



Mentoring Works

BY JONATHAN ALTER

LET'S GET ONE THING STRAIGHT RIGHT OFF: THIS MAGAZINE IS NOT for budding Mother Teresas. It's not for future Father Flanagans. If a few people read this and get inspired to quit their jobs and totally transform their own lives, that's nice. But our true goal is to reach a different, much larger group, made up of people like you.

If you're like us, you lead a busy life, full of challenges at work and home. You have a vague sense of wanting to give something back, but you aren't sure of the best way to do it. You aren't sure you have time. You aren't sure you can have an impact. You may have vaguely heard of something called "mentoring," but you don't really know what it entails.

Our goal is to clarify some of these questions and introduce you to a quiet movement that is sweeping the country. Unlike earlier movements, this one is not about marching in the streets or passing legislation in Washington. It's about something both simpler and more complex—two people, of different ages and backgrounds, talking together and learning from each other. But just as the civil-rights movement changed race relations and the women's movement changed relations between the sexes, it is our hope

Shooting the breeze: Mentor Calvin Holland (left) shares lunch with his mentee, Paul McGinnis

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MENTORING THE QUIET REVOLUTION



that the growing movement for mentoring can transform relations across generational and class lines. In other words, mentors not only touch someone's life, they have the potential to touch and change the life of the nation.

That word "mentor" can be so unspecific. It is sometimes used to describe a CEO bringing along a younger executive, or a professor guiding a graduate student. Those are not the kinds of mentors we mean here. "Mentee" is even worse. It sounds like a breath mint. But so far, those are the only words we have to describe one-on-one relationships between caring adults and kids who need some guidance.

In April 1997, the president of the United States, former presidents, members of Congress and leaders from all across the country gathered with Colin Powell in Philadelphia for a "summit" on America's future. When the organizers surveyed the research to find real solutions to social problems, they focused first on mentoring. The first goal the summit set was to reach 2 million mentors by the year 2000. The response has been tremendous. Corporations, schools, churches and nonprofits have committed themselves to expand mentoring, and the idea is gaining adherents all across the country. In program after program, adults and young people testify to how it has enriched their lives.

There's an old adage: if you need something done, ask a busy person. That surely applies to mentoring. Among the mentors I've met are a billionaire, a network-TV anchor and the governor of a major state. They all manage to squeeze some time into their busy schedules to help a young person, often insisting that the mentoring not be publicized. So do hundreds of people in less exalted positions. When you think of all the time you fritter away during the month—gossiping around the water cooler or chatting on the phone—is it really so hard to commit a few hours?

Kaplan, NEWSWEEK and The National Mentoring Partnership, the sponsors of this issue, have mentoring programs. Like most who participate, I've found my own experience as a mentor to a 14-year-old from New York City to be not just gratifying and fascinating but surprisingly fun. We listen to each other, learn from each other, work on a little homework and laugh a lot.

No one makes it in America without some kind of mentor. Whenever successful people look back, they cite those older adults who influenced their development, even if they knew each other for only a short time. For at-risk kids facing steep odds against success, finding mentors is not only helpful but essential. They can't make it all by themselves.

Mentoring works. This conclusion is now backed by solid research. In the early 1990s, 959 boys and girls in eight states were enrolled in the first national study of mentoring, the Big Brothers Big Sisters Impact Study. Half of the kids were assigned a "Big" as a mentor; the other half were on a waiting list and thus served as a control group. The research organization that sponsored the study, Philadelphia-based Public/Private Ventures, reported astonishing results. Those who met with a mentor three times a month for one year were 46 percent less likely to begin using illegal drugs, 52 percent less likely to skip school and 33 percent less likely to get into



Playtime:
A mentor and her mentee laugh together under a kite

fights. Students with mentors reported greater confidence in their performance at school and better relations with their families.

Not convinced? Here's more proof. Procter & Gamble studied its own mentoring programs in Cincinnati schools. The results should sound familiar. The 133 young people studied were more likely to stay in school, achieve and aspire to better grades and go to college. In fact, 86 percent of the students from the senior class went on to college. Before the mentoring program was instituted, only 25 to 30 percent of students from those schools went to college.

So the stakes are enormous. The U.S. now has about 13.6 million youths under 18 who are defined as "at risk" of getting into trouble. The vast majority are basically good kids who face life choices of enormous consequences, not just for themselves but for society. If they go off track into drugs, crime or teen pregnancy, their cost to society can reach \$1 million each. And the human cost is incalculable. For want of a ready ear and a helping hand, children of great potential too often end up wrecking their lives.

Mentoring is not the solution to the problems of the next generation. Parenting comes first. But even good parents often need some help. In recent years, every assessment of the best ways to confront serious American social ills has included one-on-one relationships between young people and caring adults.

This issue will explore several different forms of mentoring. The right one for you depends on your time, your interests and the willingness of your employer. If your company doesn't have a program, you might want to start one. Tell your boss that service programs uniformly boost employee morale. As this guide will show you, mentoring need not be onerous.

Oftentimes mentoring is more intimidating in theory than in practice. The stereotypes that both adults and young people carry in their heads about the other tend to break apart after they meet and start talking. At the same time, the road is not always smooth. This guide aims to chart the natural course of the process. At each stage, we'll offer a little practical advice on how to be a great mentor.

Good luck!

JONATHAN ALTER is a NEWSWEEK Senior Editor.

Greek Roots

Who was the first mentor?

The word originates in the "Odyssey" by Homer, who describes the character Mentor as a "wise and trusted friend." When Odysseus leaves Ithaca to fight the Trojan War, he asks his good friend Mentor to guard the household. Mentor, who is actually the goddess Athena in disguise, watches over the kingdom, and becomes guardian and teacher to Odysseus' son, Telemachus.

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