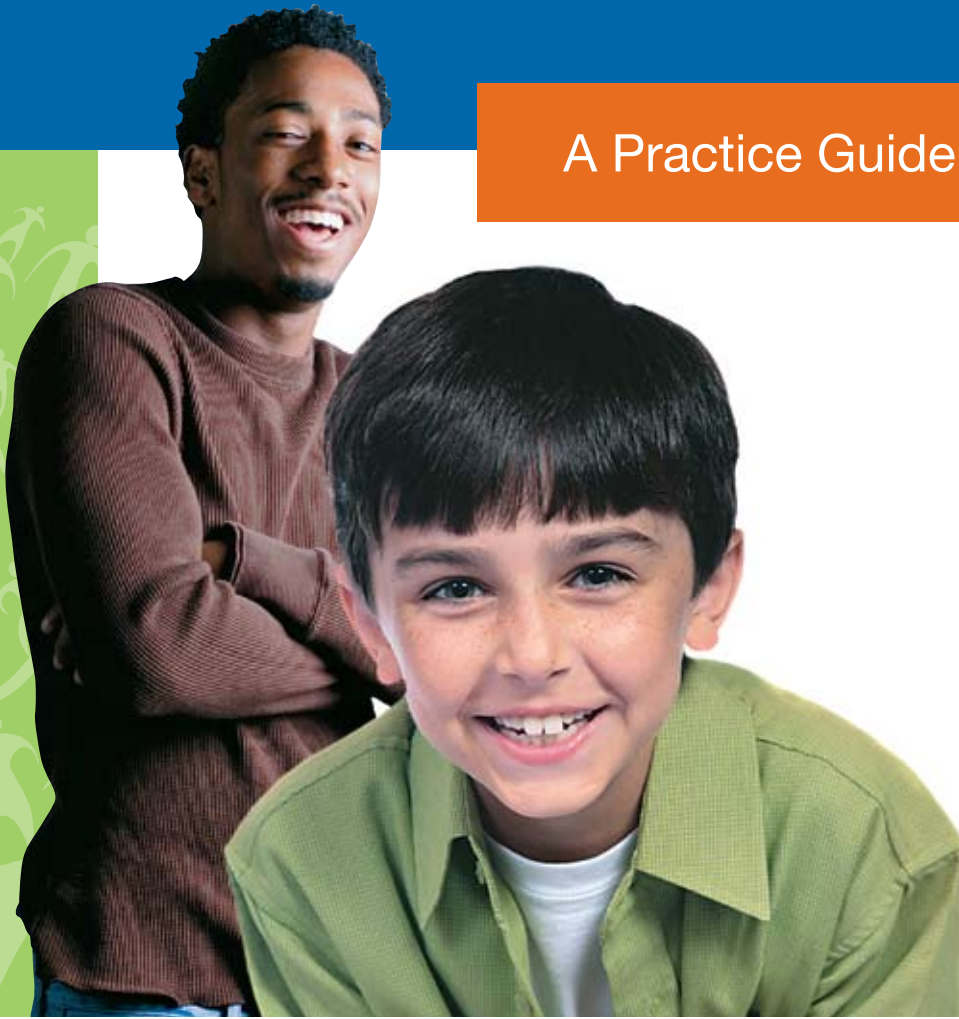




Alberta
Mentoring
Partnership

Strength-Based Mentoring

A Practice Guide For Mentors



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 strength-based 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 support 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 you learn more about and build on your own strengths as well.

For more general information about mentoring and mentoring best practices, you can always visit the Alberta Mentoring Partnership website (www.albertamentors.ca).



Strength-Based Mentoring Defined

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

Lady Bird Johnson

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?

Strength-based mentoring has the following characteristics:

1. The primary focus is on strengths, interests, abilities and potential, not on deficits, weaknesses or problems.
2. Challenges are seen as opportunities to understand and experience success. Mistakes are part of life and offer potential for different options to be explored.
3. Strength-based mentors believe all mentees learn, grow and develop through their interests, strengths and capacities. These are considered when planning and goal setting.

4. The mentor-mentee relationship is valued and respected. Strength-based mentors adapt their approach to work best with their mentee.
5. Strength-based mentors see themselves as a coach and the mentee as the star player in his or her own story of success.
6. Consistency, trust, respect, compassion, patience and acceptance are essential to being a strength-based mentor.
7. Strength-based mentors include important people in the mentee’s life who focus on building strengths and setting realistic expectations and clear boundaries.



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, Bonnie Benard has identified the following steps to enhancing a strength-based mindset:

1. Trust in your ability to make a difference.
2. Envision a better world.
3. View change/growth as a process and based on relationships.
4. Develop nurturing relationships.
5. Hold onto the belief that we all have the natural ability to be well.
6. Actively involve important and supportive people in your life.
7. Stay dedicated and be patient.



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

"The parent of my Little always brings up how worried she is about her son (the Little) 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

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

Helpful Resource: *The High School Teen Mentoring Handbook* found at www.albertamentors.ca

2. The Art of Building Trust

Lewicki and his colleagues 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;

Integrity (the degree to which the mentor follows through on commitments, actions match words as well as how they otherwise demonstrate similar values); and

Benevolence, defined as the degree to which the mentor is honest, cares and looks out for, includes, communicates and shares control with their mentee.

Given the importance of these factors in establishing trust and successful relationships, it is equally important that mentors and the

mentoring organizations assess, build upon and consider these when matching with mentees.

3. The Art of Story Telling

The art of using story to guide, teach and inspire is still very much alive; it may just require some practice. Using metaphors found in stories to answer questions and explain more complex and deeper life situations is an important and effective tool that mentors can use with their mentees. David Wagoner’s poem “Lost” is one example of storytelling (http://www.seishindo.org/david_wagoner.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).

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, such as:

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

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

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

“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 this point in time.

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

Adapting your approach and plans based on the unique strengths, characteristics, needs and feedback provided is one of the best ways to establish trust and improve the quality and positive influence of your relationship. For more information on youth-centred practice, do a web-search for and read *A Guide to Youth Friendly Practices*.

You may also encounter situations where your mentee is unfairly treated or at risk of harm. Taking a protective role is sometimes necessary, but use discretion. Being overly protective can reduce the opportunity for the mentee to learn the skills of successfully navigating those developmentally appropriate challenges in life. Ask yourself:
“Is this an appropriate opportunity for my mentee to practice new skills and/or develop stronger relationships?”

Helpful Resources: Michael Ungar’s article “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*.

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).

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



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.”

Additional Strategies for Strength-based Mentors

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

Know your mentee

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 Little Brother 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. Big Brother and little brother practiced and then when the new season came up the Big Brother 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 Big Brother 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 Big Brother has taught the little brother a lot about having to work for what you want. The family has expressed that the Big Brother is part of the family and has a relationship with each one of them.”

Skill/knowledge building tasks: 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 mentee's strengths, share some of your own and help your mentee better understand how their strengths can be used to achieve goals important to them.

Take the learning style survey in the *The High School Teen Mentoring Handbook* (go to: www.albertamentors.ca) with your mentee to find out how each of you learns best. Interact with your mentee based on their learning style.

As you get to know more about the important, caring and supportive people in your life, talk about how your mentee could draw and build upon these relationships. What could you do to support this? What could your mentee do?

If they would like more friends, find out who your mentee thinks might be a good friend to them if they had a chance to get to know them better. Talk about what qualities are important in a good friend and ways they could actually get to know this person better.

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.

Skill/knowledge building tasks: 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

Mentees need to feel good about themselves, and accurate awareness and affirmation are keys to their sense of well-being. 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.

Skill/knowledge building tasks: 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. Called upon, mentors provide knowledge, make suggestions, give advice, and stimulate motivation with encouragement.

Skill/knowledge building tasks: 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?

Learn more about Motivational Interviewing by going to the website: <http://motivationalinterview.org/clinical/interaction.html> or reading a book (i.e., Miller and Rollnick's *Motivational Interviewing: Preparing People For Change*).

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.

Skill/knowledge building tasks: 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-mentee may be able to observe you in action. Which ones might be of most interest to your mentee while being the most beneficial building activities (www.search-institute.org)?

When your mentee is struggling or talks about challenges they are having, to 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*).

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.

Skill/knowledge building tasks: Make a list and take turns talking about and celebrating successes and achievements, even small ones. Support your mentee to learn from mistakes and failures 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."

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.

Skill/knowledge building tasks: 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 your relationship and stimulate learning!

Skill/knowledge building tasks:

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.

When focused 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.

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 are almost always the result of 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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