



Big Brothers Big Sisters
A Community of Caring

Attitudes and Styles

Ten Important Features Of Successful Mentors

1. Be a friend
2. Have realistic goals and expectations
3. Have fun together
4. Give your Little voice and choice in deciding on activities
5. Be positive
6. Let your mentee have much of the control over what the two of you talk about—and how you talk about it
7. Listen
8. Respect the trust your Little places in you
9. Remember that your relationship is with the youth, not the youth's parent
10. Remember that *you* are responsible for building the relationship

In a Public/Private Ventures study of Big Brothers Big Sisters, mentors who took these approaches were the ones able to build a friendship and develop trust. They were the mentors who were ultimately able to make a difference in the lives of youth. This text has been adapted from the results of the P/PV study.

1. BE A FRIEND

Mentors are usually described as friends. But what does that mean? What makes someone a friend?

The reality is that mentors have a unique role in the lives of children and youth. They are *like* an ideal older sister or brother—someone who is a role model and can provide support and gentle guidance. They are *like* a peer, because they enjoy having fun with their Little. But they aren't exactly either of these.

Sometimes it seems easier to talk about what mentors are by describing what they should not be:

- **Don't act like a parent.**
- **Don't try to be an authority figure.**
- **Don't preach about values.**

Don't try to transform your Little. Take a “hands-off” approach when it comes to the explicit transmission of values. And especially, hold back opinions or beliefs that are in clear disagreement with those held by the youth's family. In general, young people do not like being told how they should think or behave—and they are uncomfortable if they feel that their family is being criticized. Preaching about values is likely to make it difficult for you to build a trusting relationship. Don't preach; instead teach—silently, by being a role model and setting an example.

- **DO focus on establishing:**
 - ✓ **a bond**
 - ✓ **a feeling of attachment**
 - ✓ **a sense of equality**
 - ✓ **the mutual enjoyment of shared time.**

These are all important qualities of a friendship.

2. HAVE REALISTIC GOALS AND EXPECTATIONS

What do you expect will change for your Little as a result of his or her relationship with you? How will life be different? How will it feel different?

Strong mentoring relationships do lead to positive changes in youth. These changes tend to occur indirectly, as a result of the close and trusting relationship, and they often occur slowly. If you expect to transform your Little's life after six months or a year of meetings, you are going to be frustrated. The rewards of mentoring are, most often, quieter and subtler.

Biggs might have specific goals for their Littles. They might, for example, want the youth to attend school more regularly and earn better grades. They might want him or her to improve classroom behavior or get along better with peers. But these should not be the primary targets of your efforts. If they are—and if you spend your time together trying to direct your Little toward these goals—you will just seem like another parent or teacher.

Developing a trusting relationship can take time and patience. You are unlikely to be able to achieve this trust if you approach the relationship with narrow, specific goals aimed at changing your Little's behavior. Instead, you can:

- **Focus on the Little and his or her overall development. Do not focus narrowly on performance and change.**
- **Especially early on, center your goals on the relationship itself.**
- **Throughout the relationship, emphasize friendship over performance.**

A strong mentoring friendship provides youth with a sense of self-worth and the security of knowing that an adult is there to help, if asked. This friendship is central, and it is eventually likely to allow you to have some influence on your mentee's behavior and performance outside of the relationship. As your relationship becomes stronger and more established, your Little may begin to approach you with requests for more direct advice or help. If and when your relationship reaches this stage, be sure to maintain a balance between attempts to influence the youth's behavior and your more primary goal of being a supportive presence. Keep the focus on your friendship.

3. HAVE FUN TOGETHER

Young people often say that the best thing about having a mentor is the chance to have fun—they have an adult friend with whom to share favorite activities. The opportunity to have fun is also one of the great benefits of being a mentor. However, for some mentors, fun might appear trivial in light of the scope and scale of unmet, pressing needs that may be present in the lives of their Little. Thus, it is important to remember that fun is not trivial—for youth, having fun and sharing it with an attentive adult carry great weight and a meaning beyond a recreational outlet, a chance to “blow off steam,” or an opportunity to play.

There are a number of reasons why you should focus on participating in activities with your Little that are fun for both of you:

- **Many youth involved in mentoring programs have few opportunities for fun.**
- **Having fun together shows your Little that you are reliable and committed.**
- **Focusing on “fun” activities early in the relationship can lead to more “serious” activities later.**

One mentor explains: “To get kids to where they know that you really care and can be trusted, you just have to spend time with them and do things that they like to do.” The observation is a good one. Youth see the adult’s interest in sharing fun as a sign that the mentor cares about them. They experience a growing sense of self-worth when their adult partner not only pays persistent, positive attention to them, but also willingly joins them in activities the youth describe as fun.

As your Little comes to see you as a friend, he or she is likely to be far more receptive to spending some of your time together in activities that are less obviously fun, such as working on school-related assignments. Always be sure that these more “serious” activities are not forced upon the youth—that they are something your Little seems agreeable to doing. Also be sure that activities such as schoolwork sessions are kept brief, and that they do not become the primary focus of your meetings together.

And remember, it is always possible to weave educational moments—real-life learning—into the most “fun” activities. This is the kind of learning that youth tend to enjoy—it is learning with an immediate purpose and an immediate payoff—and they often don’t even realize that they are learning. You can, for example, encourage your Little to figure out the rules of new games, read road signs to help you figure out where you are going, or do the math to see if the two of you received the right amount of change for a purchase. One mentor discovered bowling. “Bowling is a great way to teach addition,” she says. “You’ve got to count the pins and add the scores.”

4. GIVE YOUR LITTLE VOICE AND CHOICE IN DECIDING ON ACTIVITIES

Be sure that your Little is a partner in the process of deciding what activities you will do together. Giving your Little voice and choice about activities will help build your friendship. It demonstrates that you value your Little's ideas and input and that you care about and respect her or him. Help your mentee develop decision-making and negotiation skills.

Help avoid the possibility that you will impose "it's-good-for-you" activities—like homework sessions—on your Little without her or his agreement. This kind of imposition may make you seem more like a teacher or parent than a friend.

It might seem like it would be relatively easy to include your mentee in the decision making process, but often it is not. Littles might be reluctant about suggesting activities because:

- **They don't want to seem rude.**
- **It really is difficult for them to come up with ideas.**

Many youth in mentoring programs have had little opportunity to travel outside their neighborhoods and so do not know what the possibilities might be. If it is difficult for your mentee to request activities or voice preferences, you can use these approaches to make it easier:

- **Give a range of choices concerning possible activities.**
- **Create an "idea file" together.**
- **Listen. You can learn a lot about what your Little likes to do.**
- **Emphasize to your mentee that her or his enjoyment is important to you.**

A potential challenge:

Once young people are comfortable enough to request activities, they might make requests that are extravagant. Even requests for movies, video arcades, or restaurants can cost more than what you are comfortable paying, especially if the requests are made week after week. To address this issue, you can:

- **Negotiate. It will signal to your Little a sense of equality in your relationship.**
- **Set clear limits on the amount of money you will spend.**

Extravagant requests are typical for youth and especially understandable for youth who are economically disadvantaged. Take the requests in stride. You can negotiate with your Little until the two of you find something that, while less costly, is still to the youth's liking. Your Little will understand and will appreciate that her or his voice is still a factor in deciding on activities.

5. BE POSITIVE

People who feel negatively about themselves tend to live down to their own self-image. And youth who are matched with mentors usually have a number of situations in their lives that are leading them to feel exactly that way. They might, for example, have problems with a parent or sibling, difficulties in school, conflicts with peers, or involvement with the juvenile justice system. One of the most important things you can do as a mentor is to help your Little develop self-esteem and self-confidence. Doing activities together provides many opportunities for you to encourage your Little to feel good about himself or herself. You can:

- **Offer frequent expressions of direct confidence.**
- **Praise and encouragement help build self-esteem.**
- **Be encouraging even when talking about potentially troublesome topics, such as grades.**
- **Be supportive; don't sound like you are criticizing.**
- **Offer concrete assistance.**

A mentor describes how he deals with bad grades:

When I found out about a failing grade, I just said that's too bad. And I asked if there was any way I could help. ... Working on education is just stressing its importance, and then complimenting him, just trying to pick him up if he feels down.

A youth talks about the importance of support:

Well, I got an F, and he said, man, you got any problems, you come to me and I'll help you with your schoolwork ... and we'll talk about it, and then we keep sitting there talking and stuff and it just makes me feel better.

At times, your activities might include helping your Little with schoolwork, and this assistance should be given in a way that helps build his or her self-confidence.

6. LET YOUR MENTEE HAVE MUCH OF THE CONTROL OVER WHAT THE TWO OF YOU TALK ABOUT—AND HOW YOU TALK ABOUT IT

Along with doing enjoyable activities together, listening and talking are at the heart of your relationship with your Little. The communication patterns you establish early on will be key to the relationship's development over time. Especially in the early, tentative phase of your relationship, your mentee should have a high degree of control over what the two of you talk about. It is important to respect the limits youth place on how much they choose to reveal about themselves. Take the time and effort necessary for your Little to develop trust in you. While you know that your mentee should trust you, the reality is that you have to earn the trust.

Following these approaches can help you earn that trust.

- **Don't push.**
- **Be sensitive and responsive to your Little's cues.**
- **Follow your Little's lead in determining what issues the two of you discuss and when.**
- **Understand that young people vary in their styles of communicating and their habits of disclosure.**
- **Be direct in letting your Little know that she or he can confide in you without fear of judgment or exposure.**
- **Remember that the activities you do together can become a source of conversation.**

Mentors talk about the importance of silence:

I wait for the invitation to give her advice on problems—I'm anxiously awaiting, but [laughter]. Once in a while, she'll ask, what do I think about something, and I'll tell her. But if she doesn't ask my opinion, I try to keep it to myself.

When he doesn't talk and smile very much, then there's something really bugging him, and I just ask him is something bothering you ... and he says no. I say, you know you can blow off steam by talking to me if you want to. And he usually will—later.

You can tell sometimes they don't want to talk. She's very good sometimes when you get too close to home, changing the subject. That's what she'll do. And usually when she does that, I just let her do it.

7. LISTEN

When your Little does begin to “open up” to you, how you respond will serve to either promote or discourage his or her ongoing disclosure. One of the most valuable things you can do is to just listen. It is impossible to overemphasize the importance of being a great listener.

- **“Just listening” gives Littles a chance to vent and lets them know that they can disclose personal matters to you without worrying about being criticized. The process of venting can also help them gain insight into whatever is bothering them.**

Mentors talk about listening:

He has talked about a teacher who recently gave him a bad grade. So basically, I just kind of listen to him sort of grouse about this teacher. And in the same sentence, he was saying he was going to clean up his act, too, because he had been like talking out. So I didn't really, I mean, I didn't really add too much.

If he came to me about an argument with his mother, I would give him a chance to get it off his chest without giving him advice...I would let him talk it out. He might see where he was wrong. You know, I would just let him get it off his chest.

- **When you listen, your Little can see that you are a friend, not an authority figure.**

Many youth appreciate being able to bring up issues and having an adult who responds primarily by listening. They recognize that listening is a form of emotional support, and they may have few other sources of support in their lives.

Youth describe the feeling of being listened to:

She's a great listener. I can tell her anything, and she just listens. And you can tell that she's listening and not like she's going, mm hmm, mm hmm, you know, like, "oh, yeah, what were you saying?" She listens and goes, "I used to do that when I was little." And then like, you know, she tried to say don't worry about it. If you need to call me, call me. And she's like real supporting, so I really like her.

I like it because there's no other man around the house and I like his personality and what we do and just talking to someone, just having someone to talk to besides your grandma... Because, before, when I got into fights with people and I didn't have any friends, then I had one, him, I had someone to talk to...and he's always been nice and he always listens to me.

8. RESPECT THE TRUST YOUR LITTLE PLACES IN YOU

When your Little does begin to talk to you about personal matters, be supportive. If you respond by lecturing or expressing disapproval, he or she is very likely to avoid mentioning personal matters in the future. Instead of seeking support and help from you, your Little might become self-shielding by, for example, dodging conversations about problems and hiding school or family difficulties.

To demonstrate that you are supportive and nonjudgmental, you can:

- **Respond in ways that show you see your Little's side of things.**
- **Reassure your Little that you will be there for him or her.**

Some youth may be reluctant to disclose things about themselves because they worry that their mentor will disapprove of them and, as a result, disappear from their lives. This is a reasonable fear for youth who have an absent parent and may feel responsible for the parent's leaving. Youth often believe that they did something to drive the parent away.

- **If you give advice, give it sparingly.**

A mentor's ability to give advice will occur at different times and to varying degrees in relationships, depending upon the Little's receptivity and needs. In every case, though, do not let advice-giving overshadow other ways of interacting and other types of conversation.

- **If you give advice, be sure it is focused on identifying solutions.**

The situations for which youth most commonly seek advice tend to involve arguments at home, struggles at school, and problems with friends. If your Little asks you for advice, he or she is most likely looking for help with arriving at practical solutions for dealing with the problem.

- **If, on occasion, you feel you have to convey concern or displeasure, do so in a way that also conveys reassurance and acceptance.**

As your relationship develops into one of closeness and trust, there might be times when your Little discloses something to you that causes real concern. As a supportive adult friend, you may be able to express that concern—but deliver your message in a way that also shows understanding.

- **Sound like a friend, not like a parent.**

9. REMEMBER THAT YOUR RELATIONSHIP IS WITH THE YOUTH, NOT THE YOUTH'S PARENT

If you pick up your Little at her or his home for your meetings together, you will inevitably have some interaction with parents and other family members. Many Bigs in this situation have found that it can be a considerable challenge to establish and maintain appropriate boundaries between themselves and the family. And even if you meet with your mentee at a school or other location that is set by the program where you volunteer—which means you might not have any *direct* contact with the parents—your Little will probably, at times, talk about his or her family. Even in this less direct situation, there are family boundaries you should be careful not to cross.

A mentor's relationship with the youth's family can be a crucial factor in determining the success of a match. It could affect whether your mentee perceives the relationship as meaningful and sees you as a reliable ally and, ultimately, whether you and your Little meet frequently and over a long period of time. It is essential that you not become involved in family issues.

In some cases, problems may be initiated by the Little's family. For example, family members might try to involve the Big in family disputes, draw the Big into providing discipline to the youth, or attempt to have the mentor help in providing basic supports for the youth, such as clothing. In other cases, the mentor might cause problems by not respecting family boundaries. Mentors might, for example, observe or hear of situations that they view as neglectful or damaging parenting and want to intervene directly because they believe it will help the youth.

To avoid being drawn into family tensions, and to ensure that you do not intrude yourself into the family, you should:

- **Maintain cordial contact with family members.**
- **Keep your primary focus on the youth.**
- **Resist families' efforts to extract help beyond providing a friendship for the youth.**
- **Be nonjudgmental about the family.**

Both in interactions with your Little's family and in conversations with your mentee about them, do not be judgmental. If your mentee complains or vents about his or her parents, provide support and, if appropriate, help your Little find ways to deal with the problems, but refrain from commenting in ways that disparage the youth's family. Finding a response that simultaneously conveys understanding of your Little's difficulties with parents, and implies little or no criticism, can be a challenge. But criticizing a parent—even if you believe you are only agreeing with the youth's criticism—puts your mentee in an awkward and embarrassing position. The key is to listen without judgment. Assure the youth of your empathy and caring.

10. REMEMBER THAT YOU ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR BUILDING THE RELATIONSHIP

Building a relationship cannot be rushed. During the early period, when you and your Little are getting to know one another, you may have to be particularly patient and persistent as you work to establish the foundation of a meaningful friendship, one that could ultimately help lead to positive changes in your Little's life. At first, the relationship might seem one-sided—you might feel like you are putting out all the effort while your mentee seems passive or indifferent. Remember that this is the time when young people are going to be at their shyest and most reticent, because they do not yet know you. It is also the time when they may be testing you, because they could have limited reason to believe that adults can, in fact, be reliable and trustworthy.

To help build, and then maintain, the foundation of a trusting relationship, you should:

- **Take responsibility for making and maintaining contact.**

Having regular meetings with your Little is essential if you are going to be able to develop a strong relationship. You are the adult and must be responsible for being sure that the two of you meet regularly. If you expect the youth to contact you, it is very likely you are going to feel disappointed and frustrated, and it also means that you very likely will not be meeting consistently. Be understanding—consider the situation from your Little's point of view.

- **Understand that the feedback and reassurance characteristic of adult-to-adult relationships is often beyond the capacity of youth.**

At times, some mentors feel unappreciated because they get little or no positive feedback from their Little. They may interpret this as meaning that their mentee does not care about seeing them. But the fact that youth are reticent does not mean they are indifferent.

In some cases, mentors talk to program staff to find out how the youth feels about the relationship and to get reassurance that the youth is enjoying their time together.

- **And in all cases, mentors can allow themselves to recognize and appreciate the quiet moments that indicate they are making a difference.**

As one mentor explains: “You know, Lisa being Lisa, you don't get that feedback in words, but you drive up and the kid is standing there and as soon as she sees you, she smiles.”

SOME QUESTIONS

1. Think about yourself when you were the same age as your Little. Was there an adult (other than a parent) whom you especially enjoyed spending time with? What were the qualities of that person that made him or her special to you?
2. What are three or four qualities you have that are going to help you be a great mentor?
3. Are there any tendencies you have that could potentially make it more difficult for you to develop a strong friendship with your Little? (For example, do you like to talk a lot more than you like to listen?) What will you do to overcome those tendencies?
4. Think about the moment when you are going to meet your mentee for the first time. How do you think she or he will feel? What do you imagine she or he will be thinking?
5. Imagine you have just told an acquaintance that you have become a mentor. That person says to you, "What is a mentor?" What would you say? How would you describe your role?