

# CANADIAN UNITARIAN COUNCIL

## MENTORING AND COMING OF AGE

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### MENTORING FOR ALL AGES

Mentoring can be used as a support for programming and also for supporting and nurturing leadership, so it is a wise consideration for succession planning. A potential youth, young adult or adult leader can be mentored by a person well established in their role. This facilitates long range planning, looking perhaps a year down the road to someone stepping back from a key role, and another person stepping up. Mentoring can be used to support learning a specific skill set or technique, and can also be used to share “institutional history” and deepen understanding within community. Choosing a mentor to accept such leadership requires them to be self aware, mature and well differentiated, and also aware of the power inherent in a mentor role. Mentoring can be done with any age, including youth/children, youth/youth, adults/youth and adults/adults.

Mentoring is also a way to offer Lifespan Programming when there are only a few participants in a religious education program, or there is a wide age spread, or attendance is regularly irregular (like once a month), or there is some condition or situation that prevents the person from participating in other planned religious education programming. The choice of mentoring or other types of programming considers *what is the richest experience possible within the current situation.*

In the case of one child or a person with specific considerations being mentored, the same factors regarding safety measures and planning need to be considered. A mentor must be screened according to the risk inherent in the position. A mentor must enter into the relationship with a good understanding of their role, the goals or nature of the learning and the agreement around commitment.

The outline below regarding programming based on the ‘Balanced Program’ can be used with all ages using a variety of age-specific curriculum and materials. *Mentoring as a programming model is an appropriate program, not just something to do because there were no other alternatives.* There are always alternatives, and mentoring is a choice.

When mentoring is the model, much of the planning will probably reside with the mentor. However, the planning still needs to be done in conjunction with the congregational schedule and the total religious education programming. Take advantage of other things that are happening – social action projects, celebrations, etc.

Since mentoring is a major component of Coming of Age programming for youth, the Coming of Age descriptions can be adapted for mentoring at other ages, children to adults. (Even though the plural form is used in the description, the material can be used by and for one person.)

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## COMING OF AGE

Coming of Age programs are powerful components of the Junior Youth programming in many Unitarian Universalist churches. They provide opportunities for young people to deepen their sense of spiritual identity in the context of the congregations they attend, and they inspire and challenge the adult members of the church to examine their own spiritual values. We have an obligation to offer meaningful, faith based preparation for this huge life stage transition between childhood and youth, between “no longer but not yet”.

Coming of Age programming begins at either 11-12 years, or a bit later at 13-14 years. The congregation decides which age grouping is most appropriate, and a 2 year spread is generally recommended, 12 and 13 year olds attend, for instance. This transformative experience for the younger age youth group then creates the potential nucleus for a youth group.

Coming of Age programs can be quite simple or elaborate and complex. They can be done with little expenditure or with professional programs. The community and the youth make the decisions regarding the extent of the program. The importance is supporting youth in transition along their spiritual path in a Unitarian Universalist community.

### CONSIDERATIONS OF THE COMING OF AGE PROGRAM:

#### **Planning:**

A group of committed people are needed in different roles - this cannot be run by one or two people. The Coming of Age program needs to be connected with religious education leadership as part of the continuum of lifespan learning or lifespan faith development.

In considering Coming of Age programming, ask "What do youth need to 'come of age'?"

Here are some suggestions - please develop your own!

Knowledge of what to leave behind and what to take with them from their childhood

A relationship with their home church

An understanding of what Unitarian Universalism is

Modeling of how to think and talk about spiritual subjects

A feeling of safety in thinking and talking about these subjects

A challenge - something that's not quite comfortable

Affirmation and recognition

Inclusion in the life of the congregation

A Sunday morning service to own

Opportunities to make friends

Some kind of bonding experience (like a trip together)

Celebration and a chance to tell their story of transformation and learning

Service in and to the larger community

Trust from the adults with whom he/she/ze engages

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Coming of Age can be anything you wish, but usually includes: a parent and youth orientation, Youth/Mentor Orientation, a significant service project, time with the minister, religious educator and congregational leadership, a challenge, from a ropes course to an event that involves planning, working with others and establishing trust and a ceremony of celebration by the congregation

## **Length and Timing:**

Programs vary in length and intent. However, they need to allow time for the thoughtful and comprehensive attention to the respective areas of study. The minimum recommended would be six months of programming, once a month, but better twice a month or weekly.

Factors to consider in planning:

- \*What the congregation has determined to be included in the program.
- \*Scheduling over a period of time, such as alternating OWL and Coming of Age, or the age of youth ready to participate. (If there is only one youth and no immediate prospect of additional youth, tailor the program to that youth rather than delay the program.)
- \*Availability of mentors and other resources.

Scheduling, by the nature of the program, calls for flexibility. Some of the events will occur on Sunday morning, others at alternate times. There also needs to be a plan for youth who come to the church after the Coming of Age program has started.

## **Mentors:**

A focus of the programming is on providing understanding and involvement with Unitarian Universalism. Therefore mentors are selected because of their understanding of and commitment to the Unitarian Universalism, such as being part of the congregation for a significant period of time, a minimum of a year.

One of the focuses is youth connecting with adults in the congregation – beyond their own parents. It is possible for parents to be mentors, but not of their own youth.

Mentor selection must be done within the congregation's safety policy. This is manageable and risk is mitigated :

- 🚧 with mentors meeting as groups with the youth,
- 🚧 meeting only in open spaces with other people around,
- 🚧 and making sure that parents and the designated congregational coordinator are aware of and approve of activities.

In fact, parents need to know and approve of the mentors for their youth.

It is possible, using the Balanced Program as an outline, to have different adults for the various components. This would allow the youth to work with more adults in the congregation. Having only one mentor throughout however provides better continuity.

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Orientation to the program includes commitment to time frame of the program, and the established perimeters. It is an opportunity to clarify things that might be unclear or undecided.

## **Commitment:**

Continuity is very important. Youth and mentors need to commit to the program and a covenant is formed. This also means that youth do not enter the program after it has started.

## **Rules:**

The rules for a Coming Of Age program need to be stated clearly at the beginning of the program, along with the consequences for rule infractions. Adults enter in to the same covenant for behavior as the youth.

## SAMPLE PROGRAM OUTLINE

Following is an outline for Coming of Age that incorporates the Components of a Balanced Program. The plan is designed jointly by the participant and the mentor and the religious education leadership. Specific details can be taken from various resources and relate to the specific congregation and participant/mentor.

**Focus/Goal** This states the scope of the program. Goals are set for the overall program and specifically for the youth.

**Group Activity** Although this is an individual plan, but some group activities might be included, such as participating in a congregational social action project, having a group discussion with youth and mentors, a educational session or a retreat with other youth.

**Mentor Activity** This is the specific interaction with the mentor, such as talking with the mentor about what it means to him/her to be a Unitarian Universalist.

**Individual Activity** This relates to specific things that the participant needs to do separate from the mentor, such as study a part of Unitarian Universalist history.

Following is a format that can be used for planning for Coming of Age (as well as for mentoring with younger children) based on the Balanced Program. Where possible, connection with the threads of the UUA's Tapestry of Faith are noted.

## **SOCIAL JUSTICE** or **ETHICAL DEVELOPMENT** (Tapestry)

*Social Action/Justice addresses problems and inequities in human relations.*

Affirmations:

Justice, equity, and compassion in human relations; and

The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all; and

Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part

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This opens the eyes of the youth to the **social realities and innocent suffering** of the rest of the world. This normally means engaging in some sort of social action project that makes a difference in the world. Engaging youth in activities that push them **beyond their normal comfort level** is an important part of practical testing. People learn more when they are asked to stretch beyond their boundaries. **Boundary stretching must occur in a safe and supportive environment.**

Focus/Goal	Group Activity	Mentor Activity	Individual Activity

### WORSHIP or SPIRITUAL IDENTITY (Tapestry)

*Worship is the celebration of the religious community, with a focus on the "worth-ship" of each person.*  
 Affirmation: Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations.

Worship in community and individually enhances the spiritual journey. Various forms of worship provide opportunity for youth to explore spiritual expression and creativity.

Focus/Goal	Group Activity	Mentor Activity	Individual Activity

### BUILDING COMMUNITY

*Building Community focuses on the activities that are social in nature, building relationships.*

Affirmation: The inherent worth and dignity of every person.

There is an opportunity for the group itself to **build community**. Having the youth covenant to be together during challenging activities can ensure that each individual feels supported. For example; prior to an event, have each youth verbally state "my name is ..... and I choose to do this activity. Will you support me?" and the group answer "Yes, we support you."

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This also includes increasing understanding **how community is build within the congregation**. Youth contribute to the sense of community as they interact with all ages, including people who may need additional support or services from the congregation.

Focus/Goal	Group Activity	Mentor Activity	Individual Activity

## LEARNING, UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST IDENTITY/FAITH DEVELOPMENT (Tapestry)

*Learning* Structured curriculum and/or planned learning opportunities.

Affirmation: A free and responsible search for truth and meaning.

To learn about the shared institutional knowledge – **the history and heritage** of the community ~ is to explore the identity and principles upon which the community is founded. It can be a time of profound learning and great pride. Ensure there are times for reflective encounters about what they are learning. Role playing situations provides time for deeper understanding of their values.

This is also a time of learning about personal faith development within the larger community. This includes considering some of life’s basic questions, such as:

What is God to me?

What is of ultimate value?

How will I face difficult choices?

How does change affect me?

What do I hope to do with my life?

Who will I be close to?

Focus/Goal	Group Activity	Mentor Activity	Individual Activity

## LEADERSHIP

*Leadership Opportunity*

Affirmation: The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large.

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Mentored learning introduces skills one needs to be a **part of the community**. A mentor helps the youth gain a sense of pride in the community and desire to keep the community alive. A mentor can help the youth learn to recognize his or her role in the life of the community, including developing leadership skills.

Focus/Goal	Group Activity	Mentor Activity	Individual Activity

## COMMUNITY CELEBRATION

The celebration at the end of the Coming of Age program is built into the planning for the program. This is a time for the youth to express their learning from the experience and to share what it means to be a Unitarian Universalist. It includes credo or presentation by youth.

Ritual marks transition. After a Coming of Age ritual the youth will be in a different relationship with the community. The ritual should be developed by the group to ensure it has meaning, but drawing on **ancient and modern traditions** is encouraged. Choose activities that you know that will be remembered. The more the ritual is filled with mystery, the more it goes to the heart.

The celebration with the community should **honour both the individual and their own Story, as well as the group** that is 'coming of age' and the congregation that has supported them. The community celebration acknowledges that the youth are **changed** by their experience, visually by encouraging the youth to dress up, and interpersonally by encouraging everyone to treat the youth with enlarged respect. The celebration also should **include all the ages**, ensuring that a community myth gets created for the younger generation to hope for when they come of age. Most of all the celebration that follows any Coming of Age service should be **fun, fun, fun!**