

Tips for Mentors: OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS

The Mentoring Center of Central Ohio

Effective communication between mentor and mentee requires the ability to ask questions. While in the early stages of the mentoring relationship, a mentor should avoid asking personal questions that might embarrass the mentee. Over time, however, open-ended questions WILL improve communication.

- 1. Open-ended questions are those that seek an answer other than “yes or no.”**
 - For example, if you ask your mentee, “Did you enjoy the movie?” s/he may say, “Yes,” “No,” or “uh huh.” You will know very little from those answers.
 - If you ask, “How did you like the movie last week?” he/she may say, “Oh, I liked the scene where....” If the reply is just, “Oh, it was okay,” you can ask a specific question. What did you like best? Who was your favorite actor? Best scene? Was there a movie with a similar theme or setting that you liked better?
 - An open-ended question offers the mentee the opportunity to share his/her experiences or insights and encourages the development of a meaningful communication. (**What** have you learned about WWII in your recent study?)
How have kids in your class felt about (the election, the outcome of the Super Bowl, helping tsunami victims, home schooling, required gym class, etc., etc.)
- 2. Begin open-ended questions with “how,” “who,” or “what?”**

These words encourage elaboration—which is a prime way to help mentees make real to themselves the ideas they are naming. And that also helps lead toward increased cognitive development.
- 3. Avoid questions that begin with “why” when they may appear judgmental.**
 - For example, Sheila’s mentee, Jaclyn, recently revealed that she was contemplating quitting school. Sheila, horrified at this idea, immediately asked, “Why on earth would you do something like that?” Although her concern is valid, her question has become a judgment statement.
 - Instead, it is better to ask questions that will create more open discussion and encourage Jaclyn to think about her decision while remaining objective. For example, Sheila might ask instead, “How will you make a living?”

- 4. Asking open-ended questions can help a young person focus on exploring options and weighing alternatives.**

- Mentees want to talk with their mentors about their fears, peer pressure and other problems they encounter on their journeys. It is vital to the relationship to keep the lines of communication open while encouraging the mentee to probe his/her own thoughts.
- Non-judgmental mentors help mentees feel free to disclose their challenges without the fear of disapproval sometimes present in their discussions with other authority figures, such as parents, teachers or older siblings. Young people with delicate egos are more willing to add a new idea, particularly if (well into the conversation) they are gently asked, “Did you ever consider this idea . . . ?”