

Building a good relationship with your mentee

1. Which are the key skills to be a good mentor?

- Listening (empathy): listen with your eyes, repeat what the mentee says using your own words (“What you said is this...”)
- Respect and lack of judgment: “Whatever you tell me, whatever you have done is not going to change the fact that I respect you.”
- Integrity: be yourself, challenge when appropriate
- They might see you as a rich person, but it is important to tell them your story and how you have worked hard to get where you are in your life. This may help your mentee/s to better identify with you.

2. What should I do to bond better with my mentee?

- Most of our mentees are shy and lack self-confidence. They are scared to speak to adults they do not know (even more so if the mentors are from a different cultural/racial/social background). Just being able to show you their school results might be a big deal: they may be scared to disappoint you. It might take up to three meetings before they’ve built up enough confidence to open up to you and even more meetings before they share personal difficulties and feelings.
- Don’t forget that you are dealing with teenagers, who are often anxious/confused about their future. Some of them are more interested in having fun than thinking about serious issues. Rather use games and fun activities to address “sensitive” questions (e.g. ask them to draw on a paper important events that have taken place in their lives, and what their targets and dreams are for the current year and beyond matric).
- To get them focused on their studies, you might also have to be patient! Some learners only start to really improve their marks in Grade 12. But keep encouraging them, without sugar-coating it: e.g. if their Math and Science marks are low but they dream of becoming engineers or doctors, they might have to explore other options.
- Many of our teenagers are sexually active but some are careless. Please talk to them in a sensitive way about the importance of using condoms or other contraceptives to avoid HIV and unwanted pregnancies. If you are uncomfortable initiating the conversation, you can contact Karabo 071 777 5687.

“My mentor has taught me a lot about how to be around about people, communicate with people and still be myself. She taught me to never judge people unless you know them and not just know their name and where they live, but also their dreams, background, lifestyle and goals.” (mentee)



"We broke the ice quite quickly. My mentees were always responsive, sending school marks, happy and thankful for any outing. I think I helped them think broadly and be proud of themselves, I tried my best to make them learn more about SA history and culture. They also taught me a lot about their culture." (mentor)

It was an eye-opening experience both for me and the family. I am very impressed by all her energy which makes me optimistic about her future (mentor)

3. Should I give any money or gifts to my mentee?

We do not advise you give any money or presents (including computers or tablets) to your mentee as it may create feelings of jealousy between mentees or siblings.

The only exception is education-related expenses such as:

- Study guides (in the subject they need to improve their results)
- Books
- Tutors (our students are happy to help mentees to improve their results in Maths, Sciences or Accounting, but make sure that their marks do improve if they get a tutor)
- Data in small amounts for education-related researches

At times my mentee expected money, but such issues were easily resolved, and we had constructive engagements. (mentor)

4. Should I meet my mentee's family in Alexandra?

- It is recommended to meet your mentee's parents or guardian and ask them to sign the indemnity form (available on Sizanani website). Explain the purpose of the mentorship programme and the help you can bring to their child regarding his/her studies.
- Some learners are embarrassed about where they come from and may be reluctant to let you visit their home (often a single room). In that case, you can arrange a meeting elsewhere (Alex shopping mall near the N3 London Road offramp, for instance).
- We don't advise you venture into the township on your own, in a fancy car. If you go to Alex, ask your mentee to go along with you and keep your windows closed. Be cautious with your cellphone and any valuables.



- Parents are generally very grateful for our involvement but in some cases, may worry about the mentor's influence over their child. Some of them have complained about mentors giving clothes and other gifts (which is not allowed by Sizanani). In a few cases, parents did not want their children to further their studies or did not agree with their study choices.
- Parents do not always realise the challenges of school work and it may be helpful if you talk to them. For instance, girls are expected to look after their younger siblings, cook or do other chores. Parents, especially fathers, worry that their girls might have boyfriends and fall pregnant. They do not allow them to be part of study groups at school or study at the library. If necessary, those issues should be addressed with sensitivity. It is important to inform us should you encounter any problems with your mentee's parents or guardians.
- You could also suggest to your mentee that they include you in family or other celebrations. It is a fantastic way to bond better with your mentee.

5. Should I invite my mentee to my home?

Some mentors think that the wealth gap is too high, and it could be depressing for their mentee. Others say that in any case, Alexandra youngsters are aware of the huge social gap and it is a good experience to know another social environment.

One student in Engineering confided that he became motivated to succeed after his French mentor invited him at his Melrose Arch flat and told him that if he studied hard, he could one day live in such accommodation.

"I enjoyed when we went to her place to study and do our APS score and research which careers I could do. She taught me "In life, never give up". I have the most amazing mentor and I want to be a future mentor."

6. What should I do if my mentee faces personal challenges?

Some learners live in difficult situations at home or in their environment (lack of parental support, alcoholism, violence, sexual abuse including from their boyfriends). The best you can do is try to listen to their issues. If you think they need counselling or the intervention of a social worker, please contact Valérie or Karabo.

"My mentees face some challenges at home whether with family or siblings. So I had to be a listening ear and give sound advice when I could." (mentor)



7. Why do some mentoring relationships fail?

The mentorship relationship can be challenging sometimes. You might not realise the great impact you have in the short term or will have in the years to come for some of these learners.

Some relationships are disappointing, or even fail, for various reasons, such as:

- Mentors are too busy. If you don't have time to see your mentee once a month, inform him/her and keep in touch via SMS. Try to stay in contact and encourage him/her to study hard.

"Even though I had a busy year, I made a conscious decision to see them as often as possible and always keep in touch with my mentees via telephone/email". (mentor)

- A few mentors, too serious or demanding, have difficulty bonding with teenagers or understanding them.

"It is hard to talk to her because she is uptight as a mentor". (mentee)

- Lack of communication

Mentees might not reply to your SMS/messages because:

- They are short of money to buy airtime or do not have internet access
- They have changed their phone number or lost their cellphone without informing you (in that case, we will help you to reconnect with your mentee)

It is important to make them aware of the importance of informing you of any change or difficulty buying air time.

Some learners also arrive late to meetings or do not show up at all. The idea of respecting someone's time is one that is not always taught to them at school/home.

"We lost contact during the year. Her cellphone number changed a few times and she went a few months without a cellphone. She did not communicate her latest number" (mentor)

- Mentees too shy, introverted and passive

Some mentors find it very difficult to communicate with their mentees, as it might take a lot of time (sometimes a year) for them to open up and share their feelings

"I tried to ask how I could help them – and to please discuss anything with me. It doesn't just work like that." (mentor)



- Mentees not invested in the mentorship programme

Some learners do not realise how important it is to make the most of the mentorship program.

"My mentee refuses to do any reports that I ask her to do, either after the visit or to research a particular career." (mentor)

"I could not succeed in having them suggest an outing or a way for me to help them. Their grades did not improve as much as they wanted, and I wonder how I could have motivated them more." (mentor)

- Mentees not showing signs of appreciation

Often, mentees do not thank their mentor for the outing/help they receive; bear in mind the differences in education between the two parties. But it is also important to teach them how to communicate with people from other backgrounds and the importance of showing gratitude to others.

Most of the learners are under the impression that their mentors are rich, so it is important that they know and understand the boundaries of the mentorship relationship from the start.

"I took my mentee to get an eye test because he was having difficulties concentrating in class. I wanted to buy him glasses but he only wanted the expensive frames. I ended up not buying any." (mentor)

8. How can I get support?

- Create an account on the Sizanani website to access the yearly calendar, mentors and mentees details and a forum to exchange questions and experiences regarding the mentorship program
- On the mentors' WhatsApp group, you can post general announcements, for instance, if you want other mentors to join you on an outing or if you want to share a tutor. Please reply directly to the person who sent the message unless it is relevant for everyone, as some mentors complain about too many messages on the group.
- Important information will also be sent directly to your WhatsApp



- Check our Facebook page “Sizanani Mentors” to see pictures of events
- Mentors of Grade 12 learners will be invited to listen to a presentation on the UJ admission system and other questions related to tertiary education.
- Mentors’ debrief sessions will be organised every two months, on a Wednesday evening
- If you are unable to bond with your mentee/s, we suggest you choose another learner.
- If you decide to leave the program, please inform us. We will try to find a new mentor for your mentee.
- You can also direct any question to the Sizanani managers:

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