

Why you could be a Good Mentor!

You may gain from being a mentor with a program like Big Brother/Big Sister as much as it needs you. Whether you realize it or not, you likely have more great qualities to offer than you don't. But either way, it will be a fun learning curve.

Getting Started

A few months ago, I had the desire to look into a mentor program myself. I found the Safety Net Mentor program. I signed up, committed to at least one year, and have been mentoring weekly, ever since. Actually, a year prior, I started looking for some way I could offer service in the community. It was a casual idea at first, as I expected I would find some kind of one-time service activity sort of commitment. But when I came across the service of mentoring it resonated with me. Even though it was a longer-term service, I couldn't help but give it more consideration. Things came up and I got busy, but it was back then that the idea of becoming a mentor sparked something in me that stuck.

An Epiphany

I came to a realization that I was at one of many crossroads that come in life. And though the direction of my life hadn't taken the exact path I had hoped it would—as often dreams aren't realized in the timing we would have it anyway—the thought came to me that even if I couldn't necessarily accomplish everything I wanted for myself, perhaps fulfillment would come in doing what I possibly could give for another instead. That is what has motivated my service. My life has been blessed in many ways that I often take for granted, but I can't deny the upbringing and the influence good mentors have been in my life. And I concluded that I could be a good mentor.

The Circle of Life

We are all mentors. Someone looks to us to act at many different points in our life. The only question is whether you are a good mentor or a bad mentor. If good thoughts lead to good actions on other's behalf, then you could find yourself becoming a good mentor.

My Mentoring Experience

In becoming a mentor for the Safety Net Mentor Program, I have a concrete application to see how mentoring can affect someone's life. The challenges I face are unique to the situation I was assigned, but I want to share some of the experiences I've had that may be of interest for someone considering what it would be like. In order to protect the trust of my agreement with my Mentee and with the Safety Net Mentor Program, I won't mention names and I will be conservative with the details I share.

First Visit

My Mentee was placed in foster care a couple weeks before I met him. I figured that in itself would make him timid about everything. He was much more outgoing than I expected he would be. In fact, he was rather talkative. He was even waiting outside to meet me and excited at the opportunity to get out and to have someone to go and do activities with. Most kids may take longer to warm up to the idea, but I guess he kind of thought it was cool to have a “Big Brother” so to speak. He doesn’t have any siblings. It was a night of breaking the ice and becoming comfortable with one another. I brought him to my parent’s place where he could enjoy a nice family environment, but also a place where we could play some pool, and watch an animated movie in the home theater. We had a great time.

Second Visit

At the next opportunity I brought him to my apartment. After buying a couple different brands of pizza, we had a blindfold pizza test. Dominoes won over Little Caesar’s with him. Big surprise! Only I actually chose Little Caesar’s. Maybe his palette is better developed than mine but surprisingly the Dominoes pizza just seemed too salty. I got a better idea of what has influenced my Mentee’s likes and dislikes. It seems he has a propensity to lie, especially about his age, depending on whether older or younger suits him best for the occasion (older for the movies, younger when we need to buy a fishing license). He has developed a desire to get tattoos when he gets older, as well as drink beer. But he hasn’t thought about going to college or what he is going to be when he grows up. He likes rap music and his choice of reading material would be revealed at our next visit.

Other Visits

There are times I include my Mentee on just basic routine things. They need to see that mentors lead a normal life and should be involved with some of those activities. We had an interesting time visiting a store. I really had to watch him. When I was busy asking a store clerk where to find an item, my Mentee disappeared. I found my Mentee looking through magazines of women. The kind of magazines stores display are embarrassing, but it was a good opportunity for me to tell this thirteen year old boy that I didn’t think it was an appropriate magazine to be looking through. Later, I had to convince my Mentee that I would personally turn him into the security guard; if he didn’t return a drink he had stuffed down his shorts. I’m not sure how he thought he would get away with stealing it, but like the magazine, I think he was testing his bounds, or more likely, my bounds. As I have been upfront with each standard I hold, he has come to respect me more and more.

We have played bocce ball together and soccer with some friends. I invited him to watch me perform a song and juggle in a talent show. We’ve gone to watch a baseball game together of one of his friend’s playing. I love baseball. We have simply gone to have an ice cream cone or went to have dinner at Taco Bell—his favorite. I invited him to come to family dinner, a rodeo, and to help with service in moving a friend’s mom. We have just had fun, whether running errands or joking around.

Missed Visits

Mentoring a child in foster care is a unique challenge. There have been weeks where his foster parents were unable to look after him, whether they are going out of town or something else comes up. Then the foster children go elsewhere for a while. I've missed some opportunities to visit my Mentee, as a result.

There have been other times when my Mentee's own parents are in and out of his life more or less than other times. It has been understandable when he and his dad want to spend more time with each other, at the expense of times we had set aside. But I have let my Mentee know that I will be visiting him even if he returns to his parents and that I'm not replacing them. When I talked to my Mentee about it, we together came to an agreement that as long as he lets me know when something comes up, that it is not a problem if we can't fit in time together in a given week, but that he will come to know that I will make myself available to him each week. This is the key to mentoring. I will be a consistent person in his life and have committed to be his Mentor for at least one year.

Just Being There

If a parent has to go to jail or to rehab or whatever else that prohibits them from freeing him from the foster care system (even if the other parent overcompensates for a while for that failing) my Mentee is beginning to realize that mine is just a steady influence. And I am beginning to realize that my charmed life is a great source to provide a good influence.

Enriching Lives

Hopefully my Mentee will find that his life is enlivened and enriched as much as learning from this experience has done for my life as a Mentor. There is definitely a need for good mentors. If you have enjoyed a stable upbringing with good parenting, or have observed good mentors, from teachers, to coaches, you might consider extending that influence in officially becoming a mentor yourself. Someone out there could use your influence for the better, and the service you give will do a lot for you as well. You will be happier and filled with more purpose as you connect yourself with improving others lives.