



**CENTRAL TEXAS  
TRANSGENDER  
HEALTH COALITION**

# **Caregiver Peer Mentorship Program**

## **Mentor Manual**

**2022**

## Table of Contents

<b>About this Program</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>A Note about Language</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Common Ground: Identity and Myth Busting</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Common Ground: Feeling Empowered as a Caregiver</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>What is a Mentor?</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>What Exactly Does A Mentor Do?</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>Communicating with Your Mentee</b>	<b>22</b>
<b>Skill Building</b>	<b>24</b>
Communication with Others	
Tips for Advocacy	
Communicating with Your Young Person	
<b>Confidentiality and Boundaries</b>	<b>34</b>
<b>Self Care</b>	<b>36</b>
<b>Mentor Agreement</b>	<b>37</b>
<b>Program Contact/Additional Resources</b>	<b>38</b>
<b>Appendices</b>	<b>39</b>

# **History of the Caregiver Peer Mentoring Program**

During the Fall of 2020 in Austin, Texas, a group of folks with experience supporting transgender and gender creative youth and their families identified an ongoing need for caregiver support, particularly in the time of COVID-19. Caregivers of trans\*<sup>1</sup> youth face unique joys and challenges. Caregivers often have to juggle practical and emotional support of their loved one with processing their own thoughts and feelings. While each individual family situation is unique, caregivers who have already started their own journey are well equipped to provide support and guidance to others. We conducted a needs assessment of caregivers in Central Texas, which solidified our commitment to developing a peer-to-peer mentoring program for the caregivers of youth under the trans\* umbrella.

## **What is the Caregiver Peer Mentoring Program?**

The caregiver mentoring program is designed to provide caregivers of trans\* youth with a safe, supportive relationship with another caregiver who has had similar experiences. Mentors are trained volunteers who are themselves caregivers of a trans\* youth. This program is an opportunity for mentors and mentees to build a relationship, navigate stressors, and share information and resources. Mentees are encouraged by their mentors to ask questions, explore and challenge stigma and stereotypes, and gain confidence in their ability to support their youth during their gender affirmation process, whatever this may entail.

Peer mentors are recruited and trained with materials including this manual and other supplemental resources. Then, they are matched locally with a mentee that has compatible needs. Peer mentors will discuss a schedule to connect with their mentee, and check in with the local entity implementing this program (see "Resources" section for details) for continued support in their role.

This manual and supplemental materials are meant to provide mentors in the caregiver program with confidence in their ability to support other caregivers. We hope this resource will provide an opportunity for experienced caregivers to give back to the larger community, and will provide caregiver mentees with vital information and support as they seek to encourage and nurture their youth.

<sup>1</sup> Please see definition of trans\* on the next page.

## A Note About Language/Terms in this Manual

Affirming and supporting people for who they are is an important part of this program. Inclusive language can be a powerful tool in the affirmation process, and also signals safety, an important component of the support process. After careful consideration, the following terms will be utilized in this manual in order to be as inclusive as possible. We did want to specify, however, some examples of other terms or labels within these umbrella designations.

**Caregiver:** “Caregiver” will be used for mentors and mentees in this program who care for a trans\* youth. This term is an umbrella designation meant to encompass parents, guardians, grandparents, foster parents, or other relatives or individuals who are currently the primary caregiver for the youth in question.

**Youth:** “Youth” will be used to refer to the trans\* young person who the caregiver is supporting. When developing this program, we specifically had in mind caregivers of adolescents, approximately middle and high school aged youth, since developmental considerations are unique to this population. At the same time, we welcome others to modify this material to support caregivers of trans\* children and adults as they see fit.

**Trans\* or Transgender:** An umbrella term encompassing anyone whose sex assigned at birth does not match their gender identity. This could include terms and labels such as gender creative, non-binary, gender queer, gender fluid, and transgender.

# Common Ground: Identity and Myth Busting

## Help to Normalize Being Trans\*

As a mentor, you will likely swap experiences, share wisdom, educate, and advocate with your mentee. While you share the joy you have experienced watching your youth flourish as they begin the journey of accepting their transgender identity, you may also notice you and your mentee might experience sadness, stress, confusion, uncertainty, and grief. While all of this is valid and normal, it can sometimes be helpful to shift perspectives to an outlook of positivity and hope.

It can be helpful to remind your mentee that being transgender is not inherently bad nor is it synonymous with living a doomed life. One of the best forms of support is to change the negative language and, therefore, the stigma of being transgender!

Stigmatized narratives exist in our society suggesting collectively being labeled trans\* as something shameful. Luckily, you and your mentee can refute this and empower trans\*, non-binary, and gender non-conforming youth by endorsing their self-awareness and uniqueness! You may also find empowerment for yourself and your mentee as advocates and caregivers.

***This is one of many sections in this manual that serves as an FYI for you as a mentor. These seven helpful reminders are topics you can explicitly discuss with your mentee. We've provided a mentee handout for this purpose!***

Here are seven helpful reminders:

### **1. Caregivers can flip the switch and change the language.**

What if your youth could live a meaningful, fulfilling life as a transgender human being? They absolutely can! You can remind your mentee that loved ones are their youth's foundation, their rock, their unwavering support that strengthens them enough to rise above challenge or circumstance. Being transgender is something to be celebrated!

### **2. Caregivers can bolster a child's power of personal choice.**

Happiness resides in the mind. You can empower your youth with the belief that they can be happy. You can help them choose joy instead of fear. You can teach them

that their differences are superpowers. The rest of the world just hasn't caught up to them yet!

### **3. We teach others how we want to be treated.**

It is only natural as a parent to be scared, confused, and worried about a youth's safety. You and your mentee can be involved, informed, and protect your youth in many tangible ways that you two may discuss. It can also be supportive to remember that nobody can control every external situation, but caregivers can bolster their youth's confidence. This way, the youth can be the change they want to see in the world.

### **4. Difficulties can bring empowerment and strength.**

Think back on something you are most proud of – was it easy? Probably not.

Many of our most powerful moments and greatest accomplishments were born out of towering obstacles or deep sorrows. As a mentor, you are in an inspiring position to teach strength not fear!

### **5. Beware of Negative Connotations**

Much of the language and news surrounding transgender issues, even when well-meaning, can be depressing or scary.

Here are a few subtle examples:

- “Oh, your child came out as transgender? I am so sorry! Are you doing ok?”

Caregivers should not be made to feel as if something tragic just happened after their youth comes out. Honesty, self-awareness, bravery, and the fact that the child was comfortable enough with the caregiver to share, are things to be proud of!

- “Oh, maybe it is just a phase.”

To question whether or not something is “just a phase” can many times carry a negative connotation and implies a form of self-presentation that one needs to grow out of like the “terrible twos” phase or the “rebellious teenage” phase. Nobody ever says “he’s going through the all-A’s phase” or the “employee of the month phase”.

Furthermore, youth should feel free to change their minds or be uncertain without fear of disbelief or invalidation from adults.

· "What bathroom should they use at school? Maybe they can use the nurse's restroom or single-stall restroom."

In this example, some youth may be very happy sharing any kind of separate restroom, but there can also be a negativity associated with using separate restrooms. Youth may have to take more time to walk further, get teased, or be identified as different. Also, in between class-time, including any time with peers, can be an important time for social interaction, which trans\*youth can be excluded from such policies.

#### **6. Transgender people can live normal lives just like people who are not transgender.**

Transgender, non-binary, and gender non-conforming people overcome obstacles and enjoy marriages, happy relationships, and fulfilling friendships too! In fact, according to The Transgender Education Network of Texas, between 25% and 50% of trans\* adults are parents. They can grow up to be successful leaders, speakers, advocates for minority communities, doctors, husbands, wives, and ministers all while moving through life in their most authentic form.

#### **7. Don't forget to celebrate "wins"!**

What are some wins - positive perspectives, events, silver linings that you can share with your mentee?

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## **Debunking Common Myths and Misconceptions**

*This is one of many sections in this manual that serves as an FYI for you as a mentor. These are myths you can explicitly discuss with your mentee. We've provided a mentee handout for this purpose!*

**🚫 Myth #1: Children aren't old enough to know their gender identity.**

Children understand themselves and their gender better than adults think they do. Between the age of 2 and 3, children develop an understanding of gender. Furthermore, nobody questions a youth's gender identity when it is in-line with the sex assigned on their birth certificate!

**🚫 Myth # 2: Kids are becoming trans\*as a fad due to the media or influence by peers.**

This is an incorrect belief that unfortunately has gained traction in recent years due to transphobic rhetoric being published in journals and books. Youth could be persuaded to dye their hair, dress in all black, take up smoking, but being influenced to change one's gender is an unlikely occurrence. Believe. Have Faith. Trust in the unknown. In the absence of belief, transgender people can feel invisible.

**🚫 Myth #3: Being transgender is a phase kids will grow out of.**

Generally, if a youth has been persistent, consistent, and insistent, it is most likely not a phase. "Phase" usually implies a choice and being transgender is not a choice nor is it something that can be simply outgrown. Although this exploration is not necessarily a bad thing, it is often used as a barometer to measure how seriously to take a youth. One might unknowingly send messages that a youth is worthy of support and belief only when their identity is set in stone.

**🚫 Myth #4: Hesitation, indecisiveness, backtracking, or changing one's mind are indications that a person is not transgender and their gender identity should not be taken too seriously.**

Youth can change their minds and still be trans\*. They may take five steps forward and 20 back. They may retract and go back into the closet and this indecisiveness (or appearance of indecisiveness) is normal. Coming out to family is scary. Coming out to yourself can be scarier. Give them the gift of the space to discover without letting the non-linear timeline de-legitimize their process. According to the National Center for Transgender Equality, a survey of 28,000 people showed only 8% of respondents de-transitioning. Only 3% de-transitioned permanently. Less than 1% de-transitioned because they realized transitioning wasn't right for them.

**🚫 Myth #5: If my child changes their mind later in life, it means I made a mistake to let them transition.**



A phase – a temporary process of discovery - can be a liberating period of one's life and lead to genuine growth. By honoring this growth, we allow youth a safe space to change their mind or change their identity without backlash or repercussion. By viewing change as a mistake, we might teach youth that identities must be set in stone and that gender must be permanent in order to be valid. This is a ton of pressure on a youth to expect them to know exactly who they are going to be for the rest of their life!

There is no such thing as perfect.

Describe instances when you thought something was a "mistake" but it turned out to be a valuable learning experience instead:

*Ex: I jokingly discouraged my transmasc child from wearing makeup and took it as a sign of their doubt when they did wear makeup. I noticed how this hurt my child and I learned the difference between gender expression and gender identity.*

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**🚫 Myth #6: There is a specific way to be trans.**

There is no right or wrong way to be transgender, non-binary or gender non-conforming! For example, some youth come out early in life while other people discover their true gender identity much later. Some take medical or surgical intervention while others choose not to. You and your mentee may have very similar or very different experiences with your youth and this is perfectly valid. A perspective of diplomacy, open-mindedness, and compassion can help you and your mentee get the most out of your relationship!

**🚫 Myth #7: Puberty blockers are dangerous.**

Puberty blockers can be used to alleviate gender dysphoria and give children time to consider their future. They allow teens to avoid going through the wrong puberty. They are reversible. They have been used for years to address precocious puberty. Once they are stopped, puberty kicks back in.

**⊘ Myth #8: Hormone Replacement Therapy is inappropriate for minors.**

After being on puberty blockers for a few years, teens need to go through puberty, either through the addition of testosterone or estrogen, or through the puberty they would have gone through had they never been on blockers.

**⊘ Myth #9: Trans-affirming care is equivalent to child abuse.**

Trans-affirming parental and medical care are recommended by all credible medical organizations as the best means of addressing gender dysphoria. It reduces both anxiety and depression for children and teens, and lowers the rate of youth attempting to die by suicide.

What are some myths (maybe myths you believed yourself at first) that you can debunk with your mentee?

Myth	Truth

# Common Ground: Empowerment and Resilience

*This is one of many sections in this manual that serves as an FYI for you as a mentor. These are concepts you can explicitly discuss with your mentee. We've provided a mentee handout for this purpose!*

## PROVIDING A SAFE SPACE

For non-binary and transgender kids and teens, family can be a vital source of support. Positive relationships with their parent(s) can be the single most critical factor for positive outcomes for these youth. Transgender and non-binary youth especially need a sense of validation, caring, closeness, warmth, safety, and comfort from their families in order to more favorably weather the discrimination they face outside the home. Parents should make home their children's safe place--a positive and accepting soft place to land, regardless of their age.

Every family is unique. Various dynamics--religion, race, culture, or financial status--impact the choices each parent makes. However, parents must weigh the effects of their parenting approach on their child's long-term psychological well-being. Trans kids and youth will forever remember the approach parents chose to take in relation to their gender.

Parents and caregivers of trans\* youth have the incredible opportunity to demonstrate unconditional love. Parents should make it clear that neither they, nor their love, can be lost by the child being their authentic self. In this way, the child can be assured they don't have to be something they are not to win their parent's love, then they can relax and feel sustained by that love.

Refusing to accept a trans\* child as they are and behaving in an unkind, punitive, or disrespectful manner communicates a lack of value. Practices that are damaging and increase the risk for trans\*children include, but are not limited to:

- Abuse (physical or verbal)
- Exclusion from family events
- Blocking access to supportive friends
- Denigration or ridicule
- Shame, silence, or secrecy
- Refusal to use preferred name and pronouns

## PROVIDING SUPPORT

Supportive parenting behaviors help children weather the challenges related to their gender identity and contribute to their long-term well-being. These practices include, but are not limited to:

- Gather information and educate yourself
- Create a supportive family environment
- Require respect within the family (including siblings)
- Allow child to naturally express their gender
- Support your teen in making decisions about their future
- Maintain open and honest communication
- Share with extended family and friends (with your child's permission)
- Assemble a team of supportive medical and mental healthcare providers
- Insist on safety and inclusion at school
- Search out role models and mentors
- Welcome your child's friends into your home

Each and every trans\* person's journey is unique. Parents of trans\* and non-binary children are being told that their stories--and the way in which they relate to their children--are wrong. It is difficult to adjust to this new reality. Parents often don't know what to do and are fearful that they are either making the wrong decision or, in some cases, "missing the boat" such as opting for puberty blockers in a timely manner, for example.

A common misconception is that a person's journey with gender is linear. There is no definitive start--destination--end progression for most trans\* individuals. Instead, it is a lifelong, sometimes chaotic journey. Many parents would much prefer a checklist and progress reports. But life continues in the midst of transition.

Transition typically occurs in two categories: social and medical. Social transition includes changing one's name and/or pronouns, gender expression (i.e. hair, clothes, nails, etc.), and sharing their new identity at school and/or work. Medical transition can include the use of puberty blockers beginning cross-hormone treatment, gender confirmation surgeries, and amending legal documents to reflect new name and/or gender marker.

Parents should understand that the child and, most especially, the teen should take the lead in their own transition and coming out. They are in the process of acquiring their own identity and this is only one aspect of their life. Their life continues in the midst of social and medical transition. Not everything in their life is about being trans\*--just as not everything in a cis-gender person's life is about their gender identity.

There is NO ONE RIGHT WAY to transition one's gender identity! Parents should be mindful that transition is not a project to be managed. It's not about "winning" and there is no finish line.

### **Making Space for Grief or Ambiguous Loss**

Parents may long for the time when their family life will just "return to normal." It's important to understand that "normal" is a false construct. Life will never go back to what they remember as normal. There's never a time, no matter how far into transition, that their child won't be trans\*.

It is perfectly understandable that this new reality causes grief for parents. But having clarity about what you're grieving is important. Be honest with yourself and ask, "What has died?" Your child is alive right in front of you, so you're not grieving the entirety of the child. You must come to terms with not seeing the child you had anymore. Chances are, your child's personality and heart will not change. Your child can be much more alive than ever, now that they are free to live as their authentic self. So acknowledging what is lost is important. There's a difference in grieving hopes and dreams than the loss of a person. Both of the following statements may be true for parents: "I am very sad I will not recognize you in the same way" *and* "I am so happy you are still here!"

When a child or teenager comes out as transgender, future planning sometimes gets interrupted. It is common for parents to lower their expectations as they grapple to come to terms with a new reality. Parents should resist the temptation to rescue their transgender children from the discomfort and potential danger of being in the world as their true selves. They don't need to be bubble wrapped. Resist the seduction of fixing all their problems as a response to their discomfort and challenge them to meet your scholastic and parental expectations regardless of their struggle with identity. As a parent, it can feel unbearable to see your child in pain and suffering but by maintaining

your expectations to perform in school (grades) and at home (chores) you will create resilience and a tolerance to adversity that will serve them well as adults.

As a parent, you are allowed to have needs--but own them as your needs. You get to own your part of this journey, but it's important for your emotional needs not to overshadow those of your child. Create for yourself an emotional holding space. As a parent, you are receiving the emotional spillover from your child (imagine a teacup overflowing onto the saucer). It's important to allow for some of your own emotional spillover as well. You need someone to hold space for you as a parent, whether it's a trusted friend or a professional therapist.

### **Making Space for Joy**

As a transgender child or teen is supported in their gender identity, positive changes in their demeanor and personality begin to emerge. These signs of life should be encouraging for parents and an assurance that their support is bearing good fruit in their children. Although the journey is long and often fraught with setbacks, over time, parents should be able to sleep more soundly knowing that their child is making positive steps toward a bright future.

Being transgender is only one part of your child's life, and it is only one part of your family's story. Imagining the possibilities that may ensue as a result of a happier, healthier child is really important. Just as a child is navigating their path toward a happier life, your family has the potential to be stronger than ever. The parent plays a critical role in making this future a reality so that you all may look back and see the goodness that came from your journey. Instead of saying, "...your hard life" replace that phrase with "...your sweet and beautiful life."

### **A Note about Religion**

Acceptance of gender diversity can vary tremendously across different religious communities. Faith or spiritual communities can provide a vital source of solace and support for transgender youth and their families. Inevitably, however, some use religion as a sword instead of the shield it was designed to be.

### **Religious-Based Condemnation**

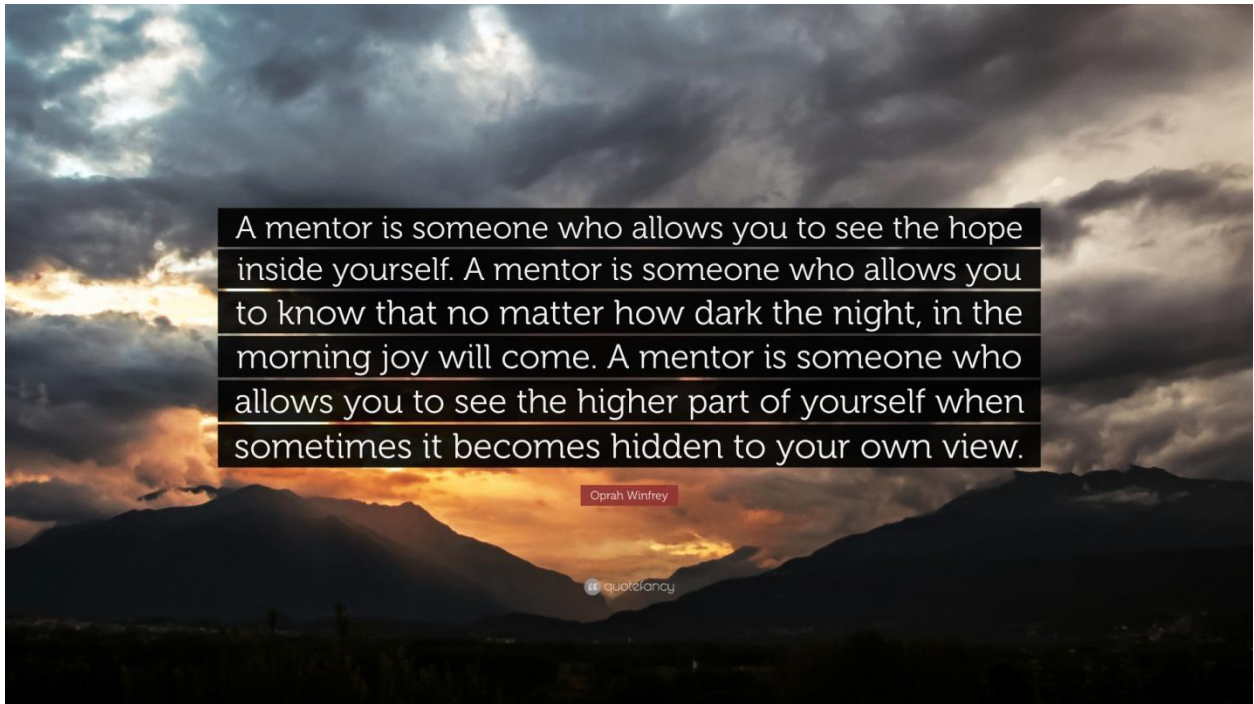
Hearing that being your true self is sinful and going against the teachings of your religion damages one's sense of inherent worth. Negative messages such as they are not loved just as they are or will punish them for living as their authentic self, greatly increases their health and mental risks.

Each of the major religions has a tremendous range of teachings. If you are unaware where your religious organization stands on gender diversity, find out. Ask to have a conversation with the pastor or other ministry leader. If you are told anything other than your youth is perfectly created and both welcomed *and* affirmed to be their authentic selves, you might need to seek out a different faith community where your family will be more included and better supported.

### **Supportive Religious or Faith Communities**

They exist! You do not have to choose between your faith and your child. If being a part of a faith community is something that is important to you and your family, choosing one that will sustain the spiritual growth of your transgender child is extremely important. Even if it means deconstructing some binary beliefs you've been taught in the past, it is worth the effort to reconcile your faith with your love and support of your child. There are resources to help you find a supportive faith community.

# What Is A Mentor?



As a mentor, you are making a personal commitment to support someone in their journey. You don't have to have all the answers. You don't have to be perfect: what you offer is your experience. You have probably gone through similar difficulties, you've asked similar questions, and you've had similar feelings as your mentee. You can help your mentee feel like they will get through it. With your support and encouragement, your mentee can reach their goals.

## **Brainstorm: Who were some of my mentors?**

Who are some people that believed in you growing up? What did they do that helped you grow?

*Ex: My college professor encouraged me to pursue a career in my chosen field*

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- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_

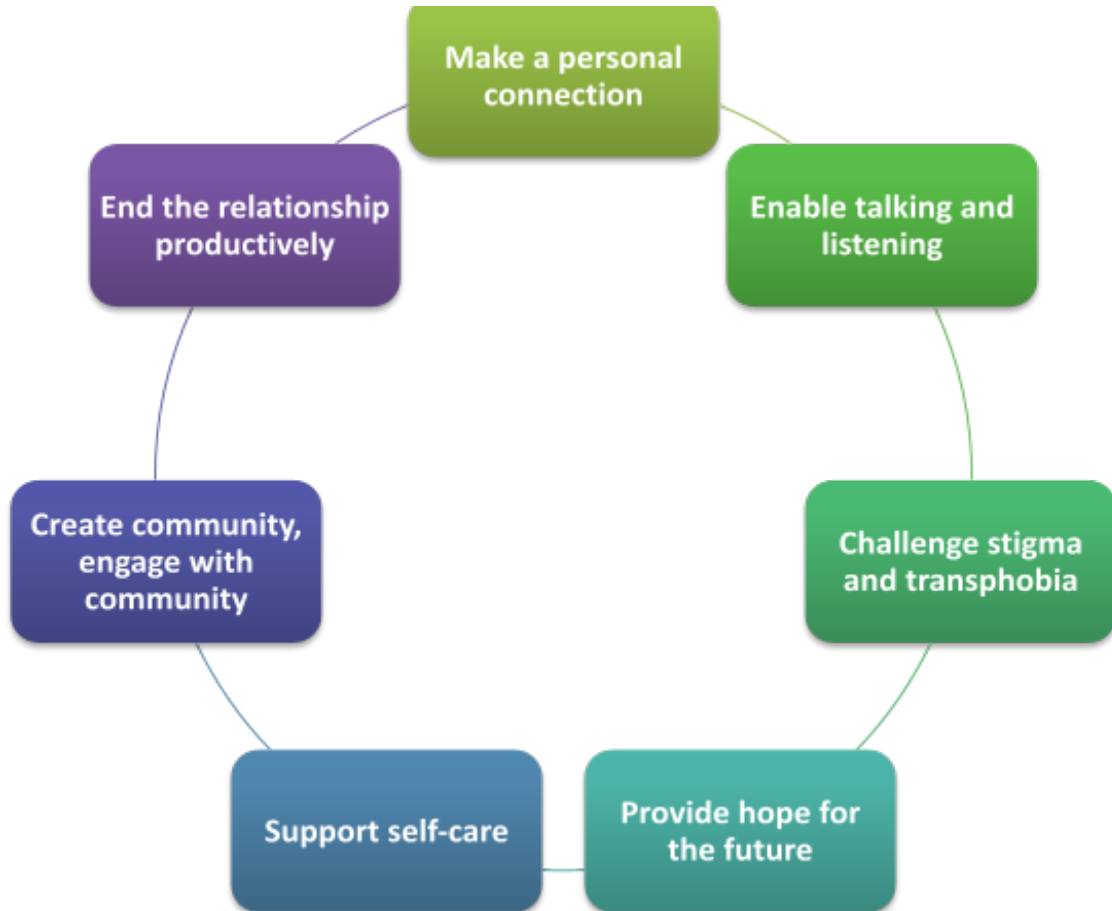




**Why do you want to be a mentor? Fill in your own.**

- To help my mentee access resources that I know about
- To help my mentee understand the journey from my experience
- To learn leadership skills
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_

# What Exactly Does A Mentor Do?



## 1. Make a Personal Connection

When you meet your mentee for the first time, you'll be starting a relationship from scratch. What can you share about yourself that will allow your mentee to better understand you? What are the life experiences that are important for you to disclose? What are the experiences that were formative in supporting your young person that you might share?

*Ex: I can share how I helped my young person come out to our extended family. It was scary but went way better than I expected. That might be comforting for my mentee to hear.*

I can share:

- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_

## 2. Enable Talking and Listening

At its core, mentorship opens a channel for deeper communication. How can you establish trust with your mentee so that you can have fulfilling and productive interactions with them? What makes it easier for your mentee to share difficult or scary thoughts with you?

*Ex: I can give my mentee my cell phone number and encourage them to text me if they're having a hard day.*

I can:

- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_

## 3. Challenge stigma and transphobia

As we previously explored, "it can be helpful to remind your mentee that being transgender is not synonymous with living a doomed life. One of the best forms of support is to change the negative language and, therefore, the "stigma of being transgender!"

*Ex: I can share with my mentee how I provided gentle education to my own mom when she said this was "just a phase."*

I can share:

- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_

#### 4. Provide hope for the future

When things are difficult, a mentor can be a shoulder to lean on, a sounding board for new ideas, or someone to help you keep going. What keeps you hopeful? What keeps you moving when things are tough? What can you tell your mentee to encourage them?

*Ex: I follow the Instagram hashtag #translove. Seeing other trans\* people in loving, supportive relationships reminds me that my young person can have a happy and connected life!*

I feel hopeful because:

- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_

#### 5. Support self-care

As a mentor, you can model healthy behaviors for your mentee. That includes the boring stuff like creating a schedule and getting enough sleep. But you probably have some fun and creative ideas for how to take care of yourself and lift your spirits when things are tough. What ideas can you model to encourage good habits in your mentee?

*Ex. When I have a big event the next day, I cook a big dinner and watch my favorite TV show to de-stress. It helps me sleep better and feel more relaxed. My mentee might find this strategy useful, too.*

I practice self care by:

- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_



## 6. Create community, engage with community

It can be important to have people around you that see you and your family in all of your complexity. These are people with whom you can share your struggles, but also enjoy social time. What groups or individuals have made you and your family feel welcome? What people or organizations can you introduce your mentee to?

*Ex: I can bring my mentee with me to the virtual Pflag meeting I attend. I can introduce them to the PFLAG facilitator and other families.*

I find community through:

- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_

I can introduce my mentee to:

- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_

## 7. End the relationship productively

Mentor/mentee relationships usually don't last forever. When your mentee is ready to move on from the relationship, or if you need to exit the program, it's important to have a formal acknowledgement that your dynamic is changing. Think about what closure you might need for yourself if you were the mentee. Maybe that means a final meeting where you sit and talk about what you both want going forward. Maybe it means setting up agreements about whether you will still talk/text in the future. Above all else, make sure your choices are collaborative and appropriate to the relationship between you and your mentee.

*Ex. I want my mentee to feel supported when they move on. I envision one final meet-up for lunch where we talk about my mentee's current hopes, and let them know they can reach out if they need further support.*

Initial brainstorm of potential last meeting ideas:

- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_

## Communication with Your Mentee

The Caregiver Mentoring Program serves families from different racial, cultural, religious, socioeconomic, and political backgrounds with middle and high school youth at different ages and different stages along their journeys. Ensure diplomacy to create a safe space to explore the unique set of challenges of raising a transgender youth. Give the benefit of the doubt and have an open mind when interacting with your mentee.

Mentors should take the initiative to email or call their mentees and set up the first meeting. Offer your name and pronouns when introducing yourself and ask for your mentee's availability to meet. Ideally, you will meet at least twice a month with your mentee. Mentors and mentees may meet more or less frequently, depending on the mentee's needs. You can also plan to text, call, Zoom, Google Hangouts, or Skype, in between those times.

If you and your mentee feel comfortable with in-person meetings, always meet in public places. A couple of potential meeting locations include coffee shops and parks. Once you and your mentee are comfortable with each other, you can plan to meet at different locations. Consider doing things that are *free or low cost* because you do not know your mentee's financial situation, and you should not feel compelled to pay for food or activities as a mentor.

If your mentee accidentally misgenders their youth, politely educate and correct the mentee while honoring their journey as a parent. Reassure your mentee that there is no right or wrong way to be transgender, non-binary, or gender non-conforming. Transitioning is a highly individualized journey. Some affirm their gender with hormones, dermatology, voice therapy, or surgeries, while others do not, and they are just as valid. There is no one-size-fits-all approach to being trans\*.

Nothing is definitive. Change happens, and that's okay. Whether a youth confides to their parent/caretaker about questioning their gender identity or changing their minds about transitioning is considered a success! Remind mentees of their resiliency. Empower the mentee to develop the skills needed to advocate for their youth. It is not a mentee's failure if their child changes their mind about transitioning. Learn from the child and continue to support them. Meet the child where they are.

## Encouraging Conversation

There are many strategies—verbal and non-verbal—that you can use to encourage conversation between you and your mentee. Remember that you can talk about yourself during these conversations, but the goal is to focus on *your mentee's experiences and needs*.

**Go through this list of communication strategies and put a star (\*) next to the ones you use consistently. Circle the ones you think you need to work on.**

Verbal Communication	Non-verbal Communication
Warm and friendly tone of voice	Using consistent eye contact
Asking open-ended (instead of yes-no) questions	Comforting gestures (hand touching, hugging)
Seeking clarification if you are unsure what a person said	Open body language (uncrossed arms, not slouched)
Asking for feedback: "How am I doing?"	Keeping my phone off/on silent
Listening more than I talk	Empathetic facial gestures (nods, smiling)
Encouraging my partner to keep speaking	Appropriate energy level for the conversation
Reflective listening: "It sounds like you're saying ...."	Not interrupting



# Helping Your Mentee With Communication Skills: Communicating with Others

Language is powerful, as previously mentioned there are two types of communication: verbal and nonverbal language. As a mentor you will be modeling supportive affirming language and behavior for your mentee. Throughout the mentor-mentee relationship, but particularly in the beginning, it is important to communicate compassion to your mentee and encourage them to also practice self-compassion during their journey.

*“With self-compassion, we give ourselves the same kindness and care we’d give to a good friend.” -Kristin Neff, PhD.*

## **Respectful Language**

Let's start with the concept of person-first language and the use of 'I statements.' Person-first language means using a descriptive adjective after the noun. For example, individuals in larger bodies, not large body individuals. Or youth who are transgender, not transgender youth. This form of language displays regard and shifts away from labeling language, which can be harmful.

The use of 'I statements' also takes ownership of your actions, thus showing respect to another by not placing responsibility for your actions/ feelings onto someone else. Using 'I statements,' will ideally take away the sense of blame and accountability onto the other party. This will help set a welcoming tone to the conversation. For example, 'I was really hurt by the comments you made about my outfit.' Or 'I felt unheard when you laughed at my question.'

Lastly, remember it is natural to want to avoid uncomfortable conversations. Honesty, vulnerability, and courage, all qualities a person typically possesses when initiating such talks, can be intimidating. Your mentee or even you yourself may not feel that you have mastered these characteristics and that is okay. The resilience within you should also be recognized. In fact, transparency with your mentee about your personal experience will provide a sense of common humanity, the recognition that they are not alone, and that others too have/are facing similar challenging conversations.

### Let's reflect!

Think of a time you had a difficult conversation:

How did you feel before? What did you think before?	
How did it play out? How close to your initial predictions was it?	
What was the end result? What, if anything, was surprising about the end result?	
What is something you would change about that experience?	

### Steps to Productive Conversations

A helpful tool that is taught in many dialectical behavior therapy groups is the interpersonal effectiveness tool called GIVE. Below is a breakdown of the acronym and is a great starting point when preparing for an official meeting with school staff or an unofficial talk with a loved one.

The practice of GIVE.

1. **Gentle**- Use a welcoming tone of voice, keep an open mind. If ever in doubt, recall the manners that we teach our youth. Do you recall the section before about verbal and nonverbal language? Remember that you want to provide an inviting environment through both language and behavior.
2. Acting **Interested**- Remember that a conversation is the exchange of information from two or more parties, therefore you want to hear the point of view from other participants. This can be difficult, especially when unhelpful thinking styles are present. For example, "I already know what they are going to say." This is an example of the unhelpful thinking pattern of jumping to conclusions. Remind yourself, you cannot predict the future. Ask yourself, are my thoughts based in reality?

In preparation of *acting interested* before a difficult conversation, it may be helpful to know what your triggers are. You can also think of triggers as *buttons*, "they just know what buttons to push!" Identifying triggers beforehand can help identify when to start using calming/ soothing techniques (breathing, taking a drink of water, etc.). This can also be a good indicator of when to briefly step away and come back or to end a meeting/ conversation.

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### **Let's Reflect!**

*What are my limits?*

*Remember to H.A.L.T. if you are Hungry, Angry, Lonely, Tired (or intoxicated).*

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3. **Validate**- Acknowledge statements, this communicates to the other party that they have been heard. Remember validation does not mean that you agree, it is seeking clarification that you understood what they said. This is when you would practice reflective listening, which was mentioned earlier.
4. **Easy Manner**- It is critical in conversations that you use emotion strategically. Therefore, before the meeting/ conversation identify who your audience is and then identify the purpose/ goal you are wanting to achieve.
  - Do I just want to share and be heard?
  - Am I seeking sympathy, praise, comfort, or celebration?
  - Are you searching for a solution to a problem, seeking help or advice?

Sometimes the use of directive/ insistent language is appropriate, but whenever in doubt, err on the side of caution and use directive open-ended questions. It is important that your approach supports the goal you are trying to achieve.

## **Assertiveness**

Just as person-first language is respectful, communicating assertively is another way to show respect. In fact, part of assertive language is displaying respectful disagreement.

Any conversation about your youth will no doubt have a personal connection and display emotion. Therefore, it may be beneficial to be mindful of how to strategically use emotion to support the objective of the conversation. An article from TeenHealth says, "People who speak assertively send the message that they believe in themselves. They're not too timid and they're not too pushy. They know that their feelings and ideas matter. They're confident." Channeling confidence in your verbal/ nonverbal language and showing passion in your tone will communicate the respect you have for yourself and others.

Using sarcasm, putting others down, and the use of 'you statements,' can allow the opportunity to lose the respect you have gained from others or introduce argumentative language. When disagreeing with another person, it is important to remember you do not want to lose your focus or theirs on your objective. Be clear and say what it is you need, state an observation of what happened free of accusation or spin.

Remember productive conversation = GIVE. It should also be mentioned that another part of any difficult conversation is acknowledging your resiliency. A common factor in both assertiveness and resilience is your mental strength. The mental strength of knowing your voice matters, the attitude that you matter. The strength and ability to keep having these conversations and advocate for your youth and all youth who identify as transgender or non-binary is undeniable resilient.

## **Advocacy**

Just as there is no one right way to be transgender, there is no one right way to be an advocate. It may be as private as living one's life authentically, which in and of itself can require a lot of courage. It may be as public as testifying at public hearings and rallies. Maybe it's joining a phone bank or calling school administrators.

### Let's reflect!

Think of a time you advocated for yourself or someone else and it went well:

How did you feel?	
How did it play out? How confident did you feel about whether you were making a difference?	
What was the end result? What, if anything, was surprising about the end result?	
What is something you would change about that experience?	

### Things to consider when thinking of and advising caregivers about advocacy:

- Caregivers who have recently discovered that their child is transgender may be ready not only to be their own child's advocate, but also to become an advocate for other families.
- Be aware of the impact your advocacy may have on your child. Check in frequently with whether they are comfortable with having you speak out about their identity. Be safe.
- Help your child learn to be their own advocate.
- If you're comfortable doing so, find other advocates and learn from them. Many organizations provide literature and Trans 101 classes, through which you can learn about the problems faced in your own community. Maybe your child's school has a good written policy but doesn't follow-up if a teacher or other students bully trans\* students.

- It's okay if you feel overwhelmed by all of the information and worried as to whether you'll make a mistake. The advocacy community is generally supportive and appreciative and will help you grow as an advocate. All they ask in return is that you truly care and that you're respectful.
- Identify what skills you bring to an advocacy role. Are you comfortable with public speaking? Do you enjoy writing editorials or letters? Do you have pre-existing connections with decision-makers like school administrators or city council members? Do you like to teach? Or draw?

**Identify some challenges faced by trans\*people in your community:**

- Transphobia in school, work, and public settings such as staring, failure to use name/pronouns or harassment
- Monetary, emotional, and time costs to update legal and social documentation
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_

We need advocates. But if you're not yet ready to take on that mantle, that's okay. What matters the most is that you provide love and support for your transgender child.

**Let's reflect!**

*Think of a time you advocated for yourself or someone else and it did not go well:*

How did you feel?	
How did it play out? How confident did you feel about whether you were making a difference?	
What was the end result? What, if anything, was surprising about the end result?	

What did you learn and what would you change about that experience?	
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## **COMMUNICATING AS PART OF ADVOCACY**

Sometimes, your advocacy work will involve reaching out to other family and community members. School teachers, staff, and board members are generally willing to - and have an obligation to - meet with you to discuss what's best for your child. Don't be afraid to just call and request an appointment. If you've got specific concerns, you can practice what you want to say ahead of time and turn to fellow advocates to actually roleplay different scenarios.

Similarly, your child's doctor is probably already set to discuss how best to provide trans-affirming medical care for your child and will be experienced in how to communicate with you about your child's needs. If your child's doctor is unwilling, unable, or untrained, you may want to seek a different doctor.

When it comes to communicating with your family members, there is no right way; you know your family the best. Not everyone will understand immediately, hurtful in their comments, and unwilling to support you and your child. It is reasonable for you to insist that family members respect your child by using correct names and pronouns. If you're getting resistance, a therapist should be able to help. The bottom line is that family members can help make a trans\* child feel love and support, or they can make a trans\* child feel unwelcome or invisible, but they can't make a trans\* child not be trans\*. Hopefully, as your extended family realizes the truth of this, they will choose to make your child happy. You may need to remind them about how any refusal to accept your child's gender identity can lead to increased anxiety and depression.

# Helping Your Mentee With Communication Skills: Communicating with Your Youth

*This is one of many sections in this manual that serves as an FYI for you as a mentor. These are communication skills you can explicitly discuss with your mentee. We've provided mentee handouts for this purpose!*

## Communicating with your Transgender Youth

Don't put pressure on yourself to always say the right thing at the right time. Rarely can the perfect response make the situation better anyway. What makes it better is connection. Keep connection, not perfection, the goal of communication.

The first act of communicating your support to your non-binary or transgender youth is to use their preferred name and pronouns, without exception, as soon as they request it. But don't get too attached to names or labels. They may shift and change. Just support them as they go through the process of figuring themselves out.

An important message for a youth to hear from their caregiver (and should be repeated over and over, even if the youth rolls their eyes).

*"Nothing about you is a disappointment to me. Your gender and/or sexuality is not a disappointment to me. It is a part of you. It is good. You are my child. I love you and I have always loved you. I do not understand all of this but I am willing to learn and I am seeking out information. I love you and we will get through this together, no matter what." (Shared by Colt Keo-Meier, Ph.D. anecdotally as a message his father repeated to him everyday upon his coming out)*

## Tools for Communicating

Every parent and child communicate in a way that is unique to them. Relationship, personality, and style all affect communication. A good practice is to talk openly and often even about little things so that when hard conversations arise, you already have an open line of communication. Still, it can be hard to have difficult conversations, especially about one's gender identity.

Teenagers are unlikely to initiate conversation, and if they do, it will most likely not be at a convenient time or place. Parents should be ready to listen when the opportunity



arises. Asking open-ended questions and listening empathetically will encourage conversation.

Parents of trans\* children and teens who are more reserved and hesitant to open up should look for creative solutions, like:

- **Beginning a journal** that can be passed back and forth with questions and answers. Simply leave the journal in each other's room with ample time to think through a response before passing it back. This takes the pressure off of knowing what to say in the heat of the moment.
- **Having conversations in the car** (nighttime is best) so that neither party is too distracted and eyes can be forward facing.
- **Suggesting an activity.** Children and teenagers sometimes open up while busy with an activity (cooking, board games, taking a walk) so that the pressure to talk is off a bit.
- **Talking one-on-one.** It can also be helpful not to outnumber the child by both parents sitting down at once for a talk, which can seem like "ganging up" even when that's not the intention at all.

Caregivers should appreciate the fact that they can't "understand" because they have never been in their children's shoes. It's ok to give up on trying to ever fully "understand." Because one doesn't have to fully understand to love and support their child. It's important for parents to try and suspend their perspective and place themselves on "pause" so that they can effectively listen to their child's point of view.

Your child is the best expert on their own experience. Listen to them much more than you listen to other parents or "experts." Let them help educate you. Most likely, especially if they are teenagers, they've been researching a while and can share their wisdom and resources.

## **Empathetic Listening**

Empathetic listening requires parents to embrace vulnerability. Parents are the adults in the conversation and should not expect the child to appreciate your efforts. Parents should at all times keep in mind the impact their words and reactions have on their children.

Empathetic listening does not include:

- ✘ Giving advice
- ✘ Interrogation
- ✘ Explanation
- ✘ Pity or “feeling bad for”
- ✘ One-upping
- ✘ Fixing
- ✘ Correcting
- ✘ Minimizing

Never use “Why?” (there's no answer, and it puts them on the defensive.)

Never use “If you would...” “Just...” or “At least...” (this comes off as accusatory.)

Instead of “What's wrong?” or “Cheer up!” ask instead, “How are you feeling?”

Empathetic listening responses do include:

- ✓ “I see...”
- ✓ “I hear...”
- ✓ “It sounds like...”
- ✓ “I imagine...”
- ✓ “It looks like...”
- ✓ “It must be...”

## Confidentiality

Confidentiality is an extremely important part of the mentorship program. Ideally you will build a relationship based on trust and respect over time. In order to respect the privacy of your mentee, it is important not to repeat any information that your mentee shares with you **unless you are concerned about the safety of their youth**. This means keeping their personal thoughts and feelings private. If it sounds like gossip, then it probably is.

Another element of confidentiality is how you interact with your mentee in public. You will want to decide with your mentee if and how you will acknowledge your mentor-mentee relationship. For example, can you post about it on social media? If you see your mentee in the movie theater when they are out with friends, will they want to approach you to say hello?

If you haven't discussed a specific situation with your mentee, err on the side of caution. That means keeping your distance from your mentee outside of mentoring activities and only responding if your mentee approaches you in public.

## Maintaining Healthy Boundaries

While mentoring relationships are largely positive, sometimes unexpected and difficult situations can come up between you and your mentee. Clear personal boundaries are an extension of your mentoring values, because they guide your actions in difficult situations. You should decide what boundaries are important to you before being confronted with a difficult situation. Planning in advance prevents you from being caught off guard and will help you rehearse your desired response.

**Here are some questions about areas where you might need to set boundaries:**

- How much time are you willing to offer your mentee monthly?
- Do you feel comfortable interacting with your mentee's family? For how long or in what circumstances?
- How late at night can your mentee contact you?
- Are there any topics you do not want to talk about with your mentee?

**What are some boundaries that are important to you?**

*Ex: I don't want to take calls from my mentees on the weekend, unless it's an emergency.*

Some personal boundaries I have are:

- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_

***As part of your participation in the caregiver mentoring program, you may be asked to sign additional confidentiality and ethics agreements.***

# Self Care

You have a life, both personal and professional, outside of your mentoring responsibilities. In order to effectively balance these competing commitments, you need to be thoughtful about taking care of yourself. Some people think “self care” needs to be fancy, indulgent activities like taking long bubble baths or getting manicures. But self care can be any activity, however boring or simple, that lets you function at your best.

Some examples of self care:

- Getting 8 hours of sleep a night
- Playing with your pet when you are stressed
- Taking any prescribed medications
- Eating delicious and healthy meals that make your body feel good



What are some forms of self care that you enjoy?

I enjoy \_\_\_\_\_

I feel better when I \_\_\_\_\_

Self-care can also involve self-reflection. When we understand ourselves, we are better able to support others. You know how airline safety instructions tell you to “put on your own mask before helping the person next to you?” The same principle applies to our mental health and wellbeing outside of emergencies. You need to know who you are and what makes you feel good/bad, so that you can distinguish **what you need** from **what your mentee needs**.

# Mentor/Mentee Agreement

Please take a moment to read and sign our mentoring agreement. Please let the program contacts (listed on the next page) know if you have questions or concerns about anything in the agreement.

As a Mentor I agree to...

- meet virtually or safely in-person with my mentee at least twice per month
- never spend my own money on my mentee in the course of mentoring
- abstain from using drugs or alcohol while engaging in mentoring activities
- never get involved romantically or sexually with my mentee
- never speak with my mentee's child or children unless I am invited and my mentee is present
- reach out to a program contact if I feel uncomfortable, if my mentee expresses thoughts of suicide or harm to another person, or if there is an emergency or accident

As a Mentee I agree to...

- meet virtually or safely in-person with my mentor at least twice per month
- never spend my own money on my mentor in the course of mentoring
- abstain from using drugs or alcohol while engaging in mentoring activities
- never get involved romantically or sexually with my mentor
- never let my mentor speak with my child unless I am present and both myself and my child are consenting
- reach out to a program contact if I feel uncomfortable, if my mentor expresses thoughts of suicide or harm to another person, or if there is an emergency or accident.

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Mentor or Mentee

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Date

## Program Contact Information:

If you have any questions, concerns, or need help with your mentoring responsibilities, you can reach out to:

Summer Hough, LPC  
[summer.hough@outyouth.org](mailto:summer.hough@outyouth.org)  
or  
Cece Flores, LMSW  
[cece.flores@outyouth.org](mailto:cece.flores@outyouth.org)

Jo Ivester  
Caregiver Mentoring Workgroup  
Member  
[jo@joivester.com](mailto:jo@joivester.com)

## Additional Resources:

**Out Youth's Support for Families** - Helpful resources during difficult political times for families of trans youth, and also for more peaceful times.  
(<https://www.outyouth.org/support-for-families>)

## Outline For First Mentoring Session

### Introductions

- a. Share your name and pronouns to model this for your mentee
- b. To your comfort, disclose why you decided to be a mentor in this program and any relevant aspects of your experience from your caregiver journey and your family you would like to share.
- c. At this time, you can also invite the mentee to ask any questions they have about the mentoring program or your role as a mentor.

### Goal Setting

- a. Invite your mentee to share to their comfort what they want to get out of this mentoring relationship. What goals do they have?
- b. They can either summarize and share the thoughts from their journaling if they elected to do so OR
- c. You can have a discussion of the following questions. *What goals do you have for yourself as you enter this mentoring relationship? At the end of your time with your mentor, what is the one thing you hope has changed for you, your trans child, or within your family?*
- d. As the mentor, listen carefully to what you mentee has to share, reflecting back themes you've heard or summarize your understanding of their goals.

### Strengths and Support System (Optional, time permitting. Could also discuss the following week)

- a. Invite your mentee to share who has supported them through this process thus far, and to reflect upon what their ideal support system might look like.
- b. Invite your mentee to share the ways they have already been supporting their young person. What has been the easiest part of affirming their youth?

### Logistics and Closing

- a. As needed, confirm with your mentee your meeting schedule and location(s).
- b. Warmly thank your mentee for taking the time to meet with you and be a part of this program.



## Journal Prompts

### Prompts for First Scheduled Meeting:

*Prior to first meeting with your mentee, you can send the following prompt via text or email, and invite them to reflect before your first scheduled meeting. Explain that keeping a journal and responding to prompts for the first meeting and following meetings is strictly voluntary.*

For mentee: What goals do you have for yourself as you enter this mentoring relationship? At the end of your time with your mentor, what is the one thing you hope has changed for you, your trans child, or within your family?

For mentor: What made you decide to be a mentor in this program? What are some relevant aspects of your experience from your parenting journey and your family you would be comfortable sharing with your mentee?

### Prompts for Second Meeting:

Mentee: What has been the hardest part of affirming your youth's gender identity? What has been the easiest part of affirming your youth?

Mentor: What was the hardest part of affirming your youth and how was this overcome? Share any relevant positive and negative efforts/outcomes in your growth process.

### Prompts for Third Meeting:

*\*the concept of "creating space" means allowing the youth to be their authentic self, whether it be not commenting on their music choices (no matter how grating they are to our ear), or calling them the right name/pronouns to allowing them to be who they are regardless of the gender stereotypes related to their gender identity)*

Mentee: In what ways are you creating space for your young person to be their authentic selves? How might you be limiting space for your young person? What is it in yourself, your family or your culture that makes it difficult to make that space for your youth?

Mentor: What ways did you notice you might be/were limiting space for your young person? How did you notice and how was this overcome? What about ways you limited space for yourself in growth? How did you notice and how was this overcome?

### Prompts for Fourth Meeting:

Mentee: How will you empower your young person inside the home? Are there places outside the home where your youth may feel "othered"?

Mentor: How do you empower your youth in places where they may feel “othered?”

**Prompts for Fifth Meeting:**

Mentee: How are you going to/how have you taken care of yourself during the week?

Mentor: What are some of your favorite self care activities that you can share with your mentee?

**Prompts for Sixth Meeting:**

Mentee: What have been some bright spots throughout this journey with your young person?  
When have you noticed your youth experiencing gender euphoria or joy in their self expression?

Mentor: How has the relationship between you and your young person grown/developed? When have you noticed your youth experiencing gender euphoria or joy in their self expression? Have you noticed any trans superpowers (things your youth has gained from growing to accept, love and defend themselves?)

**Prompts for Seventh Meeting:**

Mentee: Write a letter to your past self telling them what they may have needed to hear.  
(Remember to be kind with that person as they brought you to this point!)

Mentor: What are some of the biggest changes that you see in yourself as a caregiver?

**Prompts for Eighth Meeting:**

Mentee: How much closer are you to the goals you established in the beginning? In what ways have your goals and intentions changed with this program?

Mentor: How was your experience as a mentor? What ways have you noticed your own growth over the last few weeks?

**Additional or Alternative Prompt Ideas:**

Mentee: Think about what it would be like to try and affirm your child in one of the ways you find most challenging. Reflect on what feelings and thoughts this brings up. How might your child react to your attempts? Think of ways you can challenge yourself to try the hard thing this week and ways you can encourage yourself to do so (like tapping your support system!)

**Example of Open-Ended Questions or General Prompts to Ask your Mentee to Encourage Conversations**

Potential questions for first sessions:

- Tell me about your experience with your young person coming out.
- Describe the relationship between you and your young person.
- Describe the relationship with your youth and other members of the family.
- What are some fears or concerns that you have going into this new journey?
- What do you need in order to get to a better place so that you can support your young person?
- What is working in your relationship with your young person? What is not working?
- What are some of your strengths as a caregiver?
- How can you take care of yourself as you move through this difficult time?

To start a session:

- Discuss the journal prompt given last week
- Weekly reflection
  - What was your greatest accomplishment this past week?
  - What did you struggle with this past week?
  - What is one small goal that you have for yourself and your young person this week?

General conversation starters

- How can I help you this week?
- What are your concerns this week?
- What has been on your mind that you would like to process?

Potential Discussion Topics:

- LGBTQ+ Basics
- Supportive parenting tips
- Checking in on your young person's mental health
- Support systems
- Unsupportive Family members
- School Concerns
- Legal concerns, as legislation and state-wide policies change
- Medical Concerns (ie going on hormones)
- Self care (for parent and young person)
- Creating a coping toolkit

## Tips For Mentors

### Mentee Feedback

- Assessing your privilege - intersectionality visual - ask the mentee if there are cultural differences between you that they would like you to know about. (add this question to the appendix)
- Only the mentee will know what is best for their family:
  - let the mentee decide what they want to do and how much they can handle.
  - help them experiment to find what works for them -- Don't give them directives.
  - they need your listening ear and to know they are doing just fine.