How Lifestyle Figures in an Appropriate Mentor Match

By John C. Patterson

Resource Type: Articles

Topic: HR Risk and Employment Practices, Youth Protection and Child Safety

There is a fine line between gathering the necessary information for making the appropriate match and infringing on the privacy of all parties involved. Yet, the parents' right to set limits on who they feel is an acceptable match for their child requires information about the lifestyle of the mentor matched with their child. For example, smoking, drinking alcoholic beverages, sexual orientation and religion may all be factors in whether a particular mentor is acceptable match for a specific child. Thus, the screening process must ask about parental/child lifestyle concerns and the volunteer mentor's lifestyle.

The road to these answers is not always paved. Staff interviewers may encounter bumps, roadblocks and misdirection. Matching prospective mentors and children requires staff skill in obtaining sensitive information from each party that will be considered when forming a suitable pairing.

Customizing Your Organization's Mentor Screening Process

Checklist

- Your nonprofit uses written descriptions for each position.
- Your nonprofit uses application forms for employees and volunteers.
- Your nonprofit conducts interviews with applicants.
- Your nonprofit checks applicants' references.
- Your nonprofit conducts record checks determined by risks inherent in the position description.
- Your nonprofit uses other screening techniques dependent on the risks inherent in the position requirements.

Address Blank Answers

Some applicants for mentor positions may find the information requested on the application form to be too personal and may resist answering questions related to their personal lifestyles. When this happens, the match-support professional should seek to obtain the desired information during the interview with the prospective mentor by acknowledging the sensitive nature of the information and explaining why the information is necessary and how the information will be used to make an appropriate match. If the applicant chooses not to

provide the information, he or she should not be given a mentoring assignment.

Address Falsified Answers

As a rule, falsification of any information on the application for a volunteer or employee position should be grounds for terminating the organization's relationship with the applicant. When faced with falsified answers to lifestyle-related questions staff should follow this rule.

Provide Universal Precautions

Tell all mentors as part of their training that it is not appropriate for them to discuss the private aspects of their lives with the children they are mentoring. The Nonprofit Risk Management Center has learned over the years that a frequent precursor to child sexual abuse is engaging the child in discussions about the molester's (or the child's) sexual behavior. Often sharing intimate details of one's life can lead to confusion or to the appearance of impropriety; therefore, it is not acceptable mentor behavior.

Ascertain Parental Preference

Just as you may request information about the mentor's lifestyle on your application form for matching purposes, you may also ask parents to indicate their wishes on their child's application. Three choices that you may want to present are:

- I would accept a mentor for my child regardless of the mentor's lifestyle.
- I would accept a mentor for my child, but wish to be informed of the mentor's lifestyle, specifically __Sexual orientation; ___Religion; ___Smoking; ___Drinking.
- I would not accept a mentor for my child if the mentor were _____(specify a religion); ___ a smoker; or, ___ a drinker of alcoholic beverages.

Balancing the parents' wishes, the child's safety and the applicant's privacy is a tricky proposition, but one that a mentoring organization needs to set down as policy and procedure.