

Goal-Setting:

Your Guide to Helping Mentees Realize their Potential



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INTRODUCTION

Goals help give our lives direction and meaning. Simply put, goals provide a road map to help us achieve what we want in life—whether it’s in our relationships, sports or other hobbies, school or our careers. In a sense, they are mile markers that help us navigate purposefully toward our dreams.

Most mentoring programs are designed to help youth realize their potential and reach their goals. There is a lot of value gained by talking about and setting goals, but it’s not always easy, and mentors may not always have the resources or skills to broach the subject.

This toolkit is designed to provide practical information and tools that mentors can use to help their mentees identify and set effective short- and long-term goals for themselves. It provides tips for the best ways to approach goal-setting, reviews common barriers and offers useful tools and resources.

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“Having goals can help motivate young people and give them structure in their everyday lives so that they can make better decisions and gain greater confidence in their abilities.”

–Carlos Collazo, Director of Operations, Boys & Girls Club of New Haven

WHAT'S INSIDE

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- What is a Goal?
- Examples of Goals by Age
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WHY GOAL-SETTING IS IMPORTANT

Setting specific goals offers each mentee a chance to:

- learn about him or herself
- measure his or her progress
- feel a sense of personal satisfaction and pride about the achievements he or she has made

Successfully working toward and meeting short- and long-term goals builds self-efficacy—something that can boost youths’ confidence and belief in their own capabilities. It can also strengthen their commitment to and engagement in their communities, schools, relationships, various interests and activities. Outlining achievable goals — informally or formally — also gives mentors and mentees something important to focus on during their time together.

Goal-setting may be especially helpful for at-risk youth who can benefit from developing the critical skills they need to think ahead, and plan and anticipate consequences. Albert Bandura, a well-known psychologist, researched the relationship between self-efficacy and performance and

found that “the conviction that one can successfully execute the behavior required is shown to have a positive effect on workplace performance.” Mentees who are at risk of serious behavioral problems (e.g., truancy, delinquency and/or substance abuse) may not have the cognitive skills they need to make decisions that will impact their future. Connecticut has historically had one of the largest achievement gaps in the nation, according to the U.S. Department of Education, so focusing on how to equip disadvantaged youths with skills to be successful is important.

The prospect of setting and following through with goals can be challenging and overwhelming, even for the most high-achieving adult. Just think about all those New Year’s resolutions that never come to fruition.

Through goal-setting, mentors can help mentees:

- define what is important to them
- plan ahead and be accountable
- increase their motivation to achieve
- prepare for their future education and career

Approaching goal-setting with youth can be tricky. First, goals need to be **achievable** for the individual and tailored to their age/developmental stage. Second, they need to be **student-directed**.

Formally sitting down with pen to paper to write down goals and expectations with your mentee can be intimidating for him or her, and may change the dynamic of the relationship.

For this reason, formal goal-setting doesn't often successfully happen until the mentor-mentee relationship is firmly established. Many mentors prefer that the process occur more gradually.

All youth need to set goals for school, career and life, and those with a mentor have an additional level of support to help guide them.

The Power of Goals

Among other things, having realistic goals can:

- give mentees a sense of purpose and direction
- boost confidence and self-efficacy
- help improve performance
- increase mentees' motivation to achieve
- lower stress
- teach mentees how to tackle challenges
- be intrinsically rewarding when goals are achieved

“Mentors should listen carefully to what a mentee says is challenging or hard, and provide gentle encouragement and guidance to help him or her reach that goal.”

—Valerie Knight-DiGangi, Mentoring Director, Shelton Public Schools

WHAT IS A GOAL?

By definition, a goal is “an event, circumstance or condition a person strives to attain.”

When talking to youth about goals, it’s best to keep it simple. Aim for goals that are **SMART**:

Specific – the goal should be very clearly defined.

- Not specific: I want to make good grades.
- Specific: I want to have at least a B+ average in science by the end of the next marking period.

Measurable – you should be able to track your goal.

- Not measurable: I want to be more involved in school.
- Measurable: I will join one after school club/activity this month.

Action-oriented – what small steps or actions can you take that will get you closer to your goal?

- Not action-oriented: I will read more.
- Action-oriented: I will spend 20 minutes each night reading.

Realistic – a goal needs to be realistic.

Can it really be achieved? Does it consider available resources and other challenges the mentee might be facing?

He or she must also have the appropriate knowledge, skills, and abilities to achieve the desired goal.

- Not Realistic: I want to graduate at the head of my class.
- Realistic: I want to graduate with a GPA of at least X.

Time-bound and trackable – there must be a reasonable timeframe within which the goal should be reached.

- Not Timely: I want to learn how to play soccer sometime.
- Timely: I want to learn how to play soccer this year.

Some examples of SMART goals might be:

- I will get to school on time every day next week.
- I will get a B or higher on my math test next week.
- I will participate in at least two extracurricular activities this academic year.

It's Not All Academic

Goals can relate to all parts of the mentee's life. It might help to think about goals as dreams for kids/youth. And it's not only about big decisions – for example, “Should I go to college?” There are many smaller, seemingly inconsequential decisions that young people make over time that can have a cumulative effect on their lives.

For example, for a student facing challenges, attendance might be a more important goal than academic performance because going to school more regularly is a first step to getting better grades. Additionally, practice and positive experience with achieving small goals can lead to being comfortable with reaching higher in the future.

Domains in students' lives that could be amenable to short- and long-term goals:



“Goal-setting should be fun, and reflect what is most important to mentees—after all if they aren’t motivated and engaged, then most efforts will be futile.”

—Matthew Quinones, CEO, Stamford Public Education Foundation

EXAMPLES OF GOALS BY AGE:

Elementary School Age	Middle School Age	High School Age
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Being kind to other children ■ Making a new friend ■ Expressing feelings with words instead of shutting down or having a physical reaction ■ Paying attention in class ■ Reading at a certain level ■ Not interrupting the teacher 	<p>Similar to elementary school examples, plus:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Engaging in class and school activities ■ Identifying/exploring interests ■ Doing homework ■ Asking for help if needed ■ Joining a sports team ■ Doing something to give back to the community ■ Managing time by creating schedule of activities and responsibilities 	<p>Similar to middle school examples, plus:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Getting a job ■ Graduating ■ Participating in a sport and/or volunteer activity ■ Resisting alcohol and drugs ■ Planning for college career (researching, writing essays, etc.) ■ Making smart financial decisions

WHAT GETS IN THE WAY:

Common barriers to setting goals

To help mentees set and work toward goals, it is useful to know what factors may hinder the goal-setting process. Here are some of the challenges and/or potential barriers.

From the Mentee's Perspective	From the Mentor's Perspective
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Nervous to openly share sensitive issues right away that could be a focus for goals or improvement (e.g., if they are absent from or late to school, failing courses, etc.) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ To gain acceptance, mentees may instead tell mentors what they think they want to hear ■ Lack of self-confidence or belief in one's abilities ■ Little or no support system at home <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Hearing sentiments like "you'll never amount to anything" or "you're incapable" ■ Lack of positive modeling by parents/guardians ■ Goal-setting ≠ fun ■ Changes in mentor relationship or perhaps the mentee had a previous match that didn't work out ■ Different perspectives on priorities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Mentors sometimes go in thinking they can fix a situation – some things are out of their control and it's best to build self-efficacy in kids to solve problems ■ Lack of time ■ Parental barriers (parents may withhold information, not be reachable or supportive) ■ Uncertainty and/or lack of resources to address or broach the topic of setting goals with kids ■ Cultural differences and expectations ■ Different visions of end goals – the mentor might be thinking big – become a lawyer, nurse, chef, etc. when what might be needed are smaller, weekly goals. For example, getting to school, joining a club or committee or completing homework.

Any effort to promote goal-setting must also take into account the reasons why goals may not be achieved even when they are set. Factors that may play a role include:

- Unrealistic expectations on the part of the mentor or mentee
- Lack of support or involvement from staff or parents (for example, teachers may have given up on student or parents may insist that an older child has to take a younger sibling to school so mentee has to be late)
- Time management, which in and of itself could be a goal
- Lack of resources (for example, no textbook or transportation)
- Mentors may not have the tools or training to help set goals
- Cultural differences and expectations
- Underlying health, psychosocial or adjustment issues on the part of the mentee

YOUR ROAD MAP TO GOAL-SETTING

Outlined below are some of the important considerations and steps to follow to help with goal setting.

1) Establish trust first.

Whether you are new or seasoned mentor, you know that trust is at the heart of the mentor/mentee relationship. But **developing a bond of trust with your mentee takes time**. Formal goal-setting can't really happen until trust is established. Even then, it should also be framed in a fun, engaging way. Try to avoid the perception that you're just another adult placing expectations or demands on them.

Hints for Building Trust

- Listen, listen, listen
- Be reliable, patient and consistent
- Keep your word
- Refrain from judgment
- Make it fun
- Believe in mentees and their capabilities and point to positive qualities and behaviors to help boost their self-esteem
- Let your mentee guide your time together - you can provide some options, but letting him or her choose activities or topics of conversation can be empowering

2) Get to know what really motivates and interests your mentee.

For goal-setting to be successful, it is critical to practice *active listening*. Pay special attention to what really matters to your mentee—what gets him or her excited—as well as areas where he or she struggles. Any goal should directly relate to something mentees really want to do, not something they feel they must or should do.

Refer to the *Exploratory Questions: Getting Mentees to Open Up*, a list of questions in this guide with which you can gently probe different areas of the mentee's life or ambitions to help identify potential goals and available support systems.

3) Meet mentees where they are.

Mentors need to know how receptive their mentee might be to certain goals, as well as what resources they have available to support them. Do what you can to affirm your mentee's strengths and talents, and support him in recognizing areas that could be improved upon.

Remember that for some kids simply showing up for the mentoring session is a big accomplishment. Some mentors say it's best to start with a "fun" goal first before delving into more serious, and sometimes intimidating, goals such as getting better grades, fitting into a peer group or finding a job.

Getting Youth to Talk about Goals

Activities, shared experiences or specific questions that can help kids talk about their goals, their future and what matters to them include:

- Organized career days
- Featured speakers
- Mentors' personal experiences/trials
- What's their favorite subject and why?
- What are they really good at and why?
- Ask what they might want to work on, and have them help their mentor set goals, too. See *Exploratory Questions in this guide*

HELPFUL TIP: Some experts suggest reframing the term "goal-setting" and instead calling it "Things I'd like to achieve" or "what can we do or work on together?"

4) Remember who should be steering the ship.

Mentees must be actively involved in setting goals for themselves. Never push mentees to meet goals that you have set or envision for them. Instead, provide gentle encouragement and guidance. Share stories of similar challenges you have met, but give advice sparingly.

5) Keep them motivated.

How can you motivate mentees to set goals?

- Get the youth's buy-in, which hinges on #4 above
- Build on previous successes
- Create a timeline, photo journal or creative way to track progress
- Set mutual goals
 - You might consider setting a related goal for yourself, and tracking your progress in the same way your mentee tracks his or hers. For example, "I will read ___ books per month, watch ___ fewer hours of TV everyday or exercise ___ times per week." In this way, both you and your mentee can work toward your respective goals and be cheerleaders for each other as well.
- Use positive language that gives kids a sense of worth. Focus on "You" language:
 - "You are fine the way you are."
 - "Be who you are."
 - Accept differences
 - "You're the coolest kid and I'm looking forward to seeing you next week."
 - "You should feel really proud." "Aren't you proud?"

6) Set kids up for success.

Make sure the goal is realistic, achievable and that the mentee believes in his or her capabilities. If a goal seems too big, help your mentee break it up into doable steps. Help him or her think through attainable benchmarks on the way to reaching the goals and acknowledge progress. Again, be sure the appropriate resources are in place if needed to avoid setting youth up for failure.

7) Put an action plan in place.

Once it seems your mentee is ready to commit to a goal, it's important to put a plan in place. See *Your Dreams & Wants*.

8) Check back in and celebrate successes.

Help your mentee track his or her progress. Look for interim achievements to build confidence and momentum.

"Goal-setting should happen organically. Mentors need to provide gentle guidance and encouragement to youth, and refrain from making judgments."

-Mary Gregory, Director, Danbury Schools and Business Collaborative

GOAL-SETTING AT WORK

Mentors can encourage their mentees to take a stepwise approach to reach their goals. Although it can seem daunting, it can work. Mentors in Connecticut share stories of success.

Finding Their Spark

Mentors change lives every day by helping their mentees set and achieve manageable goals for the future, and those goals don't always have to be making the honor roll or being student council president to have a profound impact.

For one high school senior, the goal was feeling like being part of a team. A skilled and avid basketball player, this particular student was having a hard time during his parents' divorce, and it was starting to seep into his life. His slipping grades kept him off of the school team and his behavior almost got him expelled.

But all the while, his mentor continued to serve as an advocate in all areas of the mentee's life. He provided consistent guidance and actively listened to what was troubling his mentee and what mattered most. Basketball seemed to be an important outlet. He was able to connect this student with other mentees in the program to develop and manage their own community basketball team. With his mentor's help, he took ownership of the team, finding practice space and joining a local league.

His leadership on his basketball team translated to the classroom. He began to excel again and was accepted to all three colleges to which he applied and pursued his interest in political science.

After graduation, he started his career in Washington D.C., and now works in politics back in CT. His mentor helped him navigate his circumstances and find the right goals to get him on track.



The path to success is not the same for every student, and when it comes to goal-setting it often starts by honing in on what really gets a mentee excited and focused.

Deepening the Mentor-Mentee Connection

Tina Banas, LCSW, a social worker and youth programs manager at Family ReEntry Inc. in Bridgeport, makes it a point to include goal-setting as part of all mentor training.

“Goal-setting helps deepen the connection between mentors and mentees. But it’s only one aspect of mentoring, and we always caution that mentors need to be careful not to come with their own agenda,” she said. “As mentors, we can help guide conversations and offer a gentle push, but ultimately we want it to be youth-driven.”



Tina advises mentors to actively listen to their mentees to better understand what really drives and excites them.

“A lot of things can bubble up from good conversations—things that the youth might not have explored much, but has been thinking about,” she said.

Mentors in her program have helped youth to:

- Discover their interests by asking non-threatening questions – What are their dreams? Where do they see themselves? If they could change anything in the next year, what would it be? – to get a sense for where the youth needs or wants to go
- Break down the steps they need to take, even helping define interim goals
- Realize goals related to improving some part of their school performance, obtaining a job, taking the SATs or learning about money management
- Brainstorm other options, if needed, especially if there are obstacles
- Stay accountable by tracking their progress—in as much as the youth is receptive and ok with that

Mentors also need to know when to ease up. Paying attention to nonverbal cues can help, adds Tina.

Of course, not all mentors approach goal-setting in a formalized way. Rather, it is woven through many of the contacts they have with their mentees. Sometimes it may not even feel like goal-setting. Think about whether there are areas in your mentee's life that could be enhanced through experiences or opportunities. What strengths can be built on?

A lot of goal-setting is about developing life skills that will serve the youth over a lifetime. It often centers around problem solving too.

“Everything the youth wants to do may not be appropriate or feasible, so as mentors we need to feel comfortable weighing in and helping to brainstorm other options,” says Tina. “Kids have to be grounded in their solutions.”

She adds that when you are problem solving, it's not just about offering advice, but helping mentees to see there may be several ways to resolve a problem and then letting them select the best option and follow up on it.

Most important is to acknowledge their efforts, especially when goals are met.

Paving the Path Forward

A high school student who is a first-generation American and plays soccer had no real plans for college. He didn't even really know how to plan for it. His mentor, a young professional, gently suggested that he consider taking the SATs—explaining that doing so would allow him to take the next step—if, of course, that's something he decided he wanted to do. It would keep the door open.

The youth registered for the SATs, and the mentor advocated for and received some pro-bono SAT preparation services. The youth did marginally well, and when he decided to apply to colleges, his mentor helped to walk him through the application and financial aid processes. The youth was accepted at four schools and enrolled in a Pennsylvania college.

In other situations, youth were seeking to secure jobs, so their mentors helped them navigate the process of applying and interviewing—even practicing how to look people in the eye and shake hands. These are the soft skills which mentors can help youth to acquire and practice, enabling mentees to achieve their goals for employment.

RESOURCES TO HELP

Here are some additional resources that you may find helpful.

Community Tool Box

Youth Goal-Setting

<http://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/implement/youth-mentoring/youth-goal-setting/main>

Mentoring.org

Goal-Setting and Decision-Making

http://www.mentoring.org/downloads/mentoring_429.pdf

My Mentor and Me publication series

<http://www.preventionworksct.org/resources/>

“Successful Goal-Setting: A 6-Step Guide for Mentees”

<http://www.micromentor.org/blog/successful-goal-setting-a-6-step-guide-for-mentees/>

NEW! TOOLS YOU CAN USE

The following tools have been designed to help you encourage youth to think about and set goals. Please download them and put them into practice!

Tool #1: Exploratory Questions: Getting Mentees to Open Up

This resource provides a list of probing questions to facilitate your discussions about goal-setting and discern what is really important to your mentee.

Tool #2: Conversation Starters and Stoppers

Getting a thoughtful conversation started is a necessary first step to goal-setting. This tool outlines questions that can help or not.

Tool #3: Your Dreams and Wants...

Ask your mentee to take a few minutes to think about his or her dreams and wants, and then use the space provided to draw or write them down. For older youth, you can gently probe by asking if there is anything they think will improve their life or make them a better person. For example, learning to play the guitar, playing on a baseball team, getting to school on time, or giving back to the community in some way. Younger students can be encouraged to use the first handout to draw pictures.

Tool #4: Goal-Setting Checklist

Use this checklist to help get organized and work with youth on goal-setting.

Tool #5: Sample Action Plan

If your mentee wants to formally set goals, this worksheet can help define goals, what changes need to occur, who can help and if there are resources needed, as well as setting a timeframe.

EXPLORATORY QUESTIONS

Getting mentees to open up



This resource provides a list of gentle, probing questions to facilitate your discussions about goal setting and discern what is really important to your mentee. The answers to these questions, which should be posed over time rather than all in one session, will demonstrate that you genuinely care about what is important to him or her and the insights shared can also help you identify potential goals.

These questions are just a guide and a reminder to make the prospect of identifying and working toward goals fun and friendship-based.

- What's your favorite thing to do and why?
- Is there something that you would like to learn how to do? Why?
- What's your strongest trait or quality?
- What things do you wish you were better at or would like to be involved with?
- Is there one thing you wish [I, your teachers and/or your parents] knew about you?
- What are some things you want to have happen over the course of this year at school?
- Who is someone you really admire and why?
- What do you like best about school? Do you have a favorite subject or teacher?
- If you could do anything in the world what would it be?
- Is there anything getting in the way of you succeeding in school, sports, relationships or other areas?

CONVERSATION STARTERS & STOPPERS

Getting the conversation started is a necessary first step to goal-setting. These questions can serve as ice-breakers to help your mentee get comfortable and open up with you. At the same time, there are some types of questions that can knock your efforts to connect off track.

Conversation Starters	Conversation Stoppers
<p>Usually center around assessing mentees' feelings and where they see themselves.</p> <p>Get-to-know-you questions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Tell me something that most people don't know about you, and I'll share something about me.▪ Sharing "favorites" – what is your favorite food, activity/hobby, part of the school day, form of entertainment, place to visit, thing that happened this week, etc. and why?▪ What do you like to do in your spare time?▪ What would be one thing you'd like to change about yourself?▪ What's important to you?▪ Do you have any pets? <p>Ice-breaking or problem-solving activities that require the mentor and mentee to work together</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Answer questions about one another – what's your favorite color, food, singer/sports team, subject, what animal would you be, beach or mountains, etc.	<p>Asking only about schoolwork or academics</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ "Tell me about your grades/attendance." <p>Give advice about what they should/shouldn't do</p> <p>Your mother/father should... or other statements of judgement</p> <p>Questions that only require a yes or no answer</p>

YOUR DREAMS & WANTS



My Dreams



My Wants



YOUR DREAMS & WANTS



School/ Academics	
Job/Career	
Money Matters	
Activities	
In My Community	
Relationships	

CHECKLIST

Things to consider



-  Understand why goal-setting is so important, and what it can afford your mentee now and in the future
-  Get to know your mentee first – take the time to build a rapport and trust
-  Ask open-ended questions over time that will give insights into different parts of his or her life
 - listen to what really matters
 - watch for signs of topics that seem to get him or her really excited, as well as those that he or she seems to worry about or struggle with (the latter may offer opportunities for growth and achievement)
-  Let your mentee take the lead in setting goals for him or herself, but guide him or her in sticking with what is realistic and work together to develop SMART goals
-  Use the handouts provided to help youth think through their dreams and wants and write out goals they want to achieve
-  Know the barriers for goal-setting so you can be prepared
-  Offer encouragement
 - Provide opportunities to expose your mentee to successes
 - Share your own experiences with setting and achieving goals
-  Celebrate successes over and over again!

SAMPLE ACTION PLAN



GOAL #1	
Changes To Make	
By When?	
Who Will Help?	
Resources	
What is Success?	

GOAL #2	
Changes To Make	
By When?	
Who Will Help?	
Resources	
What is Success?	

GOAL #3	
Changes To Make	
By When?	
Who Will Help?	
Resources	
What is Success?	