



## Gender-Specific Approaches in Mentoring

Those working directly with youth know that boys and girls respond differently to mentoring, often requiring separate approaches and strategies to achieve similar outcomes. While research is still limited on how gender affects mentoring relationships, there is some evidence that gender difference is an important consideration. Research on gender in the broader field of developmental psychology points to differences in the ways boys and girls develop personal identity, form friendships, and communicate their interests and needs. Helping mentors understand some of these differences through initial and ongoing training and continuing support can help them be more effective in developing a positive relationship with their mentee.

### Why Understanding Gender Differences Matters in Mentoring

Girls and boys may be referred to mentoring programs for different reasons, form relationships differently, and thrive under different approaches to mentoring. Reasons for referring girls may include:

- Difficulties in mother-daughter or peer relationships
- Low self-esteem or signs of depression
- Lack of career or educational goals

Boys, on the other hand, are often referred because they:

- Lack a male role model in the home
- Are faring poorly academically

- Have disciplinary issues at school or in the community

Girls and boys develop at different times, physically, emotionally, and cognitively, so a 12-year-old girl may be at a considerably different developmental stage than a boy of the same age. They also have different ways of developing and maintaining friendships. Girls generally want more intimacy in friendships, rely more on interpersonal relationships to help them form their own identity, and turn to friends for help. Boys are more task-oriented, form friendships through action, and are less likely to divulge intimate details about themselves. They are not as interested in the relationship as an end in itself, but rather as a framework for doing things and asserting their own independence. In short, as one psychotherapist recently noted, “Boys develop friendships through the stuff they do. Girls develop friendships and then go do stuff” (Steiner, 2006).

### Training Mentors in Gender-Specific Approaches

Whether your mentors are matched with mentees of the same or different gender, they will benefit from learning about gender-specific issues and approaches to working with boys and girls. Your mentor training should include information, activities, and discussion about how gender differences affect the development of mentoring relationships. These training enhancements can help both male and female mentors learn how to communicate more effectively with their mentees, encourage mentees to think beyond gender stereotypes, and help all participants better understand adolescent behavior.

Examples of information that might be covered in a mentor training session include:

- Handouts on stages of adolescent development, with some discussion about whether some developmental tasks are more important for boys or for girls to complete.
- Information on maintaining boundaries that includes special issues facing female mentors as their eager mentees ask for increasing levels of self-disclosure about their personal lives.
- How to use print and media resources that focus on gender-specific issues to generate conversations with mentees about stereotypes. Provide reading and movie recommendations where gender is an issue or where stereotypes are challenged, and include some ideas on how to stimulate discussion.
- Effective methods of communication for working with young people, and how gender affects the way in which people communicate.

Effective communication is possibly the most significant factor in the development of a successful mentoring relationship. Here are some gender-specific tips for helping mentors communicate with their mentees:

### Communicating with boys

As noted earlier, boys tend to be much less willing to share their personal feelings and experiences with an adult than are girls. They are wary of asking for help and may reject direct offers of help from others, seeing it as a sign of weakness. This can be frustrating for mentors who may see their male mentee struggling with a difficult situation but unable or unwilling to talk about it. The following tips may help mentors of boys communicate about sensitive topics with their mentees more effectively.

**Keep moving.** Physically, boys like to move around and are often uncomfortable sitting with an adult with nothing to do but talk. Engaging boys in physical activity or a project of some kind while talking can help them relieve their anxiety about communicating.

### An Asset Snapshot

## Boys report fewer assets than girls

Over the past 10 years the Search Institute of Minnesota has surveyed more than half a million children across the country from all races and economic backgrounds to assess the presence of protective factors in their lives. The *Search Institute Profiles of Student Life: Attitudes and Behaviors* survey data compares assets held by boys and girls. Among almost 100,000 sixth- to 12th-grade students surveyed in 1996–1997, the study found that:

- Boys, on average, report having fewer of the 40 developmental assets—16.5 vs. 19.5 for girls.
- There are 18 assets that girls are significantly more likely to report having than boys, but only three assets that boys are more likely to report having.
- Girls are far more likely than boys to report having assets in interpersonal competence, conflict resolution, and caring, while boys are more likely to report having a sense of purpose, high self esteem, and a sense of safety.

Understanding the “gender gap” in assets may be helpful in training mentors about encouraging these missing assets in their mentees.

Adapted with permission from Search Institute®. Roehlkepartain, E.C., *Connecting with Boys: Closing the Asset Gap*, *Assets: The Magazine of Ideas for Healthy Communities & Healthy Youth*, Summer 2001. Retrieved June 19, 2007, from <http://www.search-institute.org/assetmag/summer01/boys.html>

**Tips for communicating with boys**

- Keep moving
- Avoid face-to-face, formal settings for meetings
- Listen for cues that your mentee wants to talk
- Use storytelling

**Tips for communicating with girls**

- Encourage meaningful conversations
- Help girls be proud of themselves
- Encourage goal setting, self-sufficiency, and independent thinking
- Be prepared to provide emotional support
- Don't expect too much too soon

***Avoid face-to-face, formal settings for meetings.***

Keep the setting informal, and try sitting shoulder-to-shoulder rather than face-to-face, perhaps working on a project together. Situations that feel like a counseling session are likely to be a conversation-stopper for many boys. If your mentee is stressed out or has a problem he can't talk directly about, try engaging him in physical activities that can help him burn off steam.

***Listen for cues that your mentee wants to talk.***

Mentees may give cues that they want to talk about something by starting off on a random subject or by showing increased nervousness or physical activity. Using active listening and open-ended questioning

can help mentors learn what their mentee really wants to talk about. Remember that your male mentee may have a hard time sharing any personal information or opinions and will need to warm up first.

***Use storytelling.*** Mentors can use what's known as "strategic storytelling" to encourage their male mentees to feel more comfortable talking about personal issues or sensitive topics. Sharing a story about a personal experience models positive ways of revealing feelings and may allow the mentee to share his own feelings and struggles. Storytelling doesn't have to be entirely serious. If a mentee is going through an uncoordinated stage, for example, sharing funny tales about the mentor's own clumsiness might lighten the moment and get the mentee talking about funny stories of his own.

Choosing to tell a personal story should be done thoughtfully. The story should not put the mentee in a position of trying to "fix" a mentor's own problem. Ideally, the story should include a resolution—how the problem or struggle was resolved. Remember, the goal of strategic storytelling is to help boys see that sharing personal experiences and talking about feelings is OK and can be helpful. Of course, mentors need to decide for themselves what their "comfort level" is for sharing personal stories.

(Tips for mentoring boys adapted from *BAM! Boys advocacy and mentoring: A guidebook for leading preventative boys groups.*)

**Communicating with girls**

Girls develop relationships through talking, developing trust, sharing intimate information. As they grow up and begin to separate from their mothers, they need to form other positive relationships with females who can be role models for them. They are eager for opportunities to connect with other girls and women, they are open to seeking help, and they need the feedback of friends and respected adults to validate themselves. Mentors can use these opportunities to listen, offer support, teach, and nurture. Here are some communication tips for mentors of girls:

**Encourage meaningful conversations.** Although your mentee may be shy at first, it's likely that she will soon open up and want to share all sorts of information with you about her interests, her friends, and her life in general. Find activities that help you channel conversations with your mentee toward meaningful, thoughtful subjects. For example, you might watch a movie or read a book that highlights social inequities or portrays gender stereotypes and then talk about those themes and how they affect you and your mentee. Or use a homework project to talk about careers or personal goals.

**Help girls be proud of themselves.** Reinforce your mentee's strengths and celebrate them regularly. Let your mentee know that she has many great skills and abilities that she can use throughout her life. Give her opportunities to use those skills whenever possible. She is likely to reject your praise outwardly, but continued reinforcement will pay off in the long run.

**Encourage goal setting, self-sufficiency, and independent thinking.** Talk to your mentee about her goals and dreams and help her see how she can work toward them. Do some personal goal setting together, helping her to choose goals that are meaningful for her regardless of what others expect of her. Sometimes girls rely so much on what others think that they lose sight of their own goals, values, and beliefs. As a mentor, you can encourage your mentee to get in touch with the things that really matter to her.

**Be prepared to provide emotional support.** Girls rely on others to help them sort out problems, emotions, and stressful experiences. Listen actively, help them identify what's really going on, and help them come to some kind of resolution rather than allowing them to dwell on their problems. Suggest that they write their feelings down or use problem-solving tools like lists of positives and negatives to decide what to do. Try to avoid getting caught up in "making it better" for them rather than giving them the support they need to make it better for themselves.

**Don't expect too much too soon.** Remember that the primary purpose of mentoring is to develop a strong, positive relationship with a younger person, not to "fix" her or "make her change." Give your female mentee time to develop trust with you, to relax in your presence, and to open up to you.

## Final Thoughts

Taking a look at the differences between boys and girls reminds us that young people are diverse in every aspect of their lives, regardless of gender. While gender is an important consideration in working with young people, tailoring our interactions to address their *unique* individual needs and attributes is most likely to produce positive results. Mentors should examine their own stereotypes about male and female roles and can encourage mentees to think critically about what it means to be male and female in our culture. They can help mentees take on new activities and challenges that make them more rounded human beings. But above all they should listen to them and appreciate them for who they really are.

## References

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## Resources available in the MRC Library

[http://www.edmentoring.org/lending\\_library.html](http://www.edmentoring.org/lending_library.html)

Big Brothers Big Sisters of America. (1999). *Services to girls: A toolkit for Big Brothers Big Sisters agencies*. Philadelphia, PA: Big Brothers Big Sisters of America

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## Web Sites

Girls Inc. is a national nonprofit youth organization dedicated to inspiring all girls to be strong, smart, and bold. Their Web site has articles, resources for working with girls, and tips for advocacy. <http://www.girlsinc.org/>

Mentoringboys.com is the Web site of Barry MacDonald, author, speaker, and consultant on boys' issues and gender. The site offers tools and articles on working with boys, excerpts from his books, and links to other resources. <http://www.mentoringboys.com/>

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