

Mind Matters

articles on mental health from experts in the field

Mentoring Helps Kids Believe in Themselves and their Future

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Most of us can remember at least one person in our lifetime, a mentor, who taught us lessons about ourselves that have never been forgotten. For me, it was my high school track coach who helped shape the person that I am today. When I consider what made him such an important person to me, the answer is not easily expressed in words.

There was never any doubt in my mind that Coach Suhuba-Baruti truly cared about me. Coach was there for me at a time in my life when I was floundering, unsure of myself, and lonely. He noticed when I was having a particularly bad day, and, more importantly, he really listened when I told him what was wrong. Coach had the rare ability to see past my teenaged awkwardness to the potential that lay beyond. Even more amazingly, he helped me believe in myself merely by believing in me. I wanted to be like Coach when I grew up, and I hope that he would see glimpses of his influence on me today.

In the simplest of terms, a mentor is someone who is willing to share his or her time with a younger person. A mentor's background, life experience, career, and age are not as important as that person's ability to see a young person's potential. A good mentor listens, shares, and is genuine. Mentoring helps kids believe in themselves and their future.

Although everyone can benefit from having a mentor, young people who are particularly vulnerable due to mental illness, lack of positive role models, lack of support from peers/concerned adults, and multiple other risk issues can benefit to an even greater extent. Psychotherapy is also helpful to vulnerable youth, but it includes a component of expected change and improvement. By its nature, therapy addresses difficult issues or problems. In contrast, mentoring provides young people with the opportunity to be known for their strengths and accepted for who they are. During identity development in the teen years, mentoring can be an invaluable tool in helping young people adopt positive, hopeful visions of themselves and their abilities.

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