

CAREER-FOCUSED MENTORING FOR YOUTH: THE WHAT, WHY, AND HOW



When asked to describe an ideal employee, attributes such as being a hard worker, a team player, and a good communicator are frequently cited by employers as being even more important than technical expertise. According, however, to a recent survey of 461 employers conducted by the Conference Board, Corporate Voices for Working Families, the Partnership for 21st Century Skills, and the Society for Human Resources many new entrants to the workforce lack these important skills. These business leaders reported that while the three "R's" are still fundamental to every employee's ability to do the job, knowledge of applied skills is even more important. (Are They Really Ready to Work? Employers' Perspectives on the Basic Knowledge and Applied Skills of New Entrants to the 21st Century U.S. Workforce (2006)).

One remedy may be found in mentoring. Career-focused mentoring provides young people the opportunity to get a glimpse of the world of work that may not otherwise be available to them. It also allows them to gain and practice skills that are useful in professional and other settings, and to prepare for life as an adult.

■ WHAT IS MENTORING?

Mentoring is a relationship where a mentor, through support, counsel, friendship, reinforcement and constructive example, helps another person (usually a young person) reach his or her work and life goals. Although many people may equate mentoring with friendship, mentoring actually has its roots in the professional world. Mentoring principles and practices have perpetuated the continuity of art, craft and commerce dating back to ancient times where masters taught, coached and guided the skills development of apprentices. Mentoring is a relationship built on trust. It is not expensive, and the return on investment of a successful mentoring relationship can be profound and significant.

■ WHY IS MENTORING IMPORTANT?

Mentoring relationships provide valuable support to young people. Mentors can help guide youth through the sometimes awkward developmental stages that accompany the transition into adulthood. Mentoring can offer not only academic and career guidance, but also role models for leadership, interpersonal and problem-solving skills.

Many youth with disabilities, like other disadvantaged youth, have not had the same opportunities as their peers for exposure to career preparation options like mentoring. Even today, some youth with disabilities play at best a passive role in their own career-planning process. This may reflect low expectations that either they or others have, learned dependency, or the perceived need for protection and support.

■ WHAT ARE THE CHARACTERISTICS OF A GOOD MENTORING RELATIONSHIP?

By and large, youth appreciate mentors who are supportive, caring, and willing to assist them with activities that support academic, career, social or personal goals. One common theme is that the longer the relationship continues, the more positive the outcome. Another is that youth are more

likely to benefit from mentoring if their mentor maintains frequent contact with them and knows their families. As a general rule, youth who are disadvantaged or at-risk stand to gain the most from mentoring. Youth with disabilities are among these populations.

■ HOW DOES CAREER-FOCUSED MENTORING WORK?

Hardly any young person would disagree that his or her goal in life is to become a successful adult. But what does it take to successfully transition to adulthood? The National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth (NCWD/Y) and ODEP tackled this question and, based on research, created the Guideposts for Success. The Guideposts provide a framework of what all youth, including youth with disabilities, need to transition to adulthood successfully. Similarly, Ferber, Pittman, & Marshall (2002) identified youth development competency areas that all youth need, which closely parallel the Guideposts.

Based on this foundation, ODEP and NCWD/Y created the following table, which explains how mentoring activities can be used to support career preparation of all youth, including those with disabilities, by assisting them in meeting their transition-related and youth developmental needs. After describing each Guidepost and youth development competency as they relate to the needs of all youth and youth with disabilities, the table provides information on mentoring activities that can assist youth in the achievement of these developmental objectives.

Using this tool will help ensure that youth receive a positive career-based mentoring experience.

Mentoring Activities that Support Youth in Meeting Developmental Objectives

GUIDEPOST: School-Based Preparatory Experiences

DEVELOPMENTAL AREA: Learning is based on positive basic and applied academic attitudes, skills, and behaviors.

Mentors can help ALL youth reach these developmental objectives:

- Develop improved basic math, reading, and creative expression skills
- Improve critical thinking and problem-solving skills
- Improve self-assessment of academic skills and areas of need for further education and training

Mentors can help youth WITH DISABILITIES with specific needs such as the following:

- Learning how to use their individual transition plans to drive their personal instruction, including obtaining extra supports such as tutoring, as necessary.
- Accessing specific and individual learning accommodations while they are in school.
- Developing knowledge of reasonable accommodations that they can request and control in educational settings, including assessment accommodations.
- Identifying highly qualified transitional support staff, who may or may not be school staff.

Mentoring activities that support the achievement of developmental objectives:

- Tutoring
- Coaching
- Recreation

- Helping develop a personal development plan
- Helping youth apply academic skills to community needs
- Helping youth identify and access learning and assessment accommodations
- Helping youth to identify highly qualified support staff in school and community settings
- Monitoring the youth's grades and helping youth perform his or her own informal assessment of skills
- Developing a showcase of work that highlights the youth's learning experience(s) (e.g., an essay, a painting, a portfolio, or an algebra exam)
- Locating relevant preparation courses for GED, ACT, SAT, etc., and supporting the youth's participation in them
- Helping the youth learn about college and scholarship opportunities

GUIDEPOST: Career Preparation and Work-Based Learning Experiences

DEVELOPMENTAL AREA: Working focuses on the positive attitudes, skills, and behaviors necessary to meet expectations in jobs, careers, and vocational development.

Mentors can help ALL youth reach these developmental objectives:

- Develop an understanding of the world of work
- Identify work readiness skills
- Identify strategies for completing educational requirements or training
- Identify individual strengths and potential opportunities for meaningful work

Mentors can help youth WITH DISABILITIES with specific needs such as the following:

- Understanding the relationships between appropriate financial and benefits planning and career choices.
- Accessing supports and accommodations for work and community living, and learning to request, find and secure appropriate supports and reasonable accommodations at work, at home, and in the community.
- Learning to communicate their support and accommodation needs to prospective employers and service providers.
- Accessing multiple opportunities to engage in work-based exploration activities such as site visits, job shadowing, internships, and community service.

Mentoring activities that support the achievement of developmental objectives:

- Participating in career exploration activities, including career interest assessments, job shadowing, job and career fairs, and workplace visits and tours
- Planning and setting career-related goals
- Finding varied internships and work experience, including summer employment, to learn and practice work skills (soft skills)
- Assisting with exposure to entrepreneurship training
- Networking with other young people with similar interests
- Practicing mock interviews
- Attending work readiness workshops
- Arranging visits from representatives of specific industries to speak to youth participants about the employment opportunities and details of working within their industry
- Providing assistance with job searches, including preparing resumes and writing cover letters
- Conducting visits to education or training programs

CAREER-FOCUSED MENTORING FOR YOUTH: THE WHAT, WHY, AND HOW

- Providing job coaching
- Participating in learning activities using computers and other current workplace technology

GUIDEPOST: Youth Development and Leadership

DEVELOPMENTAL AREA: Leading is the area of development that centers on positive skills, attitudes, and behaviors around civic involvement and personal goal setting. Thriving centers on attitudes, skills, and behaviors that are demonstrated by maintaining optimal physical and emotional well-being.

Mentors can help ALL youth reach these developmental objectives:

- Demonstrate an ability to articulate personal values
- Demonstrate a sense of responsibility to self and others
- Demonstrate an ability to assess situations and avoid unduly risky conditions and activities
- Demonstrate knowledge and practice of good nutrition, physical exercise, and hygiene
- Demonstrate daily living skills
- Promote youth leadership development experiences
- Promote community volunteerism
- Promote youth activities that encourage group participation as well as collaboration with other individuals and groups

Mentors can help youth WITH DISABILITIES with specific needs such as the following:

- Participating in mediation and conflict resolution training.
- Participating in team dynamics and project management training.
- Learning about or improving self-advocacy and conflict resolution skills to fortify leadership skills and self-esteem.
- Learning anti-peer pressure strategies.
- Learning how to access reliable information sources.
- Identifying mentors and role models, including persons with and without disabilities.
- Developing an understanding of disability history, disability culture, and disability public policy issues as well as of their rights and responsibilities.
- Participating in voter registration and voting in local, state, and federal elections.
- Participating in town hall meetings.
- Engaging in community volunteerism, such as organizing a park clean-up or building a playground.
- Participating in a debate on a local social issue.
- Training to become a peer mediator.
- Participating in a letter-writing campaign.
- Arranging to meet with local and state officials and legislators.
- Participating in a youth advisory committee of the city, school board, training center, or other relevant organization.
- Participating in learning activities or courses about leadership principles and styles.
- Engaging in activities to serve in leadership roles such as club officer, board member, team captain, or coach.

Mentoring activities that support the achievement of developmental objectives:

- Tutoring
- Coaching

- Engaging in problem solving, conflict resolution, and self-advocacy training
- Providing opportunities to practice skills in communication, negotiation, and personal presentation
- Participating in sports and recreational activities
- Providing training in life skills, such as how to manage money, find transportation, shop on a budget, buy a car, and obtain insurance
- Assisting youth in the creation of a community resources map related to physical and mental health, personal physicians, insurance companies, parks, grocery stores, drug stores, etc.
- Engaging in meal planning and preparation activities

GUIDEPOST: Connecting Activities

DEVELOPMENTAL AREA: Connecting refers to the development of positive social behaviors, skills, and attitudes.

Mentors can help ALL youth reach these developmental objectives:

- Demonstrate effective interpersonal skills in relating to adults and peers (e.g., conflict resolution and active listening)
- Demonstrate a knowledge of key community resources

Mentors can help youth WITH DISABILITIES with specific needs such as the following:

- Locating the appropriate assistive technologies.
- Identifying community orientation and mobility training (e.g., accessible transportation, bus routes, housing, and health clinics).
- Gaining exposure to post-program supports such as independent living centers and other consumer-driven community-based support service agencies.
- Identifying personal assistance services, including attendants, readers, interpreters, and other services.
- Obtaining benefits-planning counseling, including information regarding the myriad of benefits available and their interrelationships so that they may maximize those benefits in transitioning from public assistance to self-sufficiency.
- Locating mentoring activities that connect youth to adult mentors.
- Providing tutoring activities that engage youth as tutors or in being tutored.
- Mentoring others.
- Preparing research activities identifying resources in the community to allow youth to practice conversation and investigation skills.
- Writing letters to friends, family members, and pen pals.
- Attending job and trade fairs to begin building a network of contacts in one's career field of interest.
- Participating in mock interviews and role-playing other workplace scenarios.
- Providing positive peer and group activities that build camaraderie, teamwork, and a sense of belonging.

Mentoring activities that support the achievement of developmental objectives:

- Tutoring
- Coaching
- Problem solving
- Recreation
- Engaging in cultural activities that promote understanding and tolerance
- Providing peer and group activities that promote service and civic engagement
- Providing training in accessing available transportation, assistive technology, mental and physical health services, and benefits planning services

(Taken from Paving the Way to Work: A Guide to Career-Focused Mentoring for Youth with Disabilities, www.ncwd-youth.info/resources_&_Publications/mentoring.html.)

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