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The Positive Impact of Youth Mentoring

by Stephen Wallace, school psychologist

Seeking shelter from the flurries and wind on an unusually cold Nashville day, I duck into a bookstore to await the arrival of my lunch partner, a former camper enrolled as a freshman at Vanderbilt University. Prominently displayed on a nearby shelf is a large book emblazoned with the title *Heroes* just above the black and white photographs of John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Muhammad Ali. I have been thinking a lot about heroes lately, because I'm in town to talk about mentoring to camp directors attending the annual conference of the American Camp Association. So, I'm intrigued.

What – or who – is a hero, anyway? Would young people today identify as one a national political figure, a civil rights crusader, or a sports legend? Given the relatively newfound propensity to build up public personas only to then tear them down, my guess is probably not.

Mentors as Heroes

Who, then, instead? My twenty-five-plus years of working with youth tell me that our kids are more likely to cite as heroes those they actually know, rather than those they only know about. Adolescents need, and very much want, consistent exposure to caring, supportive adults who serve as their mentors.

While parents clearly play an influential mentoring role in the lives of their children, it is also clear that other “significant” adults can, and do, ef-

fect important outcomes when it comes to education, social and emotional well-being, and health and safety. “Mentoring: A Promising Strategy for Youth Development,” a report by the

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research center, Child Trends, concludes that adults other than parents can provide necessary emotional support, advice, and guidance while also help-

ing to build self-esteem and self-control. It also points out that, overall, young people who participate in mentoring relationships experience positive academic benefits, including better attendance and better attitudes toward school.

These mentoring relationships need not be formal. While “matched” mentorships have long been shown to enhance school performance, improve relationships with parents and peers, reduce initiation of drug and alcohol use, and decrease incidents of youth violence, a *Teens Today* study conducted by Students Against Destructive Decisions (SADD) found similarly encouraging results for young people with informal, or “natural” mentors, such as teachers. According to more than 3,000 middle and high school students, these adults are some of the most important, influential people in their lives.

Teachers are some of the most important, influential people in students' lives.

And that influence shows up in some pretty substantial ways. For example, 46 percent of teens with a mentor reported a high “sense of self,” versus 25 percent of teens without a mentor. High sense-of-self teens feel more positive about their own identity, growing independence, and relationships with peers than do teens with a low sense of self. Not insignificantly, they are also more likely to avoid alcohol and drug use.

The Profile of a Mentor

So, what does a mentor look like? The characteristics young people ascribe to them include trustworthy, caring, understanding, respectful, helpful, dependable, fun, compassionate, and responsible. Being a good listener and offering good advice are also seen as key skills of successful mentors.

According to a 14-year-old ninth grader, “Being a mentor to someone does not mean you have to always know the right answer, just that you are always there when they need someone to lean on.” She may be on to something. As Woody Allen said, “Ninety percent of life is just showing up.”

In her essay “The Power of Presence,” which appears in *This I Believe: The Personal Philosophies of Remarkable Men and Women*, psychologist Debbie Hall writes, “Presence is a noun, not a verb; it is a state of being, not doing. States of being are not highly valued in a culture which places a high priority on doing. Yet, true presence or ‘being with’ another person

carries with it a silent power – to bear witness to a passage, to help carry an emotional burden or to begin a healing process.”

The Power of Parents

When teens identify their mentors, high on their list are teachers, coaches, neighbors and – believe it or not – parents. The *Teens Today* research points out that:

- Almost all (91 percent) teens say their parents are good role models.
- Most teens say their relationships with their parents make them feel good about themselves (82 percent), their parents respect them (68 percent), and they feel close to their parents (60 percent).
- Almost half of young people (47 percent) cite parents as most influential in encouraging them to positively challenge themselves.
- Approximately one-third of teens (32 percent) say they don't spend as much time as they want or need to with their parents.
- Parents are teens' number-one influence against making poor choices when it comes to drinking, drug use, and sexual behavior.

Great Teachers

As for other “natural” mentors, teachers possess an incredible capacity to inspire children and, thereby, to shape the future. And, along the way, many of them provide the very type of mentoring most beneficial to young people in search of themselves.

Election years and presidential inaugurations – such as those in the recent past – inevitably open the door to discussion about the education of our children. Such was the case when *Time* magazine ran a 2008 cover story, “How to Make Great Teachers.”

As with most questions involving subjective measurement, figuring out exactly what makes a great teacher is a tough task. Yet, one thing is certain: in our rush to build better teachers, bolster math and science scores, and improve American students' rank in the global community, we are well served to remember that great teachers transcend GPAs and SAT results – as evidenced by the *Time* story's author, Claudia Wallis, who credits two teachers with providing the inspiration that led to her writing career.

The Big Chill

Despite clear evidence of the positive effects of mentoring on youth, a fear of legal responsibility for misconduct by its employees is causing schools and youth organizations to develop standards limiting the contact

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that may make mentoring such an effective tool in the first place. For example, guidelines recommended by the National Education Association (NEA) describe as inappropriate professional behavior “taking students to lunch, outside social activities or receiving and writing personal notes.”

Further, a startling number of teens (53 percent) say their parents discourage them from participating in organizations or activities in which such mentoring might occur, including one in five who specifically cites parental concern for the teen’s personal safety when spending time with a mentor.

Can something so good really be so bad? Sometimes – but maybe not as often as we think. In *The Blessing of a Skinned Knee*, psychologist Wendy Mogel points out that the world may not be quite so dangerous after all, referring to media scare-mongering in which “the most disturbing stories are given the most attention and our sense of impending danger becomes exaggerated.” Federal statistics do not support the notion that our children are facing increasing risk of harm. Neither does a study released in April 2008 by the Crimes Against Children Research Center at the University of New Hampshire: it revealed that child sexual abuse cases nationwide declined 5 percent from 2005 to 2006, capping a 14-year decline of more than 50 percent. Cases of physical abuse declined as well in 2006, down 3 percent since 2005, with a drop of 48 percent since 1992.

Of course, parents are wise to be wary. There are some simple steps you can take to be sure your children remain safe:

- Stay involved. Know with whom your teen is spending time, where they are going, and what they are doing.
- Get to know your teen’s mentors. Working together will benefit your teen and give you a better sense of your teen’s safety.

- Encourage your teen's involvement only in organizations that conduct employee or volunteer screenings and/or criminal and sexual offender background checks.

That said, the “bogeyman effect,” brought about by the over-amplification of select incidences of child abuse, should not be allowed to chill important relationships proven effective in fostering growth and discouraging poor choices. In *The Shelter of Each Other*, Mary Pipher warns, “A culture in which children fear adults and adults are uneasy around children is an unhealthy and dangerous place.” Thus, the real bogeyman may not be lurking in the bushes outside the door but rather behind a climate of fear that threatens from both ends the very type of adult-child relationships that nurture healthy development and decision-making.

Mentored youth, in turn, mentor other youth.

The Mentee as Mentor

Often lost in the debate over the efficacy, or advisability, of these relationships is the boomerang effect: mentored youth who, in turn, mentor other youth. A compelling example can be found in the work of SADD's 2008-2009 National Student of the Year, Stephen Winkler, who participates in a program sponsored by Big Brothers Big Sisters of America. As “Bigs,” he and his friends meet weekly with their “Littles” to talk and have fun – building a bridge between natural and planned mentoring. Stephen says of the younger boys, “They never miss a Tuesday.” Given the gain, it's no wonder.

The work of Stephen and his friends also points to a larger trend that many may find surprising. Adolescents seem to be less self-absorbed and more other-oriented than they are given credit for. Indeed, that teens are ready, willing, and able to “give something back” is self-evident in data from Youth Service America, which reports that millions of young people are engaging in disaster relief, registering new voters, educating their communities about good nutrition, and distributing HIV/AIDS prevention materials, for example.

Despite commonly held beliefs that adolescence is inextricably linked with anxiety, upheaval, and acting out – or “storm and stress,” a phrase coined by G. Stanley Hall, the first president of the American Psychological Association – there is compelling evidence to the contrary. In his book *The Good Teen*, Tufts University Professor Richard M. Lerner offers rebuttal to definitions of this developmental stage that necessarily link it to conflict with parents, mood disruptions, and risky behavior. Conversely, his study of about 4,000 adolescents found ample existence among young people of what he calls the “five C’s”: competence, confidence, connection, character, and caring. These may coalesce, says Lerner, in a sixth C: contribution. And that contribution may take the form of mentoring another.

Thus is the power of great mentors who forge strong bonds of connectedness and, in the process, transform young lives ... perhaps more of them than they know.

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