



**Becoming a Better Mentor:
Strategies to Be There for Young People**



MENTOR

CHAPTER 4

ATTUNEMENT IN MENTORING RELATIONSHIPS

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What Does Being Attuned in a Mentoring Relationship Mean?

Attunement is a term we use to describe a set of communication strategies employed by a support provider to facilitate relationship connection and create a sense that the recipient feels “heard and seen.” In the context of youth mentoring, we often think about the importance of mentors demonstrating attunement in their relationships with mentees; we have also learned that attunement is important for program staff to demonstrate when interacting with those they support. That is, similar processes are needed to support each level of the mentoring system (see chapter 7 for more on the mentoring relationship system). Importantly, being “attuned” involves a set of skills that we can all develop, practice, and grow over time.

One component of attunement involves noticing one’s own cues as we notice those of others. In other words, we attune to ourselves, to attune to others. Attuned mentors work to notice their own cues (bodily state, thoughts, feelings). They can in turn observe their mentee’s verbal and nonverbal cues, and respond to those cues in a flexible way, without pushing their agenda at the expense of the connection. This process of attunement involves an intentional focus on building a relationship and on prioritizing the mentee’s needs and preferences alongside one’s own, in order to “meet the mentee where they are.” In this way, attunement represents a broad strategy to elicit, read, interpret and reflect on others’ cues.

In this chapter, we define attunement from the adult perspective, as well as provide initial insights on how youth experience attuned interactions with adults in their lives (including with their mentors). We discuss what attunement looks like, how it works, and how you can develop your skills in using this approach.

Using the information in this chapter, mentors can grow in their awareness of their own strengths and challenges in being attuned and reflect on how to be more attuned in their relationships with others. Attunement to your mentee’s cues incorporates the responsiveness discussed in chapter 1 on empathy and expands on the affective component of empathy by building in behavioral responses. Attunement skills may also be particularly helpful when mentors and mentees come from different cultural and personal backgrounds, as discussed in chapter 2 on cultural humility.

Why Attunement Is Important in Mentoring Relationships

Attunement is a set of skills conceptualized and researched by the authors of this chapter. In the mentoring field, attunement emerged primarily out of watching supportive adults (i.e., mentors and staff) and young students interact together in school-based mentoring programs. By observing them weekly for a year, we were able to observe a set of skills, now labeled “attunement,” that were demonstrated by those mentors and staff most capable of building relationships with mentees across age, gender, race, and levels of risk. Through this work, we also saw that mentees paired with more attuned mentors reported stronger mentoring relationships and demonstrated improved school engagement relative to those with less attuned mentors.

Since this early work, attunement in youth mentoring has become the focus of a training initiative for mentors and mentoring program staff. The training uses the Mentoring FAN (Facilitating Attuned Interactions), an approach originally developed to support home visitors (i.e., helpers who support parents with new babies) by Professor Gilkerson and her team at the Erikson Institute.



Research on this training has demonstrated that it can help mentors and mentoring program staff improve critical attunement skills, such as expressed empathy, and increase their confidence and satisfaction in their role. Youth who experience attuned relationships with adults describe themselves as “feeling known” and “feeling seen” by these adults and feeling accepted for who they are.

The theory underlying attunement suggests that meeting young people where they are (e.g., in terms of their development, life experiences, personal wisdom, and worldview) facilitates collaboration and capacity building for mentees. As mentors read mentee cues and “meet them where they are,” they share ideas and decision-making, devoting intentional effort to hearing ideas from the mentee and building on them together.

Attunement requires empathy (i.e., flexible responding and perspective-taking; see chapter 1 on empathy) and suggests actions that build upon empathic skills. Empathizing with your mentee allows you to read cues, and attunement allows you to respond in a way that keeps pace with your mentee’s dynamic preferences and needs. You also identify places where and when you can challenge your mentee in ways that do not jeopardize, but rather strengthen, your connection.

Feedback on attunement from adolescents and emerging adults affirms its value and suggests important components. In ongoing work by the authors of this chapter, we are interviewing young people and learning how they experience and describe attunement in their own words. Generally speaking, they agree it is important for their adult and older peer mentors to pay attention to their body language, not just what they say; to check in on how they are feeling in the relationship; and to give them space to express their feelings and

their perspectives before offering solutions and advice. They want mentors to validate their feelings, explore their own ideas and solutions, and respect the expertise they have about their own lives. At the same time, some express resistance in engaging in mentoring sessions that feel “too much like therapy.” They acknowledge that mentors occupy a unique and special role, one that requires a bit of a balancing act! In this work, it’s disheartening to hear that young people often experience a lack of attunement in their mentoring relationships yet struggle to speak up when their needs are not being met because of the power mentors hold in the relationship. This speaks to and further reinforces the importance of attunement skills in mentoring practice.

What Does Attunement Look Like in Practice?

Attunement is a process of paying attention to the young person (or their parent/guardian) in the moment and noticing their cues in order to meet them where they are. This often involves reading body language and verbal signs to understand how to move forward in the interaction. To begin, attunement involves calming or centering yourself and noticing your own cues, which can be particularly useful during times of stress and uncertainty for mentors. Am I feeling anxious? Worried about my mentee? Have I had a long day already, and am I dragging as I greet my mentee? Or am I excited and eager, building off our last great conversation? A brief check-in with yourself before connecting with your mentee provides an opportunity to attune to your own nonverbal cues. These cues could be tension in your neck, a faster heart rate, a sense of fatigue, or a faster gait than usual. In other words, developing skills in attunement requires that you first attune to yourself.



Otherwise, you are unlikely to be able to read and respond to the cues of your mentee because you are caught up in your own emotions, thoughts, and physical state.

To attune to your own thoughts, behaviors, and feelings, it's useful to consider how you can begin to read your own cues more clearly. What practices could you commit to that can help you read your cues regularly? How might other relationships in your life be causing stress right now? Could deep breathing help you be present here and now? A question to yourself prior to calling or seeing your mentee (e.g., "How am I feeling? What am I bringing to this call?") can be helpful. Some people visualize something that helps them feel calm, while others use physical movement to help ground themselves (e.g., touching the ends of your fingertips together and paying attention, which can help you notice your body in space). Before reading further, consider other ways you can ground yourself prior to connecting with your mentee, and commit to a practice that you can use easily and regularly.

As we attune to ourselves, we are better able to attune to our mentee's verbal and nonverbal cues, as well as the cues of others in their lives (e.g., parents, teachers). Research suggests that young people often communicate with their body language as much as with their voices, so observing cues includes noticing eye contact, body posture, pace of speech, and other behaviors. Take a moment and consider what cues your mentee shares with you to let you know how they're doing. Do they typically share their emotional state with you verbally (e.g., "I'm excited today!" or "I'm frustrated.")? Or are they more inclined to let you know by what they don't say, or how they move their body or shift their focus? What are the telltale signs from your mentee that they are feeling a certain way or that they have

something on their mind? What are the signs they share that are more difficult for you to read? Feel free, after reading this chapter, to consider having a conversation with your mentee about how they express themselves and what they want you to know or learn about the cues they send.

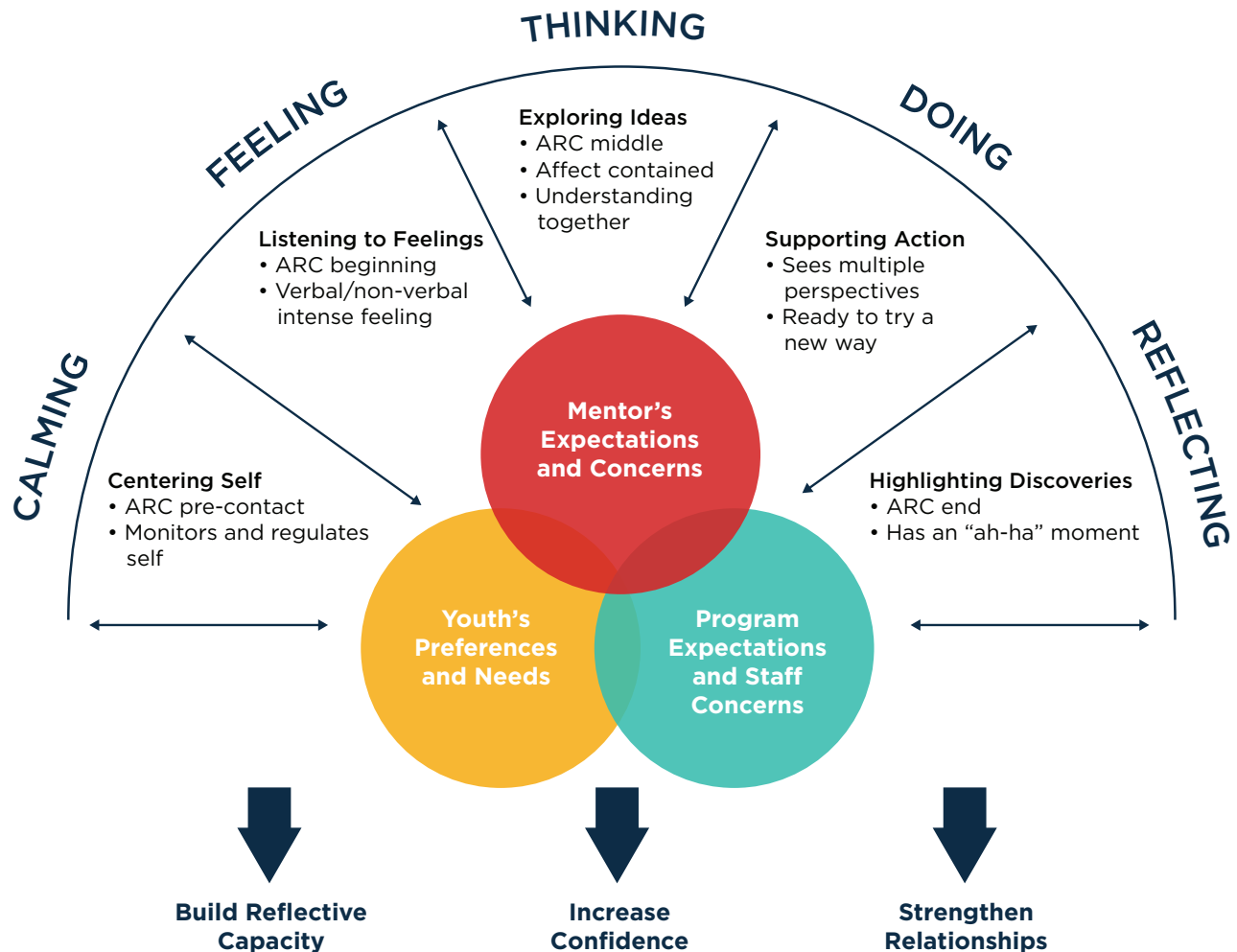
As you read the cues of your mentee, you can collaborate and explore with them, build capacity, and reflect on their strengths and insights. This process is illustrated through the Mentoring FAN model on the following page. This graphic can be useful before and after your time with your mentee, as you reflect on how you "matched" them or how you might have had trouble reading cues. As you become more familiar with the model, you can keep a vision of it in your head when you are meeting with your mentee to think about where each of you might be landing that day. While you may not use this model directly during mentoring, you might share it with your mentee and talk through the different pieces. It also serves as a helpful visualization of the concepts we discuss here.





In the center of the model are the many “balls” a mentor is “juggling” as they build their relationship with their mentee. You, as the mentor, have your own expectations and concerns as you work to get to know your mentee’s preferences and needs. If you are mentoring through a program, it also has expectations (e.g., how often you meet with your mentee, in what capacity), as well as its own concerns and constraints. As you juggle these balls, you work to meet your mentee, or others in their network, where they are.

As you can see on the far left, the **Calming** “wedge” is the place we start in every interaction. As we discussed previously, you will be better able to read your mentee (or another person in their life) if you are grounded and calm. You can return to a **Calming** practice throughout your time together. For example, in a difficult conversation about a fight your mentee had with their sister, they get frustrated and become withdrawn. This is a wonderful time to reengage a **Calming** practice as you try to give your mentee space to respond when they are ready, rather than filling in the silence with suggestions or worries.





Beyond starting with the **Calming** wedge, all other wedges (i.e., **Feeling, Thinking, Doing, Reflecting**) are places where you might join your mentee, depending on their cues. To be clear, we use the Mentoring FAN as a “GPS” tool to figure out where we are with the mentee, but it’s not giving us directions on where to go. That is, for the most part, we don’t try to move our mentee to another wedge. Instead, we strive as mentors to follow their lead and meet them in each wedge to be attuned together, but mentees will move on their own from wedge to wedge. It’s our job to meet them wherever they go.

So, if your mentee is expressing **Feeling**, either verbally or nonverbally, join them there (e.g., “That’s great! I’m thrilled too!” or “I’m so sorry to hear that — you’re right, it is so disappointing.” or “You seem quiet — what’s up?”). Do not skim over the **Feeling** in order to problem-solve or act. Instead, stay in the **Feeling** wedge until your mentee demonstrates they are ready to problem-solve (for example, they ask you what you think) or moves on to a different wedge. Similarly, if your mentee is problem-solving about a conflict with a friend or an upcoming tryout for a team (i.e., in **Thinking** wedge), share ideas together (perhaps by asking them what they think) rather than offering your advice all at once. In the **Thinking** wedge, it’s often helpful to build off of your mentee’s wisdom and ideas (e.g., “What has worked for you in the past?”) so that the solution you two identify is informed by their experience.

If you meet your mentee during a game of basketball, but you are concerned about their grades, hold off on raising the topic of their grades until the game (i.e., the **“Doing”**) is completed. Then, look for openings (e.g., they begin a discussion about school, expression of worry) to talk about their grades instead of redirecting their interest to

meet your needs (e.g., “I see you’re playing, but I wanted to talk about your grades first . . .”). In this example, while a conversation about grades is likely an important one, your mentee might join you there more openly if you first engage in their activity, and offer them a say in when they might be ready to talk about their grades (e.g., “Love playing basketball with you — before I leave today, I have to check in with you on a few things, OK?”). You may want to check out chapter 11, which offers a number of strategies for how to start these types of conversations and evoke “change talk” in effective ways, while in the middle of **Doing** activities.

Meeting your mentee in the **Reflecting** wedge takes place when they are taking stock or considering an experience, or when they are having an “aha” moment or insight (e.g., “I just realized I haven’t called my mom because I’m afraid of what I might hear.”) When your mentee is in the **Reflecting** wedge, it’s a time to “glow” with them in moments of accomplishment (e.g., “That is such great news — I’m proud of you.” “That took a lot of courage!”) or reflect back what you see them doing well. This is an opportunity to pause, perhaps to take stock in your time with your mentee, prior to parting ways for the day.

When using the Mentoring FAN approach, a set of questions (called the “ARC of Engagement”) can be used to help you stay attuned and let you know when you’re not tracking accurately. As shown in the model, these ARC questions are often useful when meeting your mentee in certain wedges (e.g., ARC Pre-Contact in Calming, ARC Beginning in Feeling, ARC Middle in Thinking, and ARC End in Doing). The Pre-Contact question is **“How am I doing?”** which you can ask as you attune to yourself prior to connecting with your mentee. The ARC Beginning question (i.e., **“What has the day [or period of time**



since you last saw them] been like for you so far?”) is helpful to ask when your mentee is in Feeling, and/or toward the beginning of your time together. You can modify this question if you'd like; the key is to make it reflective and personalized (i.e., make sure to include the “for you” part). This question facilitates sharing and connection and can help your mentee feel seen. The “ARC Middle” question (i.e., **“Are we getting to what you wanted to talk about today?”** or **“Anything else on your mind?”**) can be asked when your mentee is in the Thinking wedge, and/or toward the middle of your time together. This question allows you to share power with your mentee and gives them another opportunity to identify or remind you what is most important to them. The “ARC End” question (i.e., **“What stands out from our time together?”** or **“What are you taking away from our time together?”**) is a wonderful way to reflect together, often toward the end of your shared time. You can initiate this on your own by sharing what stands out for you, using this as a chance to praise your mentee and highlight something positive you noticed during your shared time. These ARC questions help provide structure for time with your mentee. They can be adapted to fit your style and approach; just try to maintain the function and spirit of the questions as you make them your own.

As we partner with our mentee, sharing our wisdom as needed while drawing on theirs, we help them feel seen and heard.

Using the Mentoring FAN model and incorporating the ARC questions is preferred to a more prescriptive approach that is mentor led and focused on the mentor's goals (or the program's) rather than the young person's. Attunement can result in stronger reflective capacity, stronger relationships, and increased confidence in one's role as a mentor.

Contextual Considerations for Applying Attunement

Attunement can help build relationships with young people across all ages and stages of development, although it may take shape differently with older youth. For example, the opportunity to “think together” when a mentee is in the Thinking wedge may be particularly important for older children and adolescents, as they learn more and more how to use their voice and experience in their own lives. Youth feedback on attunement also reminds us that advice-giving from mentors is welcomed, assuming trust has been established and the mentee feels the mentor respects them for who they are and what they value.

Attunement can be applied not only to our mentees, but also to those in their relationship “system” (see chapter 7 for more details about the ecosystem of a mentoring relationship). As an example, consider a scenario where your mentee's parent expresses frustration at your mentee's behavior. An attuned response would acknowledge their feeling (e.g., “I hear you — this sounds so hard and it is frustrating!”) and pause to see if the parent is able to share more. This approach allows the parent to be heard, and it often also lets the feeling “move” through more quickly, instead of causing the parent to get “stuck.” The flexibility and adaptability that are core features of attunement can also be very



useful when attuning to a group — a process similar to that discussed in chapter 6 on facilitating group interactions.

Attunement builds the relationship steadily across the relationship cycle but may be particularly important at the beginning and end of the relationship, as well as during more emotionally sensitive times. Because attunement is an intentional and effortful process, it can be challenging to stay attentive to cues, especially when things are feeling relaxed, fun, and easy. Attunement may therefore feel more relevant in times when support is needed (e.g., during a conflict or transition), or when a mentee's needs change. However, working to attune can help mentors manage and respond flexibly to unexpected stressors and situations that arise in the mentee's life across the relationship cycle. Keep in mind that the signals to communicate mentee needs can be subtle. Cues can change from moment to moment, and different young people give different types of cues. Even when things are feeling generally relaxed and enjoyable, pay attention to shifts in mood or engagement. It could be a memory, or another person entering the space that triggers the shift, or it could be something you said that slipped out and felt dismissive to the young person.

Developing skills in attunement is a lifelong process and can look slightly different over time and across the many relationships in your life. We realize this may sound daunting! That said, practice makes perfect. The more you work at reading cues (i.e., yours and your mentee's), the easier it will become. As we practice, we grow in self-awareness and can start noticing those things that agitate us and those that help us calm down. We also learn which wedges of the Mentoring FAN are most comfortable and which require more work on our part. Finally,

we learn the critical value of repair, as none of us are attuned all the time! In fact, research on intimate relationships suggests that most of the time, we are not attuned. In those many instances, attunement involves acknowledging the misstep (e.g., “I got ahead of you there and was distracted — can we try that again?”) and rebuilding. This process of repair strengthens your relationship and builds capacity for yourself and your mentee.

Attunement requires particular effort when verbal and nonverbal cues are informed by significant cultural differences. For example, in some cultures, eye contact is seen as a sign of respect, and in others, it is seen as a sign of disrespect. Similarly, some families speak at high volume, regardless of content being shared, while other families speak quietly, whether angry or calm. Some cultures regard sharing ideas with an adult as collaborative and generative, while others expect the young person to primarily receive and implement adult ideas. The cultural humility useful in learning about and working with these differences is discussed well in chapter 2. As you move forward with your mentee, make sure to consider how cultural background might inform how you read your mentee's cues.

Tips and Final Thoughts

The following tips can help you develop and practice your attunement skills with your mentee:

- Attend to your own stress level so you can be open and approach the relationship with curiosity more than authority.
- Make sure to regulate and calm yourself as much as possible. This facilitates connection with your mentee and helps you have empathy for them as you develop ideas and build solutions together.



- Get to know your own strengths and weaknesses in your use of the Mentoring FAN. Are you comfortable talking about feelings? Are you a “doer”? Is reflection hard for you? These insights can help you assess your comfort zones and areas of competence as a starting point for growth.
- Give the ARC questions a try during your time with your mentee, and practice them enough so you can make them your own. They may feel awkward at first, but mentors have shared with us that they help them connect with their mentee, as well as provide a safe and trustworthy rhythm for their time together.
- If you are part of a mentoring program, make sure to seek support from a program staff member or supervisor to discuss your self-identified weakness and ways to build your capacity in this area.
- Avoid a “therapeutic” approach; your mentee may experience this as confining or overly formal.

Finally, and most important, don't give up as you work to develop attunement skills! It's a slow but steady process, and when you misstep (as we all do), don't hesitate to repair and acknowledge what you have missed. Developing these skills is a worthwhile investment that can strengthen not only your relationship with your mentee, but also other important relationships across your life.

Additional Reading and Resources

The resources listed below can be accessed online at the links we have provided.

- ***Mentor Attunement: An Approach to Successful School-based Mentoring Relationships*** (2012) by Julia Pryce – This research article describes the initial work of conceptualizing attunement. It is available through Research Gate [here](#).
- ***The Mentoring FAN: A Promising Approach to Enhancing Attunement within the Mentoring System*** – (2018) by Julia Pryce and Linda Gilkerson – This article describes research findings on the use of the Mentoring FAN in real-life programs. It is available through Research Gate [here](#).

Please email jpryce@luc.edu if you are interested in learning more about attunement training for mentors and/or mentoring staff using the Mentoring FAN.