

General Effects: Current research regarding the effects public housing has on children is mixed. This is due to vast variances in public housing facilities, resources, location, etc. A common perception is that public housing developments are littered with crime, violence, gangs and drugs. While some developments deal with these issues, others have strong coalitions among residents, resulting in an increased sense of community and safety. It is important for the Big to get to know what their Little and family thinks about their community. Perhaps the family is very connected to the community and the Little is free to play in the neighborhood with other children without fear. Or maybe the Little is not allowed outside without an adult and the family is not happy with their current neighborhood. While the experiences within each public housing development may be drastically different, there are some issues and things to keep in mind:

Advice for Mentors:

Financial:

- While a Big may know that the family is struggling with finances, they should not feel responsible for payments or purchases. Practice how you would say no in the event a Little asks for a gift or item.
- Parents and guardians may have negative feelings about being a part of a government housing program and not paying for their own rent. Some guardians may feel a loss of dignity or feel embarrassment for not being able to survive independent of financial assistance. While a Big can't fix these issues, they should be sensitive to them.
- Always respect guardians' financial standing by speaking to them about what they can offer and what they would like you to offer for the child. Ensure that they are comfortable with all activities you are doing. It is essential to keep activities low-cost and free. Guardians may also be able to contribute in non-financial ways, such as providing picnic lunches and snacks for activities or transportation. Explore these options with guardians. Be careful not to assume or imply that you will need to pay for the majority of activities, as this may affect a guardian's sense of dignity or pride in the ability to provide for their child.
- A Little and family may be living in a situation very unfamiliar and uncomfortable for a Big. Many families are struggling to make ends meet and are suffering a great many stressors. As a result, a home may not be furnished, decorated or cleaned in a manner expected by a Big. A Big should not judge a family because of this and should be sensitive to how their reactions may be perceived by a family or Little. By getting to know the family, many preconceived notions and judgments can be corrected.

Self Esteem:

- A Little and family may be suffering from low self-esteem. Provide a Little with positive reinforcement to make them feel good about themselves.
- Encourage a Little to participate in things they are interested in and compliment them on jobs well done. This will allow a Little to understand positive self-worth and a sense of competence.
- Be careful not to treat outings and activities as an attempt to "rescue" or "save" a Little from their current situation. While providing an outlet for a Little away from a stressful situation is wonderful, be aware of what type of relationship you could be insinuating by focusing on the activity and perceived "need" of the child. The goal of the program is the relationship and friendship between a Big and a Little. Perhaps taking a Little to a park where they feel safe to run and play out in the open will provide a Little with a new opportunity and allow them to partake in new activities with a Big.

Support:

- Respect closeness between child and guardian. Understand your role as a secondary figure. In a poverty-stricken household, guardians are experiencing a number of stressors. If a child expresses frustration, be supportive of them and help to alleviate the pressure by giving the child the opportunity to talk about it or focusing on other enjoyable activities. Always remain positive.

Peer and Social Network:

- If a Little lives in a housing development where they are not allowed to play outside and spends a majority of time indoors, they are not being exposed to new activities or given a chance to develop social skills. A Big can be instrumental in exposing a Little to new experiences and situations and modeling appropriate social skills. By taking advantage of agency events and ticket opportunities, a Big can provide new experiences in a free and low-cost manner.