

High School Mentors: Thinking About the Holidays



At this time of year, mentors often have questions about giving gifts. The short and simple guidance is that you are not obligated to give a gift at this season. If you want to do so, our program encourages you to observe the guidelines about modest (\$10-15) gifts in order to avoid awkwardness for the mentee or caregiver. Feel free to consult your Mentor Director for ideas or guidance.

The holidays can provide other kinds of opportunities to enrich your relationship as well, like having a meaningful conversation about gratitude.

Research confirms that focusing on strengths can improve a person's life considerably. Cultivating gratitude, a practice that focuses on strengths, can reduce the stressors associated with the holidays or life in general, for youth as well as for adults.

[Christine Carter](#) of the Greater Good Science Center found that youth who engage in gratitude practices experience gratefulness more overall, they have higher grades, are more satisfied with their lives and are more integrated socially. These teens also show fewer signs of depression, feel less entitlement, and are more motivated to help others.

At this stage in their development, independence and mastery are important for adolescents, so they may not heed advice from adults about why practicing gratitude is beneficial. However, because belonging and generosity are also important, mentors can role model gratitude, helping mentees recognize their own wisdom and ability to practice gratitude in their lives. Follow this link for ideas to share in practicing gratitude-
http://m.kidshealth.org/teen/your_mind/emotions/gratitude-practice.html

As the mentor, it's important to remember to be persistent to help build habits for the mentee. It is in the teen job description to be resistant, after all. Understand that youth will need to struggle with feelings of entitlement and dependence, like all feelings. And lastly, and most importantly, focus on helping them become experts on themselves.



If you're considering an actual physical gift, take care. Situations involving gift giving in mentoring relationships can become complex and cause misunderstandings, so it's important to recognize that there are different guidelines for mentoring relationships than those for other personal relationships. The holiday times can be stressful, as usual demands upon time, unfulfilled expectations from your family or your mentee's, and a push to spend lots of money become overwhelming.

Expectations for having a loving family, receiving lavish and personal gifts, and being able to be generous to others may not be met for a family that is struggling financially, emotionally, and dynamically. The messages about gifts from the media and friends may not be realistic for many, and this impact can be greater for children and youth. Feelings of disappointment and hurt are possible, no matter what situation a family is currently in. Finding ways to prevent stress and keep the relationship positive are crucial.

Your time is the greatest gift you can give - though we know that to a young person who is excited about receiving presents, this may not seem true! Think something small, inexpensive, and meaningful, if you decide to give an actual present. One of the best gifts to give is an experience:

- Making artwork (that perhaps you take and glaze or frame)
- Making cards or other art pieces for each other
- Bringing in a kit or supplies for something your mentee can continue working on at home
- Putting together an iTunes playlist and burning a CD are all activities that continue to build your friendship while also being a little more special

Last, a caution: remember that a gift is a gift.

If you give a gift, your mentee gets to choose what to do with it. Some mentors become disappointed or resentful if their mentee doesn't use the gift as intended or if the gift becomes lost or damaged. If you let negative feelings about the gift enter your relationship, that thinking can damage other parts of the mentoring experience. While we hope you will not feel this disappointment, your Mentor Director can help you process these feelings and offer the perspective that you are respecting your mentee's individuality and voice.