

MENTORING *AND* YOUR CHILD

Developing a Successful Relationship

by Dr. Julia Roberts and Tracy Inman



Thousands of years ago when Odysseus set off to fight the Trojans and reclaim the captured Helen, he realized that his young son, Telemachus, would lack guidance during his absence. He called on his trusted friend, Mentor, to guide his son, nurture him, and lead him in the right direction. Telemachus thrived under this mentorship—just as other mentees have done through the ages.

Where would young Luke Skywalker be without the advice of Obi-Wan Kenobi? Without the tutelage of his father, what might have happened to baseball great Cal Ripkin, Jr? And without Cal's guidance where would Alex Rodriguez be? (Probably not the highest paid baseball player!) Consider Rachmaninoff's music minus the influence of Tchaikovsky or Carl Jung's work without his mentor Sigmund Freud. From T.S. Eliot's reliance upon Ezra Pound to Ralph Ellison's guidance from Richard

Wright, mentor-ships have proved life changing.

As the care giver of a gifted and talented child (perhaps the next Rachmaninoff or Eliot), you well know the challenges facing these young people. For many of these children, a mentor may be the ideal answer to these challenges.

Consider the results when your precocious daughter with an interest in science is teamed with a research biologist. Imagine the impact of a relationship between your aspiring young writer and a published author. What might transpire when your curious son who has a passion for languages pairs up with a linguist or a naturalized citizen who speaks several languages? The possibilities are endless.

If you feel that your child would be a strong candidate as a mentee, it isn't necessary to wait for his or her school to initiate the relationship. After all, you know your child best—you know his or

her passions, needs, and talents. Although a school's involvement strengthens the endeavor, school involvement isn't necessary. However, before you establish this relationship, take the following ideas into consideration.

What is mentoring?

Mentoring is a one-on-one relationship between a young person and someone who is an expert in a field or has passion and knowledge in a particular area. These shared passions (such as aviation or insects), common academic interests (from geometry to French), or career interests form the basis of the relationship. This relationship differs from the typical teacher-student relationships. Mentors and mentees work as partners or cohorts as they explore their passion, interest, or career. This exploration can be accomplished face-to-face, over the phone, through mail, or via email. Many combinations work.

Dr. Homer White of Georgetown College in Kentucky has mentored Thomas Johnston, a home-schooled high school student from Stamping Ground, KY, for three years. He views mentorships this way: “Gifted children have this consuming interest in certain ideas, but their peers aren’t ready to take a similar interest in those ideas. Many adults in their lives (parents and teachers) might be able to take such an interest, but frequently they are taken up with relating to the child as a child: that is, these adults are primarily concerned with the child’s moral or social development, worrying whether he/she will be well-adjusted or will turn out all right. Gifted kids want and need contact with people who are interested in their ideas for their own sake. Without it, they experience a unique— and very acute — kind of loneliness.” Mentoring, then, is a rare relationship, one different from other relationships in the child’s life.

Why do it?

The benefits to both the mentor and mentee can be tremendous. These benefits extend beyond the cognitive realm into the emotional and social realms as well.

Benefits for the mentee include the following:

- real-world applications of passion or interest
- self-confidence
- expanded possibilities for learning
- increased knowledge base
- continuous progress
- deepening enthusiasm for a subject
- extension or enrichment of the curriculum
- career direction
- role model
- growth in area of giftedness (e.g., academic, leadership, creativity, visual arts, performing arts).

Benefits for the mentor include the following:

- joy in sharing a passion or interest
- perpetuation of interest and knowledge in passion area or career field
- personal satisfaction of helping others and bettering lives
- renewed enthusiasm for a subject
- talent created or developed
- friendship

- sense of commitment to community and young people
- pleasure of knowing and working with a young person on a personal or one-to-one basis.

Dr. Karen Powell of Western Kentucky University’s Community College mentored Bowling Green, KY, middle-schooler Ashlee Shaw in a science experiment (which, by the way, has been chosen in the top 400 out of 6000 nationally; the finals had not been announced when this article was written). Dr. Powell believes the benefits for Ashlee were numerous: “She learned how to apply the scientific method, diligence, and most of all that science is a blast— and that she possesses the capability to become a scientist if she so desires.” Ashlee concurs: “Since I’ve been working with Karen, I’ve worked harder in all my classes to keep good grades. I feel smarter, so when I walk into a class I want to try more. I didn’t think it would transfer over, but it’s helped me a lot in other classes— especially math.”

As a mentor, Dr. Powell explains the benefits for her: “I had the privilege to be a part of the metamorphosis. I watched Ashley go from being inexperienced and unsure to confident and self-fulfilled. Plus I had a lot of fun!” The benefits are indeed many— and may be unexpected.

Who needs to do it?

Mentorships are appropriate for all ages but are especially effective in later elementary years, middle school, and high school. Mentees must be ready for this type of relationship. If they are independent learners, are diligent workers, and have a strong grasp of subject matter coupled with an earnest desire for mentoring, then the mentoring relationship should be successful. Mentors, too, must demonstrate readiness. Mentors must possess expertise in the area to be explored. “The thing to avoid in mentoring,” cautions Dr. White, “is the urge to influence the youngster to follow all the paths that you would like to have taken but didn’t or couldn’t take, but be willing instead to follow along with his or her interests as they develop.”

How do you establish a mentoring relationship?

There is no one right way to establish mentoring. Parents, schools, children, and even mentors themselves can initiate a mentoring relationship. In Thomas Johnston’s case, Dr. White was a family friend who discovered that Thomas wanted to learn Latin. This professor of mathematics encouraged the mentoring relationship (after two years of Latin, they’ve moved on to Geometry). In Ashlee Shaw’s case, her middle school science teacher, Ms. Ronnie Shuffitt, realized that Ashlee needed outside influence. She paired the two together, quite successfully.

Before matching a mentor with your child, realize that just because someone is a skilled architect doesn’t necessarily mean that he or she will be a skilled mentor. A desire to mentor and the ability to establish a nurturing relationship must be present. Becoming a mentor is a major commitment.

To find a mentor, take into account your child’s gifts and talents. Then, find experts in that area. For example, if your son is a budding musician, check with your local or state arts council. If your daughter is considering becoming a neurosurgeon, talk with someone at the American Medical Association. Other places to check include your child’s school, universities (don’t limit yourself to your local college; with email anything is possible), family, friends, professional associations, and even the web (just plug in mentoring in your search engine and you’ll be amazed).

Some additional possibilities for locating a mentor include:

- contact a statewide chapter of a national organization that addresses a student’s interest
- local or state historical societies, museums, parks (docents and other volunteers or professionals who love their topics may be willing to mentor)
- think about organizations whose membership includes people with a range of professional experience, including local service organizations

- (e.g., Elks, Kiwanis, Rotary), religious groups, or chambers of commerce
- consider approaching the local senior center; retirees with expertise in your child's area of interest could make excellent mentors.
- check the local newspaper for meeting times of local or regional "clubs" organized around an interest area (e.g., ornithology, automobile clubs, antiques clubs, aviation, etc.) as a way to meet amateurs or professionals with those interests.

Seek out as many avenues as possible to find the best match for your child. You will want to check the credentials of a possible mentor, of course, especially when you are using the Internet. Speak with, or meet, the prospective mentor. If the person has been a mentor for other students, you might find it valuable to speak with them or their parents. As in any relationship outside school, safety and security can be important to consider. The person initiating the relationship must feel confident that child will be safe in the presence of the mentor. Many school systems perform criminal checks; parents must be just as certain. Be certain to know where and when any person-to-person meetings will take place.

In order for the pairing to be successful, the mentee must have a voice in the relationship. It must be a comfortable match not only in topic to be studied but in personality as well. Eighth grader Ashlee elaborates: "Karen actually listened to what I had to say. She talked to me. I could tell she liked me by how she treated me." The rapport established is just as critical as the work accomplished (if not more so).

What makes the mentoring relationship successful?

Once the right pairing occurs, there are certain guidelines that ensure success. Objectives and goals must be planned as a team. For Ashlee and Dr. Powell, the idea was Ashlee's. Together they structured the experiment following the scientific method and set goals that included everything from securing equipment to dissection to writing the results. For Thomas and Dr. White, the desire to learn Latin was Thomas's but then he relied on Dr. White to guide the mentoring.

Some sort of end product or final goal steers the relationship. An end product could be that the experiment is ready for the international science fair (as in Ashlee's case) or that Thomas learned Latin.

Duration of the mentoring needs to be established. Mentoring can last as long as a project lasts or last a lifetime. Plus mentoring can occur during any time of the year.

A time structure must govern the communication. Whether contact is made bimonthly, weekly, or daily, a schedule ensures that the communication occurs. For Thomas and Dr. White, the mentoring was set up on a weekly basis. Thomas explains, "We would meet in Dr. White's office or some other convenient location and go over my work for the week. The rest of the week was largely spent in independent study. Much of the tedious drill and practice aspects of learning a foreign language were done at home, and I could get help with specific problems during our weekly meetings. It worked very well!" The contact for Ashlee and Dr. Powell included many telephone conversations plus scheduled work visits.

The mentoring itself must be honest, respectful, and nurturing. Remember that those benefits reach far beyond the academic goal. For Ashlee, it was life changing: "A lot of kids my age say they don't need someone to back them up or help out because they want to look 'big and bad.' But you're better off to have a mentor. She's going to be there for you. You're more comfortable and safe. If you fall, she'll catch you. Now I'm more confident in myself. None of my family went to college. I want to go to college. I want to make something of myself. I want to be a doctor—that's science. That's because of Karen." Of course the fact the experiment has earned a semi-finalist ranking is exciting, but the self-image gained by Ashlee goes beyond expectation.

In spite of the planning and structuring, expect the unexpected—and rejoice in it. For example, Dr. White discovered something unexpected in mentoring Thomas: "The joy in mentoring is that it doesn't feel at all like real work. Gifted kids learn independently, usually acquire an interest in ideas for their own sake, and are nourished more by the mentor's enthusiasm than by

smoothness in the mentor's teaching technique." And Dr. Powell discovered how rewarding it is "to help someone realize she possessed the ability all along."

Once the who's, what's, when's, how's, and where's are decided, the mentoring relationship takes on a life of its own, and your high-ability child will blossom in many ways. Think of Ashlee's new life goals and self-confidence. Consider Thomas's conquest of Latin and Geometry and his acquisition of a lifelong friend at the same time. Imagine the difference a healthy pairing could make in your child's life. Research shows that mentors can have significant impact: in a 22-year study of 212 young adults, Dr. E. Paul Torrance found that those who worked with mentors completed a greater number of years of education and earned more adult creative achievements than peers who did not have mentors. Mentoring changes lives, both of the mentor and the mentee.

Would young Telemachus have possessed enough skill and cleverness to fight off Penelope's suitors upon his father's return without the years of Mentor's nurturing and guidance? Would Helen Keller have earned honorary degrees and humanitarian awards without her one-to-one lifelong relationship with Anne Sullivan? And what type of philosophical impact would Plato have made without Socrates? Ask yourself, now, how a strong mentoring relationship could affect your child—then take action. ♣

Recommended Resources

- D. Whitton & D. Siegle (Ed.) (1992). *What Educators Need to Know About Mentoring* (Practitioners' Guide – A9406). Storrs, CT: The National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented.
- Mentors Peer Resources. (2001). *Famous mentors pairings*. [Online] Retrieved September 5, 2001, from the World Wide Web: <http://www.mentors.ca/mentorpairs.html>.
- Torrance, E. P. (1984). *Mentor relationships*. Buffalo, NY: Bearly Limited.
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