

Finding a Leader Mentor for Your Child (part 1 of 2)

(Excerpts from “KidLead: Growing Great Leaders” ©2009 Alan E. Nelson)

You Can Do It

Most of us feel a bit intimidated when we think of finding or being a mentor. Perhaps it's because we see it as such an awesome responsibility, influencing a young life other than our children. Maybe it's because we don't feel worthy or we're just plain embarrassed to ask or be asked. More than likely, few of us have experienced a mentoring relationship, so replicating it doesn't come natural. Then there's the social awkwardness created by unfortunate cases of child abuse and molestation, causing responsible people to feel paranoid about a one-on-one connection with a minor.

But more than anything, the reason we don't mentor or pursue mentoring relationships for our children is that we're not sure what to do. We've made it out to be a big commitment spanning long periods of time, akin to a corporate internship or foster parenting. But this need not be. You can make a big impact in a short time with a little effort that young leaders will remember for years to come.

Mentoring is a powerful force in the life of a young leader. Following are some simple ideas of how to find a mentor for your young leader as well as how to serve as a mentor.

Finding A Mentor For Your Kid

- Consider a friend or family member who has an expertise different than yours. Obviously, you'll need to use your head regarding logistics, timing, and trust, but don't let these details deter you. Most people feel honored to be asked. You may even want to avoid the term “mentor” as it can be intimidating. Use phrases such as “shadowing you,” “watching you work,” or “spending time with you at your job.”

- Ask the mentor to meet 1-2 times with your child for 1-2 hours each time. This need not be a long or protracted arrangement. It works best if this is done in the mentor's office or work space, as opposed to a neutral meeting place where the leader is out of his/her leading environment.
- Provide interaction suggestions (next section). This reduces the anxiety of the mentor and provides some simple, coaching ideas that will help the "yes" come easier when you ask. You may also train your child to be mentored by supplying him with some good questions as well (following).
- Suggest a schedule where your child can actually observe some behaviors of leading. There are a lot of things leaders do that aren't leading. They eat, drink, read e-mails, and any number of other things that everyone does. When a potential mentor asks what to do, suggest tasks s/he does pertaining to her/his role as a leader. This may involve other people, making decisions, checking on a big project, and working with staff. The best suggestion may be to simply allow the young leader to shadow the mentor through a typical ½ day schedule. It may not seem exciting to the leader, but it will likely be pretty cool for the young leader. Provide room for talk time and unpacking a meeting or event.
- Thank the mentor and then review the experience with your young leader. Talk about his/her experience and what the mentor said or did.

8 Mentor Ideas

Here are some ideas you can use if you are asked to serve as a mentor or better yet, if you initiate a mentoring meeting with a young influencer.

1. Talk to the child like an adult, a future leader. Don't worry about "dumbing down" your conversation. Consider how you'd talk to a new friend or outsider who may not know about your industry or profession.

2. Tell the young leader what you do. Provide a simple explanation of what your company does. Many of us do our work without thinking a lot about it, especially if we've been doing it for awhile. Don't worry about trying to impress or entertain the young leader. Be yourself.
3. Describe how you work with people, how the teams function and primary jobs of people.
4. Show him/her your work environment. This may involve meetings, visiting a job site, or your office. If needed, introduce the young leader to others. This esteems the child and also models your belief mentoring and investing in future leaders.
5. Think of a problem you faced and how you attempted to solve it. Don't worry about all the details, but simply explain a challenge to illustrate what you do. People looking from the outside rarely see the difficulties you face. Consider asking the protégé what s/he might have done in that situation.
6. Ask the young leader what he/she wants to do in life (goals/aspirations). By showing interest and asking questions, you're esteeming the young leader. Plus you're discovering potential areas where their interests and what you do overlap.
7. Ask the young leader what questions s/he has. Avoid "yes/no" questions. Instead of, "Did you think that was interesting?" ask, "What was something you thought was interesting as you sat through the meeting?"
8. Briefly tell the parent what you did and discussed, so s/he can review the experience with the child. If you enjoyed the time, you may offer to do it again. If not, then don't worry about extending an invitation and don't feel badly about it either. Some kids will naturally resonate with you, based on their age, personality, and interests. Others will not, but that's okay. You've done a good job by simply being available.

Mentoring is a powerful tool that parents can use in developing their young leaders. Establishing a meaningful mentoring experience is not difficult. It's a big deal that's not a big deal.