



## READY TO GO: MENTOR TRAINING TOOLKIT

# Setting Boundaries





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# Understanding Mentoring Relationship Boundaries

Boundaries play an important role in mentoring relationships. The term *boundaries* refers to the rules, guidelines, limits and standards related to behavior (Search Institute, 2007). In mentoring, boundaries help youth, mentors and parents understand the expectations each party brings to the match. Young people need consistent boundaries and realistic expectations to feel safe physically and emotionally (Rhodes, 2002).

Programs will set some boundaries through their rules and policies. Other boundaries will vary from match to match. A significant task for every mentor involves setting and modeling appropriate boundaries with the mentee and his or her parents. It's also critical that mentors honor the boundaries of both mentees and parents. For these reasons, programs need to provide mentors with training to help them understand the importance of appropriate boundaries and to help them work with young people to define the boundaries that will be set in their mentoring relationships (Morrow & Styles, 1995).

The activities in this module are designed to help mentors explore their personal boundaries and determine what boundaries need to be set within their mentoring relationships.

How does it feel when you know that you have crossed another person's boundary? It can be pretty uncomfortable. For a young person, it can be confusing because they feel a shift in the other person's mood, but often don't understand why. This is why it is important to help mentors understand the personal boundaries and other boundaries that are appropriate to set with their mentees. This clarification can help mentors communicate about boundaries before the mentee crosses any of them.

Training can also help mentors learn ways to address boundary issues with young people and their parents and help them understand appropriate and inappropriate roles (Reglin, 1998).

Young people need to have appropriate boundaries throughout all of their social systems (Scales & Leftert, 2004). Mentors and mentees should negotiate



boundaries carefully because, while having no boundaries can harm the relationship, having too many can incapacitate the relationship (Zachary, 2000). Zachary also notes that mentees may misinterpret existing boundaries if they are not consistent or if too few boundaries are set.

Many boundaries are cultural, and it's helpful to have a conversation with volunteers about how they can set boundaries without judging behaviors (Jucovy, 2000). For instance, a young person may use language that the mentor finds offensive. Mentors need to remember that sometimes such language has been learned in the home. Instead of labeling the language and those who use it as "bad," mentors should address how they are uncomfortable with that language and ask that mentees not use it during their time together. Depending on the relationship, a mentor may take it further and help the mentee understand how that language may not be appropriate in certain settings and why. It is critical that mentors not make judgments about those who use inappropriate language.

Young people learn about boundaries by watching adults. Mentors should model proper boundaries and help young people set their own limits. Freedman (1993) notes that "youth . . . place a high premium on having their particular boundaries respected . . . When mentors ask young people personal questions before a solid relationship has been established, the most common response is silence. Young people will clam up." Therefore, when setting boundaries, mentors must remember to also respect their mentees' needs for privacy.

Having and setting boundaries are two different things. If a person has ever felt taken advantage of,

chances are that their boundaries were crossed – perhaps because the boundaries were not set and reinforced at the onset of the relationship. We convey our boundaries with others through verbal and nonverbal communication. Here are a few examples:

- ▶ Marcus steps back when someone invades his personal space.
- ▶ Kenisha stiffens up when someone offers an unwelcome hug or sign of affection.
- ▶ Molly’s facial expression shows disdain for language that she finds to be offensive.
- ▶ Susan ends a social networking friendship with a colleague who frequently posts political opinions.
- ▶ José interrupts the conversation if someone starts to share “too much information.”
- ▶ Kea tells people not to call after a certain time at night.
- ▶ Harold does not respond to work requests outside of work hours.

Many people don’t often think about their personal boundaries. Before talking to mentors about setting boundaries in the mentoring relationship, it’s important to introduce the concept and help them explore the boundaries that they already have with various people in their lives.

Our boundaries generally vary between relationships. For instance, consider boundaries related to personal space. You likely have people in your life with whom you are comfortable standing or sitting in close proximity, while there are others that you prefer to keep at a greater distance. The “Relationships: Where Do They Stand?” activity looks at how a person’s comfort level with different behaviors is affected by the type of relationship and emotional bond that exists between people. The activity challenges potential mentors to determine what type of relationship they will have with their mentees in comparison with their other relationships.

It is also important to note that we all have different boundaries. Some people have very rigid boundaries about their time, while others are rarely concerned with time. Every person has his or her own comfort level with different behaviors, and that comfort level changes depending on the context of the relationship.

An added layer to the boundaries conversation is that of social and professional expectations. A person may not have strong boundaries regarding punctuality;

however, in his or her professional life the person may need to adjust to meet professional requirements for being on time. The “Cross the Line” activity gives potential mentors a chance to examine their personal boundaries and how they differ depending on the relationship.

The mentoring relationship likely will be different than other relationships that volunteers have had. For this reason, volunteers need training to help them understand the nature of the mentoring relationship and the types of boundaries that are appropriate within these relationships.

Mentors should also be prepared for young people to test boundaries (Jucovy, 2000). Testing boundaries is natural, and mentors need to reinforce the boundaries that have been set.

Young people are not the only ones who test boundaries. For instance, Jucovy notes that teachers in school-based programs will often encourage mentors to tutor mentees rather than focus on their relationships. Parents may ask to borrow money or see mentors as potential child care providers. The “Boundaries Brainstorm” activity provides participants with a chance to consider what boundaries they will set with their mentees and the mentees’ parents or guardians. The activity also provides an opportunity for potential mentors to consider how they will communicate their boundaries and what the consequences will be if they are crossed.

“This Is a Test” further explores boundary testing, allowing mentors to role play scenarios in which mentees push or cross their boundaries. Through this, mentors can practice reacting to these situations in an appropriate way that doesn’t discourage the young person from expressing themselves and that fosters greater understanding between the mentee and mentor.

The “Black, White and Shades of Gray” activity features video clips that provide examples of boundaries. Participants will discuss the pros and cons of the boundary decisions that are portrayed in the video segments. Some of the segments highlight how easy it is to cross your own boundaries in an unexpected situation. The activity encourages volunteers to start their relationships with strong boundaries and over time – if agreed upon by all parties – to show greater

flexibility. For instance, mentors in a program that allow for mentees to visit mentors at home may still choose not to have mentees visit their homes at first. Over time, mentors may decide – with input from mentees and parents – to arrange occasional home visits.

The “Who Are You Online?” activity explores online boundaries. In the age of Facebook and other social networking sites, mentors and young people need to consider their online boundaries. For instance, should mentors and mentees be Facebook friends? Should mentors and mentees’ parents or guardians? What information is shared online and is it appropriate in the context of the mentoring relationship? These are fairly new questions that we must all consider.

The “Rules, What Good Are They?” activity explores the idea that boundaries are, in a way, the “rules” of a relationship, while social boundaries are the rules that govern daily interactions. Mentors explore the necessity of these boundaries by exploring what happens in a game when no rules are given. Program boundaries, like personal boundaries and the rules of a game, exist for a reason even if they may initially seem inconvenient before a mentor fully understands them.

When setting boundaries, volunteers must consider organizational rules, personal preferences, societal expectations and the well-being of their mentees. The task of setting boundaries may seem daunting to new mentors, and training should provide ample opportunities for discussion on this topic. Mentors should have copies of all program rules and expectations before this session, because these rules and expectations will inform their decisions related to boundaries.



## REFERENCES:

Not all of the following sources are cited in the text; however, we drew on them and recommend them to you as you learn more about mentoring and boundaries.

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## UNDERSTANDING MENTORING RELATIONSHIP BOUNDARIES HANDOUT:

# Boundaries in Mentoring Relationships



## Why is it important to set boundaries?

Setting boundaries is healthy for both you and those around you. You will likely have different boundaries with different people in your life, and it's important that you're clear about what those boundaries are so that the people around you understand your limitations. Boundaries provide a structure for your relationships.

Undefined, weak or unenforced boundaries can result in:

- ▶ Development of a victim mentality.
- ▶ Inability to say no.
- ▶ Extreme dependency.
- ▶ Blaming.
- ▶ Feelings of over responsibility.
- ▶ One-sided relationships with no give and take.

Examples of healthy boundaries include:

- ▶ I care about you, but I cannot take away your problems.
- ▶ I need time to be alone.
- ▶ I will not be the object of rage.
- ▶ I can disagree with you and still care about you.
- ▶ I form my own opinions.
- ▶ I only accept phone calls until 9 p.m. unless there is an emergency.
- ▶ I will not allow others to make me feel guilty or bad about myself.
- ▶ I will not do something for you that you are able to do yourself.

As a mentor, you should consider what your boundaries are before you are matched. What are the limits of this relationship? By setting and maintaining healthy boundaries, you will avoid burnout. Mentors who

don't set strong boundaries often feel used, disrespected and taken advantage of. The mentees they work with often feel confused. Inappropriate boundaries are harmful to both people in the relationship.

It's easier to set strong boundaries and relax them over time than it is to strengthen weak boundaries. Talk to other mentors and the program coordinator for help in setting boundaries.

## I will do this just this once . . .

**STOP!** Think before you use these words. If you're tempted to do something "just this once," chances are it's something that you are uncomfortable with (that goes against your boundaries). Many mentors regret saying these words because they soon learn that it's harder to say no once they've said yes. Soon you may find yourself caught in a tough situation and feeling resentful. Remember that:

- ▶ Young people need boundaries to feel safe, healthy and cared for.
- ▶ Young people grow and mature by testing the boundaries adults set.
- ▶ Once a child or teen learns what works to break you down, he or she will use it in the future. (For example, if you respond to the incessant begging or pouting, the person will beg and pout in the future to get what he or she wants.)



## ACTIVITY:

# Cross the Line

**DESCRIPTION:**

This activity will introduce the concept of boundaries within relationships. Participants will explore the topic of boundaries in both personal and mentoring relationships.

**OBJECTIVES:**

After completing this activity, participants will be able to:

- ▶ Define and explain the concept of boundaries.
- ▶ Identify and reflect on personal boundaries.
- ▶ Discuss boundaries within a mentoring relationship.

**MATERIALS:**

- ☐ One rope or tape (long enough to divide the training area in half)
- ☐ List of scenarios
- ☐ Discussion questions

**TIME:**

20–30 minutes

**SETTING:**

Large room or open space outdoors

**AUDIENCE:**

Adult and peer mentors

**PROCEDURE:****Before the activity:**

1. Review the background information at the beginning of the “Setting Boundaries” module and these activity directions.
2. Split the room or space you will be using in half using the rope or tape.
3. Review the list of scenarios and situations listed below. Select the items that you would like to use when facilitating this activity, and write down additional scenarios that are appropriate for your program and audience.

**During the activity:**

1. Read aloud or paraphrase the following:

*This rope (or tape) acts as a line dividing the room into two sections: This side (indicate one side) represents a comfortable area and the other side (indicate the opposite side) represents an uncomfortable area. The line represents a neutral area where you may be unsure of how you feel or lack strong feelings on the topic. I’m going to read a number of different scenarios or situations you most likely have found yourself in during your life. Reflect on these situations, and choose which side of the line to stand on – whether you’re comfortable or uncomfortable with that situation. Move to the area that best represents your comfort level. Your distance from the line represents your level of comfort or discomfort. For example, if I say, “Hugging a boss or superior,” you would move to the area that best describes how you feel about hugging your boss or superior. If I stand all the way against the wall right here (move to the appropriate spot), that would mean that I’m really uncomfortable with the idea of hugging my boss or superior. The closer that I move to the middle, the less uncomfortable I am (continue walking toward the line as you talk). As I cross the line, I am getting into an area where I’m okay with the idea of hugging my boss. There are no right or wrong answers; these are all situations that will vary from person to person. Do you have any questions? Please remain quiet throughout this activity so that you don’t influence others. Okay, stand up and we’ll get started.*



2. Read the items you have selected from the following list as well as any that you have added. Give participants time to decide their comfort level in each situation and time to position themselves accordingly.

Scenarios for both adult and peer mentors:

- ▶ Friends or acquaintances stop by with no notice.
- ▶ A child swears or uses vulgar language directed at you.
- ▶ A family member borrows something of yours without asking.
- ▶ Someone calls you with a non-emergency at midnight.
- ▶ A friend hugs you.
- ▶ Your boyfriend, girlfriend or spouse is reading your text messages.
- ▶ Your mentee wants to be Facebook friends with you.
- ▶ Your mentee asks for your cell phone number.
- ▶ An acquaintance makes a racist or sexist remark.
- ▶ A friend asks you to loan her some money.
- ▶ Someone you just met hugs you to say good-bye.

Scenarios for adult mentors:

- ▶ A colleague swears or uses vulgar language in the course of regular conversation.
- ▶ A friend or family member is 15 minutes late to meet you for coffee.
- ▶ A houseguest uses some of your personal hygiene products.
- ▶ A colleague asks you to tell your boss a lie so that he doesn't get in trouble.
- ▶ Your sibling asks you to lie to help pull off a surprise for his or her spouse.
- ▶ Your boss tells you that you need to work late or over the weekend with little notice.
- ▶ You are out for lunch with coworkers and they start to gossip about other colleagues.
- ▶ A coworker borrows your stapler without asking.

Scenarios for peer mentors:

- ▶ A friend tells you he or she is being verbally abused by another friend or dating partner.
- ▶ Your friend has bruises and tells you that his or her boyfriend or girlfriend did it.
- ▶ Your parent reads your personal email.
- ▶ Your friend tells you he or she is planning to meet an online acquaintance.
- ▶ Your friend tells you he or she is going to run away from home.
- ▶ Your sister tells you of plans to skip school.
- ▶ Your friend asks for your help in running away from home.
- ▶ Your friend asks you to skip school with him or her.
- ▶ A friend is texting you every night at 3 a.m.
- ▶ An acquaintance asks you for money.
- ▶ A friend sends you a text message that is spreading a rumor about another friend.
- ▶ A friend tags you in a picture on Facebook that is unflattering.





3. When finished reading the list of scenarios, invite participants to go back to their seats. Pick up the rope or point to the tape.

*This room divider represents boundaries. When you're uncomfortable with a situation, it often means that someone or something has crossed a personal boundary. One definition of the word "boundary" is "any line or thing that sets a limit." Perhaps this is why people may say that someone "crossed the line" when referring to a behavior that crossed a boundary.*

## PROCESSING:

Guide participants through a discussion about boundaries, using some or all of the questions and key points that follow. Be sure to give participants time to think about and respond to the questions.

### Discussion questions:

- ▶ Why do you think we did this activity?
- ▶ When I talked about a situation that was uncomfortable for you, did you have any physical response? (tightening of the stomach, blushing, clenched jaw)
- ▶ The situations each focused on different people – family, friends, acquaintances, coworkers. How much did your response depend on your relationship with the person who was mentioned?
- ▶ If someone "crosses the line" with you, how do you feel? What do you do?
- ▶ Can you remember a time when you could tell that you crossed someone's boundaries? How did you know? How did it make you feel?
- ▶ How might a young person react if you cross his or her boundaries?
- ▶ Why is it important for you to know your own boundaries within a relationship? What about within a mentoring relationship?
- ▶ How can you convey your own boundaries to others?
- ▶ How can you communicate your boundaries with your mentee and his or her parents?

### Key points:

- ▶ Everyone's boundaries are going to be different, which is acceptable. However, in order to foster healthy and acceptable relationships, some specific boundaries must be in place.
- ▶ Mentors help young people learn healthy boundaries by modeling healthy boundaries.
- ▶ Boundaries help people feel safe within relationships. They let us know what is allowed and what is not allowed, as well as what to expect.
- ▶ When we allow other people to act outside of our boundaries, we often feel used and resentful. It is healthy for young people to learn how to communicate their boundaries to avoid feeling like this.





- ▶ Boundaries are capable of changing depending on experiences (a bad day may lead to someone not wanting to discuss something that was previously an acceptable conversation topic), the people involved and the closeness of their relationship, or situational details (a given topic may be fine to talk about – but in a different setting). Boundaries may also change over time as the closeness of a relationship changes. This fluidity allows mentors and mentees to relax certain boundaries as they become more comfortable with one another.
- ▶ If your mentee oversteps one of your boundaries, he or she will likely be able to tell that something is wrong. If you don't communicate what the problem is, the mentee may mistakenly think that you are angry. It's important to be firm in setting boundaries, but you must also realize that young people will test boundaries as a natural part of their development.
- ▶ Young people often shut down when others cross their boundaries. It's important to find out what was said or done and apologize for crossing the line when this happens.

## VARIATIONS:

- ▶ Repeat the activity after discussing boundaries and using scenarios involving relationships between young people and parents such as those that follow. Add scenarios that are common within your program.
  - ▶ Your mentee and his or her parent call you at work.
  - ▶ Your mentee visits your home.
  - ▶ You're having dinner with your mentee's family.
  - ▶ You and your mentee attend program-sponsored group activities.
  - ▶ A friend asks you for money.
  - ▶ Your mentee uses vulgar language.
  - ▶ You use vulgar language in front of your mentee.
  - ▶ Your mentee hugs you.
  - ▶ You pay for your mentee when going out.
  - ▶ You go to a movie with your mentee.
  - ▶ You receive frequent phone calls from your mentee's parent, who wants to talk about your mentee.
  - ▶ Your mentee wants you to include his or her friends on your weekly outing.
  - ▶ You exchange small birthday or holiday gifts with your mentee.
  - ▶ You talk to your mentee's teacher to see how he or she is doing.
  - ▶ Your adult neighbor invites you to a movie.
  - ▶ You offer advice to your mentee's parent.
  - ▶ Your mentee sends you a friend request on Facebook.
  - ▶ Your boss or another adult sends you a friend request on Facebook.
  - ▶ Your mentee's parent sends you a friend request on Facebook.
- ▶ Ask participants to suggest scenarios, allowing them to see how others in the room might set different boundaries in the same situation.



## ACTIVITY:

# Relationships: Where Do They Stand?



### DESCRIPTION:

This brief activity will encourage participants to think of people in their lives in context of emotional proximity. It is an exercise designed to begin a conversation about the range of boundaries that exist and to begin to explore how boundaries influence interactions.

### OBJECTIVES:

The participants will:

- ▶ Determine the level of closeness they'll want to seek with their mentees.

### MATERIALS:

- ☐ "Relationships: Where Do They Stand?" handout (one per participant)
- ☐ Writing utensils
- ☐ Flip chart paper and markers (optional)
- ☐ Tape

### TIME:

15–30 minutes (Note that this activity has the potential to run significantly longer if the facilitator encourages a deep discussion of the discussion questions and the key points.)

### SETTING:

A room with chairs and tables with a surface to write on

### AUDIENCE:

Adult or peer mentors or both

## PROCEDURE:

### Before the activity:

1. Review the background information at the beginning of the "Setting Boundaries" module.
2. Review activity directions.
3. Gather the other materials you will need for the activity.
4. Print one copy of the "Relationships: Where Do They Stand?" handout for each participant.
5. Prepare a list of suggested people for participants to think about on flip chart paper (optional) and post it where participants can see it during the activity. Some suggested individuals include a significant other, children, parents, siblings, neighbors, clergy or spiritual leader, coach, teacher, scout leader, supervisor, store clerk, librarian, specific friends, and taxi or bus driver. Change this list as is suitable for the activity audience (adult or peer mentors or both).

### During the activity:

1. Ensure that each participant has a copy of the "Relationships: Where Do They Stand?" handout and a writing utensil.
2. Read aloud or paraphrase the following:

*This activity will help us begin a conversation about boundaries. As you look at the handout, you'll notice you're in the center of the innermost circle. The next circle represents the people in your life who are in your inner circle – those who mean the most to you. Each circle moving outward represents an additional layer of emotional distance. Think about the various people in your life and where they fall in the circles. Consider the following: your significant other, your children, your parents, your siblings, your neighbors, your clergy and religious or spiritual leader, a coach, your teacher, your scout leader, your supervisor, the store clerk, the librarian, specific friends, and taxi or bus driver. Try to envision the variety of people you interact with daily, and chart them on the circle graph according to how emotionally close you are to them. We call this level of closeness your "emotional proximity" to these individuals. Make sure you write at least one person in each circle.*

