

Five ways to help your child find (and keep) a mentor

By Braden Bell
September 26, 2017

In our competitive world, a mentor can make a powerful difference in professional opportunities and personal growth. Because numerous mentors have blessed my life, I've tried to pay it forward, actively mentoring students by giving them leadership positions in our school's theater program each year.

I've recently encouraged my college-aged children to find mentors of their own. They asked me how to go about this, prompting me to consider my experiences as both mentor and mentee, searching for common threads and patterns.

An old proverb says that when the student is ready, the teacher will come. I believe finding a good mentor starts with being a good mentee. At the very least, certain habits can facilitate finding a mentor. These skills can be practiced, and it's never too soon to start.

Signal interest: The opening bid

Potential mentors are everywhere: teachers, coaches, neighbors and others. However, they probably have more potential mentees than they could effectively teach. Thus, it's important to be present and signal interest. Talk with the professor after class. Ask the boss for coaching. Assist the teacher. Help the coach pick up the athletic equipment.

Or just ask.

Numerous students have approached me to discuss working in our theater program. I've appreciated their initiative and have generally found places for them on the production team.

Every mentoring relationship I've experienced has started with what I call the opening bid — some small request or task, initiated by either the mentor or mentee.

I gained a mentor in college by asking my professor if she wanted help making copies. She accepted, then gave me other projects. Eventually I became her teaching assistant. With her help, I ended up teaching

classes of my own before graduation.

I've worked with a student of my own for several years, entrusting her with substantial responsibility. This started because she came to every rehearsal, even when it wasn't required. She loved being involved in the production of a play and happily did anything that needed to be done: filling water bottles, taking notes or reading lines for missing actors. As she demonstrated commitment, I gave her increasingly responsible tasks until she became a trusted assistant.

One caution: Let the child signal interest. When a parent does this for their child it's a red flag. Is the student truly interested? Will the parent always intervene? Is the student actually ready to be mentored? Mentoring requires open communication. If a child isn't ready to signal interest, she's not yet ready to be mentored. There's nothing wrong with that, but it's important to consider.

Start small and do good work

Earning a mentor's trust and developing skills takes time. Along the way, the mentor may assign unglamorous, even menial tasks. These tasks might help gauge interest, work ethic and aptitude. They might also teach important skills.

I once asked a professor who was a noted set designer if I could assist him. He agreed then assigned me to find books to help him research his next production.

That wasn't what I envisioned; I decided the professor had not recognized my talent and felt somewhat put upon. I procrastinated but finally went to the library and scrounged up a handful of books. He was obviously surprised when I returned; he'd wanted dozens and dozens of books, multiple images for every aspect of the design.

I understand now that he was assessing my reliability and desire. He was also teaching me a fundamental principal of set design: Serious designers do exhaustive research. A professional might spend days — or weeks — researching before ever sketching a line. My ambivalence signaled that I wasn't ready to learn. The professor politely thanked me but never called me again.

A mentor shares time, expertise and professional reputation. Trust him. Be prepared to learn, even if this involves small, apparently unimportant tasks.

Be teachable

Several years ago, I gave a student a significant leadership role in a production. Unfortunately, because of inexperience, she alienated her peers. Although I approached her as gently as possible, I couldn't sugarcoat some difficult facts. She was upset and hurt. I could see she wanted to argue, but she clamped her mouth shut, heard me out, then excused herself quickly.

Later, she emailed to thank me for caring enough to be honest. She acknowledged her error, apologized and promised to address the problem. Her mature response enhanced my trust. More important, however, it allowed her to grow.

None of us enjoys being corrected, but learning to not argue with feedback is critical to growth.

Don't be intrusive

A parent's role in all of this is to ensure their child's safety and provide necessary support. Beyond that, one of the most important things a parent does is nothing.

Don't try to manage this process. Any mentor worth having probably has a preferred method of working. She may not take kindly to interference and intervention; let her work her way.

Resist the urge to promote your child. A quality mentor will have seen many talented people. Allow him to evaluate your child's talent independently. If he's not as impressed with your child as you are, remember, the point of having a mentor is to help your child develop and grow, not to earn praise.

Being reliable

Most mentoring relationships give a novice a chance to participate in the mentor's professional life. That involves a great trust. Be respectful of a mentor's work and reputation. Treat the experience as an honor and take care not to make the mentor look bad by doing shoddy work or embarrassing her.

These simple steps can help a child build habits that will facilitate and invite successful mentoring relationships, enriching their lives and enhancing their skills.

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