

The Bogeyman and the Bathwater

A Chilling Effect on Youth Mentoring

By Stephen Wallace, M.S. Ed.



Given recent well-publicized cases of child exploitation, perhaps it is no surprise that the age-old practice of mentoring teens may be yielding to modern-day concerns about youth safety. But throwing the baby out with the bathwater, regardless of how sullied, may do more harm than good.

Consider that more than half (56 percent) of middle and high school students say that *not* having a mentor would negatively affect them, according to a new *Teens Today* study from SADD and Liberty Mutual Group. Indeed, teens able to identify at least one influential mentor in their life, such as a teacher, coach, counselor, or neighbor, report a higher Sense of Self and are more likely to take positive risks that promote overall development and mental health.

Just as important, the breadth and depth of the mentoring a young person receives correlates strongly with decision-making. For example, teens who report high levels of mentoring are significantly more likely than those who report low levels of mentoring to avoid alcohol, other drugs, and early sexual behavior.

Despite clear evidence of the positive effects of mentoring on youth, a startling number of teens (53 percent) say their parents discourage them from participating in organizations or activities where such mentoring might occur, including one in five who

specifically cite parental concern for their personal safety when spending time with a mentor.

Can something so good really be so bad? Sometimes ... but maybe not as often as we think.

In *The Blessing of a Skinned Knee*, psychologist Wendy Mogel points out that the world may not be quite so dangerous after all, referring to media scare-mongering in which "the most disturbing stories are given the most attention and our sense of impending danger becomes exaggerated."

This "bogeyman effect," brought about by the overamplification of select incidences of child abuse, appears to be chilling important relationships proven effective in fostering growth and discouraging poor choices.

And that chill is not coming just from parents.

Fearing legal responsibility for misconduct by its employees, schools and youth organizations are developing standards limiting the contact that may make mentoring such an effective tool in the first place. For example, guidelines recommended by the National Education Association (NEA) describe as inappropriate professional behavior "taking students to lunch, outside social activities or receiving and writing personal notes."

While surging fears about harm directed at youth may impair support for mentoring relationships, adolescents need, and very much want, consistent exposure to caring, supportive adults. And with good reason.

A report by Child Trends, "Mentoring: A Promising Strategy for Youth Development," concludes that adults other than parents can provide important emotional support, advice, and guidance while also helping to build self-esteem and self-control. They also point out that, overall, young people who participate in mentoring relationships experience positive academic benefits, including better attendance and better attitudes toward school.

While parents clearly play the most influential mentoring role in the lives of their children, it is also clear that other "significant" adults can, and do, affect important outcomes when it comes to education, social and emotional well-being, and health and safety.

For sure, parents are wise to be wary. And there are some simple steps they can take to be sure their children remain safe.

1. Stay involved. Know with whom your teen is spending time, where they are going, and what they are doing.
2. Get to know your teen's mentors. Working together will benefit your teen and give you a better sense of your teen's safety.
3. Encourage your teen's involvement in organizations that conduct employee or volunteer screenings and/or criminal and sexual offender background checks.

In *The Shelter of Each Other*, New York Times bestselling author Mary Pipher warns, "A culture in which children fear adults and adults are uneasy around children is an unhealthy and dangerous place." Thus, the real bogeyman may not be lurking in the bushes outside the door but rather behind a climate of fear that threatens from both ends the very type of adult-child relationships that nurture healthy development and decision-making.

In this new year, let's make a resolution to throw out the bogeyman with the bathwater ... and keep the baby.

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