



## What Is My Role as a Mentor?

It seems simple at first, the notion of being a mentor: someone who spends time with a young person. But once you are in the mentor role, you may find yourself in situations where you are uncertain about your part in the relationship. Is it appropriate to provide discipline when she's out of line? What if I suspect he is experiencing trouble at home—what is my responsibility? How can I have the most positive impact on my mentee?

There is no one answer concerning what your role is or is not. If you are involved in a formal mentoring program, the staff may be able to provide clearer direction for you based on the program's rules and expectations. In general, here are some basic guidelines to help you determine your role with your mentee.

### YOU ARE . . .

**. . . a friend.** Like peer friendships, mentors and mentees do things together that are fun and engaging. They support each other both in good times and in tough times. They teach each other. They help each other. They're honest with each other. And sometimes they have to have hard conversations about concerns they have, asking the right questions at the right time. By being a good listener and engaging in authentic conversations with your mentee, you are helping her develop important life skills.

**. . . a role model.** You are expected to set a good example to the mentee for how to live your life. This is not the same as being perfect. Rather, it is about acknowledging your imperfections and sharing your strengths. It is also about advocating for your mentee when dangers to his physical or emotional well-being are present.

**. . . a confidant.** Building a close relationship with your mentee will help her build better relationships with others in her life as well, such as parents and peers. In the process, your mentee may tell you things she does not feel comfortable telling anyone else. Sometimes she may tell you about her hopes, dreams, or insecurities. Other times she may reveal mistakes she has made. Unless your mentee is in trouble and needs outside help, try to keep her private comments between the two of you. Your role is to be supportive of your mentee as a person with potential, regardless of the kinds of actions or attitudes she confides in you.

**. . . a nurturer of possibilities.** Your role is to see the gifts and strengths of your mentee and help him flourish personally. You should help your mentee channel his gifts toward actions that make him a resource to others in his family, neighborhood, school, or community.

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## YOU ARE NOT . . .

**. . . a mentor to the family.** In fact, some mentoring programs intentionally limit contact between mentors and parents. Your role is to provide special attention to your mentee. While getting acquainted with parents, caregivers, and siblings can be helpful to understanding your mentee and her situation, your energy and attention should be focused on providing support to your mentee.

**. . . a social worker or doctor.** If your mentee tells you about experiences or health conditions that concern you, always turn to the mentoring program staff for help. Although arming yourself with information about, say, a learning disability or abuse may help you understand your mentee better, it is not your responsibility to try to address conditions or situations that require professional help. The staff at the mentoring program may be able to find additional help for the mentee, including local information and referral services.

**. . . a savior.** You should not see your role in this relationship as coming in to make a young person's life better or to fix his problems. Certainly your support can help your mentee overcome hurdles. But don't forget that every young person—regardless of his circumstances—has gifts and talents that make him more than a "recipient" of your support. Your mentee should be treated as having much to offer to the world, because he does.