

WHAT IS A MENTOR?

The notion of mentoring is ancient. The original Mentor was described by Homer as the "wise and trusted counselor" whom Odysseus left in charge of his household during his travels. Athena, in the guise of Mentor, became the guardian and teacher of Odysseus' son Telemachus.

Today, the concept of mentoring has found application in virtually every forum of learning. In academics, mentor is often used synonymously with faculty adviser. A fundamental difference between mentoring and advising is mentoring is more than advising. Mentoring is a personal, as well as, professional relationship. An adviser/teacher might or might not be a mentor, depending on the quality of the relationship. A mentoring relationship develops over an extended period, during which a student's needs and the nature of the relationship tend to change. A mentor will try to be aware of these changes and vary the degree and type of attention, help, advice, information, and encouragement that he or she provides. In the 4-H Teen Leadership Project, the mentor's role is to serve as a caring adult who guides the 4-H member in the development and carrying out of their 4-H leadership plan.



A mentor will take a special interest in helping another person (4-H member) develop into a successful adult leader. Some 4-H members may develop a close relationship with their community club 4-H leader or project leader. Others may find their mentor elsewhere—perhaps the parent of a fellow 4-H member, a teacher or coach, a wise adult friend or neighbor, or another person with experience who offers continuing guidance and support.

An effective mentoring relationship is characterized by mutual respect, trust, understanding, and empathy. Good mentors are able to share life experiences and wisdom, as well as technical expertise. They are good listeners, good observers, and good problem-solvers. They make an effort to know, accept, and respect the goals and interests of the 4-H member. In the end, they establish an environment in which the 4-Her's accomplishment is limited only by the extent of his or her talent. Mentoring styles and activities are as varied as human relationships. Different 4-Hers will require different amounts and kinds of attention, advice, information, and encouragement. Some 4-Hers will feel comfortable approaching their mentors; others will be shy, intimidated, or reluctant to seek help. A good mentor is approachable, available and willing to offer guidance while allowing the 4-Her to learn by doing the actual work of the planned project. A good mentor will understand that the process of the leadership plan is more important than the final project. The purpose of this project is to provide the 4-H member a safe environment to develop and practice leadership skills. A leader involves others in the project; when the 4-Her does all the work without involving others we define this as citizenship. Feedback to the 4-Her should be given in a positive matter that encourages leadership skill development while encouraging personal growth and development.

4-Hers may not know what questions to ask, what information they need, or what their options are. A good mentor can lessen such confusion by getting to know the 4-Her and their project plans and become familiar with the project concept, provide suggestions and information that can be useful. Effective mentoring need not always require large amounts of time. An experienced, perceptive mentor can provide great help in just a few minutes by making suggestions or asking questions that assist the 4-Her to understand or explore new options. As a mentor you will be asked to provide a reference letter regarding your involvement with the 4-H teen and the planned leadership project. Contact the Atchison County Extension Office if you have further questions regarding being a mentor for the 4-H Leadership Project. The 4-H member is responsible for contacting you to write this letter.