



Introduction

Virtually every Big signs up because they want to make a difference. They are hoping to help a child realize their potential. - The good news is that large scale randomized control studies suggest that with patience and empathy, Bigs accomplish this task

Maximize your Effect

Bigs are a facilitator of a Little's process of self-discovery and that process is something you cannot mandate or accelerate without a Little's input. A Little will change at their own pace and in their own way. This is a hard truth about mentoring.

Mentoring is a long-term strategy that takes place over the course of your friendship and possibly even multiple mentors. Do your part and don't try to rush the process.

Lastly and most importantly, we are hoping to change a child's perception of themselves. All the good habits, intentions, goals and healthy progress in life is built on a foundation of self-esteem. The most important question a Big should ask themselves week in and week out is how they are helping a Little build up a belief in their present abilities and future prospects"

That said, there are research-supported strategies to turbo-charge your impact and help you think critically about how you engage in a relationship with a Little.

These strategies allow mentors to stay within their role in a child's life and have an impact on their healthy development.

Key Precursors to being an influencer for a Little

Before diving into those research-supported strategies, let's talk about some key precursors to being an influencer for a Little

Mentors have the biggest impact and build the healthiest relationships when they use a strength-based approach, are honest with their Little about their own challenges and goals, and are able to celebrate their Little and remind them of their potential. These are the key precursors to building a healthy mentoring relationship and to maximize your impact along the way of your Littles positive development.

Mentors who focus on youth development and find ways to set goals and focus on the 6Cs in their friendship are creating opportunities for Littles to form healthy, important habits that will support their ability to thrive later in life. Let's explore these more.

Strength based strategies

Strength Based strategies are long term strategies, you need patience and consistency. Mentors who focus on potential and good behavior, even in times of disappointment, will reinforce the possibility that a Little can determine their future and have the ability to accomplish goals.

Deficit based strategies more short term, mentors might see immediate results but this approach breaks down trust and does not inform habits

Some of these High Risk/short-term strategies are lecturing, eliminating failures, incentives and ultimatums.

A common scenario is when a Little is struggling in school. A natural reaction is to want to help your Little do their homework or study for that upcoming test, and the Little might succeed in the short-term and pass the test- But how will they do on future tests? Bigs should focus on empowering Littles to try hard and seek resources to help them - a teacher, school counselor, a trusted peer- and encourage the Littles ability to do well with effort. Bigs should focus on the effort and hard work - which is in a Littles control vs the outcomes, which may not always be.

Be Honest

There is no such thing as the perfect person. A mentoring relationship often puts pressure on adults to "be perfect" for their Little to look up to. But being perfect is not attainable and sets an unhealthy precedent for the challenges and struggles everyone navigates in life. Mentors should BE HONEST with Littles about the good and the bad or challenging things in their lives. Mentors can role model how to identify, strategize and cope with failure through role modeling and providing opportunities for their Little to be challenged. Moments of disappointment and failure are what strengthen a child's determination and resilience to help them navigate life's unexpected and challenging times.

Celebrate Your Little

Mentors should take the opportunity to find ways to genuinely praise and celebrate with a Little. This goes hand in hand with having a strength-based mindset. A mentors role is to help a Little see their potential, even in moments of failure. Reminding Littles of their strengths, potential and encouraging determination and hard work will build the foundation for positive development over time.

Research proven Strategies to Maximize Impact

Let's explore the 3 proven strategies of promoting and supporting positive youth development and building the 6cs in a match. These methods are Role Modeling - which Bigs are doing without even realizing it, we call this "every day role modeling"; using Active Listening - which Bigs need to be intentional of doing and avoid the righting reflex with their Littles; and lastly Providing Opportunities - being intentional of thinking about how to weave the 6Cs into every outing or interaction with their Little.

Role Modeling

A child can mimic a facial expression at 21 days old. Long before textbooks and TED talks, we learned by patterning our actions upon the examples of elders. Learning by imitation is the most elemental and essential method for transmitting ideas and concepts to our youth. There is simply no more effective way to teach than to model the behaviors you want a Little to do themselves - The revered Fred Rodgers once said, "...FROM THE TIME YOU WERE VERY LITTLE, YOU'VE HAD PEOPLE WHO HAVE SMILED YOU INTO SMILING, PEOPLE WHO HAVE TALKED YOU INTO TALKING, SUNG YOU INTO SINGING, LOVED YOU INTO LOVING."

Every Day Role Modeling

Studies on observational learning have confirmed that role modeling is an essential learning component, especially when it comes to the foundational attitudes and habits that impact a child's trajectory in life

So, consider on each of your outings how you might create opportunities to be a positive role model. Think of how your Little is seeing you approach situations through the lens of the 6Cs -- how are you showing caring or empathy for the people around you (Little's guardian especially) -- how are you exhibiting integrity and strong moral character -- how are you dealing with setbacks and showcasing determination. The unexpected or challenging moments in a mentoring relationship often present opportunities to showcase the strength of your resolve and the richness of your role modeling - The finest role modeling is to showcase failing and the persistence required to move forward against stubborn challenges. This example, above all else, is one that a child in an under-resourced situation can benefit from

Finally, mentors should focus on role modeling effort vs outcomes. Outcomes are not always within our control. Focusing on the effort a kid puts in and praising effort will encourage that Little to continue effort towards goals regardless of the outcome.

Active Listening

As a Big, you are going to come into close contact with your Little in their best and worst moments. You'll likely observe behaviors and attitudes that you feel are not the ones that lead to long-lasting success and happiness. First, it's good to remember how rebellious we all are when we're young. A child's brain is programmed to take risks and to explore limits. Regardless, it is natural, when seeing or hearing things we don't like from our Littles to want to fix or correct these unhelpful concepts and ideas. This is called the "righting reflex." You'll say to yourself, "that's not good, I should fix this. These habits I am seeing are not helping my Little thrive." Reflexive strategies, used in the moment to right a wrong tend to be lecturing, showcasing your disapproval or getting discouraged. You cannot be blamed for this, it's hard being a mentor.

Reflexive strategies may help you alter behavior on the short-term but will most likely also lower the self-esteem of your Little. These reactions would violate the most basic principle of youth work - do no harm. Even if you do not mean to lower a child's self-esteem, unsolicited criticism and judgment will likely do just that. Instead of jumping straight to judgment there a few techniques (stolen from the world of social work or psycho-therapy), you can use to help your Little learn from their action and the resulting consequences. These 4 strategies don't have to happen in sequential order or as a unit but work powerfully together.

Active Listening Strategies

Before sharing remember to pick your moments to confront behaviors you do not like. Exploring mistakes and challenges is hard "in the moment" when a Little is already struggling or potentially feeling defensive. Choose when the time is right.

#1 Ask open ended questions that can create space for your Little to reflect on their actions, Some great questions are: - It seems like you're relying on your friends and is that working for you? - How do you think that made that person feel? - Are there other ways you could approach the situation? - If you are genuinely trying to listen and learn, your Little will come up with some good stuff and will likely stumble into some learning on their own. If a Little can state a different intent or approach on their own, that's infinitely better than pointing out your preferred way of doing it which a Little will likely reject outright –

#2 Linked to the first item, make sure you affirm your Little, even if they're not able to connect the dots or make some revelation. You may not like what you hear but if you want to keep on having conversations like this with your Little, you should thank them for opening up to you, talking or even considering the question now or later - Affirmation is the knob on the faucet of open communication and moderates trust. Be mindful of the fact that mentoring is a long-term strategy and will take iterations to get right

#3 - Do something called "reflective listening." The essence of reflective listening is that you are genuinely trying to understand where someone is coming from. By asking clarifying questions, you can make sure you fully understand where your Little is coming from and where they stand. Good clarifying questions are things like: "What do you mean by that? Can you tell me more about how that made you feel? You said [repeat statements in your own words], do I have that correct?" By saying back what you're hearing (again, without judgment), you're helping your Little reflect on their statements and what they mean. Not only do you get more clarity by using this technique, you also help your Little come up with the words to express where they are and what they believe. Just doing this can be powerful enough to bring about change. Another way to think about it is like being a sportscaster, providing a play by play on what you're hearing, accentuating the key points

#4 and the final strategy is to summarize what you've been hearing. Synthesize the key takeaways for your Little. Hopefully your active listening has elicited some helpful discourse and meaningful self-reflection. When the conversation winds down, say, "Can I take a shot at summarizing what I just heard?" You said that you [insert learning and self-reflection], is that right?" Then give your best affirmation!

The best news is that by approaching your role as a mentor in this way, as a facilitator of learning rather than an authority and lecturer, you are role modeling empathy and high character. Double win. Lastly, sometimes you cannot help yourself and you will need to share your opinion. If so, ask permission to share your thoughts first and be humble that your world view and experiences may or may not apply to your Littles

Providing Opportunities

The final proven method to helping Littles grow in critical areas of development is to practice. "Practice makes permanent" because our bodies and minds make future decisions and actions based on what it knows so having experiences that promote healthy and fulfilling actions are good in themselves and also in creating momentum that can carry forward throughout the mentoring relationship and beyond - Remember the key is to build self-esteem so don't bite off a goal that is too large or far away. Find an incremental gain and know that all practice can help in the long run - When deciding what to do together as a match, it's always helpful to:

Decide together or take turns (co-authorship). Set out to have fun primarily.

Have a goal in mind -- what long-term skill(s) are you practicing (6Cs). Discuss this and reinforce the skill being practiced throughout the activity - Seeing a movie that explores a moral dilemma? Talk about the decision making and focus on Character and having a moral compass - Watching the NBA playoffs together? Research statistics on players and discuss the importance of being Curious and learning - Going rock climbing or ice skating for the first time? Talk about being confident to try new things and keep trying if you don't succeed at first - Is your Little having a bad day? Having a fight with a friend at school? Encourage them to share how they feel, how do they think their friend feels? Talk through how you help yourself identify negative emotions and your coping strategies and discuss the importance of emotional competence

Do the activity together - ROLE MODEL and promote teamwork and collaboration (connection). Create space for your Little to reflect on their experience and LISTEN. Celebrate accomplishments no matter how small. Setbacks are inevitable in life, giving a kid opportunities to have setbacks in a supportive environment helps them build resilience and confidence that even if it is hard, they can keep trying.

Key Takeaways to Maximize Impact

So lets reflect on the key take aways here to maximize your impact in being a Big.

Build trust with your Little based on genuine care, provide consistency and focusing on your Littles positive attributes.

Role model healthy habits and look at every moment with your Little through the lens of "every day role modeling"

Provide opportunities for yourself and your Little to learn new things, grow together and do not shy away from failure, whether it is on an outing or by sharing your own setbacks and challenges with your Little.

Listen actively and seek to understand your Little from their perspective, validate how they feel and continue to provide a safe space to share in your friendship.

Thank you!

Being a mentor is rewarding and challenging at times. Change takes time and is not exponential. Mentors should utilize support from the agency and in Littles life, along with these strategies, to maximize their impact.