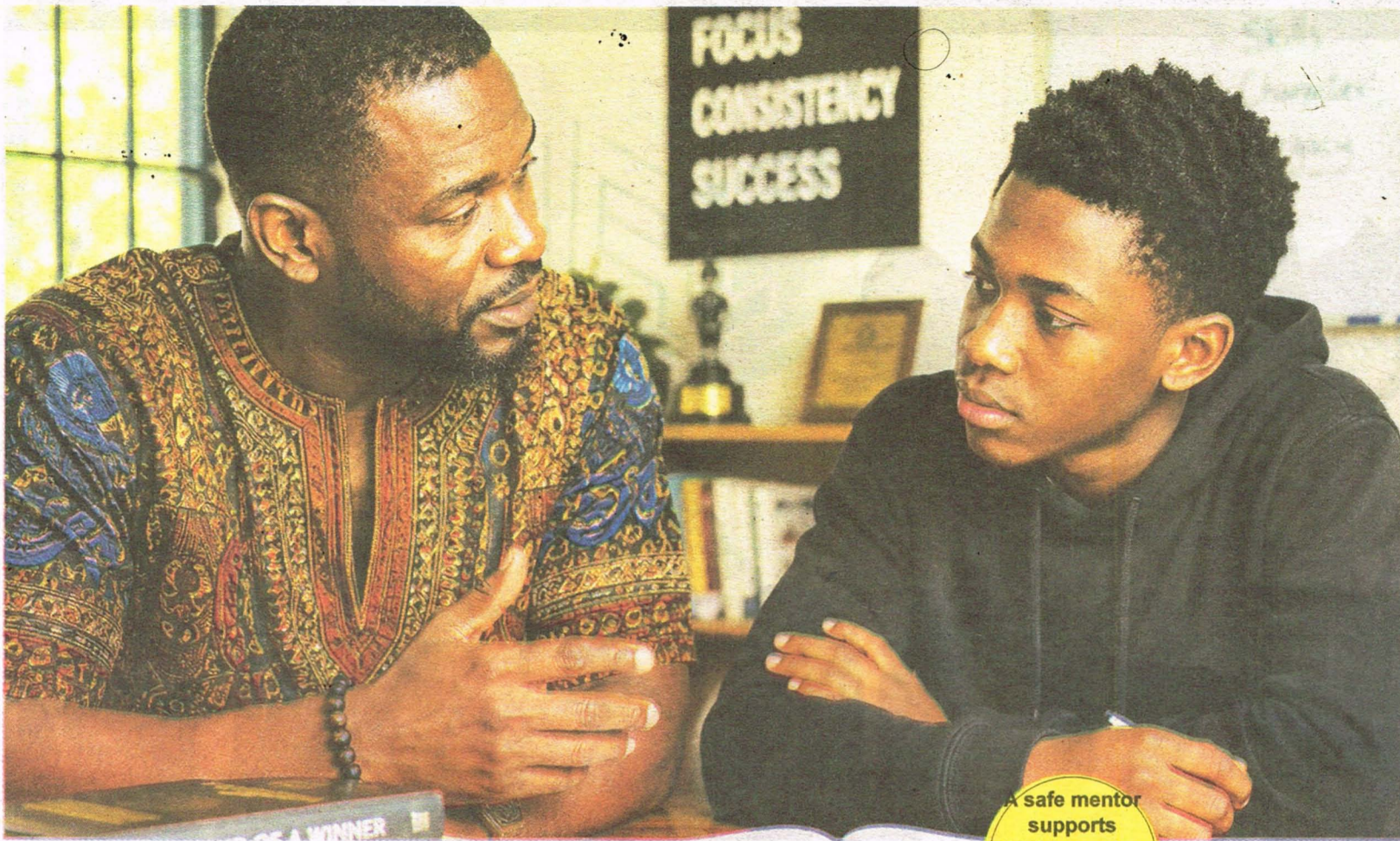


Mentor or misleader?

How to tell the difference



A good mentor can help you discover your strengths and build confidence. As many teenagers look for guidance beyond the classroom, experts share the signs of safe mentorship.

BY GLORIA IRANKUNDA

Teachers, timetables and examinations shape decisions about what to learn, how to behave and even what to aspire to become. But once the school term ends and holidays begin, that structure fades, leaving a different kind of question: Who guides you when school is no longer setting the direction?

Holidays become a period where you are not only discovering yourself, but also trying to identify who you can safely learn from outside the classroom. With more time spent at home, online and in communities, the question of safe mentorship becomes as important as self-discovery.

Counsellors say this stage can either support healthy growth or expose young people to influence that is unstructured and sometimes misleading.

"Holidays remove the supervision that school naturally provides. You begin to look for guidance elsewhere. The challenge is that not every voice you encounter is safe or helpful," says adolescent wellness coach Patricia Mirembe.

Search for direction outside school

18-year-old Joel Kayiwa from Kyaliwajjala says his first long school break left him unsure of who to listen to.

"At school, you know exactly who to ask when you do not understand something. But at home or online, everyone seems to have advice," he says.

Mirembe explains that this is where mentorship becomes important.

"As a teenager you need guidance and protection from harmful influence," she says. "A safe mentor is someone who supports growth without controlling or misleading you."

What makes a safe mentor?

Not every older person offering advice qualifies as a safe mentor. Wakiso based Youth leadership trainer Dennis Ssemwanga says the difference lies in consistency, values and intention.

Ssemwanga says many teenagers confuse popularity with mentorship.

"A safe mentor is not necessarily the most impressive or successful person," he explains. "It is someone who listens, guides without pressure and respects boundaries."

He adds that mentors should encourage independence rather than dependency.

"If someone is making all your decisions for you, that is not mentorship. That is control," Ssemwanga explains.

Risk of unsafe influence

With increased access to social media and informal networks during holidays, teenagers are exposed to a wide range of voices. Some are helpful, others are misleading. Mirembe says this exposure can easily blur judgment.

"While you are naturally drawn to confidence and success, not everyone who appears confident online or in the community has good intentions or accurate guidance," she explains.

She warns that unsafe mentors may encourage risky behaviour, unrealistic lifestyles or emotional dependency.

"In some cases, you may be influenced by habits or decisions you do not fully understand because you are seeking approval," Mirembe notes.

"A safe mentor is consistent and their

A safe mentor supports thinking rather than replacing it.

behaviour matches what they say," she adds.

Learning from home first

Simple responsibilities such as cooking, managing errands or helping with household projects can reveal qualities that shape identity and decision-making.

Kayiwa says he discovered confidence and organisation skills after helping his older sister coordinate children's activities during church holiday programmes. "At first I thought I was just helping to pass time. But I realised I enjoy organising people and making sure things run smoothly," he says, adding that his sister became an unexpected mentor.

"She does not just send me around. She explains things patiently and trusts me with responsibilities," Kayiwa shares.

Mirembe says such relationships often form the safest early mentorship structures.

"Family members who guide without pressure often become the first mentors," she explains.

School connections beyond class

Even after school closes, teachers and school networks often remain a valuable source of mentorship if approached correctly.

Ssemwanga says former teachers, coaches or school counsellors can offer balanced guidance because they already understand a student's strengths and weaknesses.

"The advantage of school-based mentors is that they have observed the teenager over time," he says.

However, he warns that mentorship

should remain professional and structured.

"Boundaries are important. A safe mentor does not blur roles or create confusion in the relationship."

Online mentors

The digital space has become one of the most common places where teenagers find role models. From content creators to influencers, advice is available at any time.

But Mirembe says this comes with responsibility.

"Online mentorship is unregulated and anyone can present themselves as an expert," she explains. "You must learn to question what you see and verify information before applying it."

She encourages young people to follow content that promotes skills, education and emotional well-being.

Mirembe also encourages teenagers to pay attention to how mentors treat other people. Someone who constantly humiliates others, pressures you into secrecy or discourages family involvement may not be safe to follow.

"Healthy mentors welcome accountability and do not isolate young people from relationships."

She advises teenagers to involve parents, guardians or trusted adults when entering mentorship programmes, online groups or community activities during holidays.

Recognise safe mentors in daily life

Ssemwanga notes that safe mentors are often found in ordinary places such as community centres, sports teams, church youth groups or neighbourhood projects.

What matters most is how they interact with young people.

He outlines simple signs.

"They are patient, listen more than they speak, do not force decisions and respect boundaries," he says.

He adds that teenagers should also trust their instincts.

"If something feels uncomfortable or controlling, it should be questioned."

Mirembe encourages teenagers to speak openly with trusted adults whenever they feel uncertain about someone's intentions.

"Sometimes you ignore warning signs because you admire the person but that should not stop you from consulting those you trust," she advises.

Building independence

While mentorship is important, there is need for independence.

Ssemwanga explains that the goal is not to replace school structure with another form of control.

"A safe mentor supports thinking rather than replacing it. You should still be allowed to make decisions and learn from outcomes," he says.

He encourages balance between guidance and self-reflection.

"Quiet time is important as it allows you to understand your thoughts instead of constantly following others."

Learn who to trust

As holidays progress, you are not only learning new skills or spending time differently, but also learning how to evaluate influence.

Kayiwa says he now pays attention to how people make him feel after conversations.

"A safe mentor does not leave you confused or pressured. They make you think, but not feel small," he says.

Mirembe agrees that this awareness is part of growing up.

"Learning to identify safe guidance is part of identity formation," she says.