4 case studies of challenging pairs

Here are four case studies that can guide you as you support challenging pairs in your program.

- Before you discuss, review 9 principles for supporting challenging pairs (http://partners.imentor.org/help/9-principles-for-supporting-challenging-pairs) .
- You can also check out 7 training scenarios to increase the quality of your pair support (http://partners.imentor.org/help/7-training-scenarios-to-increase-the-quality-of-your-pair-support) for scenarios to discuss with your team.
- When you lack clarity about how to proceed, always reach out to your manager to think through the best strategy to implement.

Case 1: Mentee is reluctant
Case 2: Mentee is hurt by or doesn't like the mentor
Case 3: Mentor is inconsistent
Case 4: Mentor has "unreasonable" expectations

Case 1 - Mentor Sam and Mentee Juan: Mentee is reluctant to participate

It is the 3rd month of the first year of the match. Juan is 15, comes to class regularly, but is shy and withdrawn most of the time. His mentor, Sam, on the other hand, is outgoing and very excited to connect with Juan. Sam told the PC he joined iMentor because he loves working with teenagers and likes the idea of helping kids out during hard times.

In the beginning of the school year, Juan would roll his eyes in session when the PC introduced the prompt, but he still emailed Sam a line or two. The emails were short with little substance. Juan also did not attend the first event and told the PC that he would not try and make it up.

The PC spoke with Sam and asked him to be patient as Juan got used to the program. When the PC spoke with Juan about sharing more in his emails and meeting Sam, Juan quietly argued that he didn't want to do this in the first place and that he didn't want to meet Sam. However, Juan did start sharing a little bit more in his emails, here and there. He told Sam that he wanted to be an engineer when he grew up and that he loved baseball. Sam took this as a sign of encouragement and shared more about himself. Sam asked more questions about Juan's life. Juan would answer some of them, but always steered clear of answering questions about his family.

The PC encouraged Juan to meet Sam at the next event. Juan agreed, but the night of the event, when Sam showed up, Juan ran out of the building and left for the night. Sam was disappointed and confused. He told the PC that it wasn't fair to force Juan into this if he doesn't want to be involved.

Mentee development

- Find out why the mentee is resistant to meeting his mentor. To do this, read all email exchanges in case the mentor said something that hurt or scared the mentee (intentionally or not). Ask the mentee what made him run away from the mentor. Speak with the guidance counselor to see if he/she has any insight into why this might be hard for the mentee. Consider that he may have had a negative experience with an adult in the past.
- Consider the two personalities involved. Is Sam's approach intimidating, given that the mentor is outgoing and the mentee is shy? Remember that teenagers have a hard time reading other people's emotions and intentions and are in the process of learning how to interact positively with other adults.
- Identify what is working. Find out why the mentee was starting to open up. Start from where the mentee feels safe. Reinforcing positive behavior is the most effective way in changing a person's behavior, so point out what is working to both parties.
- Research has shown that teenagers are more likely to change their behavior when they are supported by a "friend" and less likely to change their behavior when feeling pushed.

Match life cycle:

- Share with Sam that this is not unusual behavior to observe in the beginning of a match and that this resistance does not necessarily mean that Juan doesn't like Sam or the program. Encourage Sam not to push too hard (as this often leads to more resistance). Instead, encourage Sam to start with small steps like finding common interests and asking open ended questions.

Case 2 - Mentor Marie and Mentee Chanelle: Mentee's feelings are hurt

It is the 5th month of the first year of the match. Chanelle is 16, outgoing and bright. Marie is from one of iMentor's corporate partners, a young professional, relatively new to the city. Marie told the PC that she became a mentor because she believes that young people living in poverty deserve the chance to go to college.

At the beginning of the year, the pair emailed regularly for the most part. Twice Marie missed an email but made it up right away, citing work was very busy. The pair met at the first event and they seemed to get along well. Chanelle was very impressed with Marie and gave Marie a huge hug at the end of the event. Later, she told her PC that she thought her mentor was really cool.

The pair continued to email, but Marie missed an email here and there. When this would happen, Chanelle was clearly disappointed. She would slump in her chair and disengage from class. When she did receive emails from Marie, Chanelle would be exuberant. Marie told the PC and Chanelle that she could not make the next event, due to work obligations. Chanelle was sad, but told Marie that she understood.

They continued to email, and even though Marie was late on a couple emails, they seemed to connect. However, Marie missed the next event even though she said would go, and didn't call to let Chanelle know. Chanelle was very upset at the event and told the PC that she hated Marie. The PC called Marie the next day to follow up and Marie apologized profusely and said it

wouldn't happen again. At the next iMentor session, Chanelle emailed Marie and told her that she didn't like her and that she was ugly and stupid. The PC caught the email before Marie read it.

Mentor motivation:

- Remind the mentor why they got into mentoring in the first place. Does she feel like she is still achieving this goal? How can the curriculum help Marie achieve this with Chanelle? How will consistency and clear, communication help Marie achieve this goal with Chanelle?
- Find out what the mentor wants: Marie may not be telling you the whole truth about how she is feeling as a mentor. Mentoring can be an intimidating experience that can lead to a mentor feeling inadequate, defensive and scared. Find out if this is the case and whether or not Marie's inconsitencies are a passive aggressive reaction to feeling vulnerable.

Mentee development:

- During adolescence we begin to learn how to read people and situations effectively and respond in appropriate ways. While it is appropriate for Chanelle to feel disappointed, it is inappropriate to say mean and hurtful things to her. When Chanelle does this, she is expressing anger in an unproductive way. This is a great opportunity for the mentor (and the PC is appropriate) to help Chanelle learn how to express her feelings appropriately and take accountability for her language. On the other hand, Chanelle should also have the opportunity to learn from the behavior that Marie models. In this case, Marie needs to be consistent and honest about why she has been inconsistent in order to model to Chanelle how to take accountability for one's actions and how to be self–aware no matter how vulnerable one feels.

Case 3 - Mentor Anita and Mentee Lisa: Mentor is inconsistent

It is the 5th month of the 2nd year of the match. Lisa is 17, responsible and studious. She was eager to receive a mentor because she wants to continue to do well in school and get help in the college process, as she will be the first person in her family to go to college. Anita was excited to be a mentor in order to help a struggling young person to succeed.

The first year of the match went relatively well. They met 4 times and they emailed 80% on time. Last year, Anita told her PC that she really liked Lisa, but thought that she probably didn't need a mentor since she was already doing well.

This year, Anita changed jobs and has only been able to meet her mentee once at an event. Anita travels frequently for work and she often forgets to tell her PC and Lisa that she'll be away and then forgets to email. She's been increasingly hard to get a hold of to address these issues. When the PC does connect with Anita, she tells the PC not to worry too much about it because she and Lisa have a strong relationship and Lisa understands how busy she is. Lisa has told Anita that she understands how busy she is and why she has to miss so many events in her emails to Anita, but in class she confides to the PC that she doesn't think Anita cares any more and that she is worried that this inconsistency may affect her grade.

Mentee Development:

- Lisa needs to learn how to communicate her feelings truthfully and directly and have her experience this with positive outcomes. Coach Lisa to be upfront. Coach Anita to answer her email back honestly and positively, in a way that demonstrates that she cares for Lisa and is proud of her for being mature enough to communicate difficult feedback.
- Know the mentor's limits: Find out how the mentor is feeling. Is the mentor inconsistent because she feels she won't have an impact on Lisa's future or is she really being inconsistent because of her new work schedule. If the latter is the reality, than work to find out what the mentor can commit to, making sure she is not committing to more than she can really do. If the former, point out how Anita is making a difference, stress the social–emotional since academics are not a problem for Lisa. Have Anita tell Lisa how she feels and ask Lisa for feedback. Lisa is mature enough to have this conversation.

Match Life Cycle:

- We often observe mentors resisting the coaching and supervision of PCs after at least a year has gone by and the pair has successfully bonded. While the research suggests that we see this "testing" during this period from mentees, it is not uncommon to see mentors go through their own "testing" stage. Typically, people resisting at this stage need reassurance that they are cared about. Proactively encourage your mentee to thank the mentor or show the mentor how she continues to be helpful. If the mentor is resisting the PC, then the PC should consider pointing out the positives that the mentor is doing and remain supportive of the relationship.

Case 4 - Mentor Michael and Mentee Amir: Mentor has unreasonable expectations

It is the 2nd month of the first year of the match. Amir is 14 and moved to the US three years ago. Amir is friendly and energetic and a bit immature compared to his peers. He is still working on perfecting his English and adjusting to the US. Michael told the PC that he became a mentor because he was the first kid in his family to go to college and he wished that he had a mentor when he was going through the high school and college process.

Two months in, Amir seemed to like Michael and enjoyed the iMentor sessions. While it wasn't always easy for Amir to sit down and get started in class, once he did, he clearly put effort into his emails. However, the PC noticed that it took Amir a lot longer than his peers to craft a sentence and finish his emails on time.

Amir and Michael met at the first event. The PC didn't get a chance to check in at the event, but they looked engaged. After the event, Amir told the PC that he was happy that he was paired with such a good mentor.

Michael sent Amir long emails about how to do well in school and what Amir should be thinking about as he starts his journey in preparing for college. His emails were encouraging but serious. Amir continued to respond to Michael's emails with only a few sentences and rarely addressed

the advice that Michael gave. Instead, Amir would write about his favorite movies and video games. Michael called the PC to tell him how he didn't think Amir was really trying and that he wasn't taking this seriously. He said if Amir didn't want to be in this program, then he would be happy to be rematched with a different student that could really use his help. Until he saw real effort, he said, he would refrain from attending events and would only email Amir back if the emails were based on the prompts.

Mentee development

- It appears that Michael is demonstrating a lack of what researcher Renee Spencer calls "youth focus." Michael is applying a communication style and approach that may be appropriate for adults, but not appropriate for an emotionally immature 14 year old. The PC needs to reframe the experience for the mentor, teaching the mentor what is developmentally appropriate for a 14 year old and how the mentor can apply the same productive energy to different age–appropriate strategies. The PC should also discuss what success would like if the mentor was to adopt a different approach. In this case the mentor should try to be more playful, interested in the mentee's personality and introduce a college focus through baby steps while including the mentee in the decision of talking about college more.
- Research has shown that teenagers are more likely to change their behavior when they are supported by a "friend" and less likely to change their behavior when feeling pushed.

Mentor motivation:

- This may be a case where the mentor is engaging in what the psychology world calls counter–transference. In mentoring, this happens when a mentor has unresolved feelings about their own past and projects this onto the student. The PC is not the mentor's therapist and so should not try and help the mentor get to the root of the matter. Instead, the PC can help the mentor see the mentee as an individual with his own unique experience that may be similar but that are not the same. If this is what is happening, it is important that the PC carefully monitors this relationship as this can deteriorate quickly.
- Alternatively, it may be the case that because the mentor is motivated by being helpful, he may be feeling like he is not having an effect on the mentee and feels demoralized or inadequate because of this.