



# Strength-Based Mentoring:

Nurturing children and youth to help them thrive!

## Introduction

What enables some children and youth to do well in life, to **successfully navigate** life's challenges and to **feel hopeful** about the future in spite of adversity, while others are over-whelmed or uncertain? Research has determined that the one clear difference between these two categories of young people is the presence of a **significant mentoring** or supportive adult influence in their lives that enhances their strengths, resources and **ability to thrive** in the face of life's inevitable challenges.

## Role of Mentoring

Mentoring has the potential to bring about **positive change** for children and youth. Like adults, children and youth are social beings who live their lives in the context of relationships with others. The goal of mentoring is to make **connections** with children and youth, forming a positive relationship based on empowerment, altruism and mutuality. These qualities lay the foundation for young people as they work to **succeed** and develop life skills.

In many ways, effective mentoring embraces the **goals** and focus of positive youth development. As in mentoring, positive youth development uses strength-based approaches that promote healthy child and youth development by **building relationships** with caring adults within supportive community environments.

## What is Strength-Based Mentoring?

A strength-based mentoring approach has as its focus the identification, exploration, and use of strengths in children and youth to foster positive mental health outcomes at school, at home and in the community. Those supporting a strength perspective view children and youth as having "self-righting potential". In other words, they can draw on their own strength to constructively navigate life challenges with resilience. Positive youth development is viewed, therefore, not as the absence of risk behavior, but rather as the presence of positive attributes and relationships that support children and youth in reaching their full potential.

## Principles of Strength-Based Mentoring

1. The focus of the mentoring process is on the little's strengths, interests, abilities and capabilities, not on their deficits, weaknesses or problems.
2. All little's learn, grow and change through their strengths and capacities.
3. The big-little relationship becomes a primary and essential partnership.
4. The big is viewed as the facilitator and the little as the director in their own social capacity building story.
5. Continuity, trust, respect, compassion and acceptance are essential traits for strength-based mentoring.
6. Involves a collaborative and participatory process that continually builds upon strengths with realistic expectations and clear boundaries.



## Strategies for Strength-Based Mentoring

- Know Your Little:** Good mentors engage in ways that allow them to learn about their mentee from the inside out. They discern the littles distinct mix of strengths and limitations, listen to them and show interest in their dreams and aspirations.
- Expect Excellence:** Mentors should set high, but realistic expectations and communicate them clearly to their mentee. Mentors need to model excellence and demonstrate confidence in the littles ability to meet age appropriate expectations.
- Affirm, Affirm, and Affirm Some More:** Littles need to feel good about themselves, and affirmation is key to their sense of well-being. Always and unconditionally affirm your littles uniqueness and great value. Be sure to gently shed light on unrealistic aspirations and find ways to affirm littles even in the face of short-term challenges.
- Be a Teacher and Coach:** What you teach, littles will learn. Effective bigs are dependable, provide knowledge, make recommendations, offer consultation, and stimulate motivation with encouragement.
- Offer Counsel in Difficult Times:** Be open to discussing and exploring a littles concerns and difficulties, actively listen, reflect feelings, and clarify alternative options. Know and accept your limitations, refer your little to an alternate resource when serious mental health or safety issues emerge.
- Protect When Necessary:** Respond quickly and calmly to situations where the little may be unfairly treated or is at risk. Use protection wisely, as being overly protective reduces the opportunity for the mentees to learn the skills of successfully navigating those developmentally appropriate challenges in life.
- Stimulate Growth With Challenges:** Support littles in exploring developmentally appropriate challenges tailored to their strengths and capabilities. Nurture their sense of confidence, optimism and self-efficacy through successive episodes of accomplishments – leading to greater successes. Celebrate small gains and important milestones to reflect your littles achievements.
- Nurture Creativity:** Encourage innovative thought and creative problem-solving strategies. Create a safe place for learning from mistakes and model innovation as well as persistence.
- Be an Intentional Model:** Invite the littles into various aspects of your life where you want them to learn through direct observation - model excellence and directedness. Once observed, require increasing participation and ownership of their own process.

## Traits of Strength-Based Mentors

- Exude Warmth:** Radiate warmth with an attitude of friendliness, approachability, and kindness. Consistently offer verbal and nonverbal expressions of sincere interest, acceptance and genuine positive regard.
- Listen Actively:** In reasonable ways, make yourself available when your little wants to talk. During those conversations, give them your undivided attention. Ensure your verbal and non-verbal messages are similar and you reflect (accurately paraphrase) your littles primary concerns.
- Show Unconditional Regard:** Show that your little is a person of great value and potential by being consistent in your commitment of time, being dependable and by making an effort to genuinely understand.
- Embrace Humor:** Laugh at yourself often as a way of modeling humility and perspective. Use humor to engage and teach littles how to balance life's stressful moments with laughter.



**Do Not Expect Perfection:** Expect excellence without perfection. Model how life's mistakes are opportunities for exploring other options and pathways to success. Serve as an intentional and transparent model of imperfect excellence.

**Attend to Interpersonal Cues:** Pay attention to your own emotional life and demonstrate emotional self-awareness. Model a range of emotions in constructive ways and work at an accurate understanding of the emotional states of your little.

**Be Trustworthy and Dependable:** Demonstrate trustworthiness as well as consistency, reliability, and integrity. Keep promises, maintain confidence and adhere to professional and organizational codes of behavior.

**Respect Values:** Do not pretend to be "value neutral" – acknowledge your core beliefs and values. Respect the little's values and provide a safe place to discuss value differences when appropriate.

### **Matters of Integrity and Self-Care for a Mentor**

**Consider the Implications of Mentoring:** Mentoring is a big responsibility. Although one may be motivated to influence the life of a child in a positive way, engaging in a mentoring relationship is a purposeful journey that requires giving of oneself in many ways. One must recognize and accept the potential challenges of being a mentor and constantly assess one's motivations.

**Practice Self-Care:** It is important to understand that caring for a little means caring for oneself by modeling a responsible balance across all areas of one's life, including mentoring life. Follow through with commitments to family, friends and your little.

**Be Competent:** Work at developing your own resilience and relational mentoring skills. Evaluate your own experience, expertise and confidence before and during your time as a mentor.

**Hold Yourself Accountable:** Ensure your mentoring activities are characterized by honesty, consistency and integrity. It is important to have a trusted friend or organization that provides a safe place to routinely confer about your mentoring and your relationship with your little.

**Practice Humility:** Practice humility through non-defensiveness and transparency with respect to faults and weaknesses. Understand that by being open about one's limitations, you give your little permission to be human as well. Understand and appreciate your own strengths and accomplishments while using them to support your little.

**Welcome Change and Growth:** Believe that your mentoring relationship will positively enhance the social capacity of your little and will change in positive ways over time. Understand the common phases of mentoring development and how your little might need different things from you at each one. Narrate, welcome and highlight proof of your little's growth and positive development.

**Mentor as a Way of Life:** Remember that if you are drawn to mentoring, you probably have gifts in this area that will be best served by frequent use. Embrace the rich rewards associated with mentoring, but take care to protect yourself from being overextended.

For more information about mentoring, please visit [www.mentoringworks.ca](http://www.mentoringworks.ca).

This document has been adapted from:  
Alberta Mentoring Partnership. (2010). Strength-based mentoring: nurturing the social capacity of children and youth to thrive. Retrieved from <http://resiliencyinitiatives.ca/>