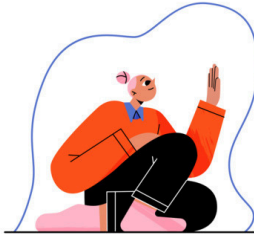
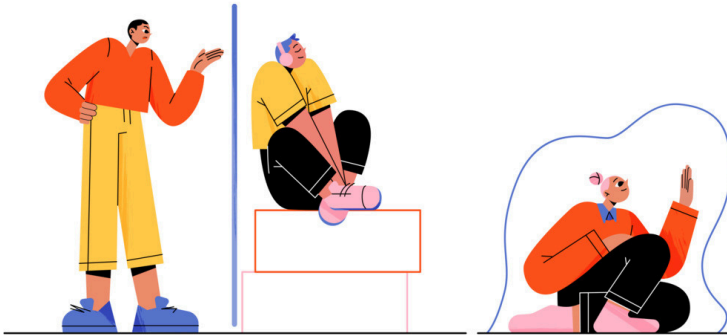




boundaries and belonging

WHEN THE LINES ARE CLEAR,
TRUST HAS SOMEWHERE TO LAND.



ACTIVITY: DEFINING BOUNDARIES IN MENTORING PURPOSE

This introductory activity is designed to help mentors reflect on their own boundary-setting practices. While some expectations in mentoring relationships are non-negotiable, many situations require quick, in-the-moment judgement. This exercise will help you assess your baseline comfort level to better help you navigate those on-the-fly mentoring moments.

Mentoring boundaries are shaped in real time, while you're actively working with a student. Our goal in this exercise is to better understand your morals and values, and get you thinking about what your personal boundary line is when working with an at-risk child, so you can be prepared when they do challenge your boundaries.

Step 1: Establish the Non-Negotiables

Begin by grounding yourself in the base expectations that apply to all mentoring relationships. These boundaries are not flexible and should guide all interactions with your mentee.

- Violence in any form is never acceptable
- Romantic or inappropriate relationships are strictly prohibited
- Mentors and mentees must never knowingly be placed in unsafe situations

These baseline boundaries exist to protect both individuals and ensure the integrity of the relationship. Any situation that conflicts with these standards should be immediately addressed or avoided.

Step 2: Explore the Gray Areas

Consider the following scenarios independently or with a group of mentors. Reflect honestly. Your answers may not always feel clear, and that is part of the process:

- Would you spend time with your mentee in your home?
- Would you meet your mentee outside of school (e.g., at a park, restaurant, or event)?
- Would you take your mentee to an R-rated or PG-13 movie?
- Would you share personal experiences involving alcohol or other substances?
- Would you provide food or buy meals regularly?
- Would you extend your scheduled time if your mentee asks to stay longer?
- Would you give your mentee a gift? If so, what kind and how often?
- Would you discuss topics such as sex or relationships?
- Would you communicate with your mentee outside of program hours (texting, email)?

After reflecting, discuss your responses with a trusted friend or confidant. Notice the questions that gave you pause and consider why. Remember that boundary-setting will always be influenced by personal values, professional expectations, and context. As a result, boundaries will look different for every person and every relationship. What is comfortable for one person may not be comfortable for another.

MORE THAN “NO”: THE PURPOSE OF BOUNDARIES



“Boundaries” often get a bad reputation, as they are sometimes associated with restriction or having to say “no” to people you care about. In reality, healthy boundaries can actually strengthen relationships! When clear, consistent expectations are in place, young people are able to engage more deeply, build trust, and take appropriate emotional risks within a safe and stable framework. In any adult–child relationship, it is the adult’s responsibility to establish those boundaries, just as it’s developmentally appropriate for the child to test them.

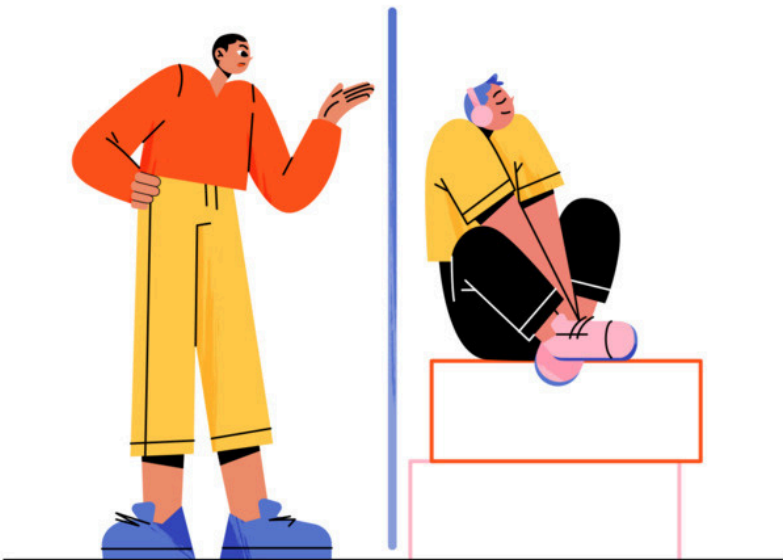
As you move through this material, I encourage you to reflect not only on your own approach to boundaries, but also on your mentee's. Every young person brings a different set of experiences into the relationship. Some may be quiet and unlikely to challenge expectations, while others may test your limits at every visit. Both patterns of behavior can offer valuable insight into what they have learned about relationships so far, and what they still need to figure out. Taking time to consider these differences, and asking some of the harder questions about how boundaries have shown up in your own life, will help you better serve your lunch buddy.

Many adults find boundaries challenging, especially in close relationships. If you find yourself struggling with this topic, remember that this is a shared human experience. What matters most is the willingness to reflect and grow. Young people learn through observation, and mentors play an important role in modeling what healthy, respectful boundaries look like in practice. This includes helping adolescents distinguish between genuine kindness and behavior driven by fear or insecurity. By approaching boundaries with consistency, thoughtfulness, and care, mentors help create relationships that are not only safe, but meaningful and lasting.



READING BOUNDARIES THROUGH BEHAVIOR

Understanding a young person's relationship with boundaries begins with observation. The way a student interacts with peers, caregivers, and teachers can offer valuable insight into how they approach boundaries in general. For example, patterns within their friend group (such as over-accommodating others, frequent conflict, or difficulty asserting needs) can reflect how they navigate limits and expectations. Similarly, their interactions with adults may reveal whether they are comfortable expressing themselves, seeking help, or trusting authority figures. For some students, particularly those who have experienced trauma, boundaries may be especially difficult to establish or maintain, as past experiences can shape how safe or predictable relationships feel. In contrast, healthy boundaries are closely tied to self-awareness and a developing sense of identity. When adolescents have a clearer understanding of their values, beliefs, and emotional experiences, they are better equipped to set limits that protect their well-being. Over time, this allows them to build stronger, more balanced relationships and engage with others in ways that are both respectful and sustainable.



SIGNS OF HEALTHY & UNHEALTHY BOUNDARIES IN ADOLESCENTS

UNHEALTHY BOUNDARIES	HEALTHY BOUNDARIES
Chronic overwhelm or burnout	Balanced responsibilities and self-care
Avoidance or withdrawal	Healthy engagement with others
Over-involvement in others' problems (rescuer role)	Maintains appropriate responsibility for self vs. others
Difficulty saying "no"	Able to say "no" without excessive guilt
Not asking for or accepting help	Seeks and accepts support when needed
Going along with uncomfortable or unsafe situations	Respects personal limits and prioritizes safety

Mentor Tip: If your lunch buddy doesn't readily share about family or friendships, and it's difficult to get a sense of their boundaries, try a simple, low-pressure question:

"Which feels harder for you—saying no, or asking for help? Why do you think that is?"

FAWN, FREEZE, AND FIGHT

FAWN

People pleasing is the habit of prioritizing others' needs, wants, or comfort at the expense of one's own in order to gain acceptance or avoid conflict. You may also hear it referred to as the **Fawn** Response. This behavior often develops as an adaptive strategy in situations where there is a perceived power imbalance, such as with adults, authority figures, or peers. It can also function as a form of social survival, where an individual can maintain a sense of belonging by "keeping the peace" or by masking their authentic selves. Over time, these patterns can become automatic, making it increasingly difficult to assert personal needs or establish healthy boundaries.

Take a look at the following traits.

Does this look familiar for you or for your mentee?

- Hiding struggles or negative emotions
- Seeking approval or validation
- Difficulty asserting boundaries or saying "no"
- Prioritizing others at personal cost
- Suppressing identity or opinions (masking)
- Feeling guilt or anxiety after self-advocating



Sometimes, what appears as friendliness or agreeableness on the surface is actually stress or anxiety beneath. People pleasing is usually a mask that hides deeper struggles, such as feeling powerless, struggling with authority, or being hypervigilant/on alert.

FIGHT

In contrast, the **Fight** Response is a protective reaction where an individual responds to perceived threat or boundary violation with confrontation, control, or defensiveness. It often develops in environments where a person learns that asserting themselves is necessary to feel safe, heard, or respected. While it can appear as aggression or argumentativeness, this behavior comes from a need for control when boundaries feel unclear or repeatedly crossed.

Take a look at the following traits.

Does this look familiar for you or for your mentee?

- Quick to argue or escalate conflict
- Difficulty hearing “no” or perceived criticism
- Controlling behaviors in relationships or groups
- Reacting strongly when feeling disrespected or unheard
- Struggling to pause before responding in conflict
- Using anger as a way to set or defend boundaries

FREEZE

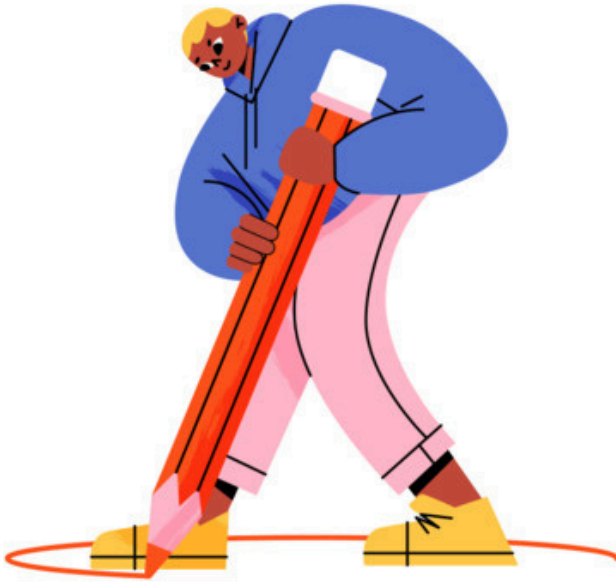
Finally, the **Freeze** Response is a protective reaction where an individual becomes emotionally or physically “stuck” when facing stress, conflict, or perceived threat. Instead of responding or escaping, the nervous system shuts down as a way to cope. This can be especially common when a person feels overwhelmed or unsure how to safely assert boundaries in the moment.

Take a look at the following traits.

Does this look familiar for you or for your mentee?

- Suddenly becoming quiet or shutting down when facing conflict
- Difficulty making decisions under pressure
- Appearing “checked out” or unresponsive; dissociated
- Trouble finding words when upset
- Delayed reactions to stressful situations
- Avoiding engagement when overwhelmed

TESTING THE WATERS



Every relationship is shaped by both explicit and implicit boundaries. Within mentoring relationships, these boundaries provide a framework for safety, trust, and emotional clarity. During adolescence, however, boundaries are often tested, renegotiated, and sometimes misunderstood. While this can feel frustrating, it is important to recognize that this behavior is both developmentally appropriate and a healthy part of growth!

Many students in the Lunch Buddy program have not experienced consistent, predictable relationships with adults. As a result, you may see increased boundary-testing, particularly in the early stages of the relationship. While frustrating, these behaviors are not just acts of defiance. They are attempts to assess reliability, emotional safety, and the stability of the relationship. When viewed through this lens, boundary-pushing becomes less about challenging authority and more about understanding your values, expectations, and limits.

COMMON BOUNDARY-TESTING IN MENTORING

The idea that “behavior is communication” is well established in developmental and educational psychology, and it offers a useful lens for understanding why young people act the way they do. In the context of mentoring, this framework can be extended to boundary-testing.

Adolescents often use their behavior not to challenge authority for its own sake, but to gather information –assessing whether an adult is consistent, trustworthy, and emotionally safe.

As a mentor, you may see behaviors such as:

- Bringing friends into one-on-one mentoring time
- Asking for personal contact information or social media
- Attempting to extend time beyond what’s allowed
- Disclosing highly personal information early in the relationship
- Challenging minor expectations (e.g., arriving late, leaving early, avoiding sessions)
- Testing consistency through withdrawal or disengagement

If behavior is communication, then these moments provide valuable insight into what your mentee has experienced and what they may need now. While these behaviors can feel off-putting, they are often indicators of uncertainty rather than rejection. In many cases, they signal that the student does want your connection and support. They are simply trying to determine whether you are a safe and reliable presence in their life, and whether that safety will remain over time.

EVALUATING BOUNDARIES: A FIVE-QUESTION FRAMEWORK

Use the following five-question framework to evaluate any situation where boundaries may be unclear:

1. Is it safe and legal?

Consider whether there is any risk of physical, emotional, or social harm.

2. Is it within program guidelines?

Ensure alignment with the policies and expectations of your mentoring organization.

3. Does it align with their cultural and family expectations?

Reflect on what the mentee's parent or guardian has communicated as appropriate.

4. Will it support their development?

Ask whether the decision supports growth in areas such as: support, empowerment, boundaries and expectations, constructive use of time, commitment to learning, positive values, social competencies, & positive identity.

5. Does it fit your comfort level?

Consider your own boundaries, values, and expectations for the relationship.

If any of your answers raise concern, pause before moving forward. Remember that boundary challenges are not moral judgments; they're opportunities to reflect, clarify, and make thoughtful choices.

When in doubt, talk it through with a trusted friend to gain perspective. If you have questions about #2, refer to page 15 in this booklet or reach out to program staff for guidance.

TURNING CONSISTENCY INTO TRUST

When adolescents test you about your boundaries, try to approach it as an opportunity for intervention rather than a disruption to your mentoring session. The way you choose to respond in the moment communicates your expectations, reinforces that you are a safe adult, and shapes how your lunch buddy comes to understand relationships. These moments are often where the most meaningful learning occurs.

Human behavior is cyclical. A student who tests boundaries once will likely do so again; not out of defiance, but to confirm consistency over time! Each instance is an opportunity to define the boundary line, and it'll make future situations easier to navigate. Over time, these repeated interactions build trust and reinforce clear expectations, turning challenges into opportunities for growth.

By setting healthy boundaries as a mentor, you can influence:

- Their understanding of trust
- Emotional regulation, when things don't go their way
- A clear understanding of rules and expectations
- Appropriate adult-child relationship dynamics

By contrast, inconsistent or overly permissive responses can reinforce uncertainty and lead to continued testing. Establishing boundaries is not about control; it's about creating an environment in which adolescents can safely explore their autonomy with appropriate limits. You *can* facilitate belonging, just by being predictable.

SHIFTING BOUNDARIES, STEADY PRINCIPLES

Boundaries within mentoring relationships are not static. Naturally, boundaries will evolve over time as adolescents grow and change. As your mentee develops greater independence, social awareness, and decision-making capacity, you may find that your expectations of them shift as well. Sometimes, these changes happen gradually, but there are few key developmental milestones to be aware of.



Major life transitions such as entering high school or gaining increased independence (e.g., getting a driver's license) are likely to bring about conversations about boundaries. While some flexibility is appropriate, it should always remain grounded in safety, program guidelines, and professional ethics. It is also normal for these shifts to feel uncomfortable or uncertain at times. When that happens, return to the decision-making framework (see Page 2) to help you think through the situation and make a clear, intentional choice.

Reflection: Think about a relationship in your own life that has evolved over time.

- 1. What changed, and why?*
- 2. Which boundaries stayed consistent over time, and which ones adapted and changed?*
- 3. How can you apply that same balance of consistency and flexibility to your mentoring relationship?*

OUR PROGRAM GUIDELINES

This is a good time to reiterate our program guidelines. The following list includes all the non-negotiable boundaries you should maintain with your lunch buddy, along with our recommendations for the gray areas you're likely to encounter.

Non-Negotiables (Must Always Be Followed)

- Do not be alone with a student
- Do not put your student in harm's way
- Maintain a safe, appropriate, and healthy relationship at all times.

Gray Areas & Program Recommendations

Transportation: You will never be *expected* to transport your student. If you choose to do so, at your own risk and liability, COA guidelines say you must have explicit parent/guardian permission.

Social Media & Texting: For elementary and middle school students, private communication is not permitted. When working with high school students, use caution and flexibility. You should always have parent/guardian permission when communicating with a minor, and ensure communication is transparent.

Gifts & Money: Keep gifts small, appropriate, and occasional. Never give them cash or high-value items.

Meeting Outside of School: Lunch Buddy is an on-campus, school-based program. Any off-campus interaction requires written parent/guardian permission.

Physical Contact: Keep it minimal and appropriate (fist bump, high five, side hug). Never initiate physical contact with your lunch buddy – this should always be student-led.

BOUNDARIES AND REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

Reflection on our own experiences of safety, trust, and belonging can be a powerful tool for understanding how we show up in mentoring relationships. The ways we have felt heard, respected, or supported often shape the expectations we bring into new relationships, including our work with youth. Taking time to notice what contributed to those experiences (especially the presence of clear, consistent boundaries) can help us better understand how structure and connection work together rather than in opposition.

Self-awareness and reflection are an essential part of effective practice. When we are mindful of our own needs, tendencies, and comfort levels around boundaries, we are better equipped to respond to adolescents with clarity and consistency. In doing so, we not only create safer and more predictable relationships for our mentees, but we also model healthy behaviors that will last them a lifetime.

Reflection Activity:

- Think of a time when you felt genuinely heard, valued, or understood in a relationship.
- What conditions allowed you to share honestly?
- What behaviors from the other person contributed to your sense of safety?
- Were there clear boundaries present? If so, how did they enhance (rather than limit) the relationship?

Understanding your own experiences of safety and belonging can inform your mentoring practice. Mentors who are aware of their own needs and boundaries are better equipped to model these skills for adolescents.