programs can track engagement by examining the frequency of platform log-ins, number of messages exchanged, length of messages, and average response time, or the length of video conferences. Engaging online could also allow for easier integration of pre- and post-surveys.

Some online mentoring programs have effectively analyzed the content of text-based messages exchanged by mentors and youth in order to evaluate program quality, provide mentors with feedback, and inform future training (Garringer et al., 2019; Gorman, 2016; Hooley et al., 2016). Video sessions could be recorded, with consent, and/or transcribed. Be aware of ethical issues around surveillance and privacy when introducing any evaluation methods and tools.

8. Consider combining online mentoring with in-person meetings (if possible).

Evidence suggests that online mentoring is most effective when combined with face-to-face meetings (Radlick et al., 2020; Shpigelman & Gill, 2012). If feasible and appropriate, consider a blended model that integrates online and in-person contact between mentors and mentees, or even text-based and video-based contact.

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