

# Transformers

## The Positive Presence of Teachers and Teens

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By Stephen Wallace, M.S. Ed.



While hurtling toward the homestretch of this academic year, we're already paying significant attention to the next. Perhaps that's no surprise in this most political of seasons when the state of our schools, and the teachers who teach in them, is plenty of fodder for debate. Such critical issues as class size, standardized testing, merit pay, and student behavior will compete for attention – as many of them do in a recent *Time* magazine cover story, "How to Make Great Teachers."

But, what makes a great teacher, anyway?

As with most questions involving subjective measurement, answers can be hard to come by. But one thing is certain: in our rush to build better teachers, bolster math and science scores, and improve American students' rank in the global community, we are well served to remember that great teachers transcend GPAs and SAT results – as evidenced by the *Time* story's author, Claudia Wallis, who credits two teachers with providing the inspiration that led to her writing career.

I can make exactly the same case about one of my teachers.

Great teachers possess an incredible capacity to inspire children and, thereby, to shape the future – perhaps in ways more significant than whoever becomes our next President.

While the presence of "formal" (or matched) mentors has already been shown to enhance school performance, improve relationships with parents and peers, reduce initiation of drug and alcohol use, and decrease incidents of youth violence, a *Teens Today* study conducted by SADD (Students Against Destructive Decisions) has found similarly encouraging results for young people with informal (or natural) mentors, such as teachers, coaches, and counselors. According to more than 3,000 middle and high school students, these adults are some of the most important, influential people in their lives. And that influence shows up in some pretty formidable ways.

For example, 46 percent of teens with a mentor reported a high sense of self versus 25 percent of teens without a mentor. High sense-of-self teens feel more positive about their own identity, growing independence, and relationships with peers than do teens with a low sense of self. They are also more likely to avoid alcohol and drug use. Teens struggling with those developmental areas, on the other hand, are more likely to drink, to use drugs such as ecstasy and cocaine, and to cite boredom and depression as reasons to have sex. They also note a greater susceptibility to peer pressure when making choices about personal behavior.

Notably, more than half of teens (56 percent) say the absence of a mentor would negatively affect them. And, after all, they would know best.

So, what does a mentor look like? The characteristics young people ascribe to them include trustworthy, caring, understanding, respectful, helpful, dependable, fun, compassionate, and responsible. Being a good listener and offering good advice were also seen as key skills of successful mentors.

That sounds like a tall order but, on second thought, maybe not.

According to a fourteen-year-old ninth-grader, "Being a mentor to someone does not mean you have to always know the right answer, just that you are always there when they need someone to lean on."

She may be on to something. As Woody Allen said, "Ninety percent of life is just showing up."

In her essay "The Power of Presence," which appears in *This I Believe: The Personal Philosophies of Remarkable Men and Women* (Henry Holt and Co.), psychologist Debbie Hall writes, "Presence is a noun, not a verb; it is a state of being, not doing. States of being are not highly valued in a culture which places a high priority on doing. Yet, true presence or 'being with' another person carries with it a silent power – to bear witness to a passage, to help carry an emotional burden or to begin a healing process."

Pretty heady stuff – but well worth the effort, not only because of the direct impact of mentors on youth, but also because of the multiplier effect: Mentored teens may be predisposed to mentor others – transferring the positive value of presence to the lives of others younger than oneself.

Such is the case with Stephen Winkler, SADD's incoming 2008-2009 Student of the Year, who participates in a program sponsored by Big Brothers Big Sisters of America. As "Bigs," he and his friends meet weekly with their "Littles" to talk and have fun – building a bridge between natural and planned mentoring. Stephen says of the younger boys, "They *never* miss a Tuesday." Given the gain, it's no wonder.

And thus is the power of great teachers who teach not just to the test, but to the student, forging strong bonds of mentorship and, in the process, transforming young lives ... perhaps more of them than they know.

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