



## Mentoring and Saying Goodbye: Understanding the Process of Healthy Closure

As a mentor, your primary focus is getting to know the wonderful young person for whom you have created a space for in your heart. As your relationship progresses from week to week, the farthest thing from your mind is the thought of saying goodbye. Some mentors even imagine that they will someday watch their mentee graduate from high school, and maybe even college! There are relationships where this happens, but more often than not, the reality is different, and mentoring ends at different times, for all sorts of reasons.

The most common reason, life happens. Your mentee moves away suddenly, it is no longer feasible for you to leave the office to mentor at lunch once a week, or sometimes a mentee's poor school attendance makes it impossible to continue. Or, sometimes the mentor or mentee realizes that mentoring just isn't what they imagined and the relationship is cut short due to dissatisfaction.

The natural breaking point of a mentoring relationship is the best time to have a healthy goodbye. For example, when mentors and mentees have an agreement their relationship will end when he/she moves into middle school, or high school, or closure is planned in advance due to a pending move. **Closure is a stage in the relationship that cannot be skipped over.** As the adult it is your responsibility to plan for closure with your mentee and that it happens well!

Sometimes researchers talk about good closure as "starting a relationship at the beginning with the end in mind." How can you plan ahead for the healthiest closure?

1. Make a firm resolution that you will try to make the relationship last as long as you can when it is to the benefit of your mentee. Research is clear that longer is better, and that a relationship that ends in fewer than three months is more damaging than if there had never been a relationship at all. Try to be in it for the long haul.
2. When thinking ahead to the next school year, if you have plans to return, tell your mentee that you are hopeful that the two of you will be together again, but if it does not work out, you treasure the time you have spent together.
3. Rituals and systematic check-ins can form the foundation of good closure by creating a common understanding of the relationship as you go along. A mentoring ritual can be as simple as beginning each visit by asking each other, "What was the high point of your week?" and "What was your low point?" Rituals are celebrations of your bond and wonderful ways to say "I care about you." They are also beneficial if it happens that you are not able to share a meaningful goodbye.
4. Be cautious about assuming that you know what is in your mentee's head or even the child's life outside of you. For example, we have no evidence that a parent's release means that the mentor is no longer needed. A child under stress can be hard to deal with, but it may be when you're needed most. Your Mentor Director can help you process whether it's time to close.

5. Good closure happens over several (at least two) meetings with your mentee. Take the time to allow for the reality to set in. Share memories and what you are proud of regarding your mentee's growth, and share wishes for his/her future. It's critical to arrange closure in such a way that the child does not feel at fault. In the absence of a story, the child will fill in his own, and it usually includes self-blame.

Sometimes when a relationship closes for good, a mentor wants to let a child down easy or feels too guilty about leaving and so you promise to stay in touch or you ask to continue being a pen-pal or you really, really want to tell the child how to reach you. But here is a time when you take better care of not only the child but also yourself by just bringing things to a definite end. At some point, you will tire of trying to keep up those extending promises such as "I will write to you", and then what? The child has expectations that are not fulfilled.

Finally, closure is something that happens inside you, too, and your MD is there to support you, to listen and to guide, and sometimes to help you grieve.

**For rituals and closure activity ideas [click here](#).**

*The following resource was used to write this article: Collaborative Mentoring Webinar Series, June, 2015.*

<http://www.mentoring.org/program-resources/collaborative-mentoring-webinar-series/#1443187606894-d1aace50-c00e>