

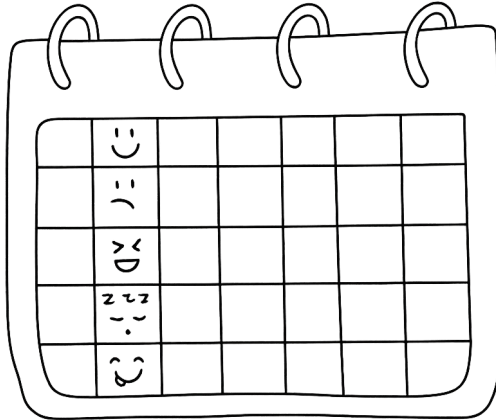


the long road to trust

A MENTOR'S GUIDE TO TEENAGE INCONSISTENCY AND SHOWING UP WITHOUT EXPECTATION

They'll push you away.
They'll test your boundaries.
They won't always be grateful.
But they still need you to stay.

NOT TO FIX, BUT TO STAY



If you mentor long enough, you'll eventually meet what feels like five different versions of the same teenager.

Depending on the week, your lunch buddy might be talkative, funny, engaged, silent, irritated, quick to snap, distracted, or just plain exhausted. This emotional whiplash can feel confusing and sometimes discouraging, especially for new mentors!

The truth is that teens don't show up consistently because their inner worlds are deeply inconsistent. Adolescence, by definition, is a season of intense change. Hormones are raging, friendships come and go, family dynamics can feel unstable, sleep and diet is all over the place... And all the while, they're trying on lots of different identities to try and figure out who they are.

(I'll always remember the sixteen-year-old student who came to my class one day wearing a black leather jacket and aviator sunglasses, looking like he had stepped straight out of Top Gun, only to come back the very next day acting like it had never happened.)

The most important thing to remember is that all behavior is communication. A teen's mood can provide insight about what they're going through or what they're struggling with. It should never be considered a verdict on you or your relationship. A quiet meeting doesn't mean you failed. It doesn't mean that they don't like you. It doesn't mean the relationship is not working, or that you need to try harder to meet them where they're at. Sometimes they're just teenagers!



SHOWING UP WHEN IT'S HARD

It's completely overwhelming to be an adolescent today. When teens pull back, act distant, or behave in a manner that's unpredictable, there's often more happening beneath the surface. Sometimes, behavior is a test to see whether it's safe to open up. Other times, it might reflect their limited skills for regulating big emotions. Often, they simply don't have the language to explain what's happening inside.

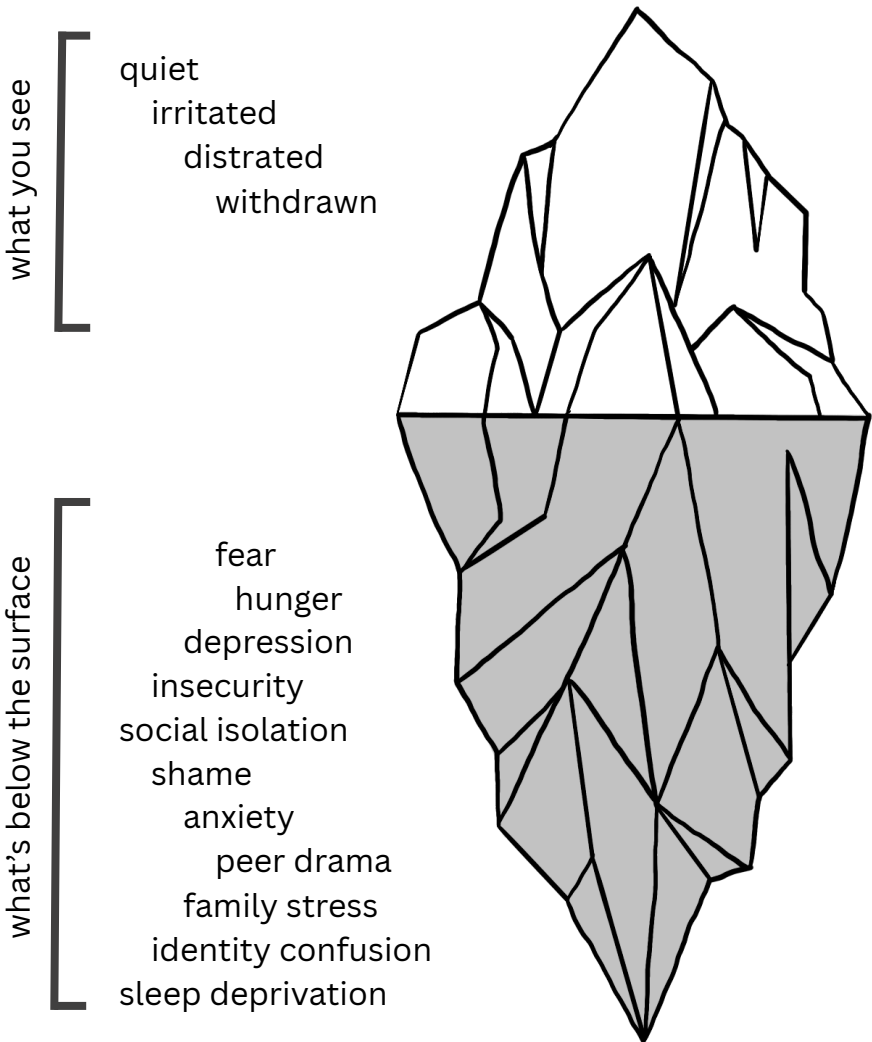
Consistent presence matters more than anything. When mentors remain steady through the ups and downs, they communicate, "I'm not going anywhere." That unwavering stability is exactly what teenagers need.

Early mentoring work is often quiet and slow, so it's important to let go of expectations – especially in the first year. Regular and rewarding progress is very rare and they may not be grateful for a very long time.

Instead, focus on consistency; show up, be calm, and be predictable. Teenagers are highly attuned to adult stability. In healthy, lasting mentoring relationships, stability outweighs intensity, and just being there for them matters more than having productive sessions. The goal is not to have big, dramatic breakthroughs, but to build a strong enough foundation that when it's tested, it's steady enough to hold. I say it all the time; just showing up is enough.

TIP OF THE ICEBERG: WHAT YOU SEE VS. WHAT'S BENEATH

Often, the behavior you're seeing is just a surface level response; a small glimpse of much bigger things happening underneath.



WHY THEY PUSH BACK

When you start to delve into the psychology of teenage development, you're far less likely to take behavior personally. Many reactions that feel confusing, dismissive, or even hurtful are actually signs of healthy adolescent development!

Teenagers are hardwired to move towards independence! As part of that process, they naturally:

- Pull away from family
- Question authority
- Push back against rules
- Test boundaries
- Seek autonomy
- Try on different identities

This push for independence can sometimes look a little ugly. But for the teen, it's less about rejection and more about figuring out who they are. It's *because* of this developmental stage that teenagers reject the very people they rely on. When they act combative with safe adults, or come across as indifferent or detached, don't take it to heart. These behaviors are developmental, not personal.

Resistance doesn't mean rejection. If a teen does or says something to hurt your feelings, it helps to remember that their brains are still developing, and their short-sighted, emotionally driven behavior will reflect that.

THE PARADOX: WHAT RESISTANCE REALLY MEANS

One of the most challenging realities of mentoring adolescents is the paradox at the heart of it. They'll push you away, and at the very same time, they *desperately* need you to stay. That rejection we often feel when a teen lashes out is often a test of stability.



For a beginning mentor (or anyone who hasn't spent much time working with adolescents), these behaviors can feel surprisingly personal. It's easy to walk away from a meeting wondering, *"Is this working? Did I say something wrong? Do they even want to be here?"*

At the same time, they'll notice immediately if you miss a week. In the middle of a session, they may bring up a small detail you mentioned months ago. And every now and then, they'll push a little just to see if you're really committed to staying.

They're asking, without words: *Are you consistent? Are you safe? Will you stay if I am difficult?*

After a difficult mentoring session, I encourage you look at it from a different point of view. Try to reframe that challenging behavior: If a teenager is testing you, it means they're considering trusting you. Testing isn't the opposite of connection. In many cases, it is the doorway to it!



TRUST TAKES TIME

Not all teenagers enter mentoring relationships from the same starting point. Some take much longer to warm up, and that reluctance can actually tell you a lot about their life experience. For students who have encountered instability, neglect, or even abuse, caution is a way for them to protect themselves.

Teens may take longer to trust because:

- In the past, their trust has been broken.
- Adults in their lives have been inconsistent.
- Authority figures have been unsafe or unpredictable.
- Cultural norms discourage vulnerability (or even relationships) with adults outside the family.
- Racial or socioeconomic differences create unspoken distance or hesitation.

For these students, you'll need to move slow and steady. Trust is rarely formed from a single powerful moment of connection; instead, it develops through repetition. Consistency over time. Conversations may remain surface-level for longer than you might expect, and when they do start showing their emotions, they might emerge gradually rather than all at once. But taking it slow is certainly not a sign that the mentoring relationship is failing. More often than not, it reflects healthy, trauma-informed, and culturally aware practice. Patience builds lasting trust.

FROM THE GUTTER

I once had a student from the St. Stephens area of Hickory who described herself as “from the gutter.” I want to clarify; that was her language, not mine. She told me she just could not relate to anyone who was not also from the gutter. In her mind, there were two very separate worlds, and there was one she simply didn’t belong in.

Years later, long after she had left my classroom, she told me something that stayed with me. She said that while she was in school, she never trusted teachers or school counselors; Not because they were unkind, but because they just didn’t understand her world.

They dressed too nicely.

They used big words.

To her, they were part of “the other world” – one far from the gutter, and full of rules she didn’t understand and could not safely enter.

She shared that she was afraid that if she ever spoke honestly about what was happening in her life, she assumed the school would call the police and it would make her life harder. In her experience, authority figures were connected to systems of punishment, not protection. Even when she found a safe adult in a trusted teacher, she still interpreted their position as one of power and authority, and that simply didn't feel safe to her.

Her story may sound extreme, but it always struck me as a good example of how a child's ability to trust is completely out of your control. When a young person comes into your life and you're tasked with offering them guidance and support, your responsibility is to meet them wherever it is that they're at.

For some students, the distance between home and school feels enormous. That gap can create distrust and disengagement long before a mentor ever says a word. Some of the teens in our very own community are navigating two very different worlds every day, quietly trying to decide whether it is safe to step across the line between them.

CHECKING YOUR ASSUMPTIONS

I encourage every mentor to take the time to reflect on their expectations and assumptions. There's always room to grow, and taking the time to sit with these questions is a good first step.

- When a teen is slow to open up, what assumptions do I make?
- How comfortable am I with slow progress?
- What expectations do I carry about how quickly trust “should” form?
- How might my own familial and cultural background shape how I define connection and respect?
- Do I remain steady when a teen seems distant, or do I take it personally and subtly withdraw?
- What behaviors might I have misinterpreted in the past?
- What can I do next time my teen shuts down?
- How can I remain patient when progress feels invisible?
- Where might cultural differences be influencing expectations on either side of the relationship?

Trust is a long road. It's built by showing up, staying steady, examining your assumptions, and choosing patience again and again. And you don't have to walk that road alone. You can always lean on the Council on Adolescents, on your community, and on your school contacts to help you carry that weight! Let us know whatever you need and we can walk alongside you.