



# Conducting Reference Checks

## Best Practice Resources – Mentor Screening

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Reference checks serve as a critical component to a thorough and effective volunteer applicant screening process. Information provided during reference checks can confirm or call into question details regarding a given candidate's suitability for your program. Reference checks provide the most information when they are conducted over the phone by a trained and experienced staff person. This information on conducting reference checks is adapted from SAFE: Screening Applicants for Effectiveness by Friends for Youth, Inc. For more information on screening youth, purchase a copy of at [www.friendsforyouth.org](http://www.friendsforyouth.org).

### **Avoid Assumptions**

Typically an applicant will provide positive references (individuals who maintain a positive opinion of the applicant and his/her suitability for your program). This does not mean that you should automatically assume that applicants will only give the names of people who will speak well of them. Many people assume references will not be contacted. A thorough, well-documented reference check remains critical to effective screening to safeguard against those instances when a red-flag or issue of concern does arise from a source close to the applicant.

### **Considerations**

- **Reference Check Selection**

Who has the applicant listed as references? Are these references appropriate? If the applicant has given you the name of a reference he or she has known for less than two years this might raise red-flags including; your applicant's inability to follow instructions, and to identify positive relationships.

- **History**

Consider whether the applicant's references represent an appropriate spectrum of interactions from his or her life. For example, if an applicant's references reveal that they formerly knew the applicant but have not been in contact in recent years, this might raise a red flag regarding the candidate's recent relationship history.

- **Believability**

How present is the candidate's reference during the conversation? Is he or she providing general or vague responses, or simply stating yes or no answers? This may be a sign that the reference is distracted, busy, or uncomfortable speaking about the appropriateness of the applicant. If your hunch is that the person is busy, ask if you can call back at a more convenient time.

- **Motivation**

References can also provide insightful information regarding the applicant's motivation to volunteer, and who he or she might work well with. I.e., "She's great with teens but doesn't really like to babysit my six-year-old."

- **Consistency**

References also help you verify additional information provided by the applicant. For example an applicant might describe himself as outgoing whereas a reference may characterize the same individual as shy and quiet.

- **Hinting**

A lot of information can be shared through both direct and indirect communication. For example, a reference may be communicating information about the suitability of an applicant when he or she is vague, unsure or hesitant in his or her responses. If you think this is the case don't ever be afraid to ask clarifying questions to seek more information. While you should rely on a consistent set of questions for all volunteer references of the same volunteer position; consider in advance what answers you are looking for (including non-verbals or red-flags) and ask follow-up questions where necessary.

- **Deciphering Safety vs. Opinion**

A reference may share information about a potential applicant that reflects a personal opinion rather than a serious safety concern. When this happens it's your job to dig deeper and clarify what is being said. For example, if a parent shares that she doesn't think her daughter has time for this volunteer commitment, you can ask clarifying questions to get the mother to expand on her point. Asking clarifying questions will help you develop a better sense of the applicant's ability to form a healthy, trusting relationship with a young person in your program.

- When I asked you how well your daughter keeps her commitments you mentioned that you don't believe she has enough time for this experience. Can you tell me why you feel that way?
- How many volunteer or community activities is your daughter currently involved with?
- How well does your daughter juggle/balance multiple activities/commitments?
- Would you say she commonly bites off more than can she chew?

- **On-going Monitoring and Supervision**

A reference may also indicate that an applicant needs more support or supervision in a specific area or aspect of your program. Looking at the sample scenario above, a staff person might discern that this young woman may need extra support with setting appropriate boundaries around time.

When determining the suitability of an applicant, consider how much time it will take staff to support the development of a healthy, supportive, long-term mentoring relationship utilizing this specific applicant. Try to differentiate between skills that can be taught and innate qualities that are essential of all volunteer mentors in your program. If all signs indicate that the individual will need more training and supervision than your program model typically affords, you may be better off to decline the applicant. Remember that your program defines the eligibility criteria of your volunteer mentors. Be sure to state from the beginning of your screening process that all materials submitted and collected for the purposes of being considered to become a volunteer with the program are confidential and the property of your agency.

Any hesitations, red-flags, supervision indications, and general observations gleaned from the reference check process should be documented using Personal Reference Check Questionnaires and stored in the volunteer's file. This information should be

summarized for staff during a final screening meeting before approving or denying an applicant for participation in your program.

### Flow of the Reference Check Phone Call

**Intro:** Make it welcoming, and try to combat the other person's nerves by remaining calm, confident and nonjudgmental.

**Explore:** Try to keep it conversational using the Personal Reference Check Questionnaire to guide the conversation and ask probing questions as appropriate.

**Closing:** Thank the person for their time, provide your phone number, and let them know that you are available should they have any other information or considerations they'd like to share related to the applicant's ability to mentor a youth in your community.

**Document:** Be sure to clearly document notes and impressions gathered from the individual's reference immediately following the conversation using the Personal Reference Check Questionnaire.

### Tips to Remember

1. Know what you need from a volunteer mentor, how to recognize it, and then trust your gut. Be aware of your own preferences so that you can welcome and expand diversity.
2. Making the right decision to deny someone from program participation saves you supervision time in the long run, and protects the well-being of vulnerable youth participants.
3. Pay attention to all red-flags and take all concerns seriously. This does not mean rejecting an applicant based on one bad reference. If a red-flag is raised, speak with all other references.
4. Asking leading questions
  - Tom said the two of you are really close is that true?
  - Try -How long and in what capacity have you known Tom?
5. Asking questions that can be answered with a yes or no
  - Do you think Tom works well with kids?
  - Try -How well do you think Tom works with kids?