

## Mentoring Benefits

Every day, people strive to make a difference...in their jobs, their friendships, and their communities, but do you ever stop to think about whether or not you are really doing anything influential? "I think we all want to make a difference, but at the end of the day, we really hope, but are not always sure, we have," said Jo Woodard, Brookings County Youth Mentoring Program Coordinator.

Woodard has been involved with the mentoring program in Brookings, South Dakota, for the past two years. There are currently 80 children paired with mentors in the program. Woodard believes the community is benefiting from the positive effects of the program by reducing negative images some local children may feel.

The Brookings County Youth Mentoring Program (BCYMP) relies heavily on the United Way for funding, but also receives help from the local school district, churches, private funding, and occasionally from other mentoring programs. In order to succeed, mentoring programs depend on caring individuals willing to donate a little time. In as little as an hour a week, you can make a difference by becoming a mentor.

What are the roles a mentor is expected to fill? Being a mentor means being a friend, a motivator, and a role model. Not only will you be giving back to the community acting as an example for others, but you will learn and grow yourself.

Learn more about yourself. Be honest. Do you know what your weaknesses and strengths are? By exposing yourself to different lifestyles and socioeconomic conditions, and encountering new experiences, you learn about yourself. Maybe you are patient, but need to work on being non-judgmental. Perhaps you are a good listener, but lack communication skills. Mentoring a youth in your community can help you find out what those strengths and weaknesses are.

Gain new perspectives. By mentoring, you can learn a new way of life or culture to which you are unaccustomed. You could learn a new sport, or become introduced to a new way of thinking. Your mentee may have different opinions or a unique lifestyle different than your own, forcing you not only to be non-judgmental, but to realize that not everyone grew up in ideal living conditions. Lindsey Hansen, a Brookings mentor, learned that not every kid was exposed to her way of life as a child. "I always thought every kid grew up like me...spoiled,

loved, well taken care of. But, I've learned as a mentor, that's definitely not the case," said Hansen.

Work on interpersonal skills. Have you recently challenged or opened yourself up to new possibilities and experiences? By becoming a mentor, you can try new things you have never done. You can even learn to play like a kid again.

Earn respect from the community. Those who volunteer their time are often respected/admired?. By donating your most precious commodity, the youth of the community will know that you actually care. As the old saying goes, children spell love T-I-M-E. Donating time to young people will portray you a role model for other citizens of the area looking for a way to make a difference themselves.

Growing sense of accomplishment. Not only will you respected by community members and your mentee, you will feel good about yourself. You can be assured that at the end of the day, you will know that you are making a difference. You will learn more about your strengths and weaknesses, gain new skills and perspectives, and grow as an individual.

So by taking time to mentor someone, you can make a definable and measurable difference. "Mentoring is a concrete way of knowing you've helped a young person keep their feet on the ground," said Woodard. While having fun learning new skills and gaining knowledge about lifestyles different than your own, you improve the community one person at a time. "Many of the people who apply to be mentors express that they want to give back to the community. The mentors are really affirmed," said Woodard.

Anyone can participate in mentoring. You don't have to have a certain educational background or special skills. Woodard says the only requirement to become a mentor is a willingness to learn and make a commitment to "be there" for your mentee.