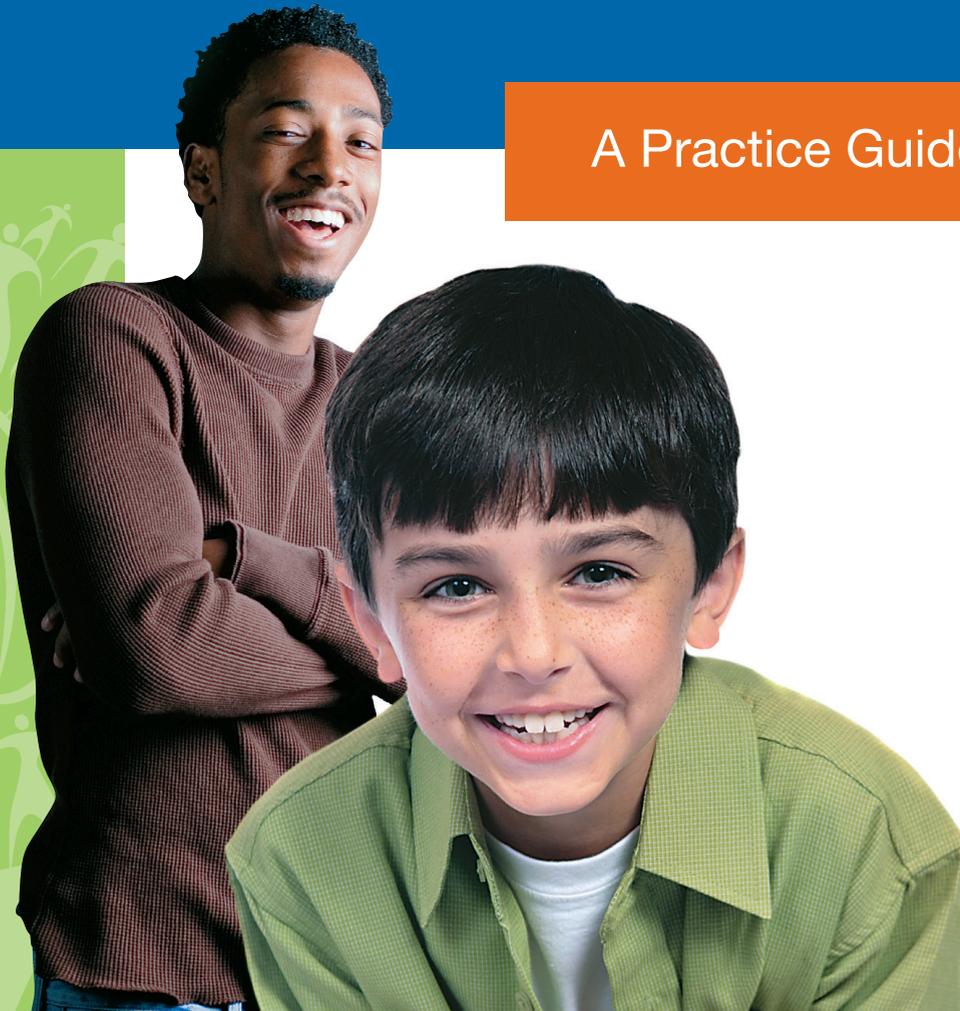




Alberta
Mentoring
Partnership

Strength-Based Mentoring

A Practice Guide For Mentors



On behalf of the Alberta Mentoring
Partnership and the many children
and youth of Alberta, thank you!
Mentoring not only contributes to
the health, wellness and success
of mentees and mentors, but to
our very social fabric as well.

The Case for Mentoring and Strength-Based Practice

*“We make a living by what we get,
we make a life by what we give”.*

Winston Churchill

The Benefits of Strength-based Mentoring

The most effective mentors are strength-based. That is, they will always find opportunities to build a caring, respectful relationship with their mentee while supporting them to develop in positive ways through activities and interactions that are mutually enjoyable, meaningful, challenging and success oriented.

Taking this approach, mentoring has the potential to forever change the lives of both mentees and mentors.

In order to support strength-based mentoring in Alberta, the Alberta Mentoring Partnership has engaged in the effort to provide resources that supports mentors in better understanding and becoming strength-based in their relationships with young people.

This manual is your practical guide to strength-based mentoring and building on the strengths of your mentee. Along the way, you’ll probably find that you learn more about and build your own strengths as well.

For more general information about mentoring and mentoring best practices go to the Alberta Mentoring Partnership web-site:

<http://www.albertamentors.ca>



Strength-Based Mentoring Defined

Child and Youth Mentoring

The Alberta Mentoring Partnership 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.”

What is Strength-based Mentoring?

The following chart compares some of the characteristics of strength-based and deficit-based mentoring:

STRENGTH-BASED MENTORING

Primary focus on strengths, interests, gifts, abilities, preferences and potential

Relationship, mutual goal and competency oriented

Nurtures

Encourages interactive learning & contribution

Conveys “I believe in you” while setting high but realistic expectations

Celebrates (i.e. successes)

Communications and interactions are inclusive

Adapts approach to engage

Challenges and healthy risk taking are opportunities to grow and learn toward success

Interact with and includes other important people in the mentees life

DEFICIT-BASED MENTORING

Primary focus on deficits, problems, labels, diagnoses and/or weaknesses

Strictly goal or control oriented

Intervenes

Teaches to

Directive in setting unrealistic and/or meaningless expectations

Punishes (i.e. non-compliance)

Communications and interactions are exclusive

Tries to fix the child/youth

All challenges and risks are avoided

void interacting with and inclusion of other important people to the mentee

Children are likely to live up to what you believe of them.

Lady Bird Johnson



If Being Strength-based Is New to You

The first step is to take stock of your thoughts and attitudes about young people, strengths and mentoring. As part of a strength-based mentor's ongoing personal development, complete this checklist to get a sense of where you are at in your strength-based journey now!

- I trust in my ability to make a difference
- I see the world as being a better place
- I view change/growth as a process influenced greatly by relationships
- I think it is important to develop caring relationships with young people
- I believe that that we all have the natural ability to be well
- I actively involve important and supportive people in my life
- I am dedicated and patient with people I am in relationship with

Based on your answers, what is your next step in becoming more strength-based?



The following is an example of strength-based mentoring in action:

“The parent of my (mentee) always brings up how worried she is about her son (the mentee) every time I talk to her. His marks went down from elementary school to junior high, and even though the mentor reassures her that it's normal for it to happen, she's worried that he won't care about school anymore and not finish grade twelve or be successful in life. Every time that she brings this up, the mentor reminds her of all of the amazing things about her son (he's athletic, easy going, incredibly sociable, very polite, has responsible friends, funny, etc) and talks about the different kinds of intelligence and all of the ways that he is “smart” even though his marks aren't as high as they were. During my last conversation with the mom - it was amazing to see the lightbulb go on over her head that her son is amazing and talented and will be successful in life, even without excellent marks in social studies. By the end of the conversation, she wasn't focusing on her worries about him anymore, but was telling me even more things that are great about him that I hadn't seen yet.”

Practicing Strength-Based Mentoring

“Along the way places and people planted seeds in my soul and in my spirit and added stones to my foundation I was trying to form”

Lisa Fain

The Essential Skills of a Strength-based Mentor

1. The Art of Listening

Good mentors engage in ways that allow them to really get to know their mentees. They come to understand their mentee’s distinct mix of internal strengths, important relationships, interests, resources and limitations, as well as dreams and aspirations.

“The (mentee) expressed at the match meeting that he would like to be a professional football player and they missed the registration that year so he wasn’t able to play. The (mentor) and (mentee) practiced and then when the new season came up the (mentor) looked into seeing when registration needed to be completed by and registered him. He then helped with the driving to get him to and from practices as well as volunteering so the cost is lower. The (mentor) has also taken extra time to practice football with the little brother so that he can further develop his skills and work towards his dream of being a professional football player. The (mentor) has taught the (mentee) a lot about having to work for what you want. The family has expressed that the (mentor) is part of the family and has a relationship with each one of them.”

Getting to know and hearing your mentee’s story requires good listening and communication skills such as active listening and effective non-verbal communication.

Skill/knowledge building tasks:

- The next time you meet with your mentee, pay close attention to what they say and verbally summarize what you heard in a matter of fact, non-judgmental way.
- Get permission from your mentee’s parents/guardians and your mentor Supervisor to take a resiliency/strengths assessment or survey at www.authentic happiness.com (VIA Survey of Character Strengths and the VIA Strengths Survey for Children). Review the results and talk about your mentees strengths, share some of your own and help your mentee better understand how their strengths can be used to achieve goals important to them.

Helpful Resource:

Pages 34 to 37 of The High School Teen Mentoring Handbook found at www.albertamentors.ca/admin/content/default.cfm?h=6&PageId=12232.

2. The Art of Building Trust

Experts define trust as “an individual’s belief in, and willingness to act on the basis of, the words, actions, and decisions of another.”

The key components to a mentee’s level of trust are their perceptions of a mentor’s:

Ability (in terms of knowledge, skill, or competency so avoid promises beyond ability).

Integrity (follow through with your promises & commitments and ensure your actions and words match) and...

Benevolence (honesty, caring, looking out for and sharing of control with your mentee).

Reflection:

When interacting and planning activities with your mentee, to what degree are you honest, considerate, inclusive in decision making, genuine in terms of how you convey your knowledge, skill and competency? Do you follow through on commitments and promises? What could you focus on to try and build more trust in your relationship?

3. The Art of Capturing the Journey (Through Narration and Story Telling)

Attend carefully to your mentee’s small gains and important milestones throughout the mentoring relationship. Reflecting their process through narration and story telling is a proven method to reinforce learning and inspire new insights and skills.

Skill/knowledge building tasks:

- Make a list and take turns talking about and celebrating successes and achievements throughout your mentoring journey. Support your mentee to frame mistakes and failure as learning and growth opportunities.
- Use metaphors found in stories to answer questions and explain more complex and deeper life situations as an important and effective learning tool. David Wagoner’s poem “Lost” is one example of such storytelling (<http://www.panhala.net/Archive/Lost.html>)

Helpful Resources:

The Storyteller’s Start-Up Book: Finding, Learning, Performing and Using Folktales by Margaret Read MacDonald or

Improving Your Storytelling: Beyond the Basics for All Who Tell Stories in Work and Play by Doug Lipman).

“My mentor was willing to hear me out; she was an outstanding listener.”

4. The Art of Asking – “Are We On Track?”

The best way to know how your relationship with your mentee is going is to use a satisfaction survey developed by your mentoring organization or ask your mentee open-ended questions.

Questions like:

“What else I can do to help you feel listened to, cared for and appreciated?”

“What could make our time together more meaningful and enjoyable for you?”

“What could I do differently to help us communicate better?” and

“What would need to happen to make our match a good fit?”

Also, how you respond to this feedback is a good indication of how strength-based you are at present.

5. The Art of Adapting (A Youth-Centred Approach)

Adapting your approach and plans based on the unique strengths, characteristics, needs and feedback presented is one of the best ways to establish trust and improve the quality and positive influence of your relationship.

The following is a great example of focusing on strengths while adapting to the unique characteristics of a young person:

Helpful Resources:

For more information on youth-centred practice, do a web-search for and read A Guide to Youth Friendly Practices.

Michael Ungar’s article called “Too Safe Schools, Too Safe Families” at: www.michaelungar.com/ungar_9634.html or his book *Too Safe for Their Own Good: How Risk and Responsibility Help Teens Thrive*.



The following is a great example of focusing on strengths while adapting to the unique characteristics of a young person:

“During her one month phone follow-up, one of my community Bigs brought up that she was getting frustrated on outings because her Little often gets bored or distracted. Although the Big knew that the Little has been diagnosed with ADHD, she wasn’t exactly sure what to do with her Little anymore, and we were able to talk about strategies to have fun outings (keeping a box with multiple activities in her trunk, going on scavenger hunts in the river valley), and about the benefit that her Little, though distracted, is also happy to do the same things every week. The next month when I talked to the Big, she was happy to tell me that she had started teaching her Little how to ride her bike, and that they would be spending the summer going to different parks in Edmonton (to keep it somewhat interesting), learning bike riding and exploring the different parks and playgrounds in each location – allowing her Little to jump frequently between activities if she couldn’t focus on one anymore.”

6. The Art of Asking for Support (All mentors can benefit from a mentor)

It is important to remember that we all need support and mentors in our lives. Mentoring sometimes involves providing support through difficult experiences for the mentee. If we look at our lives as a constant process of growth and overcoming challenges, it is much easier to admit we are sometimes vulnerable and need the help and support of others. By recognizing this reality, we teach our mentees to accept their own vulnerability and be open to ask for help as well.

Mentoring program staff are there to support you and address any questions or concerns you may have. The Alberta Mentoring Partnership On-Line Training for Mentors supports this rule of thumb: “If you think you should contact your mentoring program, do it!”

Helpful Resources:

For more information about getting support and self-care practices, speak to your mentoring supervisor, refer to your mentoring organization’s volunteer manual and read a book on self-care for caregivers (i.e., *Passages in Caregiving: Turning Chaos into Confidence* by Gail Sheehy or *Chicken Soup for the Caregiver’s Soul* by Jack Canfield).

Additional Considerations for Strength-Based Mentors

In addition to the strategies your mentoring organization supports, the following are important in strength-based mentoring:

Expect excellence (not perfection):

Mentors should set high, but realistic expectations and communicate them clearly to their mentee. Mentors need to demonstrate confidence in the mentee’s abilities and model the same excellence expected of the mentee.

For example: “It sounds like you are really struggling with math at school but I know that you have the ability to overcome. What strengths do you already have and what people can support you in doing better in math?”

Activity:

Discuss with a colleague/friend the difference between high expectations and expectations of perfection. How will you convey high but realistic expectations to your mentee?

Affirm, affirm and then affirm some more:

Always and unconditionally affirm your mentee’s uniqueness, strengths and value. In the face of challenges, assist your mentee in realistically evaluating the strengths that they can call upon to help them cope and overcome. The example above applies here as well.

“Your strengths become your vehicle for solving problems. If you start building on strengths, you start to get clues as to how to solve your problems.”

Skill/knowledge building activity:

- Read and practice the activities in Martin Seligman's article "The ABCs of Accurate Optimism" found at <http://www.cyc-net.org/cyc-online/cyconline-july2010-seligman.html> or his book *The Optimistic Child: A Proven Program to Safeguard Children Against Depression and Build Lifelong Resilience*.

Be a role model, teacher and coach:

What you role model and teach, mentees will learn. Effective mentors are dependable, youth-centred, optimistic, and morally conscious and when called upon, provide knowledge, make suggestions, give advice, and stimulate motivation with encouragement.

For example: While driving with a young person in your car, the driver in the car ahead of you suddenly cuts you off. How would you respond? Would this look different if a youth wasn't in your car?

Skill/knowledge building activities:

- Reflect on the activities and roles that your mentee may be able to observe you in action. Which ones might be of most interest to your mentee while being the most beneficial?

Stimulate growth through 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 scaffolding: building new successes on top of earlier ones.

For example: Your 12 year old mentee Nancy wants to be a professional actress but has never been in a play. Nancy and you talk about important steps toward becoming an actress and you both agree that a good place to start is taking a drama class at school. Building on her enjoyment and success in the drama class, you support Nancy to audition for an understudy position in the drama club. Building on that success, Nancy then goes on to play a supporting role in a drama club production, takes a lead role in the drama club, auditions for extra roles in a nearby movie shoot and finally auditions for supporting and lead roles in local movie and TV shoots. It's been quite a journey but one that allowed Nancy's passion and skills to evolve.

Skill/knowledge building activities:

- Explore and plan new activities that your mentee is interested in trying with your support and encouragement. The Search Institute's *Mentoring for Meaningful Results* manual is an excellent resource for strength-building activities (www.search-institute.org).
- When your mentee is struggling or talks about challenges they are having, find an opportunity to discuss which strengths they could use to help them overcome their struggles and challenges.
- Research the stages of child and youth development and identify goals that your mentee is motivated to pursue (go to www.albertamentors.ca/admin/contentx/default.cfm?h=6&PageId=12232 and read pages 15 to 17 of the *High School Teen Mentoring Handbook*).

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.

For example: “I know it’s no fun to fail your driver’s test but what could we learn from the experience that help you pass next time?”

Skill/knowledge building activities:

- Explore a creative or artistic way that your mentee could express their gratitude and hopes for the future. Give your mentee the opportunity to talk about what they created and how you can work together to build on their strengths to turn these hopes into reality.
- Review brainstorming guidelines to prepare for a creative brainstorming session with your mentee by going to: <http://www.octanecreative.com/ducttape/curriculum/index.html> and “Click here to download a pdf file.”

Have fun:

Having fun together is one of the best ways to build relationship and at the same time stimulates learning!

Skill/knowledge building activities:

- Set out to have fun during visits with your mentor and check in at the end to see if you accomplished this goal.
- Choose a “strength of the day” with your mentee to talk about and focus on during your activities together on a particular day. Discuss what each of you learned afterward.

By focusing on the existing, emerging and potential strengths and resiliency of mentees, mentoring plays a significant role in helping children and youth thrive while also being able to cope with adversity more effectively.

“Your strengths become your vehicle for solving problems. If you start building on strengths, you start to get clues as to how to solve your problems.”



Conclusion

*To the world, you may just be somebody,
But to somebody, you may just might be the world.*

Author Unknown

Establishing and maintaining a healthy, close relationship with your mentee is one of the most important and realistic outcomes of strength-based mentoring. After all, positive change and growth almost always happens through the influence of important relationships.

The positive changes that occur in mentoring also go both ways: “Mentorship teaches you confidence. Confidence to share your opinions..., confidence to coordinate with your peers and most importantly, confidence that you can make a difference.” Rebecca Buttar, Teen Mentor.

As the relationship evolves and you and your mentee become more conscious of your strengths and core competencies, you will have a front row seat to the unfolding and unique story of the amazing young person you have come to know and care for.



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