

Mentorship Matters

By **Melissa Henderson, MPH**

You have surely read a news story or heard someone say that kids today are struggling more than ever. Perhaps you have even heard someone say, “What is with kids these days?” But have you ever stopped to ask, “What can I do to help”?

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, today’s youth are experiencing increased feelings of isolation and loneliness, and along with that have come higher rates of anxiety, depression, and even suicidal thoughts. Youth often lean on peers and family members for support, but studies show that a positive relationship or mentorship from an adult outside the household is one of the most effective support systems for kids, regardless of their background. One in three young adults reports never having a mentor.

When youth participate in mentorship programs, they build confidence, make better decisions, and stay on track in school and life. Mentored kids not only show better grades; they build stronger relationships, develop leadership habits, and gain tools to handle conflict, stress, and pressure appropriately. According to a national study conducted by Mentor, a nonprofit committed to closing the mentorship gap, 58% of young people said their mentors supported their mental health, and 85% leaned on their mentors for help with school-related issues. Those with access to consistent mentoring are more likely to graduate high school, attend college, and stay out of trouble. Families and communities benefit, too, as mentoring improves family dynamics and community involvement. At-risk youth who engage with mentorship are less likely to engage in community violence and crime when paired with role models who can support positive behaviors. Recent studies evaluating the impact of mentorship programs, such as Big Brothers Big Sisters, have shown that the benefits of mentorship can last a lifetime.

The mentors also get something out of it, honing their own leadership, emotional intelligence, and communication skills. For some, serving their community in this way can help expand their network, resume, and career pathway. Most importantly, mentors feel a strong sense of personal satisfaction from being able to give back to their community and witness their mentee's positive growth.

What makes someone a strong mentor? Showing up consistently is the most important trait of any mentor. Being a reliable source of support and feedback is key to any relationship to prosper. Youth build trust when their mentor is dependable and shows they will be there for them, so they know they have someone they can count on to be in their corner. Strong mentors are also good listeners, non-judgmental, and trustworthy. Being approachable, empathetic, and patient helps build confidence. Empathy means offering understanding, open communication, and validation of experiences without judgment. You do not need to have experienced the same challenges to offer empathy. Patience is key to

allowing youth to open up at their own pace. Adaptability also goes a long way for mentors. Youth have a knack for keeping adults on their toes, so adaptability can also go a long way. When mentors lead by example and model integrity, resilience, and respect, youth take note and learn to emulate these behaviors. Not sure if you are a great candidate? Don't worry – most mentorship agencies provide matchmaking support, and all qualified programs should provide training.

Interested in becoming a mentor? You can support kids' positive development in both formal and informal settings, one-to-one or in small groups. Volunteer as a formal mentor by looking at local chapters of national organizations such as the Boys and Girls Club of Yellowstone County and Friends of the Children – Eastern Montana, or locally run organizations through the United Way of Yellowstone County or our local Parks and Recreation department. Volunteering to serve as a coach, tutor, or volunteer for local youth activities is also a great way to engage in mentorship more flexibly. Contact local schools, sports leagues, churches, or other youth-serving agencies to learn more.

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