

BE A MENTOR. BE THE DIFFERENCE.



MENTORING MANUAL



DEVELOPED AND PROVIDED BY
THE COUNCIL ON ADOLESCENTS
OF CATAWBA COUNTY

MENTORING MANUAL

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LUNCH
BUDDY
PROGRAM

BE A MENTOR. BE THE DIFFERENCE.



A MESSAGE FROM THE COUNCIL ON ADOLESCENTS OF CATAWBA COUNTY

The Council on Adolescents of Catawba County (COA) is a nonprofit organization dedicated to helping young people develop the skills, knowledge, and support systems they need to thrive. Since 1986, COA has served local youth through education, mentoring, awareness, and advocacy programs that promote healthy development and positive decision-making. COA's mission is to inspire today's youth to be physically and emotionally healthy through education, awareness, and advocacy. Working in partnership with schools, families, volunteers, and community organizations, COA strives to ensure that every young person has access to supportive relationships and opportunities for growth.

Each year, COA serves thousands of students through school-based and community-based programs focused on healthy youth education, life skills, emotional well-being, and future planning. One of the organization's signature initiatives, the Lunch Buddy Program, connects students with caring adult mentors who provide encouragement, support, and a consistent positive presence during the school year.

This Mentor Manual was developed and published by the Council on Adolescents and revised in 2026 to support both new and returning volunteers in the Lunch Buddy Mentoring Program. It is intended to serve as a practical guide, providing mentors with the knowledge, tools, and resources needed to build meaningful relationships with students and foster positive youth development. While no manual can answer every question or address every situation, we hope this resource serves as a foundation for confident, informed, and impactful mentoring!

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AN INTRODUCTION TO MENTORING

In Homer's *Odyssey*, Odysseus, the king of Ithaca, is called away to fight in the Trojan War. Before departing, he arranges for someone to care for his son, Telemachus, and to watch over his household and kingdom in his absence. That responsibility falls to his longtime friend and trusted advisor, Mentor.

Unfortunately, Odysseus's trust is misplaced. Rather than nurture, care, and protect, Mentor allows the palace to fall into disarray, and Telemachus grows up uncertain and insecure.

As is often the case in Greek mythology, when human folly arises, the gods intervene. The goddess of wisdom, Athena, takes on Mentor's form and appears to Telemachus, offering the guidance and encouragement the young man desperately needs. She builds his confidence, serves as a role model, advocates for him, and inspires him to develop his independence. It is through Athena's wisdom, disguised as Mentor, that Telemachus finds his strength.

In 1699, the French novel *Les Aventures de Télémaque* by François Fénelon catapults the story of Mentor and Telemachus into the work of popular fiction. In the novel, Telemachus, accompanied by Mentor, sets off on a journey to find his father, lost during the Trojan War. Mentor is the hero of this tale, offering guidance, support, and encouragement at every turn. It's from this interpretation that we get the word "mentor." Today, we use the term mentor to describe a trusted ally and role model who helps young people navigate life's challenges with inspiration, empathy, and wisdom.



Mentoring has evolved far beyond its mythological roots and is now respected as a major tool for personal and professional growth. At its core, mentoring is a relationship built on trust, guidance, and mutual respect. One person shares their experience, perspective, and encouragement to uplift and empower someone who is less knowledgeable. The relationship isn't based on authority or hierarchy; it's a partnership! Anyone seeking to learn a new skill or grow as a person can benefit from having a mentor, and it's for this reason that mentorship programs can be found across schools, workplaces, or in community programs like this one. For a mentee, it's a valuable opportunity to gain knowledge, build confidence, and develop new abilities. For the mentor, it offers the rewarding experience of helping someone discover their strengths and inspiring them to look ahead with strength and purpose.

THE LUNCH BUDDY PROGRAM

The Lunch Buddy Program, a mentoring initiative coordinated by the Council on Adolescents of Catawba County, connects caring adult volunteers with students who can benefit from additional support, encouragement, and positive adult relationships. Mentors meet with their Lunch Buddy once each week during the student's lunch period. While these meetings are brief, they provide a consistent opportunity for connection within the student's everyday school environment and allow mentors, school staff, and program coordinators to work together in supporting student success.

At its heart, mentoring is about showing up. Meaningful relationships are built through consistency, not grand gestures. By meeting week after week, mentors become a dependable presence in a student's life. Over time, what begins as casual conversation often grows into a trusted relationship where students feel safe sharing their challenges, celebrating their successes, and exploring their goals.

For many young people, a mentor may be one of the few adults outside their family who provides consistent one-on-one attention, encouragement, and support. Through the Lunch Buddy Program, students have the opportunity to build a healthy relationship with a trusted adult; someone who listens, believes in their potential, and becomes part of their broader support network.

Adolescence is a time of tremendous growth, change, and discovery. Rather than directing or controlling, mentors walk alongside students during their journey, offering guidance and support as they learn to navigate the challenges and opportunities that come their way. In doing so, mentors help young people recognize their strengths and develop the self-belief needed to thrive both now and in the future.

WHEN A MENTOR...

Shows up every week
Gives notice when absent
Keeps Commitments

A STUDENT LEARNS...

"I matter to someone."
"Adults can be predictable."
"I can rely on others."

WHY IT MATTERS

It builds trust
Increases emotional safety.
Supports healthy attachment

COMMITMENT & CONSISTENCY

The Lunch Buddy Program is designed to provide students with regular, albeit brief, meetings with a caring adult each week. Because of this format, we ask our volunteers to demonstrate commitment and consistency. Showing up, week after week, builds up trust and creates a sense of safety for students, showing them that someone truly cares.

By showing up consistently, mentors give their relationships the space to grow, helping students feel secure enough to open up, take healthy risks, and develop confidence in a supportive environment. While not all of our students have faced disappointment from adults in their lives, many have, and we never want to be another promise that's broken. We ask each mentor to honor their commitment to their lunch buddy by being there, week after week, to build a relationship that lasts.

MENTORING ADOLESCENTS

Before you read: Think back to your experience in middle school. What felt most important to you when you were that age?

Adolescence is a period of rapid change characterized by physical, emotional, and social changes. Kids at this age are navigating puberty, which brings hormonal shifts that can impact mood, energy, and emotional regulation. Cognitively, teenagers are moving from concrete thinking toward more abstract reasoning, but this ability is still developing. They're capable of expressing opinions, reflecting on experiences, and understanding fairness, yet they may struggle with impulse control and long-term consequences. Mentors should expect inconsistency; maturity in one moment and emotional reactivity the next. It's a normal part of development.

Friendships and peer relationships become especially important during this stage. Young adolescents are highly attuned to social belonging, approval, and rejection. As a result, friendships can often feel intense and all-consuming. They're also beginning to explore their identity, including interests, fashion, values, and how they want to be seen by others. Encouraging hobbies, creative outlets, and extracurricular interests can support identity development by helping them discover strengths, connect with peers, and build confidence. This is the time for kids to build self-identify, develop skills for emotional regulation, and establish a sense of belonging!



Effective mentoring during adolescence focuses on gentle guidance and positive encouragement. Teens benefit greatly from adults who are consistent, patient, and genuinely interested in their perspectives. Mentors should encourage independence and decision-making while also providing clear boundaries and expectations. Avoid lecturing, shaming, or minimizing their emotions, as these approaches can damage rapport. Instead, mentors should model respectful communication, help navigate social challenges, and reinforce positive behaviors in ways that feel collaborative and supportive.

A common misconception is that adolescents don't want relationships with adults. While they may temporarily pull away from family, this is a normal (and healthy) part of their development. As they explore their identity beyond the family, they often seek connection with other trusted adults to help make sense of who they are (often through sports, the arts, or mentorship programs).

ANATOMY OF AN ADOLESCENT

BRAIN

Big emotions
Poor impulse control

EYES

Comparing constantly
Hyper-aware of
peer judgment

HANDS

May be overly-dependent
on digital devices

MOUTH

Testing boundaries
Says things they don't
necessarily mean

HEART

Sensitive to rejection
Deep desire to belong

STOMACH

Growth spurts
Craves junk food
Often skips meals or
overeats

CLOTHING

Clothing changes
week to week
Exploring identity
Inconsistent hygiene



MENTORING STRATEGIES: UNDERSTANDING STUDENT DIFFERENCES

SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL NEEDS

Many students today experience significant social and emotional challenges. Anxiety, social anxiety, and depression are increasingly common, along with feelings of loneliness and difficulty forming friendships. According to recent U.S. data [1], about 20.3% of adolescents have a current, diagnosed mental or behavioral health condition, with anxiety being the most common diagnosis (16.1%) followed by depression (8.4%). In young adolescents, anxiety and depression are more likely to present as irritability, withdrawal, fatigue, perfectionism, avoidance, or a sudden loss of interest in school or peers.

Several factors likely contribute to these rising numbers, including academic pressure, social comparison, increased screen and social media use, family stress, economic instability, and lingering impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. A national push for greater mental health awareness and improved screening also means more students are being identified and diagnosed. While statistics may shift from year to year, the overall trend is clear. National data shows that between 2016 and 2023, the prevalence of diagnosed mental or behavioral health conditions among adolescents increased 35% (from 15.0% to 20.3%). During that same period, diagnosed anxiety increased 61% (from 10.0% to 16.1%) and depression increased 45% (from 5.8% to 8.4%) [1]. These trends highlight the growing need for supportive, relationship-based interventions.



“ONE IN FIVE ADOLESCENTS HAVE A DIAGNOSED MENTAL HEALTH CONDITION.”

Emotional safety and consistency matter deeply for students with social and emotional needs, which is why many are recommended for the Lunch Buddy Program. School can often feel overwhelming, and for a student with emotional challenges, having a set, weekly meeting with a trusted adult can feel like refuge from the storm. It gives them a sense of stability and something to look forward to. Mentors can support students by asking about their feelings, listening without judgment, and reinforcing that struggles with emotions or friendships are common, and with support and practice, entirely manageable.

COMMON EMOTIONAL CHALLENGES
(and how they may show up at school)

ANXIETY	Avoidance, perfectionism, irritability, stomachache
LONELINESS	Clinginess, excessive screen time, disengagement, online friends
DEPRESSION	Withdrawal, fatigue, loss of interest in hobbies, sleep issues
SOCIAL ANXIETY	Quietness, isolation, reluctance to join friend groups

The majority of teenagers today spend a significant portion of their social lives online, forming friendships through games, social media, or group chats. For some, online relationships feel just as meaningful, or even more so, than in-person relationships. From an adult perspective, these students may appear isolated or disconnected, even when they claim to feel socially fulfilled online. If you are mentoring a chronically online student, try to recognize the generational gap at play. Their feelings of connection are real and valid, even if it's a little unfamiliar to you. That said, it's still important to acknowledge that online relationships can pose real safety concerns for minors and may sometimes function as a social crutch. Thoughtful mentoring can help validate students' experiences while also encouraging healthy habits, online safety, and self-confidence. Over time, steady encouragement and a nonjudgmental presence can help students take small social risks, practice self-advocacy, and develop healthier coping skills. Feeling accepted and supported by one consistent adult often becomes the foundation for stronger peer relationships and greater engagement at school!

VALIDATE	"It sounds like your online friendships are really important to you."
STAY CURIOUS	"What do you like talking about online?"
GUIDE	"How can you tell if someone is safe to talk to?"
ENCOURAGE	"What's one way you can make a friend here at the school?"

[1] Sappenfield, O., Alberto, C., Minnaert, J., et al. (2024, October). Adolescent mental and behavioral health, 2023. In National Survey of Children's Health Data

MENTORING ACTIVITIES FOR YOUTH WITH SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL NEEDS:

1. WEEKLY CHECK INS

This is a great way to build healthy emotional habits and practice verbalizing feelings.

Start lunch with a simple check-in question, such as:

- a. "What kind of day are you having so far?"
- b. "If your mood was reflected by the weather, how's the weather today?"

If a student struggles to put words to their feelings, you can offer a short list of feeling words (calm, stressed, excited, tired, frustrated).

What's most important here is to validate whatever they share without trying to fix it.

2. SCENARIO PRACTICE

This is a great way to track student effort, progress, goals, and strengths. During lunch, the mentor asks the student to share one small success from their day or week. The mentor or student can either draw a picture or write it down, creating a growing list of positive moments to revisit over time.

Recording small wins builds confidence, reinforces resilience, and helps students see themselves as capable and supported.

3. SUCCESS JOURNAL

This is a great way to build social confidence and reduce social anxiety. Ask about a recent or upcoming social situation (school lunch, sitting with peers, asking a question in class), and then role-play a short interaction together.

Practicing in a safe, one-on-one setting can reduce anxiety and give students tools they can use in real life.

MENTORING STRATEGIES: UNDERSTANDING STUDENT DIFFERENCES

NEURODIVERGENT STUDENTS

Neurodivergent students, including those with ADHD or autism, often experience school as more demanding than their neurotypical peers. Differences in attention, sensory processing, communication, and executive functioning can make academic expectations, social interactions, and classroom routines more challenging. As a result, these students are often working much harder to meet everyday demands and are more likely to be referred to support programs like Lunch Buddy.

HOW COMMON IS ADHD?



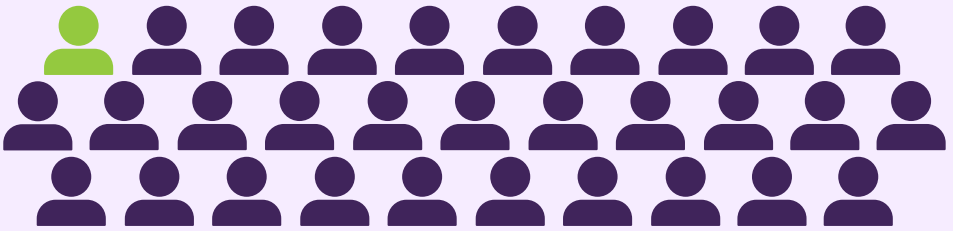
1 IN 9 CHILDREN

National data highlights how common these differences are. About 1 in 9 U.S. children (11.4%, or 7.1 million) have been diagnosed with ADHD [2], which can impact focus, organization, impulse control, and emotional regulation. Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) affects approximately 1 in 31 children (3.2%) [3]. Students with ASD may experience challenges with social cues, sensory input, transitions, and unspoken expectations, which can make school feel overwhelming or isolating. ASD is 3.4 times more prevalent among boys (4.9%) than girls (1.4%), though girls are often underdiagnosed due to differences in how traits present. Students on the autism spectrum may struggle with social cues, sensory overload, transitions, or unspoken expectations.

[2] Danielson, M. L., Claussen, A. H., Bitsko, R. H., Katz, S. M., Newsome, K., Blumberg, S. J., Kogan, M. D., & Ghandour, R. (2024). ADHD prevalence among U.S. children and adolescents in 2022: Diagnosis, severity, co-occurring disorders, and treatment.

Because school requires sustained attention, social navigation, and flexibility, students with divergent thinking styles are often identified as needing extra support. Behaviors related to attention, sensory needs, or communication are sometimes misinterpreted as a lack of effort, rather than differences in how the brain processes information. Traditional school environments are not always designed with these differences in mind, which can make school feel overwhelming for students with ADHD or ASD [2][3].

HOW COMMON IS AUTISM?



1 IN 31 CHILDREN

Mentoring is most effective for neurodivergent students when it emphasizes clarity, structure, and predictability. Breaking tasks into smaller steps, writing things down, and using visual supports can make expectations more manageable. Practicing conversations through brief scripts or role-play can also build confidence and reduce anxiety. Above all, it's important to remember that neurodivergent students are not all the same. As autism advocate and professor of special education Dr. Stephen Shore explains, "If you've met one person with autism, you've met one person with autism." Each student brings unique strengths and needs, so the most effective approach is to stay curious, flexible, and respectful.

[3] Shaw, K. A., Williams, S., Patrick, M. E., et al. (2025). Prevalence and early identification of autism spectrum disorder among children aged 4 and 8 years – Autism and Developmental Disabilities Monitoring Network, United States, 2022.

MENTORING ACTIVITIES FOR NEURODIVERGENT YOUTH:

1. CHOICE-BASED LUNCH ACTIVITY

This is a terrific way to support student autonomy and reduce lunchtime anxiety.

Offer two or three simple options (talk, draw, play a game, throw a ball). Let the student choose how you spend the time.

Choice increases a sense of control and safety, which is especially helpful for students who are easily overwhelmed or overstimulated.

2. SPECIAL INTEREST SPOTLIGHT

This is a great way to build trust and connection!

Invite the student to talk about, draw, or explain a favorite topic, hobby, or interest. With this, try not to impose a time limit, and allow topics to switch naturally; don't force a change in conversation.

When you take time to listen to and learn about a student's interests, you'll boost their confidence, encourage open communication, and provide the opportunity to connect in a way that feels natural and affirming.

3. VISUAL OR WRITTEN CHECK-IN

This is a healthy way to encourage emotional intelligence and self-regulation

Use visuals, written prompts, or rating scales (numbers, emojis, colors) instead of verbal-only check-ins.

Many neurodivergent students communicate more comfortably through visuals or writing, making it easier to express needs and feelings.

MENTORING STRATEGIES: UNDERSTANDING STUDENT DIFFERENCES

DIFFICULT LIFE CIRCUMSTANCES

Some students are referred to the Lunch Buddy Program while navigating changes in their life circumstances. Experiences such as grief, foster care placement, changing schools, custody changes, or parental divorce can disrupt a student's sense of safety and stability [4]. At times, these challenges may affect a student academically, behaviorally, or socially; in other cases, counselors recommend the program proactively in hopes of providing support before difficulties arise.

During these transitions, students often benefit from short-term, consistent support, which is why they are frequently recommended for mentoring.

Students experiencing major life changes may feel unsettled, guarded, or unsure who they can rely on. Adults who once felt dependable may now seem unavailable or inconsistent, making it harder for students to feel safe and trusting in relationships. During this period, mentors can serve as steady allies; reliable, caring adults who show up consistently without judgment or pressure. A trauma-informed approach to mentoring and coaching can be especially helpful when supporting students through these

experiences.

loss of a loved one

incarceration

divorce

foster care

adoption

changing schools

chronic absenteeism

custody changes

housing instability

food instability

financial strain

caregiver illness

court involvement

Patience is essential when working with students whose lives feel disrupted. Progress may be inconsistent, and emotional reactions may seem disproportionate or inappropriate. What matters most is a steady presence: listening attentively, validating feelings, and reinforcing that supportive relationships can remain stable even when other areas of life feel uncertain.

For many students, having positive adult contact with someone outside of their immediate family system is all they need. This kind of relationship can help rebuild trust, normalize difficult emotions, and provide reassurance during a challenging chapter. For some students, time spent with a mentor offers a rare moment of calm and connection; a respite from lives that feel complicated or emotionally overwhelming.



[4] Child Welfare Information Gateway. (2020). Understanding the effects of maltreatment on brain development. U.S. Department of Health & Human Services.

MENTORING ACTIVITIES FOR YOUTH GOING THROUGH A DIFFICULT LIFE CHANGE

1. COPING SKILLS TOOLBOX

This activity is great for teaching coping strategies for anxiety or frustration

Work together to create a “toolbox” of coping techniques. This will look different for everyone, but might include deep breathing, drawing, squeezing a stress ball, going for a run, or listening to music. A mentor can help provide concrete tools for self-regulation, which is vital for students navigating complex emotional challenges.

2. LETTER TO MY FUTURE SELF

This is a great way to inspire hope, and maybe even do some goal-setting.

In this activity, you’ll help your student write a short letter about what they hope to achieve or how they hope to feel in a few months. The mentor can save it to revisit later.

This activity encourages long-term thinking, goal orientation, and resilience.

3. CREATIVE STORYTELLING

This is a terrific way to build empathy, and practice taking a different perspective.

Take turns telling short stories. These can be true personal experiences, made-up stories, or even “what-if” scenarios. Make sure you discuss the character, decisions, and lessons from each story.

Storytelling can strengthen listening, empathy, and relationship-building while giving students a voice in a safe space.

MENTORING STRATEGIES: UNDERSTANDING STUDENT DIFFERENCES

BEHAVIORALLY CHALLENGED STUDENTS

Students with behavioral or engagement challenges often need consistency, patience, strict boundaries, and a great deal of compassion. These behaviors are frequently red flags for unmet basic needs, which can range anywhere from poverty, neglect, instability, to trauma. As a result, these students may feel disconnected from school and distrustful of adults [5]. Negative academic experiences often compound these challenges. Poor grades, truancy, and repeated disciplinary actions can leave students feeling discouraged and labeled as “challenging.” Some may have had harmful interactions with teachers or other trusted adults, reinforcing the belief that school is a place where they are not understood and not welcome.

INITIAL SIGNS OF DISCONNECTION	THE LONG-TERM IMPACT	MENTORING AS AN INTERVENTION
Negative school experiences	Student withdraws or disengages	Consistent, positive adult interaction
Repeated discipline	Low self-esteem; identity shifts towards “problem student”	Reframing behavior & strengths-based feedback
Exclusion from activities	Reduced sense of belonging, disconnected from school community	Intentional inclusion and shared experiences
Lack of trusted adults	Low expectations for relationships	Stable, predictable mentor presence

For some students, these experiences extend well beyond the classroom. Youth involved in the juvenile justice system, psychiatric residential treatment facilities (PRTFs), detention centers, or other institutional settings may be introduced to “adult experiences” far earlier than their peers. These experiences can be isolating and may contribute to stigma, instability, and additional trauma, increasing vulnerability [6]. Mentoring a student navigating these systems may require additional support, and further resources are available for mentors working with youth in these circumstances.

These experiences often include:

- Disruption of consistent routines and relationships
- Separation from typical school and peer environments
- Limited access to extracurricular or enrichment opportunities
- Increased exposure to disciplinary systems
- Feelings of isolation or disconnection from peers

Many of these students also experience frequent discipline and exclusion from positive group opportunities such as field trips, sports teams, or extracurricular activities. Over time, this can reinforce a belief that they do not belong and contribute to increased dropout risk [5]. Mentoring can interrupt this cycle by offering a space where the student is seen beyond their behavior. These young people often benefit from a consistent, supportive adult who shows up reliably.

Building confidence and connection is especially important for students who struggle with engagement. Taking interest in their strengths and interests, recognizing effort, and sharing positive experiences can help reshape how they view themselves in the school community.

[5] Rhodes, J. E. (2005). A model of youth mentoring. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 34(6), 691-707. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jcop.20071>

[6] National Institute of Justice. (2014). *Juvenile justice and mentoring programs: Guidance for practitioners*. U.S. Department of Justice. <https://nij.ojp.gov/library/publications>

MENTORING ACTIVITIES FOR STUDENTS WITH BEHAVIORAL CHALLENGES

1. PROBLEM-SOLVING ROLE PLAY

This is an activity meant to build coping skills and alternative strategies for difficult situations.

Identify a recent (or frequent) situation that caused frustration, and role-play alternative responses together. For example, if the student got overwhelmed and upset in class, practice ways to ask for help, take a break, or respond respectfully.

Role-playing provides a safe environment to practice new behaviors, reinforces guidance without lecturing, and supports consistent improvement over time.

2. GOAL LADDER

This is a great activity for scaffolding; to help you break larger goals into manageable steps.

Start by picking one ongoing goal (e.g., staying on task in class) and write out all the steps you'd need to take to reach it. Check progress weekly and adjust it if needed.

Scaffolding is a huge part of the mentoring process. This activity helps students break huge (and to them, impossible) goals into manageable steps, making progress feel achievable and reinforcing a sense of accomplishment with each small success.

3. SKILL SHARE

This activity can uplift and encourage student skills and interests.

Each week, the student should share one thing they're proud of or a talent they have. The mentor should validate the skill and encourage the student to see all the different ways they can use it in school or life.

Kids with significant behavioral challenges often have low confidence and very few opportunities to learn new skills. This activity should inspire self-improvement and self-worth.

MENTORING STRATEGIES: UNDERSTANDING STUDENT DIFFERENCES

IDENTITY AND BELONGING

Some students experience challenges around identity and belonging that are not always immediately apparent or easy to resolve. These challenges may be connected to sexuality or gender, cultural or ethnic background, disability, or other characteristics that set them apart from their peers. Feeling different can contribute to isolation, self-doubt, or a sense of disconnection from the school community. This is particularly common in middle school, a time when peer relationships are often intense and unstable, bullying is more prevalent, and personal identity is still taking shape [7].

In these mentoring relationships, the responsibility for connection lies primarily with the adult. Mentors must do the heavy lifting by creating an affirming, inclusive space where the student feels respected and valued. This includes listening carefully, avoiding assumptions, and allowing the student to define what matters to them. Oftentimes, the student is simply not safe or secure enough in themselves to be able to self-advocate, and they rely on their mentor to help them develop confidence and find their place in the world [8].

Helping insecure students see themselves reflected in others can be powerful. Talking about real or well-known people (historical figures, athletes, artists, or community members) who share aspects of their identity can help students feel less alone and more hopeful about the future. Belonging begins with being seen. When a mentor consistently communicates acceptance and curiosity, students are more likely to feel safe exploring who they are and where they fit.

THE ADOLESCENT EXPERIENCE

A MENTOR'S RESPONSE

Feeling different from peers due to identity, culture, disability, or other characteristics

Offer consistent acceptance, build youth confidence, & normalize differences without judgment

Struggling with belonging during key developmental stages (this is very common in middle school)

Provide a steady, predictable relationship outside of peer dynamics and pressure and the family unit

Difficulty self-advocating or expressing needs

Listen closely, avoid assumptions, and help the student find language for their experiences

Ongoing identity development, feeling insecure and frequently comparing self to peers

Affirm strengths and support the student in defining themselves authentically; validate self-expression

Feeling uncertain or unsafe in group or peer settings

Create a calm, consistent one-on-one space where the student feels heard, respected, and secure

[7] Walton, G. M., & Cohen, G. L. (2011). A brief social-belonging intervention improves academic and health outcomes of minority students. *Science.org*, 1447-1451

[8] Eccles, J. S., & Roeser, R. W. (2011). Schools as developmental contexts during adolescence. *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, 225-241

MENTORING ACTIVITIES FOR STUDENTS WHO STRUGGLE WITH IDENTITY AND BELONGING

1. "ABOUT ME" COLLAGE OR PLAYLIST

This is an activity meant to help them explore and express who they are. Invite them to choose images, words, or songs that reflect their interests, personality, culture, and experiences—there's no right or wrong way to do it. As they share their choices (if they're comfortable), ask open-ended questions and affirm what you notice.

This activity offers a safe, low-pressure way for students to express themselves, strengthens their sense of identity, and helps them feel seen and understood over time.

2. COMMUNITY MAPPING

This activity will help them identify the people and spaces in their life that feel safe, supportive, or important. This could include friends, family members, teachers, coaches, or places where they feel comfortable. Let them decide who and what to include, and go at their pace as they share.

This activity provides a safe, structured way to recognize sources of support, reinforces that they are not alone, and helps build a stronger sense of connection and belonging over time.

3. "FUTURE ME" CONVERSATION

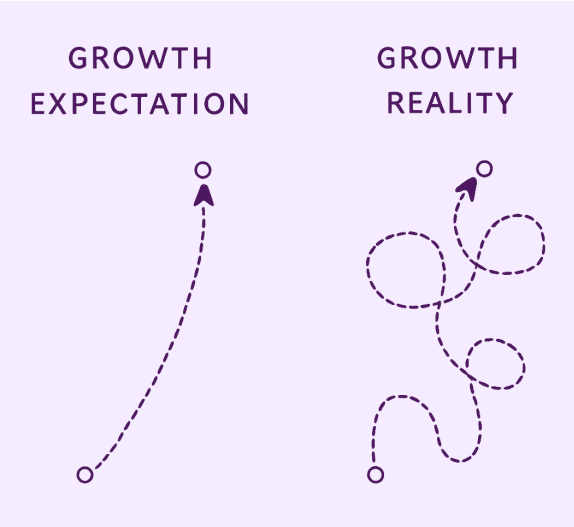
Have a structured "Future Me" conversation with your student to help them imagine who they want to become. Invite them to think beyond jobs or careers, and focus instead on the kind of person they hope to be, how they want to treat others, and what a meaningful life looks like to them. Let them guide the conversation.

This activity creates a safe, encouraging space to explore identity and aspirations, reinforces a sense of purpose, and helps students see themselves as capable of safety and belonging over time.

GOAL SETTING AND GROWTH MINDSET

Goal setting is especially effective in mentoring adolescents, and fortunately for us, it fits in naturally with the structure of the Lunch Buddy program. Because mentors and students meet weekly, there is a clear opportunity to set a short-term goal together each time you meet. Weekly goals feel concrete and manageable, allowing students to experience progress quickly. This rhythm of setting a goal, checking in the following week, and adjusting as needed helps create continuity across sessions, even when the meetings themselves are brief. As time goes on, consider setting two-week or even monthly goals. [9] A growth mindset is central to this process. Adolescents are still developing abstract thinking skills, which means long-term planning is often confusing, unrealistic, and discouraging. Focusing on short-term goals helps students focus on the things they can control right now.

When mentors emphasize effort, practice, and learning from setbacks, they reinforce the idea that growth happens over time. [10] Long-term success comes from many small steps and failures, not instant success.



Working toward a shared goal can also significantly strengthen rapport between a mentor and their lunch buddy. Accomplishing something together, no matter how small, builds trust and a sense of teamwork. Since lunch buddy mentoring sessions are so short, having a shared goal gives each session purpose and momentum. Best of all, it can provide a natural conversation anchor; something to check in on, celebrate, or problem-solve together.

Goal setting allows mentors and students to create a pattern of collaboration and success early in the relationship. Each goal achieved, adjusted, or revisited becomes part of your mentoring relationship, and it cements that your relationship is one built upon care, consistency, and connection. Over time, these small, shared wins help students see themselves as capable and supported.

TIPS FOR USING GOALS & REWARDS

- Let your mentee help choose the goal whenever possible
- Keep rewards simple and predictable
- Praise effort and follow-through, even if the goal isn't met perfectly
- Use rewards as celebration, not pressure
- You don't have to spend money on your mentee!

Rewards can be free.

[9] National Mentoring Resource Center. (n.d.). Measurement guidance toolkit. U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, Administration for Children & Families.

[10] Sisk, V. F., Burgoyne, A. P., Sun, J., Butler, J. L., & Macnamara, B. N. (2025). To what extent and under which circumstances are growth mindsets important to academic achievement? *BMC Psychology*, 13(1), 36.

GOAL SETTING IN PRACTICE

ONE-WEEK GOALS

- GOALS** Turn in all assignments for one class this week
Use a coping strategy (asking for help, taking a break) at least once when feeling frustrated
- REWARDS** Choose the game or activity for the next mentoring session
Extra time on a favorite activity (drawing, game, conversation of choice)

TWO-WEEK GOALS

- GOALS** Bring all your materials (binder, notebook, pencil) to class each day
Raise your worst grade by a small, realistic amount (ex: +5 points)
- REWARDS** Bring them their favorite snack or drink
Choose a themed activity day (art day, game day, etc)

ONE-MONTH GOALS

- GOALS** Check grades weekly and talk about them with mentor for one month
Stay out of ISS or detention for a month
- REWARDS** Pick a special game from the mentor's toolbox
Small item: sticker, fun pencil, bookmark, or fidget toy

MENTORING IN ACTION: Intentional Planning and Reflective Practice

Going into a mentoring session with even a loose plan helps to create structure. Come prepared with a guiding topic, a few conversation starters, or even just a vague idea of how you might spend your time together. This preparation can help ease awkward moments and signal to your student that you're invested in showing up for them. At the same time, effective mentors are not married to the plan. Your lunch buddy might come to lunch with big emotions, unexpected stories, unpredictable behavior, or low energy. On any given day, you should be able to pivot on a whim. Being responsive to what your student brings in the moment often matters more than sticking to what you originally had in mind. Remember, an effective mentor doesn't control the session, but they do help guide it.

Reflective practice is an essential part of effective mentoring. Taking some time after each session to think about what went well, what felt challenging, and how the visit felt overall can help mentors become more thoughtful and intentional in their approach. Reflection allows you to notice patterns, celebrate small wins, and adjust your approach when something isn't working. It also helps mentors stay grounded and avoid taking things personally. Keep in mind that changes in mood or engagement are often a normal part of adolescent development, and typically not a reflection of the relationship.



MENTORING TOOLBOX

A healthy practice for any mentor is to develop your own mentoring toolbox; a collection of go-to activities, games, and conversation starters you can bring to each session. These tools are essential for when you need to pivot. If your lunch buddy begins to get quiet, or if the conversation is grinding to a halt, it may be time to pull out a game, throw a ball back and forth, or shift into some other shared activity. A lot of young people are more likely to open up when their hands are busy, as sometimes conversation can make them feel like they're being put on the spot. As you get to know your lunch buddy, you can build a toolbox that fits their personality and interests, and you'll start to feel confident in supporting your mentee to stay present and engaged.

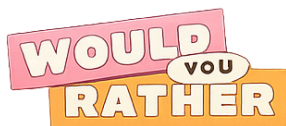
TOOLBOX IDEAS



uno



playing cards



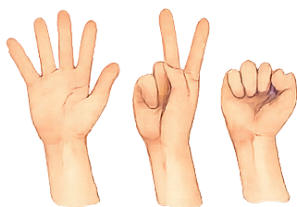
"would you rather"



toss a ball



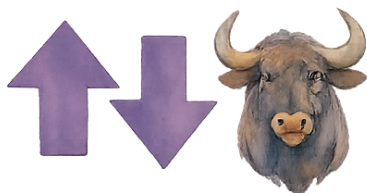
share music



rock, paper, scissors



draw together



"high, low, buffalo"
(the best, the worst, and a
random part of the week)



coloring book pages



make origami



play with a fidget toy



"two truths and a lie"

THE ART AND SCIENCE OF MENTORING

THEORY, RESEARCH, AND STRATEGIES THAT SUPPORT EFFECTIVE MENTORING

Mentoring, an ancient and timeless practice, has only recently been studied through an academic lens. Although people have been guiding and supporting one another for centuries, the formal study of mentoring is still an emerging field. Finding the delicate balance between structure and spontaneity is what makes mentoring both an art and a discipline.

In recent decades, research has deepened our understanding of what makes mentoring effective. But as you read on, please remember that there is no one “right way to mentor.” Your mentoring practice is going to look different with every student you work with, because it’ll be influenced by your individual personalities, histories, values, and the unique relationship you build together. Over time, you’ll discover the approach that works best for you.

QUICK REFLECTION:

Think about a trusted adult from your own life.

What did they consistently do that made you feel safe or supported?

How did they respond when you were struggling or made a mistake?

What did they say (or not say) that helped you feel understood?

How did you know you could trust them?

Which of these qualities do you want to emulate as a mentor?

THE RESEARCH BEHIND MENTORING

To support your mentoring practice, the next section introduces several research-based frameworks commonly used in youth mentoring. These tried and true approaches offer practical ways to understand student behavior, guide growth, and respond to common challenges. These frameworks function less like a strict set of rules, and more like a toolkit that you can draw from as you develop your own mentoring style.

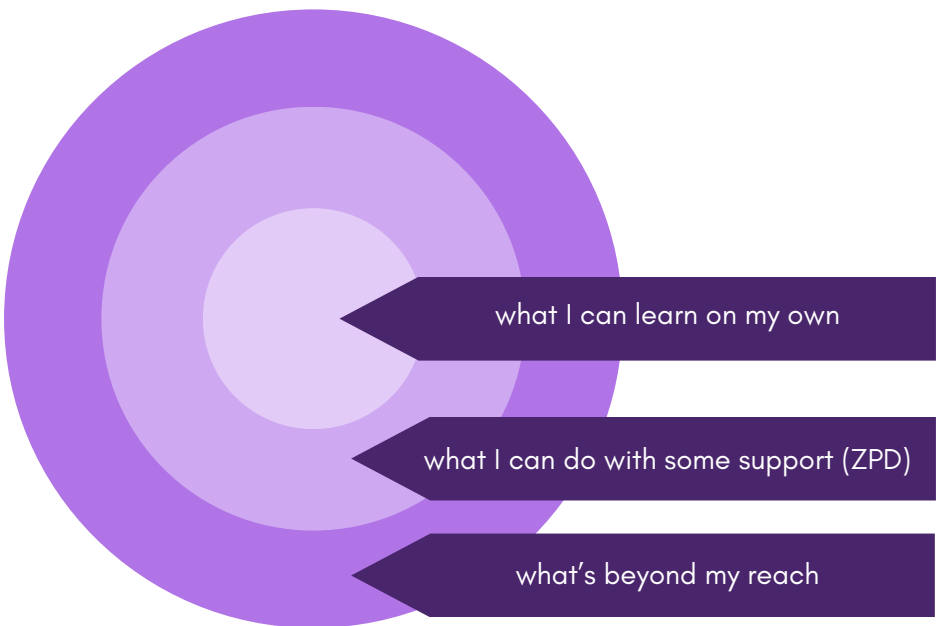
You'll notice that there are elements of each of these frameworks which overlap. For example, many emphasize how previous life experiences can shape present behavior and decision-making. By developing a deeper understanding of how young people grow, respond, and communicate, mentors are better equipped to look beyond those day-to-day challenges and focus on strengths.

In the following pages, you'll explore:

- Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) - identifying where a student is and how to support them in their next stage of growth
- Scaffolding - offering the right level of support at the right time
- Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and Trauma-Informed Mentoring - recognizing the impact of toxic stress and creating a safe mentoring environment through consistency and care
- Behavior as Communication - understanding what may be happening beneath the surface
- Resiliency and Strength-Based Approaches - building on mentee strengths and prioritizing protective factors
- The 5 Cs of Positive Youth Development - supporting competence, confidence, connection, character, and caring

ZONE OF PROXIMAL DEVELOPMENT

“The zone of proximal development (ZPD) is defined as the space between what a learner can do without help and where the learner needs support... where a learner can succeed only with guidance from a mentor or more capable peers.” [11]

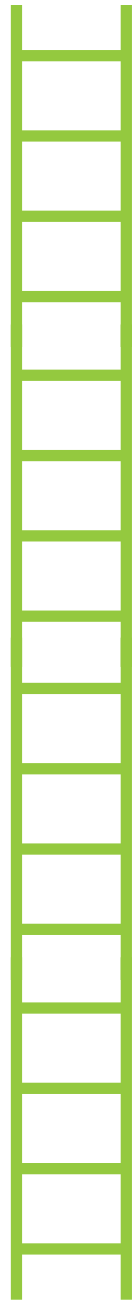


The zone of proximal development (ZPD), introduced by psychologist Lev Vygotsky, describes the space where a learner can succeed with guidance but not yet independently. With the right support—often called scaffolding—students can build new skills, and over time, that support is gradually removed as they gain confidence and mastery. This concept underpins many mentoring relationships, where a more experienced individual helps guide growth.

SCAFFOLDING

Scaffolding, or guided support, is the way teachers provide temporary, flexible guidance to help students achieve goals they might not be able to accomplish on their own. The goal is to provide just enough support that students feel comfortable tackling challenges that are just beyond their current abilities. In a mentoring relationship, this could mean helping a student break a personal goal into manageable steps, offering encouragement, or modeling strategies for success. The aim is to give students just enough support to succeed while gradually increasing their independence and confidence.

The most effective scaffolding requires matching the level of support to the student's needs. Mentors may provide general encouragement, share ideas, offer hints or suggestions, or occasionally, give more direct guidance. Successful scaffolding should make the task challenging but achievable, allowing the student to feel a sense of accomplishment without becoming so frustrated that they give up. Mentors aren't supposed to remove the struggle; instead, they support students as they navigate it -- helping them set realistic goals, develop skills, and grow in confidence. [12] In time, and with lots of practice, the student will learn to take more control over their own learning and personal development.



[11] Vygotsky L.S. *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*, 1987 (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA).

[12] Morgan, D., & Skaggs, P. Collaboration in the zone of proximal development. Paper presented at the 18th International Conference on Engineering and Product Design Education, 2016 (Aalborg University, Denmark)

ZPD IN PRACTICE

COMMON MENTORING QUESTION	WHAT IT COMMUNICATES (ZPD)	SCAFFOLDING STRATEGY
"They say it's too hard and give up quickly."	The task may be just beyond current skill level; low confidence	Break into smaller steps; celebrate or reward task completion; keep a positive attitude as you work through the task together.
"They won't get started."	Overwhelm or uncertainty about how to begin	Model the first step; consider working through it alongside them. Remove scaffolding after they complete the first step in the task.
"They rush and make careless mistakes."	Skill is emerging but needs support with focus	Slow them down; consider utilizing regular check-ins; use a timer to break tasks into chunks; consider making a task list
"They keep asking for help right away."	Reliance on adult support; confidence still building	Prompt thinking before helping; Use a variety of resources; "Before going to your teacher, where else could we find the answer?"
"They get frustrated easily."	Task may be too far outside comfort zone	Adjust difficulty; validate their feelings; take regular breaks while working on the task and reward effort & completion
"They seem disengaged or bored."	Task may be too easy or not meaningful	Add challenge; offer additional "outside" tasks or reading for them to complete between sessions; connect to their interests
"They can do it with help, but not alone."	Right in the ZPD—learning is actively happening	This is a great place to be. Gradually reduce support as they work through the task.
"They don't believe they can do it."	Likely a confidence gap, not a skill gap	Focus on relationship building. Celebrate effort and small wins. Task avoidance is a common symptom of low confidence

SCAFFOLDING TECHNIQUES

- Talking through steps
- Demonstrating once, then letting them try
- Find a friend to show you
- Working through problems side-by-side
- Providing checklists or visual organizers
- Direct instruction
- Using a template or script to practice

QUESTIONS TO IDENTIFY A STUDENT'S CURRENT SKILL LEVEL

- What do you feel confident doing on your own?
- What's something you've improved at recently?
How did you get better?
- When you're working on schoolwork, what feels easiest?
- Is there something you've learned that you could teach me how to do?
- What do you like working on by yourself?

QUESTIONS TO DISCOVER GROWTH AREAS (THE ZPD ZONE)

- What's something you want to get better at but aren't sure how to start?
- What feels challenging but not impossible?
- What do you usually do when you feel stuck?
- What's something I can do that you'd like to learn how to do?

SCAFFOLDING CONVERSATION PROMPTS

- What's the first step?
- What should we do next?
- Would an example help, or do you want to try it first?
- Tell me what you do know so far and we can go from there.

ADVERSE CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) are potentially traumatic events that occur up until the age of 18, and can have lasting effects on a young person's development, behavior, and health. These are formative experiences that can deeply influence how young people see themselves, how they relate to others, and how safe the world feels [13]. In a mentoring context, understanding ACEs helps adults respond with empathy rather than judgment, recognizing that challenging behaviors may be rooted in past experiences rather than present intent. Research shows that having one positive relationship with a safe adult is the greatest protective factor a child can have against ACEs. Positive, consistent relationships, like those formed through mentoring, are proven to buffer the impact of adversity and encourage resilience.

Common types of ACEs include:

- Experiencing physical, emotional, or sexual abuse
- Exposure to neglect (physical or emotional)
- Witnessing domestic violence in the home
- Living with a caregiver who struggles with substance use
- Living with a caregiver who has mental health challenges
- Parental separation, divorce, or incarceration
- Experiencing or witnessing community violence
- Growing up in a household with chronic instability or lack of safety

For a more comprehensive look at this topic, consider reading [The Deepest Well](#) by Nadine Burke Harris.

[13] Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2023). About adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/aces/about.html>

A TRAUMA-INFORMED APPROACH TO MENTORING

Understanding adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) naturally leads to an important next step: how we respond. This is where the concept of being trauma-informed comes in. A trauma-informed approach is a way of understanding and responding to people that recognizes the impact of trauma and adversity on their behavior, emotions, and relationships. It emphasizes creating environments that feel safe, predictable, and supportive, while also avoiding actions that could unintentionally trigger stress or harm.

Trauma-informed practices grew out of research in psychology and social work and have since become central in education and youth development, as studies revealed how adversity can impact brain development, behavior, learning, and relationships [14]. This section focuses on what trauma-informed practice looks like in the context of mentoring.

In practice, being trauma-informed means looking beyond behavior to better understand the experiences that may be driving it. Rather than asking, “What’s wrong with this child?” a trauma-informed approach asks, “What might this child have experienced?”

SCENARIO: A student refuses to participate, avoids eye contact, and shuts down when asked to read aloud.

- What does this behavior communicate?
- What could be happening underneath the surface?
- How would a trauma-informed mentor respond?

[14] Webster E. M. (2022). The Impact of Adverse Childhood Experiences on Health and Development in Young Children.

At its core, being trauma-informed means approaching each interaction with intention. It is a mindset that can be learned – one that helps mentors respond with greater awareness, empathy, and care. In practice, this means building trust, prioritizing emotional safety, and approaching each young person with curiosity and compassion rather than judgment [15].

A trauma-informed individual:

- Realizes that many individuals have experienced trauma
- Recognizes how those experiences may show up in behavior and interactions
- Responds with empathy, consistency, and appropriate boundaries
- Looks beyond behavior, seeking to understand what may be driving it rather than viewing it as simply “problematic”

TRAITS OF A TRAUMA-INFORMED MENTOR

PREDICTABLE	consistently meets with the student, and has clear, steady expectations
EMPOWERING	focuses on strengths and builds confidence through small successes; provides choices whenever possible (activities, rewards, snacks)
SAFE	is calm, respectful, and non-reactive; has healthy and appropriate boundaries
PATIENT	stays committed even when progress is slow; understands that trust and growth take time
CURIIOUS	observes patterns rather than jumping to conclusions; practices active listening

As you begin mentoring, you'll be building a relationship with a student you don't yet fully know. Many students in the Lunch Buddy Program have been identified as needing additional support, whether that be academic, social, emotional, or behavioral. A trauma-informed lens helps reframe some of the behaviors you might encounter.

On the next page, you'll find a chart called **Behavior Is Communication**, which highlights common behaviors you may see during a mentoring session and what they might reflect beneath the surface, including possible trauma responses or unmet needs. This tool is a helpful starting point for interpreting your mentee's behavior. Sometimes, student behaviors are very visible, but there are times you may notice something a little more subtle. For example, a student who has experienced food insecurity may eat quickly, try to save food, or feel anxious about not having enough. Recognizing these behaviors as possible trauma responses will allow you to respond with empathy rather than judgment.

Remember; your role isn't to fix them, or undo the trauma, but to help create a space where growth, self-regulation, and hope are possible. When working with any child, there are bound to be factors that are out of your control. Trauma can be a heavy burden, but it's not your burden to carry.

Your role as mentor uniquely empowers your mentee to:

- *Build coping skills*
- *Strengthen self-confidence*
- *Experience safe, supportive relationships*

BEHAVIOR IS COMMUNICATION

WHAT YOU MIGHT SEE

WHAT IT MIGHT BE COMMUNICATING

TRAUMA-INFORMED RESPONSE

Withdrawn; unusually quiet

Overwhelm, anxiety, lack of trust, or emotional shutdown

Simply sit together without pressure to talk; offer gentle conversational prompts; when appropriate, offer grounding techniques

Impulsive behavior; difficulty sitting still

Stress response; Lack of self-regulation

Keep expectations simple; redirect; offer fidget toys; provide structure

Quick to anger; emotional outbursts

Feeling unsafe, misunderstood, or overwhelmed

Stay calm; listen and validate without endorsing behavior

Overly talkative or attention-seeking

Need for connection; fear of being ignored

Listen attentively; set gentle time boundaries if needed

Resistance to activities or conversation

Need for control; lack of autonomy

Offer activity and conversational choices; allow the student to lead whenever possible

Difficulty trusting adults

History of broken promises or inconsistent caregivers

Be predictable; follow through consistently - it will take lots of time

Perfectionism; fear of trying something new

Fear of failure or harsh consequences

Emphasize effort over outcomes; celebrate small wins; build confidence

Asking for gifts, money, or extra food

Unmet material needs or food insecurity; testing boundaries; sometimes an attempt to seek reassurance and care

Respond kindly; acknowledge the request without promising anything; gently reinforce program boundaries and consult school staff if concerns persist

RESILIENCY & THE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT MODEL

“Even when people score high on ACEs, it doesn’t mean this is determinate of their life course. What doesn’t get accounted for in the ACE score is the concept of resilience; building resilience is a solution to adverse childhood experiences.”

*– Jane Isaacs Lowe,
Robert Wood Johnson Foundation*

Traditionally, developmental psychology research emphasized deficits, risk factors, and negative outcomes in children and adolescents. In the 1970s, however, scholars began to observe that some young people thrived despite significant adversity. This shift led to a strengths-based approach that focuses on how positive influences, supportive relationships, and adaptive skills can buffer stress and trauma. Today, this approach is known as the Resiliency Model and is a foundation of modern youth development practice.

Early resilience research explored the experiences of youth facing stressors such as poverty, family instability, and mental health challenges and identified protective factors at individual, family, and social levels that supported positive adaptation in high-risk environments [16]. A key finding was that resilience is not an innate trait but can be developed through relationships, experiences, and intentional support. In youth development, especially for youth facing adversity, the resiliency model focuses on building strengths by prioritizing supportive adults, positive peer connections, and skill-building opportunities.

THE 5 CS OF POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT

COMPETENCE	Having the skills and abilities to succeed in various areas of life, including social, academic, emotional, and vocational settings.
CONFIDENCE	A sense of self-worth and belief in one's ability to make a difference and handle challenges.
CONNECTION	Positive, supportive relationships with peers, family, mentors, and the greater community.
CHARACTER	A strong sense of right and wrong, integrity, and respect for rules, values, and other people.
CARING	Showing empathy and concern for others, and a desire to support and care for people in need.

The evidence for the 5 Cs framework was first provided in 2002 by the 4-H Study of Positive Youth Development. The study continues today [17].

The 5 Cs Framework (Competence, Confidence, Connection, Character, and Caring) offers a practical way to apply a resiliency-based approach in mentoring. Together, these traits emphasize skill-building, strong relationships, and positive values as the foundation for growth. Developed by 4H, the 5 Cs Framework comes from research on Positive Youth Development and is widely recognized as one of the most influential models for understanding how young people grow and thrive. Built upon decades of research, it shifts the focus from preventing problems to building strength; highlighting the conditions that help youth succeed.

THE 5 CS IN ACTION

COMPETENCE	<i>What it looks like:</i> Trying new skills, improving over time
	<i>What a mentor can do:</i> Break tasks into steps, encourage effort over perfection
CONFIDENCE	<i>What it looks like:</i> willingness to try, self-esteem
	<i>What a mentor can do:</i> Celebrate small wins, give genuine, specific praise
CONNECTION	<i>What it looks like:</i> feeling safe, supported, and validated
	<i>What a mentor can do:</i> Show up consistently, listen with care
CHARACTER	<i>What it looks like:</i> Making responsible choices; showing integrity
	<i>What a mentor can do:</i> Model honesty; talk through decisions and consequences
CARING	<i>What it looks like:</i> Showing empathy; considering the feelings of others
	<i>What a mentor can do:</i> Acknowledge emotions; explore alternate perspectives

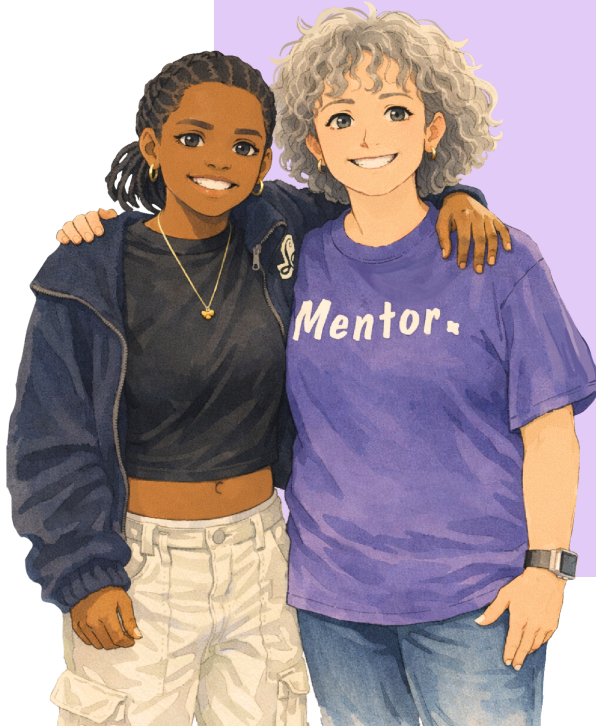
[16] Arnold, M. E., & Gagnon, R. J. (2020). Positive youth development theory in practice: An update on the 4-H thriving model. *Journal of Youth Development*, 15(6), 1-23

[17] 4-H Study of Positive Youth Development. (n.d.). Institute for Applied Research in Youth Development. <https://sites.tufts.edu/iaryd/research/current-projects/4-h-study-of-positive-youth-development/>

LUNCH BUDDY PROGRAM OVERVIEW AND EXPECTATIONS

LUNCH BUDDY PROGRAM

BE A MENTOR. BE THE DIFFERENCE.



Founded in 2011 to serve “at risk” students in Catawba County, the Lunch Buddy Program, facilitated by the Council on Adolescents, is a school-based mentoring initiative. While the program primarily focuses on the middle grades (6-8), it’s not unusual for lunch buddy matches to begin a little earlier (5th grade), or to continue into high school together. Although the students we serve have a wide range of needs and experiences, the goal remains the same: to pair adult volunteers with students for weekly lunch meetings throughout the school year – providing a consistent presence to listen, encourage, offer guidance, and be a friend.

WHAT TO EXPECT

Your first few meetings may feel a little slow or even a bit awkward, and that's completely normal. This is the time to get to know each other, find common ground, and begin building trust. As the weeks go on, consistency will matter more than anything else you can do or say. Simply showing up, being present, and listening will lay the foundation for a strong and genuine connection. Around the end of the first semester, the Council on Adolescents will host a winter celebration for all Lunch Buddy participants. This is an opportunity to reflect on your time together, celebrate progress, meet other program participants, and connect with families. As the year continues, and your relationship deepens, you may notice your student beginning to open up, engage more easily, or feel more at ease with you. By the end of the year, the relationship you've built is uniquely yours. Our end-of-year celebration is a chance to recognize that growth and celebrate the connection you've made with your student.

WHAT WE ASK

- Commit to one full school year (minimum) to support consistency and relationship-building
- Maintain regular communication with your school contact and program coordinator (planned absences, questions, concerns, and check-ins)
- Show up consistently and on time, prioritizing in-person, school-based meetings
- Model appropriate behavior at all times, including respect, empathy, and positive communication
- Engage in age-appropriate conversations and activities
- Maintain clear and appropriate boundaries, including appropriate use of social media
- Focus on building mutual trust through consistency, presence, and active listening

FIRST YEAR MENTORS: WHAT TO KNOW

We ask all our volunteers to commit to at least one full school year. Trust doesn't happen all at once; it develops over time through consistency and patience.

WHAT MATTERS MOST

- Show up consistently and on time
- Be open-minded and willing to listen
- Stay patient, even when progress feels slow

Keep in mind, this isn't about you. Trust takes time, especially for students who have experienced instability or trauma. If your lunch buddy is quiet, reserved, or slow to open up, remember that behavior is communication. What may feel like reservation or distance is often self-protection. Your consistency and genuine presence are what help a student feel safe enough to begin trusting you.

YOUR ROLE AS MENTOR

- Model respect, empathy, and positive communication
- Listen actively and engage in age-appropriate conversation
- Treat students with dignity at all times
- Maintain clear, professional boundaries
- Notify the program coordinator of planned absences longer than one visit (vacations, medical leave, etc.)
- Reach out with questions or concerns as they arise
- Participate in regular check-ins to reflect and problem-solve
- Build a relationship with your school contact early—it makes everything easier later

LONG-TERM MENTORS: WHAT TO EXPECT

For those who continue beyond the first year, mentoring relationships often evolve in meaningful and rewarding ways. It's important to recognize that trust does not always develop quickly. Some students may take months, or even longer, to fully open up. But as trust grows, so does a sense of closeness, comfort, and mutual understanding.

Long-term mentoring also creates opportunities for deeper connection beyond the school setting. Over time, it is not uncommon for mentors to develop positive, supportive relationships with family members as well, often organically.

With explicit (and ideally written) parent or guardian permission, long-term mentors may be able to operate with slightly more flexibility in their interactions. As students get older — especially as they transition into high school — it is not unusual for established mentor matches to expand their time together beyond campus. This might include:

- Meeting for lunch outside of school
- Attending community activities together
- Maintaining appropriate communication (such as texting)

While these relationships may feel more informal, they should always remain grounded in respect, safety, and clear communication with family, school contacts, and the program coordinator. Long-term, consistent mentoring relationships have the greatest impact on student growth, confidence, and sense of belonging. When a relationship is positive and mutually rewarding, mentors are strongly encouraged to continue, as their presence can make a lasting difference in a young person's life.

CONFIDENTIALITY AND BOUNDARIES

Maintaining appropriate boundaries and confidentiality is a core expectation of the Lunch Buddy Program. Anyone who works with children will hear “safe secrets” – anxieties, worries, and feelings that are healthy and developmentally appropriate to share with a trusted adult. In a strong mentoring relationship, these moments can be met with guidance, support, and encouragement. Examples might include struggles with academics, a crush on a classmate, nerves about friendships, or a desire to build confidence. These conversations often become the foundation for meaningful connection and growth! At the same time, clear boundaries must always be maintained. All mentoring interactions should remain appropriate, in person, and limited to the designated school setting and lunch period. Mentors should not transport students, share personal phone numbers, or connect on social media unless explicit parent/guardian permission has been given (see FAQ). When in doubt, always default to maintaining professional boundaries and communicating with the program coordinator.

REPORTING AND SAFETY PROCEDURES

Confidentiality is an important part of building trust, but it has clear limits. In NC, all adults are considered mandatory reporters of child maltreatment. This means that while most student disclosures can remain private, this is not the case if there are concerns related to safety. If a student shares anything involving abuse, neglect, self-harm, or intent to harm themselves or others, it is no longer a “safe secret” and must be reported. Volunteers are never expected to navigate these situations alone. If a concern arises, it should be reported to the Lunch Buddy Coordinator and the school counselor as soon as the mentoring session ends. There are established procedures in place, and support will always be provided.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

AM I ALLOWED TO GIVE MY LUNCH BUDDY GIFTS?

Yes! Small, thoughtful gifts can be used for encouragement or to celebrate progress. These don't need to cost anything; handmade or low-cost items are just as meaningful. Food can also be brought occasionally as a treat, but it's best to reserve this for special occasions like birthdays, holidays, or as a reward for reaching a longer-term goal. There is never an expectation that you spend money on your Lunch Buddy. Be sure to check with your school contact for any specific guidelines, especially around bringing in outside food, as policies can vary by school.

WHAT IF I'M SICK AND CAN'T COME?

If you're only going to miss one session, simply call the school front office to let them know you won't be attending that day. Your student's health and your own are the priority, and missing a session due to illness is completely understandable.

WHAT IF MY JOB, SCHEDULE, OR AVAILIABILITY CHANGES OR I GO ON VACATION?

If your schedule changes due to vacations, work, or other commitments, reach out to your program coordinator as soon as possible. They can help make accommodations and ensure your planned absences are communicated. Staying in regular contact is essential for maintaining trust and consistency in your mentoring relationship. The last thing we want is for meetings to be missed consecutively without clear communication.

CAN I CONNECT WITH MY LUNCH BUDDY VIA SOCIAL MEDIA / SHARE MY PHONE NUMBER?

In general, mentors should not share personal contact information or connect with students on social media. All communication should remain in person, during the school day, and within the structure of the Lunch Buddy Program.

For established mentoring relationships, there may be more flexibility – but only with explicit parent/guardian permission (preferably in writing) and communication with the program coordinator. This applies to sharing phone numbers, texting, or connecting on social media. Any communication outside of school should remain appropriate, respectful, and aligned with the expectations of the program.

CAN I SHARE PICTURES THAT MY LUNCH BUDDY AND I TAKE TOGETHER?

Because your Lunch Buddy is a minor, they have a right to privacy. You are welcome to take photos together, but do not share them on social media unless you have explicit parent/guardian permission. If you'd like to share about your experience with the Lunch Buddy Program on social media, consider using photos that do not reveal your student's identity, such as a thumbs-up, a drawing you made together, or a picture of your lunch.

DO I HAVE TO EAT LUNCH THERE?

No, you don't have to eat with your Lunch Buddy. Some mentors choose to eat before they arrive, while others bring snacks to share. Just keep in mind that some students may feel put on the spot if they're eating and you aren't.

CAN I MEET MY LUNCH BUDDY OUTSIDE OF SCHOOL?

The Council on Adolescents provides two opportunities to spend time with your Lunch Buddy off campus: the mid-year winter celebration and the end-of-year celebration. The Council on Adolescents does not encourage, promote, or endorse off-campus contact outside of approved program events. Many school events are open to the public, including performances, games, or concerts; and you might be invited to come and support your student. If you do plan to attend, it's always best to coordinate through your school contact, especially if you'd like to contact and meet up with the family while you're there.

WHEN AND HOW SHOULD I TRY TO CONNECT WITH MY LUNCH BUDDY'S FAMILY?

Family engagement is not the primary focus of the program, but meaningful connections often develop naturally over time. To support these relationships, we host two family engagement events each year: the mid-year winter celebration and the end-of-year celebration. These events are the best opportunities to meet your student's family if they choose to attend. If you'd like to connect with a family sooner, or coordinate attendance at other public school events, you can request parent contact information from your school contact while you're on campus.

WHAT'S THE TRANSPORTATION POLICY?

Mentors are only allowed to transport Lunch Buddy students if they have explicit parent/guardian permission (written permission is preferable). All mentoring sessions should otherwise take place at the school during the designated lunch period. COA does not encourage, promote, or endorse off-campus transportation, and any travel outside of school would be at your own liability. For long-term mentoring relationships with explicit parent/guardian permission and approval from the program coordinator, there may be some flexibility for off-campus visits or events. Even in those cases, safety, clear boundaries, and communication with both the family and coordinator are required to ensure the experience is appropriate and supportive.

CAN MY LUNCH BUDDY BRING A FRIEND?

The Lunch Buddy Program is designed for one-on-one mentoring, and that is always the priority. Occasionally, a student may want to bring a friend. As a general guideline, a friend may join once with permission from the school counselor, but after that session, visits should return to a one-on-one format. Friends do not have parent/guardian permission to meet regularly with a mentor, and their presence can alter the integrity of the relationship. If a friend expresses interest in having their own Lunch Buddy, the program coordinator should be notified so we can work to match them with a mentor. This ensures the program remains safe, focused, and supportive for all students.

WHAT IF MY LUNCH BUDDY AND I AREN'T A GOOD FIT?

As is true in most relationships, some matches don't click right away (or sometimes at all). If you're struggling to connect with your Lunch Buddy, notify the program coordinator as soon as possible. They are there to provide guidance, help troubleshoot strategies, or, if needed, arrange a new match. Some connections just take a little extra effort. Many students are naturally reserved or shy, and if that's why the relationship feels challenging, I encourage you to stick with it. That's not an incompatibility, it's exactly the kind of situation we're here to support. With patience, consistency, and presence, even the quietest or most hesitant students can begin to open up over time. That said, our goal is always to ensure every student has a supportive, positive mentoring experience, and if it turns out that the current pairing isn't the right fit, we can work to find a better match for both mentor and student.

HOW LONG CAN I MENTOR MY LUNCH BUDDY?

For as long as the relationship works for you both. We ask all volunteers to commit to at least one full school year, but many mentors choose to continue beyond that. The longer a relationship is maintained, the deeper the trust and connection become. We've seen many successful matches grow from middle school into high school, and some Lunch Buddy pairs have continued all the way through graduation! Continuing as a mentor allows you to witness your student's growth over time, celebrate milestones, and provide consistent support during critical developmental years. Long-term mentors often find that the relationship becomes more natural, meaningful, and rewarding as trust deepens. Staying involved also gives you access to all program perks, including mentor meetups, newsletters, and special events.

BEST PRACTICES

Over the years, experienced Lunch Buddy mentors and the staff here at the Council on Adolescents have identified a few key practices that help make mentoring successful, enjoyable, and consistent. Small steps, thoughtful preparation, and building strong connections with both your student and school staff go a long way toward creating a positive and lasting impact. Before you jump into mentoring, we wanted to share our best practices with you!

- Call before you go to confirm your student is at school and to verify their lunch time. Sometimes schedules can shift due to testing or other events.
- Bring snacks to share! They're an easy icebreaker and a simple way to make your student feel comfortable.
- Get to know your school contact. Building a relationship with them ahead of time makes it easier to get support, guidance, and information when you really need it.
- Don't take it personally. Teenagers can be unpredictable! They might be glad, mad, and sad all in that 25 minute lunch period. What matters most is the relationship as it develops over time.
- Build your mentor toolbox! Have a collection of activities, conversation starters, and strategies to keep sessions fresh and adaptable to your student's needs.

Being a mentor is a unique and meaningful gift. Thank you for the time and commitment you give to this program and to your student. Please know the door at the Council on Adolescents is always open; for guidance, support, to share in your frustration, or to celebrate!



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