Bringing Closure to the Mentoring Relationship
An Overview

All mentor-mentee mentoring relationships come to an end. Research has found that approximately one out of five mentoring relationships come to an early close, often within 6 months, and only 45 percent last 12 months. While ending a mentoring relationship can be hard for both the mentee and the mentor, when program staff plan ahead, they can help mentoring relationships end more smoothly.

Importance of Formally Bringing Closure to Matches

A mentor-mentee relationship may end earlier than anticipated for a variety of reasons:

- **Loss of interest**: The mentor and/or mentee may lose interest in participating in the program.
- **Unfulfilled expectations**: If the mentee and/or mentor have expectations for the relationship that are not met, they are likely to feel dissatisfied and may end the relationship.
- **Difficulty connecting**: Mentors and mentees may not be able to establish a close relationship. For instance, one or both may not have the skills to communicate effectively with the other person. It is also possible that mentors may not understand their mentee’s cultural background, making it hard for the two to bond.
- **Lack of support**: The mentor and/or mentee may not have the support they need from mentoring program staff or from the mentee’s family to continue the relationship.
- **Behavior issues**: The mentor or mentee may violate a program policy or refuse to cooperate with program staff.
- **Changing life circumstances**: The mentor or mentee may move, experience a personal crisis, or find that their schedule is too full to continue meeting.

For youth who have experienced trauma or abandonment—including many young people who are in foster care or are involved in the juvenile justice system—the end of a mentoring relationship can be especially difficult. It is essential to have a formal process that helps both the mentor and the mentee move along after the relationship has ended.

Policies and Procedures for Bringing Closure to a Mentoring Relationship

Program staff can encourage mentor and mentee commitment to their relationship through program policies, training and support. Mentoring relationships are less likely to end prematurely when mentors and mentees have realistic expectations about the relationship and understand and agree to the program’s policies. When developing a process for bringing closure to mentoring relationships, consider the following:

- What are the responsibilities of the mentor, mentee, parent/caregiver, and program coordinator in bringing closure to mentoring relationships?
- Is future contact between the mentor and mentee encouraged? (If it is encouraged, be sure to clarify that the mentor and mentee will no longer be monitored or supported by program staff.)

This project was supported by Grant No. 2009-JU-FX-K001 awarded by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice. Points of view or opinions in this document are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice.
Can the mentor or mentee be matched with a new person? Consider the following:

◊ Do the mentor and mentee want to be rematched?
◊ Are they ready to begin a mentoring relationship with someone new?
◊ Does the program have an appropriate mentor or mentee available to match them with?

Will the program sponsor an event for mentoring relationships that are ending?

Once you’ve developed a closure process for mentoring relationships, the process should be clearly explained in the policies and procedures manual. All program staff need to be familiar with the closure process and adhere to it. The closure process should also be addressed during mentor and mentee orientation and training and in the program’s handbook, to help mentors, mentees, and mentees’ parents or caregivers know what to expect.

Considerations Related to Bringing Closure

Additional suggestions related to bringing closure to mentoring relationships include:

• Track why mentoring relationships end early.
  Once staff understand why some relationships are ending early, they can address these issues in future mentor and mentee trainings. For instance, if mentoring relationships end early because they are not meeting participants’ expectations, program staff can spend more time talking with mentors and mentees about what they will experience in a mentoring relationship and what is expected of them.

• Gather feedback. Have a closure meeting or exit interview with the mentor, mentee, and parent/caregiver to talk about how they feel about the relationship as it comes to an end. In addition to shedding light on the mentor-mentee relationship, this can be a good way to collect feedback about the program. Program staff may want to pose the following questions in the closure meeting:

  ◊ How would you describe your relationship with your mentor/mentee?
  ◊ For parents/caregivers: How would you describe the relationship from your perspective?
  ◊ Is there any additional support you would have liked to receive from program staff?
  ◊ What did you like best about the program, and why?
  ◊ What did you like least about the program, and why?
  ◊ What can we do to improve the program for future mentees and mentors?

• Focus on progress. When you talk with the mentee about the relationship ending, highlight the progress that he or she made during the relationship. Emphasize the mentee’s positive traits (e.g., humor, perseverance) and how those qualities will enable the mentee to overcome obstacles throughout life.

• Convey program policies. Review with the mentor and mentee the program’s policies about contact following the end of the mentoring relationship. State clearly that program staff will no longer provide supervision or support.

• Inform parents/caregivers. Send the mentee’s parents/caregivers a closure letter explaining the upcoming end of the mentoring relationship and going over the closure process. Reiterate that the program will no longer supervise the relationship between the mentor and mentee if they decide to keep in touch.

• Attend to evaluation details. Staff should make sure that the necessary program evaluation data are gathered when a mentoring relationship ends.
When a Relationship Ends Prematurely

Premature closure of mentoring relationships can be difficult for both the mentee and the mentor. In this situation, program staff may want to consider the following strategies:

- **Clarify the reason.** Review with the mentee and mentor why the relationship is ending. Encourage both individuals to express their feelings about the relationship respectfully.

- **Recommend not making promises.** Advise mentors not to make promises they are unlikely to keep (e.g., that they will stay in regular touch with the mentee). Breaking a promise can have very negative effects on youth who have experienced abandonment or been seriously disappointed by adults.

- **Rematch when appropriate.** If the mentor and/or mentee is interested in being rematched once they’ve had time to move through the transition period, program staff should rematch them. Be sure to clarify that the relationship with the new mentor or mentee will be different from the previous match.

Easing the Transition

It can be difficult to end any mentoring relationship, even those that terminate when expected. To help facilitate positive closure, program staff should encourage mentor-mentee relationships to do the following:

- **Come to closure gradually.** Ending slowly gives mentors and mentees time to process their feelings. Encourage mentors and mentees not to wait until their last meeting to say goodbye, but to come to a gradual close. Program staff can discuss the end of a mentoring relationship with the mentor and mentee during check-in meetings. Some programs sponsor reflective activities for mentors and mentees every four to six months or use journals to enable mentors and mentees to regularly reflect on their relationship.

- **Celebrate!** Mentors and mentees should acknowledge and celebrate what they have accomplished in their time together. The program may host a closing celebration for mentors and mentees, or mentor-mentee pairs can plan a celebration of their own.

Program staff can train and support both mentors and mentees in remaining committed to the relationship over time. Managing mentors’ and mentees’ expectations for the relationship, supporting mentors and mentees during their time together, and reiterating program policies regularly can help to limit premature relationship closure. Preparing mentors and mentees for closure well in advance can help to make it a constructive experience for all.

Resource


Endnotes
