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## HOW TO BE AN EFFECTIVE MENTOR

You don't have to be an academic superstar or a sports hero to be a good mentor. You just need the desire to help others succeed.

"They respect me," said Theresa Pearson, a college junior from Connecticut who's involved in a mentoring program. "It's like I'm their older sister."

Theresa learned how to become an effective mentor through LEAP (Leadership Education & Athletics in Partnership), an organization that has matched more than 300 high school and college students with 1,200 children ages 7 to 14 from Connecticut's most distressed neighborhoods. In the LEAP community-based program, nearby colleges and universities work with the public schools and housing

authorities of five Connecticut cities.

Theresa became a mentor in high school. As a mentor, she discovered that teens who turn out to be the best mentors know how to set a good example, live up to strong moral and ethical standards, and demonstrate teamwork and appropriate manners. They're also eager to help younger students achieve personal goals--for example, higher grades, greater confidence, and an improved attitude toward cooperating with others.

Can you picture yourself as a mentor? To qualify, you don't have to be the school academic star or sports hero. The main requirement is a desire to help others succeed.

In fact, according to an ancient Greek legend, the first mentor was just an ordinary household employee. As the story goes, the head of the family (Odysseus) was departing on a long journey when he asked a trusted employee to advise and counsel his young son. The worker's name? Mentor, of course!

### **The Ties That Bind**

Today, effective mentoring requires certain skills, including the ability to teach others.

"I teach how to find the positive in bad situations," says LEAP mentor Starquona Gandy, a 16-year-old sophomore at Cooperative High School in Connecticut. Once, Starquona says, when two young girls in the program were quarreling, she pointed out that arguing usually doesn't solve conflicts. At the same time, however, she praised the pair for avoiding violence.

Another requirement for good mentoring is the desire to share knowledge with others. Last year, for example, 50 students (sophomores and above) in the Peer Mentor Club at Rockwood Summit High School in Fenton, Missouri, organized and took part in orientation activities for incoming freshmen. Throughout the year they also tutored teens needing extra help with their studies.

Mentors also must be willing and able to help kids pursue special dreams. For instance, in New Mexico's Buddy Program (which enrolls about 3,600 students and runs in 79 schools), mentors in grades 6 through 12 meet regularly with Hispanic, Native American, and African-American elementary school "buddies." The teens must have a solid knowledge of mathematics and science so they can tutor their "matches" in these areas and help nurture the young students' interest in related careers.

### **Buddies Make It Better**

Melissa Garcia, a 16-year-old high school student from Gilbert, Arizona, knows a lot about effective teen mentoring. She's not only a mentor, but also the cofounder of a mentoring program called The Buddy System.

Melissa's after-school program, which she developed as a board member of the Mesa (Arizona) Youth Leadership Alliance, operates two hours a week at three Mesa elementary schools. Last year the program matched 55 to 70 "Big Buddies" with about 75 "Little Buddies."

Melissa started the program because she believes that caring mentors can help kids cope with crises, such as the one she faced several years ago when her parents divorced.

Says Melissa, "Because my mother was tired from work and didn't have the energy to help me deal with things (and I didn't have a mentor), I didn't get the support and attention I wanted."

Since then, she's also learned that successful mentoring starts with sharing common interests. "One Big Buddy/Little Buddy pair [in the program] talk a lot about baseball together," she says. "Of course, the teen mentor also is really good with kids, and they love him!"

Melissa believes mentors should work on helping develop their buddies' personalities and guiding them toward greater independence. For example, at first her buddy Kaylee, age 6, used to scream and run around like her best friend does. But, says Melissa, "I could tell by the way she gave only short answers to my questions that she really was a shy, timid first-grader who wasn't too confident."

Mentoring has really improved Kaylee's behavior, says Melissa, who admits to finding mentoring a sometimes "nerve-wracking" yet "awesome" experience. "Now Kaylee is learning to sit around and talk. She's become more her own person and a lot more open, positive, and trusting when meeting new people."

Good mentors also require good communication skills to express their feelings and opinions properly. "I don't interrogate Kaylee," says Melissa. "But she has talked about her troubles—for example, how her brother bothers her. Sometimes I listen, and sometimes I give advice; it depends on what I think Kaylee needs."

Melissa says that practice in problem-solving and making judgment calls usually helps mentors handle most difficult situations, such as buddies who swear, refuse to participate, or act up in other ways. But she also holds training workshops in which she explains the "shoulds and shouldn'ts," rehearses possible solutions to typical problems, and instructs teens about their responsibility to alert adult supervisors whenever necessary. "We tell teens that any time-outs or other discipline must be authorized by adults."

### **Double Your Pleasure**

It takes hard work to keep relationships running smoothly—whether they're with friends, teachers, relatives, neighbors, or the family dog! But remember, everyone you meet teaches you something important or interesting about yourself. Find out what mentoring can teach you!

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By Janice Arenofsky

### **TAKE YOUR MEASURE AS A MENTOR**

Ready to morph into a world-class mentor? The following questions will put you on the road to mentoring success:

1. List two or three activities you would enjoy doing with your buddy.
2. What goals could you set for your buddy? (achieve higher grades, pursue a hobby, etc.) List two or three.

3. What are some of your own talents, abilities, or knowledge that you could share with a buddy?  
(example: musical ability, foreign language, crafts, sports, etc.)
4. You should promise to mentor for at least six months to a year, and meet with your buddy regularly. Kids need to know that they can count on you. What weekly activities could you schedule?
5. If your buddy's behavior becomes a problem, to whom could you go for help?

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