



# Mentorship in a Virtual World

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**Please Note:** The full version of this report is available by request at <https://www.girlsementorship.com/gemlab/main#access-full-reports>.

# Executive Summary

This report will begin with an examination of external studies on both in-person and virtual mentorship models. It will then examine virtual learning in the GEM context through a comparison of the outcomes for the 2019-20 in-person cohort and the 2020-21 virtual cohort. This report will conclude with an examination of feedback from our program participants in the areas of the mentorship relationship, learning and curriculum, events, program outreach and recruitment, and internal community-building. Based on the findings discussed in these sections, this report will present several recommendations for best practices for the virtual mentorship model.

## Research Findings

The COVID-19 pandemic forced the world to transition online and stay at home in order to stop the spread of the virus. This lack of connection and required isolation among adolescent youth led to a number of adverse mental, physical and emotional health outcomes, as identified in GEM's report, "The Impact of COVID-19 on Adolescent Youth in Canada." According to Kaufman et al, "social isolation can lead to low self-esteem, depressive symptoms, abuse, and suicidal ideation, particularly for adolescents who rely heavily on peer interactions."<sup>1</sup> Because of the consistent support and sense of community that are inherent in mentorship programs, involvement in such programs can be extremely beneficial for youth in times of crisis.<sup>2</sup>

GEM's internal findings presented throughout this report are consistent with the external research discussed at the beginning: mentorship programs, both in-person and virtual, can lead to positive personal and professional outcomes for youth. Conducting mentorship programs virtually, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, can allow for greater accessibility among participants and improved educational outcomes for youth. Conducting mentorship virtually can also lead to challenges, however, with communication and the mental health of participants. While online events were engaging and informative, virtual participants were less able to network and develop relationships when compared to in-person participants. By implementing the following best practices and recommendations, virtual mentorship participants can overcome these challenges and reach their fullest potential.

## Recommendations

Based on the quantitative outcomes, the qualitative feedback, and the conversations had during participant focus groups, the following recommendations are presented for virtual mentorship.

### Building a Virtual Mentor/Mentee Relationship

1. **Communication:**
  - a. Encourage mentors and mentees to maintain consistent communication with each other.
  - b. Encourage both parties to contact the GEM Team if they are struggling to communicate.
2. **Relationship-Building:**
  - a. Encourage mentors to break the ice, share personal experiences, and try to develop a friendship with their mentee.
  - b. Encourage mentors to contact program administrators if they are having a challenging time breaking the ice.
3. **In-Person Meeting:**
  - a. Encourage mentors and mentees to meet face-to-face via video conference at the beginning of the relationship, even if they prefer to communicate via phone calls later on. This will help to promote accountability and a closer personal bond.
  - b. When safe, it is encouraged that mentors and mentees meet at least once in-person at the beginning of their relationship. Even if the mentorship program continues to run online, encouraging mentors and mentees to meet in-person will promote accountability and help build a stronger personal connection.
4. **Monthly Meetings:**
  - a. Develop a sample agenda for monthly meetings to help mentors and mentees stay on task throughout the relationship.
  - b. Encourage mentees to reflect on what they want to take away from the mentorship experience prior to the start of the relationship. Remind mentees to return to this reflection throughout the year and ensure that they are taking full advantage of the experience.
5. **Professional Connections:**
  - a. Encourage mentors to introduce their mentees to other mentors based on career interests.

### Recommendations for Virtual Mentorship Programs

1. **Events:**
  - a. Add polls and other interactive features to PowerPoint presentations to promote engagement.
2. **Program Administration/Relationship Management:**
  - a. Set clear expectations for mentors and mentees about time commitment and communication to avoid inconsistencies and burnout. Encourage participants to contact program administrators if their mentor or mentee is non-responsive.

- b. Implement an interactive, online mentorship platform (such as Mentor City) as a centralized location for all program communication, announcements, and resources.
- c. Provide mentors with a “list of ideas for safe and appropriate ways of connecting with mentees, both in person and digitally,” according to local public health guidelines.<sup>3</sup>

### 3. **Networking:**

- a. Create more opportunities for building community among mentors and mentees.
  - i. Host informal social events and speed-networking events in addition to existing curriculum-based events.
  - ii. Create peer support groups for mentors on an online mentorship platform (such as Mentor City).
  - iii. Create professional networking groups for mentor and mentee pairs on an online mentorship platform (such as Mentor City).
  - iv. Create a Whatsapp group for all mentees to informally connect on.

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# Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Michelle R. Kaufman, Kate Wright, Jeannette Simon, Giselle Edwards, Johannes Thrul, and David L. DuBois, "Mentoring in the time of COVID-19: An analysis of online focus groups with mentors to youth," *American Journal of Community Psychology* 0 (2021): 2.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 11.

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