

The New York Times

Opinionator

Exclusive Online Commentary From The Times

OCTOBER 6, 2011, 10:00 PM

For Children at Risk, Mentors Who Stay

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Fixes looks at solutions to social problems and why they work.

Samuel was out of control. He cursed at his teacher, refused to do school work, attacked other kids in the schoolyard — and Samuel was still in kindergarten. His home life was chaotic. He'd never met his father. His mother had emotional and drug problems and was unable to care for him. His grandmother did her best. His older brother was involved in violent crime and had been in and out of jail. He taught Samuel to smoke marijuana when he was 6 years old.



If this story had continued on its trajectory, Samuel (not his real name) would have likely been one of the million American students who drop out of school each year. He would be at serious risk of getting entangled in the justice system and becoming a young parent who perpetuates the cycle of neglect and violence.

But Samuel was fortunate to get connected with an unusual mentoring program called **Friends of the Children** — and because of it, he'll probably graduate from high school and has a good chance to live a productive and satisfying life. After eight years in Friends, he has learned how to form respectful relationships. He shows and receives affection and can control his temper. Academically, he is performing at grade level (eighth grade) in math and reading. He has learned to swim, and has had the chance to kayak, rock climb and play tennis. And he's seen parts of New York — the Metropolitan Museum, the Big Apple Circus, the Central Park Zoo — that he might never have visited in his life, though he lives only a few miles away in Harlem. His home life is still difficult, but Kareem Wright, the program director at Friends in

To children at risk back on track, long-term commitment is the key.

New York, says he now handles his emotions so well that he has become a role model for other kids. “He’s very street smart,” says Wright, “but he channels that to help the younger kids and he gets a lot of respect from his peers.”

Over the past decade and a half, mentoring has been on the rise in the United States, with close to a quarter of a billion dollars of federal funding [devoted to mentoring programs](#) since 2008. There are thousands of mentoring programs in the country serving three million youths. Mentoring is rare in that it enjoys enthusiastic support from conservatives and liberals alike, and has been championed by both the Obama and Bush administrations. Dozens of states and cities have launched mentoring programs, and many corporations have their own initiatives. If there is one thing that Americans seem to agree on, it is that millions of children desperately need guidance from positive adult role models.

But in the world of mentoring, Friends of the Children stands out because of the children it targets and the commitment it makes. Most mentoring programs engage a wide range of young people, but Friends works with public schools in high poverty areas to select only the children who are experiencing the most severe behavioral and emotional problems.

They go to classrooms and look for children who are not just acting out aggressively like Samuel, but who are withdrawn, depressed or display a marked absence of emotion. They don’t just assess the family situation — many kids have a staggering array of challenges but also natural resilience — they look for children who are overwhelmed by their circumstances. And where most mentoring programs make connections that last from 9 to 18 months, Friends guarantees its children *12 years* of continuous mentoring at least four hours every week with no summer breaks — typically beginning in kindergarten and extending until high school graduation.

To make it work, Friends asks mentors to make at least a three-year commitment and hires them as full-time employees. They attract young teachers and social service workers as well as people in their post-retirement [encore careers](#). Each mentor is responsible for eight children until the kids are in sixth grade, after which they typically meet in groups. They get paid roughly the same salary as starting social workers or teachers, and they usually stay on the job longer than they promise.

In Friends, most children can expect to have just three different mentors over the 12-year period. That provides a lot of time to build solid, trusting relationships — and research indicates that the [duration of a mentoring relationship](#) is critical to its

success. (In fact, short term mentoring stints can be damaging to children who have already experienced many losses or disruptions.)

By catching children when they're young, bringing professional rigor to the task (mentors receive pre-job training and ongoing support) and making a long-term, virtually unconditional commitment to the children — there's almost nothing a child can do to get kicked out of Friends, short of carrying a gun and becoming a danger to others — Friends is working to shift expectations about the kinds of changes that can be achieved in a social program that targets children who face multiple risk factors.

Friends is not a large program, but it may soon become an influential one. It has worked with 1,300 children in Boston, New York, Seattle, Portland, and two other smaller communities in Oregon, Klamath Falls and Sisters. Almost all the kids live in poverty. Many have been uprooted numerous times, shuttled between foster care, relatives and shelters. Sixty percent have a parent who has been incarcerated; 60 percent were born to a parent who was a teenager at her first birth. In New York, about half had no caregiver employed during the past year. And yet, of the 140 youths who have completed all 12 years of mentorship, 85 percent have graduated from high school or received their G.E.D., 90 percent have avoided involvement with the justice system, and 95 percent have avoided early parenting — the program's three main goals.

This is why the program has attracted the attention of the [National Institute of Child Health and Human Development](#), which has invested more than \$3 million to evaluate its work with a randomized, controlled trial involving 262 children and families. Results have not yet been published, but preliminary findings after one year are promising.

“In terms of anxieties and depression, oppositional defiant behavior disorders, and rule breaking, we did find significant decreases looking at half the sample,” explained J. Mark Eddy, the lead researcher, who is affiliated with the School of Social Work at the University of Washington. Eddy noted that the biggest differences were seen among the children who were most at risk at the start of the study. “For kids who have gone through a lot of instability, this is a program that says, ‘Hey, we’re going to be here. We’re committed,’” he said. “And I think that consistency may be the difference.”

Friends was founded in 1993 by Duncan Campbell, a successful entrepreneur who had grown up in a rough neighborhood in Portland. Both of Campbell's parents were alcoholics and his father spent time in prison. Campbell recalls waking up one night when he was 3 or 4 years old, unable to find his parents. Frightened, he got himself dressed and started walking down the street looking for them, until a policeman

picked him up and located his parents at a nearby bar. “My home stunk, it was dirty. It smelled of cigarettes and alcohol,” he recalled. But Campbell had friends and they had nice parents and they helped him. “I loved going to my friends’ homes because they were filled with the smell of baked goods,” he recalled. Those relationships with caring adults, he says, were vital in shaping his world view — and giving him hope.

Before launching Friends, Campbell spent four years working in the juvenile court system. He saw that for all their authority and power, the courts could not guarantee that children had ongoing access to relationships with caring and responsible adults. That’s what he wanted to do. When he started Friends, he imagined that his biggest problem would be finding adults who would have the stamina for the job. “Forty percent of our kids are foster care kids,” he explained. “It’s an understatement to say that they are a handful. If a child is spitting at you, or calling you names, or saying they hate you, or refusing to look at you, will you hang in there?”

He was surprised to find that many people said yes. (In a recent job posting in Portland, Friends received 100 applications for two positions.) And mentors say that the attraction of the job is the opportunity to help children in a deep and meaningful way.

Friends has a structured screening process, involving multiple interviews and on the job observations, and its mentors have clear educational and social goals to meet (it’s not just playing ball, talking about life, and going on outings). But an essential factor remains their steadfastness. “We ask, ‘Where do you want to be in 5 or 10 years?’” says Campbell. “Because if they want to become a football coach, they’ll be gone in a couple of years. And they’d be another adult who broke the kid’s heart, even if they’re committed. We’ve had to turn down some incredible applicants who couldn’t promise they’d stay.”

One of the reasons mentoring took off in the 1990s was the publication of a large [study](#) about Big Brothers Big Sisters which showed that mentoring over the course of a year or 18 months could help more adolescents avoid negative behaviors like drug and alcohol use, engaging in violence or disregarding school.

But another reason is that mentoring is attractive, both politically and culturally. Politically, it seems to offer a relatively low-cost, volunteer-based approach to social problems, which appeals to many conservatives. Culturally, it gives many adults an opportunity to serve children without requiring an overwhelming commitment of time.

In this context, Friends of the Children presents a different view of mentoring — an approach that might be termed “deep mentoring”: one that requires a professionally

trained work force and is therefore more expensive — about \$9,000 per child per year, as opposed to \$1,200 a year for many larger or school-based programs. (Expensive is relative: New York State spends **\$210,000 a year** for each youth held in juvenile prison — and 75 percent are re-arrested within three years of release.)

“The children selected for Friends aren’t just low-income,” explains Judith S. Stavisky, Friends’ National Executive Director. “Many of these six year olds have already surrendered hope that life can be different for them. They have already sustained untenable losses, and they are living in desperate situations requiring the attention of a paid mentor — because volunteer mentors would not be prepared to handle those challenges. By the same token, not every kid needs the kind of intensive, no-matter-what commitment of Friends.”

Right now, Friends relies on philanthropy for most of its support, but that is limited. For the program to reach significantly more children, its work would need government support. The question is: Will society be willing to pay \$9,000 a year for professional mentoring for a child who needs it? On Wednesday, I’ll respond to readers’ thoughts about this question. I’ll also report on a conversation I had with a youth and his Friend, and cite an analysis about how much money society could potentially save by investing in more programs like this. (Hint: A lot.)

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