

SAFETY ISSUES and CONFIDENTIALITY¹

Confidentiality is an extremely important part of ensuring the integrity of programs. In order to respect the privacy of families it is important not to repeat any information that your mentee shares with you unless you are concerned about their safety. You may tell people the first name of your mentee and you can tell people that you played a new game together or that you baked cookies together or played basketball outside. This type of information is not necessarily confidential. However, anything else that your mentee shares with you about their feelings, changes in their family or other personal information must not be shared. If it sounds like gossip, then it probably is.

However, it is also crucial that you are an advocate for the health and safety of your mentee. Sensitive issues that come up between a mentor and mentee require different levels of response and intervention. These issues have been grouped below as delicate topics, issues of concern and crises requiring intervention. However, any of these issues may move up or down this continuum depending on the seriousness of the actions involved.

Delicate Topics

Generally speaking, delicate topics should be discussed only when initiated by the mentee. These topics can be touchy and strongly affect the relationship. Confidentiality takes on greater importance with these topics. Although mentors should be adequately trained to deal with these issues on their own, they should be encouraged to seek support and feedback from their supervisor and other mentors when their mentee has brought issues such as these to their attention.

Examples of delicate topics:

- Sex
- Peer pressure
- Hygiene
- Behavior
- School performance
- Self-image/personal insecurities
- Identity issues: class, cultural and sexual
- Others_____

Issues of Concern

Issues of concern are those that may have lifelong implications for the mentee, and therefore *the mentor needs to report them to the agency*. However, these issues do not necessarily require direct intervention. Because these issues may be part of ongoing situations and conditions that mentees face, mentors need to be trained and supported to accept these aspects of the mentees' lives without judgment. Mentors and mentoring programs should not focus too heavily on changing behavior when issues such as these arise. Nevertheless, by staying aware of the challenges their mentees must face, they may be able to help mentees ameliorate these problems over time.

Examples of Issues of Concern:

- Unsafe sex
- Fighting at school
- Depression
- Delinquent behavior
- Gang affiliation
- Substance abuse
- Verbal harassment: sexual, racial, bullying, others
- Others: _____

Crises Requiring Intervention

Crises involve issues of grave concern that generally require direct and immediate intervention. Some of these issues, like child abuse and neglect, are mandated by law to be reported to the county; others may require a referral of a direct intervention by the mentor program. **MENTORS SHOULD NEVER BE EXPECTED TO HANDLE ISSUES SUCH AS THESE ALONE.** In addition, many of these issues require collaboration with families of mentees, and this should be handled by the mentor program manager.

The only time you should make a report directly is if you feel your mentee is in immediate danger. Then call the state Children's Emergency Services Hot Line at 1-800-452-1999

Examples of Crises Requiring Intervention:

- Child abuse and neglect
- Abusive relationships: sexual abuse, incest, dating violence/rape
- Chemical dependency
- Serious delinquency/arrests
- Suicidal behavior
- Mental illness
- Physical harassment: sexual, racial, bullying, others
- Other trauma

General Guidelinesⁱⁱ

Put the mentee at ease . . .

- Stay calm.
- Use body language to communicate attentiveness (e.g., maintain eye contact, sit at same level).
- Avoid judgmental statements such as “Why would you do something like that?” or “I think you know better.”
- Be honest if you are getting emotional or upset.
- Let mentee know that you are glad he or she came to you.
- Reassure mentee that his or her confidentiality will be honored.
- Use tact, but be honest.
- Allow mentee to talk at his or her own pace—don’t force an issue.
- Do not pry—allow mentee to bring up topics he or she is comfortable with.
- Do not collaborate with mentee’s family to provide discipline.

Honor the mentee’s right to self-determination . . .

- Focus on the mentee’s feelings and needs rather than jumping to problem solving.
- When issue has been talked about, ask, “What do you think you would like to do about this situation?” “How would you like me to help?”
- If you are not comfortable with what the mentee wants to do, ask yourself why before you decide whether to say so.
- If what the mentee wants to do is not possible, explain so gently and apologize.
- Ask what alternative solutions would make the mentee comfortable.
- Encourage critical thinking through questions and reflections.
- Use the words, “I don’t know—what do you think?”

Problem solve and offer resources . . .

- Know your appropriate role as a mentor.
- Be honest with mentee if confidentiality does not hold.
- Suggest that your supervisor may have some thoughts if you don’t know what to do.
- Ask mentee if he or she would like to talk to the agency with you if necessary.
- Provide information if mentee is unaware of resources or options.
- Brainstorm with mentee and be creative in finding a solution—there is usually more than one way to handle a situation and this process is educational for the mentee.
- Offer to accompany mentee if he or she is uncomfortable with something he or she has decided to do.
- *Be collaborative*—you are a team.
- *Follow through with any and all commitments.*

Family Issuesⁱⁱⁱ

- **Let your mentee know you are there for her**, no matter what.
- **Point out the positive things that are happening in his family.** When a family member shows love or caring, be sure your mentee notices.
- **Assure your mentee that she is a good person with gifts and talents to contribute.** Tell her about specific times when you have observed her being a good daughter, sibling, grandchild, or friend.
- **Help your mentee separate the person he is in conflict with from that person's behavior.** Mom may be a fun, caring person who made a big mistake. Help him focus his frustration with family members on behaviors, not on the person herself.
- **Talk about why parents and caregivers enforce boundaries on young people.** A curfew that seems unfair may in place because parents and caregivers want to protect their child.
- **Continue to have high expectations for your mentee's behavior and achievement.** Don't allow family situations to come up as a barrier or an excuse.
- **Help your mentee strategize the many ways she could confront a difficult family situation**, weighing the pros and cons of each approach.
- **Advocate for your mentee's health and safety.** It is possible that your mentee's parent or guardian is not making good choices on your mentee's behalf. If you suspect that his home situation is in serious turmoil that could escalate to abuse or neglect, talk to your mentor program staff about your concerns. Ask them to connect the family to professional services. Do not try to step in and mediate the situation yourself.

ⁱ Adapted from materials provided by The Mentoring Partnership of New York, *Mentoring in the Faith Community: an Operations Manual for Program Coordinators* and from Virginia Mentoring Partnership: *Responsible Mentoring – Talking About Drugs, Sex and Other Difficult Issues* is a project of The Evaluation Management Training Group, Inc., Funded through The California Department of Alcohol and Drug Programs. (www.emt.org/publications.html) By Dustianne North, M.S.W.

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ Developmental Asset materials are provided by the Search Institute. Search Institute resources (from the forthcoming publication *Mentoring for Meaningful Results: Asset Building Tips, Tools and Activities for Youth and Adults* by Kristie Probst; Pass It On at School! Activity Handouts for Creating Caring Schools; Handouts and Overheads from Great Places to Learn) are used with permission from Search Institute, Minneapolis, MN; www.search-institute.org. All rights reserved. Search InstituteSM and Developmental AssetsTM are trademarks of Search Institute.