

**100 IDEAS
TO USE WHEN
MENTORING
YOUTH:**

**Activities and
Conversations to
Help Your
Mentees
Excel**

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The best way for me to get to know my mentees is to find out something they're interested in and discover ways to enhance that interest. I've done some pretty interesting things, including going to a 4-H rabbit show, a synchronized swimming competition, and a high school jazz band concert. I'm as proud as a parent when I see what young people are capable of.

—Motivated mentor

You and your mentees have met, started to get acquainted, and talked in general terms about who you are and what you might do during your mentoring partnership. Now what? The most important thing to remember is that *mentoring youth isn't another meeting or program; it's a relationship*. Effective mentoring is your personal involvement in helping mentees develop and become all they can be. Time spent doing things together—a series of “mentoring moments”—is what will build your relationships and change lives. “Layering” your times and conversations is less intimidating to youth than is a Big Meeting.

This list of 100 Ideas comes from interviews and observations of mentors, mentees, and youth program staffs and from several youth-development publications. Most ideas require your active involvement and could take place during your official “mentoring meetings” or spontaneously as they come to your mind or become available. Others can be done with some guidance from you by the mentees themselves with a “report-in” to you when you meet again.

These activities and conversation topics are most appropriate for youth ages 11-20, but many are adaptable for children. For example, idea number 33, “Visit a college campus together,” can be very appropriate to do with a 17-year-old searching for next year's options. It can also be an important trip to take with a 10-year-old, as you visit the bookstore, have a snack in the cafeteria, buy a souvenir, and talk about exciting college opportunities down the road.

Some ideas are for fun and some produce more serious responses. All are designed to help your mentees develop their social, emotional, intellectual, spiritual, and physical sides. In boxes, you'll see some quotes from mentors and mentees and descriptions that present an activity in more detail. The ideas are presented in no particular order. Read through the list, make plans with your mentees, then try the ones that will work for you.

1. Take your mentees **along on errands**. Do a few of their errands along the way.

Jay Kessler, former president of InterVarsity and long-term youth mentor, uses errand running and long trips as opportunities to “meet” with kids. *“More meaningful conversations happen in my ‘take-a-kid-along’ philosophy than anywhere else.”*

— from audiotape, *“What Works with Teens”*

2. Take them along on **workouts or walks**.
3. Go to one of their **important events** such as a concert, athletic event, or a performance they’re giving.
4. Ask to meet **members of your mentees’ families** so that you can gain a deeper appreciation for your mentees’ history and situations.
5. Ask to visit your mentees **at their homes**. Be very sensitive about not embarrassing them, especially if they’re not proud of their situations. Ask to see their rooms and say something positive about their decorations.
6. Introduce them to **your family**.

Over time, help your mentees figure out how to get the most from you: what you know how to do, why you want to mentor them, the boundaries you want to set, your pet peeves, and your typical styles of communicating and thinking. Discuss how to “read” each other and give each other feedback. Teach your mentees what mentors usually expect and help them find other mentors besides you.

— Linda Phillips-Jones, Ph.D., Psychologist

7. **Introduce them** to at least two people who could be helpful to them.
8. **Go out to lunch** throughout your mentoring relationships. Talk about your mentees’ families and friends, your family, events in your lives, movies, music, etc.
9. Play **board games, cards, darts, or pool** with your mentees. Let them invite a friend, and observe how they deal with winning and losing.
10. Visit a **music store** together. Find out what your mentees listen to, and show them some of your favorites. Tell them you’ll listen to one of theirs if they’ll listen to one of yours.

11. Do some of your mentoring **on the phone**. These “meetings” will be shorter than face-to-face times.
12. Phone at a time when you know your mentees aren’t home. Leave **encouraging messages** on their answering machines. Hopefully, other people besides your mentees will hear them.

I came home after a hectic day and did my usual check-the-messages routine. There in the middle of a bunch of callbacks was this long recorded compliment for my daughter from her mentor. Her mentor mentioned things I didn’t even know my daughter had done. After hearing the encouraging words she said about my kid, I felt like a better mom, and the message wasn’t even for me!

— Mother of an 11-year-old

13. **Call your mentees’ parents** and tell them something you admire about their sons or daughters. Ask them if there is anything important you should know about their children. Don’t break any confidences you have with your mentees, but let their parents know you’re there to help and why.
14. **Phone unexpectedly**, say hi, and that you were thinking about them.

One mentee described how shocked and happy he was to receive a phone call from his ultra-busy mentor. “I couldn’t believe it. He called me from the airport just to say he was thinking about me and ask me how my game went. I think that was one of the best parts of our relationship. He made me feel like what was going on in my life was really important to him.”

15. Ask to **read a report or story** they’ve recently written or a drawing they’ve done. Make positive comments, mention at least one thing you learned from it, and ask questions related to the material.
16. **Ask about a book** they’re reading. *“Is this book for school or pleasure reading?” . . . “Why did you choose it?” . . . “Would you recommend it?” . . . “What’s your favorite book?”*
17. Tell them about **something you’re reading**, what you like about it, and what you don’t.
18. **Read a good book** together. Take a trip to the library or bookstore, and pick out one to share. Maybe read every other chapter out loud to each other.

19. Find out when their birthdays are, and send **birthday cards**. Enclose a home-made coupon for a lunch get-together.
20. Ask your mentees to **make all the plans** for your next get-together.
21. Visit your employed mentees **at their jobs**. Stop by and say hi. If it's okay with them, ask them to introduce you to their employers.
22. **Look at a world map** together and discuss future places they might go. Help them see the world is full of opportunities. Tell them about the places you've been or hope you'll still see.
23. **E-mail** your mentees, ask questions they can respond to, and share news about yourself. If they don't have computers, help them find places where they can have e-mail privileges.

Dan Fading, an airline pilot for Aloha Airlines, commutes to Hawaii from Sacramento. As part of his busy life, he mentors a group of freshmen boys. He uses his laptop computer to send his mentees regular e-mail updates and personal notes and to share some of his weekly journaling. The guys can send Dan a note anytime. They know he monitors his mail and hopes to hear from them. One of his mentees said, *"It doesn't bother me that Dan is gone a lot. I know I can reach him more easily than most people can reach someone who lives or works right down the street. Besides, I'm not looking for the Big Meeting. It means a lot to know he's there, that I can run an idea by him. . . that he cares enough to be available."*

24. Ask them to show you something interesting on their **computers**. Express interest in their favorite game, their bookmarks on the Web, a document or graphic they created.
25. Encourage your mentees to **try something new**—food, a sport, or hobby. Jointly plan a "reward" if they pull it off.
26. Ask them to **teach you something**. If it's difficult for you, admit it.
27. **Ask for their pictures** for your wallet or desk.
28. Link up with **another mentor-mentee pair** for lunch. During this get-together, share at least two things about your mentees that you admire or are proud of.
29. Look over some of their **pictures of friends or family**. Ask questions such as: *"Which one is easiest to talk with?"* . . . *"Who would you most want to spend time with?"* . . . *"Is there one that others say you look like?"*

30. Give your mentees **sincere, one-on-one praise**.

Sample Praises to Give Youth

General: Comment on a **general ability** or **trait**.

*You're a generous person.
You're quite a writer!
You're an exceptional friend.*

Outcome: Comment on something he/she **did** or **produced**.

*What you said to your brother was very encouraging.
Your short story has a great plot and intriguing characters.
The way you hugged your mom must have made her feel good.*

Behavior: Comment on the **specific behaviors** or **actions** performed.

I liked the way you stopped to listen to him, then looked right into his eyes, and said 'You can do it!' Your tone was really sincere, and you didn't let him play it down.

31. Encourage them to get **college and career guidance** from the counselors at school. Check with them about their meetings. Suggest things they can ask for, such as taking an interest inventory.
32. Go to a **college fair** together. Talk about their college options and what they're thinking about. Discuss what to consider in choosing the right place, e.g., location, degrees offered, and financial opportunities.
33. **Visit a college campus** together. Take the official tour if available, try to sit in on a large lecture, visit the bookstore, eat in the cafeteria.
34. If you went to college, tell **what influenced your choice**.

Jerry Rice, star player for football's San Francisco 49ers, was once asked, 'Why did you attend a small, obscure university like Mississippi Valley State University in Itta Bena, Mississippi?' Rice responded, 'Out of all the big-time schools (such as UCLA) to recruit me, MVSU was the only school to come to my house and give me a personal visit.'

— Quoted in **Leadership Magazine**

35. Help them **fill out job or college applications**. Discuss different ways they can present themselves on paper.

After talking with the mother of my mentee, I realized this girl was so busy getting good grades she was missing deadlines for her college applications. 'Out of the blue' I asked her to bring some of her college catalogs to our next meeting. We worked on filling them out and sending them off. That meeting made me a hero with her mom and dad, along with helping set the course of her college years.

— Mentor of a teenager

36. **Write specific, personalized praises** on something tangible to keep.

For each of her three mentees' birthdays, a mentor framed "Things I love about (name)." When the year of official mentoring came to an end, the three girls gave her a framed "Things we love about (Name.)" They had learned from her how to encourage and affirm.

37. Talk about **money and budgeting**. Show how you meet your financial obligations. Be open and available to talk through the choices you make with your money.
38. Demonstrate how you **balance your checkbook**.
39. **Read movie reviews** together. Rent a video and make popcorn.

A Few Movie Suggestions

Chariots of Fire, Les Miserables, Sergeant York, The Robe, The Hiding Place, Saving Grace, Tender Mercies, Mr. Smith Goes to Washington, Casablanca, Inherit the Wind, The Brothers Karamazov.

— Quoted in **Breakpoint Magazine**

40. Look through a **youth-oriented magazine** together and discuss articles. Some magazines to consider for teenagers include: ***Campus Life, YM, Teen, Breakaway, Brio, Teen People, Seventeen, Jr. National Geographic, Contact, Sports Illustrated for Kids.***
41. Share a **verse, quote or saying** that's meaningful to you. Write it down on a card for them to keep.

42. Talk about **dating, relationships, and love-lives**, including your failures and successes.
43. Ask them about their **favorite cartoons**; look and laugh at them together. Show your favorites.
44. Have them **invite a friend** to your next get-together. Observe how your mentees relate, then offer feedback at your next one-on-one meeting.

Comments about Interacting with Others

“You really handled that sticky situation well.”
“Who taught you how to get along with people so well?”
“When I heard you say that, I wondered if you really meant it.”
“I like what I see in your friendship with _____. What makes him/her such a good friend to you?”

45. Observe how your mentees **relate to you**. Pay attention to your “gut reaction” to them. Your feelings and impressions are useful data about your mentees. Think about comments you could make to them and how you could help them with their people skills.

Notice how mentees talk and act with you in your meetings. Are they often late? Always making excuses about why a plan won't work? Failing to notice or thank you for actions on their behalf? They're probably also displaying these responses with others and—unknowingly—sabotaging their success. Pay attention to your reactions. With care, give your mentees honest feedback on how they present themselves, and how this affects you. Offer to coach them if they want to improve in these areas.

— Linda Phillips-Jones, Ph.D., Psychologist

46. Go **shopping at a thrift store**. Buy something for your mentees and yourself.
47. Have them look into a mirror while you tell them **four things you like** about them. Be sure to include character qualities, not just looks.
48. Listen to their **favorite radio stations**, and mention artists and songs you liked.

“My mentor took me out to lunch for my birthday. After we finished eating, she told me all these things she liked about me, and how she was so glad I was a part of her life. I felt kinda embarrassed, but I’ve never forgotten what she said.”

— 14-year-old mentee

49. Have them look into a mirror and say **two things they like** about themselves.
50. If you can’t attend your mentees’ special events, get someone to **videotape** them, and then enjoy the tapes (and their explanations) together.
51. Teach your mentees how to make one of your **“secret family recipes.”**

The last time my two mentees and I got together, I made my Famous Spaghetti. I had them help me throw in everything we could, even hot sausages, which really turned out great. I like to think maybe these guys will be better cooks than I was when I grew up!

— Male mentor

52. Ask them about their **favorite teacher or coach**. With each mentee’s permission, try to meet these individuals. Let your mentees arrange the occasion and introduce you.
53. Do **volunteer work** together. Sign up for National “Make a Difference Day,” which happens in the fall. Work with your mentees at a Habitat for Humanity project or an after-school tutoring program. Make it a one-time experience or a monthly part of your relationships.
54. Tell your **“growing-up” story** including successes and failures.

One effective mentor, who reluctantly signed up to mentor two teen girls told this story: “I was really afraid of this whole mentoring thing. What could I tell a young person after screwing up so much in my youth? But it’s funny, the things that I did wrong . . . smoking, drinking, even my pre-marital pregnancy, seemed to be what my mentees wanted to hear about from me. They wanted to learn from my mistakes.”

55. Let them know what you’re thinking, feeling, and observing about a particular **situation or challenge you’re facing**.

56. **Praise them in front of others**, but don't overdo it.

Some More Praises

*“Did you see how well _____ did in that basketball game?”
“You should see how great _____ is at his/her job!”
“I needed some help on some computer graphics and _____
helped me look good on paper. He/she really knows what to do
on the computer.”*

57. Tell your mentees about your **post-junior high and post-high school decisions**, what you learned, what you wish would've been different, or what you'd do again.
58. Help your mentees set up a **financial goal**, and coach them toward achieving it.
59. With their parents' permission, help your mentees **set up a checking or savings account**, and guide them on how to use it.
60. **Rent rollerblades**, and skate together at a park. (Remember the pads and safety helmets.)
61. Go **four-wheeling** to an unknown destination. (Let someone know where you went.)
62. Map out a **one-day bike ride**, borrow or rent bikes, and plan out stops and sights.
63. Grab two **fishing poles**, and wet your lines in a pond or river.

Because I like to fish, most of my mentees have gone along with me to nearby streams and rivers. Teaching them the basics, seeing them catch a fish and keeping the memory with pictures has been a highlight. One of my former mentees, who was an overeager, rambunctious junior higher, grew up to become a premier fishing guide.

— Carlo Walth, Youth Director

64. Have your **picture taken** together. Present framed copies to your mentees.

65. Ask your mentees to **bring something** to your next meeting that’s meaningful to them—a picture, award, letter, souvenir. Let them tell you about it.
66. **Wash and wax** your vehicle, theirs, or somebody else’s. Go through the step-by-step process, and have fun discussing the similarities between car care and personal care.
67. Scout out an indoor **rock-climbing facility**, and plan a date for this activity. Bring a video camera, and have fun hanging out together.
68. Visit a local nursery and **buy a plant** or flowering shrub together. Let your mentees choose, plant, and care for their choices. Ask about their plants in future connections.
69. On rare occasions, if asked, **be available as an advocate** for your mentees with people and situations that are very difficult for them.

Examples of Difficult Situations for Youth

student-teacher meetings
 court appearances
 parent-child misunderstandings
 coach-player disputes
 employer-employee conflicts
 returning a purchase to a store for a refund

70. Check with your mentees from time to time on the **quality** of your mentoring relationships. Ask if you’re interacting often enough, their views of the help you’re providing, and how things could be improved.
71. Fly a **kite**.
72. If your mentees play a **musical instrument**, ask them to prepare a piece for you and make a “big deal” when they perform it for you.
73. **Build a model**—airplane, car, 3-D puzzle, boat—together.
74. Play a **round of miniature golf**.
75. Drive to the **airport**, people-watch, and make up stories about where they’re from and what they’re doing.
76. Plan an **overnight campout** with several mentor-mentee pairs. Put mentees in charge of specific tasks, and note their ability to follow through.

77. Help mentees with their **homework**.
78. Develop a **list of questions and prompts** for discussions with your mentees. End a meeting by saying: “*Next time we get together, I’d like you to answer the following question . . .*”

Some Good Questions/Prompts

If you didn’t have to worry about making money, what job would you like to have?
As closely as possible, describe the person you hope to marry.

What are three things your parents say or do that you hope you *never* do if and when you have children?

What are three things that your parents say or do that you *will* say or do with your kids?

—from ***A Smorgasbord of Questions***
by John Cutshall and Mikal Keefer

79. Ask mentees to **give you specific feedback**—positive and corrective—on something you wrote or on an action you took. If you’re brave, ask for feedback on your hair and clothes.
80. **Refuse all calls and other interruptions** (except emergencies) during your mentoring get-togethers. Point out that the time you spend with them is too important to be interrupted.
81. Talk to your mentees about **their friendships**, what they look for and want in a good friend.
82. Mail them a cartoon, article, or news clipping related to **something or someone they’ve mentioned**.
83. Ask your mentees about their **pets**, past and present. Tell them about the pets you’ve had.
84. Come up with some “**What If . . . ?**” **questions** for discussion at one of your sessions. *What if you saw someone steal something at the store? Your friends offered you drugs? A classmate wanted to cheat off your paper?*
85. Buy inexpensive **journals** for your mentees. Encourage them to write their feelings, not just facts. Have them bring their writing to your meetings and select entries to read to you.

Journal Entry Ideas

What was the best thing that happened this week and why?
What was the worst and why?
Describe your weirdest dream.
What would you like to change about yourself?
What was your scariest moment?
Tell about your most embarrassing moment.
What is something people need to know about you?
Who or what is the most important influence in your life?

86. Tell **your responses** to the above questions.
87. If you journal or have kept a diary over the years, take it along to one of your meetings, and **share some of the entries**.
88. Visit a **museum or art gallery** together. Pretend to give prizes for different exhibits. (Funniest. . . Most Impossible to Understand. . . Most Beautiful. . .)
89. Send **notes or cards** offering written encouragement to your mentees.
90. Invite your mentees to **your workplace**, and introduce them to your co-workers. Talk about how you got your job and your feelings about your work.
91. Tell your mentees **what influenced your career choice**, what education or training you had to acquire, and how you got your current job.
92. Plan a meeting to brainstorm your **mentees' career possibilities**. Take notes for them as you talk about what they're good at, what they like to do, what education and/or experiences are required for the type of career they're interested in. Let them know it's normal to change their minds on what they want to do, but that it's good to start early in thinking about what they want to do with their lives and how they might achieve their goals.
93. If your mentee expresses interest in a particular career, try to set up an opportunity for them to meet **someone already in that type of work**.
94. **Co-host a picnic** at the zoo or other unusual place.
95. If your mentees are **learning to drive**, offer to ride along so they can log hours on their permits. Talk about your driving experiences.
96. Take a **class or a workshop** with your mentees.

Classes of Possible Interest to Youth

Martial arts	Car maintenance
Rock climbing	Woodworking
Cake decorating	Sports workshops
Computer operation, graphics	Ballroom/western/rock dancing
Photography/video production	Animal care
Beauty and make-up	Sewing/crafts
Drawing/art	Horseback riding

97. Bring a **classified section of the paper** to your next meeting, and talk about how to use it. Discuss qualities looked for by employers.
98. On your letterhead, give your mentees **letters of recommendation** to keep for future reference.
99. Plan a **closure celebration** to end the formal part of your mentoring relationships.

One mentor of youth said he always gives his mentees a letter during their closing meeting, which is usually over lunch. In the hand-written letter, he writes the many positive qualities and abilities he's observed in the mentee, what the relationship has meant to him, one or more successful future scenarios he pictures for the mentee and invites the mentee to keep in touch. Do you think those letters are ever thrown away?

100. When the formal part of your mentoring is over, decide how much you really will **stay in touch**. At the very least, respond to their calls or notes, send at least one card a year, and make occasional phone calls.

Resources

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About the Authors

Dr. Linda Phillips-Jones was a licensed psychologist, the author of various publications, and a consultant to a wide range of organizations. Dr. Phillips-Jones passed away in December of 2006 after a valiant six-year fight with four rounds of cancer. CCC/The Mentoring Group continues to promote Dr. Linda's mentoring vision through her publications and philosophy on mentoring.

Jean Ann and Carlo Walth are a husband-wife team specializing in youth development. Jean Ann has taught elementary school and Carlo has served as a youth pastor at two churches. They are the parents of three.

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