

# I Signed-Up To Be A Mentor, Now What Do I Do?

by Stan Crow, Founder of Rite of Passage Journeys

We were sitting in his living room. My friend of 20 years, now retired, had agreed to work with some of the young people at the local Junior High who were failing math. His first few sessions with these young people had been anything but satisfactory. The students had seemed disinterested and a couple hadn't listened to a word he'd said.

As we talked, several things became clear. The program organizer had not done any training with the mentors -- nor with their potential mentees. They were assuming that if you put someone without math skills together with someone without math skills, learning will happen.

My friend assumed that the young people were there to learn and willing to work. He discovered that all four were there because their parents had enrolled them in the program. They had no interest in learning, only in having someone give them the answers on the homework. The only one who was the least bit motivated could get her car back if she passed the math course.

The whole idea of having a mentor implies a relationship. Relationships are built--created step by step. A new mentor needs some tools: things to do to help that relationship get launched.

One tool I've used effectively is to create a contract or agreement between the mentor and mentee, especially if there is a skill to be learned. The contract need not be formal, but needs to say: 1) why you are forming the relationship; 2) what each of you expects of the other; 3) what your boundaries are? Be sure to include promises to be honest with each other and to stifle shame and blame behaviors. The contract might also include what the reward or anticipated positive outcome would be for both mentor & mentee.

"At any event," I told my friend, "I don't think I'd start any tutoring without a contract."

Another approach might be the jointly created "plan". It needs to be specific. What does the mentee need/want to know? When does he/she need to know it? What does he/she already know? (A look at some of the mentee's tests or other papers may reveal where the learning process is blocked.) What learning style will you try? Since you are not the teacher, dealing with all the students, you have the ability to experiment with methods. What subjects is your mentee succeeding in? What learning methods are working there?

These plans should be regularly reviewed and modified as you learn more about your mentee.

My friend should probably be looking for reasons that block the mentee's success. Frequently these have little or nothing to do with math. Look to things like relationships, family, in some instances a literal lack of food (expense or eating disorder). He also must remember that he cannot solve all the problems, but he may be able to get some help.

While my friend is tutoring students in math, contracts and mutually agreed on plans work well in any mentor/mentee situation. Many outdoor programs, including ours, use the creation of a "Full Value Contract" as one of the beginning activities of a group adventure.

Mentoring is based on communication. These tools are a way to get to know each other. They should not be just another form to fill out, but a free-form exploration of what you will do together. One should also acknowledge the possibility that an agreement can't be struck. And if that's the case, let the mentee move on to another mentor.