Youth Thrive in Practice:
Social Connections Between Young People & Peer Mentors

October 2021

What is *Youth Thrive in Practice: Social Connections Between Youth and Peer Mentors*?

Considerations and questions for youth workers and system leadership to explore that focus on building and strengthening young people's relationship with peer mentors.

Why are Social Connections between young people and peer mentors important?

Peer mentors provide young people with someone they can relate to and who can help them navigate what they are going through. They also provide young people with the opportunity to build their Protective and Promotive Factors:

- Youth Resilience
- Social Connections
- Knowledge of Adolescent Development
- Concrete Support in Times of Need
- Cognitive and Social-Emotional Competence

Simultaneously, peer mentors serve as a critical ally in the lives of young people. They partner with young people to:

- Identify, advocate for, and address their urgent concerns and needs;
- Set and achieve their goals;
- Process life experiences and problem-solve;
- Navigate complex systems or processes; and
- Help them to realize they are not alone and normalize their feelings about life events.

What is a "Peer Mentor"?

Peer mentors are individuals who share their life experience(s) with those who are newly experiencing a similar life event or occurrence, such as entering the foster care or juvenile justice system or starting new school/college.

Peer mentors may be known by many different titles, such as:

- youth mentor
- peer or youth coach
- near-peer mentor
- peer or youth ambassador
- peer or youth ally

Youth Thrive
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Considerations and questions for youth workers and supervisors to support the role of peer mentors:

- **Help peer mentors to connect with young people.**

  ° How is information about peer mentors shared with young people (e.g., website or social media link or one-pager on the role of peer mentors)? What type of information is shared about peer mentors (e.g., biographical information about peer mentors, contact information)? Are young people allowed to choose their mentors?

  ° How are peer mentors and young people connected? How do young people access peer mentors?

- **Recognize peer mentors have hard times too.** Support peer mentors in recognizing their own boundaries, when a young person's actions or experiences may be triggering for them, and when they need help and how to access it. This awareness is critical for the peer mentor's well-being, and it models to young people the Protective and Promotive Factors.

  ° How are peer mentors reacting to normal adolescent boundary testing?

  ° Are peer mentors aware of the impact of their own traumatic experiences? Are they aware of the impact of racism, homophobia, ablism, xenophobia on their own lives and how it may show up in their role as a peer mentor? How are they being supported to explore and continue in their healing journey?

  ° What resources are available for peer mentors to assist with any challenges and help them to process and/or address their own thoughts and feelings?

- **Give peers mentors time and space to learn.** Similar to other professional experiences, those who are in peer mentor positions need to time to understand their role and how to work with young people.

  ° How are the peer mentor's Protective and Promotive Factors being developed and strengthened?

  ° How are peer mentors being coached to be successful in their role?

  ° Who do peer mentors turn to when they need help with challenges in their role?

  ° What opportunities are available for their own professional and personal development?

Considerations and questions for systems to support the role of peer mentors:

- **Secure funding to support peer mentor programs and activities.** Peer mentors have a significant role in the lives of young people and access to peer mentors should not only be available to some young people. Funding is necessary to ensure that young people have this concrete support and social connection.

  ° Is there a designated budget line for peer mentor(s) in the agency/organization's budget?

  ° If the peer mentor position is funded by a grant or funding from a foundation or state/local agency, how long is the grant/funding available for and what is the plan to fund the position once the grant/funding period ends?

  ° How many peer mentors are needed to effectively support young people within the agency/organization?

  ° What activities are available at the agency/organization for peer mentors and young people to participate in together and how are they funded?

- ° Acknowledge peer mentors as young professionals. Peer mentors ought to be recognized and compensated for their work with other young people. For young people, peer mentors have multiple roles – from an advocate and ally to a resource connector and case planning support. While peer mentors differ from youth workers (for more information on youth workers, please visit: ADD THE LINK TO THE YOUTH WORKER SECTION OF THE ONLINE BLUEPRINT), the ways in which they actively support young people to reach for their aspirations and set goals overlap with that of a youth worker.

- ° Are peer mentors appropriately compensated for their peer mentor role?

- ° What are the expectations of the peer mentor role and how are they clearly articulated to the peer mentor, other staff members, and young people?

- ° What professional development opportunities are available for peer mentors to build and strengthen their skills? Is there a professional pipeline for peer mentors to be promoted into other roles within the agency/organization?

- ° Who is supervising the peer mentor and how are the expectations of that supervisor communicated to both the supervisor and peer mentor?

- **Provide a designated safe space for sharing.** The role of a peer mentor is wide ranging—from celebrating young people's accomplishments to acting as a sounding board and supporter when life is hard. They must be present in the moment and provide a safe, affirming, welcoming, and empathetic space for young people to share their feelings, thoughts, concerns, and challenges.

- ° What space do peer mentors and young people have that is exclusively used for peer mentor office hours, to host peer mentor and young people events, and provide an open and safe space for young people to hang out (e.g., a young people's lounge)?

- ° How does this space communicate that young people are welcomed, that the space is safe, affirming, and supports diverse identities, and does not promote damage imagery?

- ° If a space is available, but there is no funding to decorate or accommodate peer mentors and young people in the space, how can local partnerships be utilized to provide furniture and supplies? For example, furniture donations from local nonprofits or businesses that are re-decorating or relocating, grants for furniture or office supplies, community drive or community donations.

- **Peer mentors need knowledge and tools to be successful in their role.**

- ° Are the Youth Thrive Protective and Promotive Factors included in your peer mentor training? *Note:* Youth Thrive for Youth (YT4Y) is a training written by young people and specifically designed for youth and young adults. It provides an overview of the Youth Thrive Premises and the Protective and Promotive Factors in youth-friendly and accessible language and provides activities for exploring the PPFs in their life.

- ° How much training time is devoted to understanding the adolescent brain, the impact of trauma and toxic stress, healing centered engagement, the Protective and Promotive Factors and how they appear in daily interactions with young people?

- ° Besides training, how else are peer mentors informed about the Protective and Promotive Factors, adolescent brain development, the impact of trauma and toxic stress, and healing centered engagement? For example, are these discussed during staff meetings, at peer mentor supervision, community cafes or other peer mentor events?

- º How are peer mentors helped to explore their own biases and the impact of racism and other -isms on their own well-being and that of young people?

- º What resources and tools are available to help peer mentors build their relationship with young people (e.g., list of community events they can participate in together, funding for food and activities)? How do they access them?

- **Shift and share power so that peer mentors are leading and sharing with agency/organization leadership.**

- º How is leadership being prepared to share power and co-lead with young people? What information is being shared and what activities are being done with leadership to help them understand their role in supporting young people's voice and leadership?

- º How are young people being prepared for meetings and events? Are agendas and meeting materials shared a few days in advance? Who is calling or contacting young people prior to meetings and events to answer any questions, discuss concerns, and prepare any talking points?

- º Are young people being asked to co-facilitate or co-lead conversations? How are young people supported to actively share at meetings and events (e.g., coaching, mentorship, meeting preparation opportunities)?

- º How are peer mentors' ideas, recommendations, and feedback for supporting young people being integrated into decision-making and strategic plans?