

DEALING WITH PEER TUTORING CHALLENGES

Here are some tips for dealing with some peer tutoring challenges, adapted from Frontier College's A Tutor's Guide: How to Communicate Effectively with Teens, by Lorna Corzine. (Aug. 2006)

My student says her homework is too hard.

- Ask your student to explain the homework to you in her own words.
- Work through the instructions together.
- Break the homework down into smaller, more manageable pieces.
- Encourage her to give it a try ("just 3 more questions, good job, try the next one...")

My student asks questions that I don't know the answers to.

- Tell him that you don't know the answer, but that you can find the answers together. This models research and problem solving skills.
- Use the textbook to look for the answers, or do a search together on the internet.
- Check the library for a book on the subject.

My student says it's my fault he didn't pass a test or do well on an assignment.

- Don't dwell on the blame; he probably feels frustrated and discouraged.
- Talk about the test or assignment. How did he prepare for it? What can he do differently to prepare next time?
- Read the teacher's comments together and figure out the correct answers to the questions marked as wrong.
- Ask when the next test or assignment is. Make a plan together so that your student can be more prepared.

My student is uncomfortable asking for help or doesn't seem very motivated.

- Encourage her to use your time together to complete schoolwork.
- Give her space to do the work, but check in ("how's it going? do you remember how to find that answer?") if she seems distracted or frustrated.
- Don't make tutoring all about homework: try to do something fun at each meeting to encourage participation.

How am I supposed to be professional and friendly at the same time?

- Being professional means keeping your distance. Don't exchange phone numbers or email addresses: if your student is under 18, you need a parent's permission in writing to do that!! Keep your contact within the times set for your tutoring sessions.
- Being a friend and a tutor means listening but not judging.
- Get to know your student: his school likes/dislikes, his hobbies and activities, and his strengths and challenges. Share similar things about yourself ("I'm not very good in math, but I really like reading".)

- If your tutoring sessions get off track, refocus your student on the task at hand (“Oh, we better get back to the assignment. We’ve only got 20 minutes left!”)

My student keeps talking about stuff not related to homework. How can I get back to homework without seeming like I don’t care?

- Use active listening. Is your student just talking to avoid doing homework? If so, refocus her attention, but also check in to be sure she understands her work. Maybe she’s stuck and needs some help! Remind her that you’re there to help with school stuff.
 - If the questions are about academic issues (other high school classes, what you think university is like), set aside time to answer these. Your student is interested in learning from your experience!
 - Is it a more complex problem than you feel comfortable handling? If so:
 - o Tell your student that you want to help, but that you’re just not qualified to give good answers. Suggest that he try to find someone who is.
 - o Reassure him that you’ll still be his tutor! A student may think that if he talks to a counsellor, you will figure the problem is solved and not help him anymore.
 - o If your student doesn’t want to talk to an adult, discuss the situation with a teacher.
- Remember that if you are questioning a student’s safety, you must tell someone about it immediately!**

My student has a poor attitude toward our tutoring sessions, other students, and school.

- Be consistent. If you sometimes laugh or joke about your tutoring sessions, or make fun of school and other students, your student will pick up on it. Remember to remain positive and focused on learning in your tutoring sessions.
- If you can’t seem to get your student to try or to apply him or herself, speak to your teacher. Even though you may want to help your student, you can’t do that if he/she chooses NOT to be helped!

I don’t relate to my student’s likes/dislikes (due to age, culture or economic differences)!

- Relating doesn’t mean you have to experience everything your student has. Look for broad parallels. For example, even if your taste in music differs, both your parents and your students’ parents may not appreciate your musical selections.

Yikes! My student asked me out on a date!

- DO NOT date a student you are tutoring! Even though you’re close in age, there’s an unequal power dynamic between the two of you. Dating can lead to serious problems.
- Is it for real? Maybe it’s a dare created by the student’s friends. If there are lots of people around, it could be a joke designed to test you. However, if you’re in a quiet corner where others cannot hear, the student may be serious.
- Let your student down gently, whether or not he or she is joking. Tell your student that you like being his/her tutor, and that tutors and students aren’t allowed to meet outside of tutoring sessions.
- If your student persists, talk to the teacher in charge of your tutoring assignment. If it’s really uncomfortable, you can ask to be placed with another student, but sometimes if the teacher speaks to the student about the student/teacher relationship, the problem will then be solved.