

MENTORSHIP OVERVIEW:

“POSITIVES ALL THE WAY”

Your role as a mentor is an indirect—but still very important—piece of what we’re seeking to provide kids. Your regular, weekly contact establishes you as a caring adult who they’ve come to trust and respect. Your willingness to share the kinds of things that were difficult for you when you were a young student, helps them realize that everyone has some struggles. It also serves to dispel the incorrect notions of those coming from an impoverished background, that *“rich people never have/had any problems like mine.”* (Recall that in their eyes, anyone of middle-class status is seen as “rich.”)

You are slowly building your influence in the relationship so you can affirm what is good about the child’s abilities and skills, and coach them in making good decisions as they navigate some of the difficulties of his/her life. By mixing skills in Reading with a concern for their overall wellbeing, you’re becoming someone they trust as they are slowly coming to have a vision of their future with rich options if they love learning. Your empathy and brief stories expand the child’s total span of awareness, which might be very limited.

Kind and patient 1-on-1 conversations with a caring adult other than a teacher, may be a new experience for many of these children. In some families, children are merely told what to do and are seldom listened to by anyone other than



siblings. By making this a good early experience of mentoring, you are laying the groundwork for other good mentors to enter their lives later on—perhaps in middle or high school, when a dedicated mentor can make the critical difference in graduating and seeking post-secondary learning options.

Literacy Skills Applied to Social, Emotional & Spiritual Growth

The sum total of skillsets and resources that makes one successful in school and in life, include emotional, social and spiritual resources as well as the cognitive skills for learning. Social skills are beginning to take shape at this young age, and part of a child's desire to be in school, hinges on the enjoyment of friendships during class, recess and lunch. Some children move so often, they don't get the chance to form meaningful friendships, so this kind of social capital is anemic as a resource for learning support. We can't do anything about those family circumstances, but in our mentoring efforts we can model and emphasize the skills for making new friends and maintaining positive relationships.

The emotional growth appropriate at this age has to do with more than just managing anger and impulsivity. Children are coming to see the relationship between cause and effect, and to modulate their behavior based on choice and consequences. Hopefully they're beginning to separate behavior (someone did a bad thing) from the person (someone is a bad person.) Given that we see the child only for a short time during the week when they're apt to be on their best behavior, we may wonder how we can contribute to this resource.

The use of words and language, has a big influence on growth in this whole area. Being able to name and talk about feelings, and resolve an issue using words, is a big leap. Talking through problems and challenges the child is facing, gets them outside, away from fear-pictures in the mind, so better options may become apparent. And positive self-talk is usually an underdeveloped resource in children from disadvantaged circumstances. It's been shown that children may have the knowledge and skills to succeed at a task, but quit the task simply because they lack the self-talk to keep going when they feel like quitting.

Spiritual resources are not so difficult to talk about after you necessarily strip away the religious aspect, given how we're operating in a public school setting. Spiritual resources have to do with hope, optimism and a positive view of the future. Believing that the future will work out in a positive way, is a tremendous resource for both young children—as well as aging adults! Fate and luck are dominant themes in some families, so a child's coming to believe in their ability to impact their future via their personal choices, can be considered a leap in spiritual growth. (Can you imagine what a horrible handicap it would be to be told that *you're a "mistake?"*) Having a person that they admire, and identifying the kind of person they would like to be like, are all spiritual resources. Knowing examples and the history of successful individuals in their family—or stand-out individuals from their racial and cultural group, are valuable resources for the child coming to have a positive future story for himself/herself. Spiritual resources altogether, bring about a stronger sense of one's positive value as a human being.

As you keep getting better acquainted, more personal kinds of information will begin to naturally flow between you, beyond the Reading and general interests. It won't take long for the child to start talking about feelings and the other areas of his/her life, and perhaps seeking your empathy. He/she is likely to sprinkle conversations with tidbits about home life or relations with others at the school.

As their cheerleader and champion, you'll find ways to build confidence in the child's overall abilities—in social, emotional and spiritual areas as well as academics. Some of these children will amaze you—both with their span of interests and awareness, as well as level of struggle in their family life. It's good to probe for more information, and compliment the child on their ability to cope and think things through to take good actions.

If it's a wrong or bad decision they're sharing, try not to be too shocked or judgmental. Assure them that "we're smart to learn from our mistakes in life," and then help them backtrack and explore a range of other choices they might consider next time. You can share examples of challenges you may have had with your brothers and sisters, or disagreements with your young friends, when you were a child. Again, be aware of time constraints and their short attention spans, and keep your stories brief. ***(Beware that Old People's Disease!)***

Responding to *Privileged Information*

In just a few weeks you'll be amazed at how free they feel to open up and share the most amazing things. It is here that some foresight and good judgment is often called for, in knowing how to respond to all of the things you hear.

Recall one of our prime rules from the Orientation Guide was to avoid anything that looks like *ridicule* or *a judgment of the child and his/her family*. Their lifestyle may be very different from yours, and what you would prefer for them, but *it is what it is, and sad as it may seem to you, the child has to cope and live within it*. Find as many positive things as you can, and give credit for the fact that the parents may be having a very hard time of things themselves.

However, "the judgment issue" is an active consideration for you whenever you hear things that—if true, appear to be serious or harmful to the child. Your challenge is to give a positive or neutral initial response, while processing and deciding how to act on the information that's been shared. They've come to feel you care about them, so they're intently watching your face for your initial reaction. Obviously you'll take this information seriously, even as you're aware that children *sometimes exaggerate their situation, and some children even fabricate stories that are patently false, to get attention from adults*.

Discussion Examples:

ONE: “My Mom didn’t get home until after 10:00 last night, and all she gave us for dinner was some popcorn.”

TWO: “My Mom and her boyfriend were fighting all night last night, and I had to go to bed without anything to eat.”

THREE: “See this bruise? My step-sister beats me up all the time, and last night she hit me really hard. She’s 13, and my Mom leaves her to boss us around when she’s not there.”

FOUR: “I like school OK, except for recess. There are these 3 kids that usually follow me around and say nasty things about me. They get other kids to make fun of me.”

Assignment: With each discussion example, determine:

- A. What’s a good immediate response, after hearing this?
- B. What is your decision regarding what to do?
 1. Do you file it away, to bring up at another time?
 2. Is there something serious enough here to share with the teacher, who may want to take it further with a school social worker?

Answer Sheet for Discussion Questions:

DISCUSSION ISSUES ONE and TWO:

You have the difficult objective of being empathetic with the child, while also trying to avoid any implied criticism of the child's mother and siblings. It's good to be supportive of parents whenever you can, even though their reported actions don't measure up to your family's standards. And when you can't be positive, then find a way to be supportive of the child.

Try to offer something like one of these safe, deflecting responses:

"So, I bet you were really hungry, and ate a big breakfast this morning!"

"Maybe she's going to fix you a really good dinner tonight!"

"Sometimes busy Moms don't always get the time to plan and cook great meals." (like on weekends, Sundays, etc.)

"I bet your Mom cooks some great meals, doesn't she? What's your favorite thing that your Mom fixes for you?"

"So, how good are you at fixing yourself a snack or something to eat from the refrigerator?"

DECISION: Something like this probably isn't serious enough for you to report to the teacher, unless the child has a pattern of repeatedly sharing/complaining of not being properly fed at home and this is interfering with their ability to learn.

DISCUSSION ISSUE THREE:

Immediate Responses:

"Sometimes big brothers and sisters aren't aware of how hard they hit."

or

"So, I bet you try real hard to stay on her good side, or at least stay out of her way and not make her upset!"

DECISION: If the teacher hasn't noticed this already, bring it to his/her attention.

DISCUSSION ISSUE FOUR:

Immediate Response: In this case, something empathetic is called for, like, “That must make you really uncomfortable; you should be able to enjoy your play-time without having that to worry about.” Ask, “Have you talked to anyone else about this?”

Decision: If this isn’t a clear case of bullying it’s certainly headed in that direction, so you should indeed discuss this with the teacher. Get as much information as you can, and communicate to the child that you’re concerned, and will talk to the people who can help get that kind of behavior to stop.”