

The Center for Critical Mentoring and Youth Work

This moment demands that mentors and other types of youth workers be present in unparalleled ways. Our young people are taking notice. They are acutely aware of current events; they are living through the age of pandemics and protests. They are also having their own discussions and taking their own actions. As we do our mentoring work, we must consider that too many of the young people we serve come from communities created and targeted by white supremacy and white supremacist notions. The violence we collectively witnessed when the George Floyd murder was made public is something too many of our youth know via personal experience or generational understanding. The young folks we serve have daily lived experiences that force them to navigate spaces where they must face the everydayness of racism, not just the blatant racism and violence we notice when it hits the news, it's the everydayness of dismissal, invisibility, and microaggressions that challenge their very right to exist. What our marginalized and minoritized youth must contend with must be addressed with our mentoring. The critical mentoring concept stresses the importance of context in the mentoring approach. And our current context includes acknowledging an apparent and purposeful attack on the progress Black people and other people of color have made. Here are three things mentors can do to support youth in the wake of the Chauvin trial:

Do your own work before engaging with young people

Our young people are already dealing with significant trauma. The last thing they need is for adults who have not confronted their own privilege and ideas to interact with them in ways that do further damage. Ask yourself some fundamental questions about your response to the murder of George Floyd and on the trial of Derek Chauvin. Ask yourself if those answers are at odds with what the young people you are working with might need at this moment. You may not be able or be positioned to have a healing discussion with your protege. You might instead need to help your protege identify a group with which he or she can process. It is important that we understand that we may not always be the best ones to help and along with that means doing our own work first. Mentoring programs have a responsibility to ensure that the folks working with our young people have the tools and language they need to be effective. We can't afford to have untrained mentors attempting these types of discussions. Finally, if you are a mentor who has not or is not willing to do the work you need to do before engaging marginalized youth in these conversations, then do not engage.

Provide young people with safe spaces to process

As mentors, we owe our young people support and guidance. This means establishing safe spaces for youth to process current events. We can't ignore that these things are happening, and we can't ignore that youth need opportunities to talk about, understand and gather their own thoughts about these situations. If they don't do it with us, they will still do it. Mentoring programs should acknowledge the issue and establish safe and brave spaces for youth to come together to process these events with the support of their peers and adult mentors. And these spaces must be reimagined. They do not need to look like the typical town halls or open forums that adults require to feel safe and secure, let youth lead the way and allow them to organize the spaces in ways that best suit them. If you want some guidance about the types of questions that can be asked during an event such as this, take a look at the youth generated questions used in our Black Youth Town Hall.

Understand your place and privilege and behave accordingly

There is a lot of talk currently about folks identifying and understanding their privilege. If you are engaged in a mentoring relationship or in a position dealing with young people, this is work you should regularly be doing. However, we know the opposite to be true. So, re-read the very first point that I made in this piece. Do your own work before dealing with our young people. Understand that even if you do not ascribe to or agree with the stance of open racists, you may hold ideas that do more to excuse them than to condemn them; silence is violence. Understand that your place in our society in and of itself comes with challenges. Be aware, be sensitive and know when it is time to speak or act and when it is time to let other folks lead. Understand that youth might not be ready to dialogue with you and be ok with that. Do not ask young people to explain, expound or educate you. They need space to process trauma and positioning yourself as needing help or education isn't the role you should be playing for them.

There are plenty of tools available to mentors to help them do the work required to support youth in this moment. I would suggest grabbing a copy of [Critical Mentoring a Practical Guide](#) as a start. Here are a few others that model or help adults to facilitate critical conversations with young people.

Response Resources

Black Youth Townhall: <https://youtu.be/dFRi1c2PW08>

Abolitionist Teaching Network: <https://abolitionistteachingnetwork.org/>

Woke Kindergarten: <https://www.wokekindergarten.org/>