

MENTORING

SHOW UP — AND SHINE

Woody Allen once said “80 percent of success is showing up.” Now here’s the scoop on the other 20 percent that’s necessary to really shine - if you’re going to succeed at helping children.

|||||

Deciding to take a volunteer leadership role that puts you right smack in the middle of a group of kids or — maybe even more scary — with just one child can be intimidating. I speak from experience. I love kids, but leading them, teaching them, and influencing them — hopefully

for the better! — isn’t easy for me. Over the last six years of volunteering through schools, scouts and soccer, I’ve probably grown as much, if not more than, the children I’ve encountered. Some of my accumulated knowledge has come by trial and error; some through observation; some

by reading and some by request. It’s been a slow process, but I’m so thankful that all of this wisdom has come — and hope to speed up the learning curve for the new batch of mentors and volunteers who have stepped forward this fall to be the One In Charge. Here are some ideas to help you thrive, instead of just survive, as a mentor to Mini-Mes (and I’d love to hear yours; please look for this story online at www.tidewatermoms.com and add your suggestions by leaving a comment):

|||||

BY KRISTEN DE DEYK KIRK

1. Learn names

"Hey, you in the braids and the pink shirt" doesn't give a child a warm, fuzzy feeling. With a small group of 10 or so kids, I'm pretty good at remembering children's names. If ever I encounter a larger group, I'm stealing my son's kindergarten teacher's trick: She took their individual pictures on the first day, placed the photograph on a card, wrote the child's name underneath and took them home. I love that the teacher set a great example on how to study something important.

2. Practice first

Amy O'Halloran of UnStrungSisters.com has made thousands of pieces of jewelry throughout her career, but, besides her children, she's never taught anyone how to make jewelry. When she volunteered to lead an afterschool class of 4th and 5th graders, she didn't focus on that fact: She focused on being prepared. She thought through lessons and then called in a few 5th graders she knew but wasn't related to. She noticed how long each process took and identified minor hiccups that could have been major catastrophes in a larger, quicker-paced setting. She made adjustments and also gathered her adult volunteers beforehand and had them practice, so she could have reliable help during her real lessons.

3. Spread the love

If you're a parent and you're volunteering, chances are your little sweetheart is part of the group. Perfect, you get to spend time together and have fun. Just be sure little Jack or Jill knows that you have to be just as friendly and helpful to everyone - and he or she might feel a bit left out, which you, being Super Parent, understand. This volunteer time is time for Jack or Jill to show off how great Mom or Dad is, without necessarily being the star.

4. Understand the children's strengths

When I attended a training session for new Girl Scout leaders, a seasoned leader talked to us about age-specific activities. She would name a task and ask us to decide at what grade it would be appropriate to tackle. I always guessed too low. I was thinking about my daughter who wanted to go to middle school at age 4, and in some ways, was ready for big challenges. I

wasn't thinking of the other girls - whom I knew, but not well enough to judge their abilities. I wish I could tell you I learned my lesson right then and there. But the light bulb was still off until six months later when the girls were researching a major project on a foreign country. I asked one fourth grader to go online and find out what products the country manufactured. I might as well have asked her to perform brain surgery. Her reading skills weren't strong, but her enthusiasm was and she had no problem speaking loudly and performing our related skit on stage a few weeks later.

5. And pinpoint their personality

I've had the pleasure of reading Allison Moody's work. Her book, *Pressing the right buttons: People skills for business success*, isn't geared toward moms and dads volunteering, but her main point can be used by everyone. She notes that there are four main personality types - playful, powerful, precise and peaceful, and you can get along well with them by letting their "type" come out in a good way. Playfuls have a desire to have fun, love people, and have high energy; Powerfuls take charge, are natural-born leaders, decisive; and goal-oriented. Precises desire accuracy, make careful decisions, and are strategic. Peacefuls desire harmony, are good listeners, and are diplomatic. As for weaknesses, Playfuls can be disorganized; Powerfuls can be bossy; Precises can be critical; and Peacefuls possibly indecisive. Most people "prefer" one type or a combination of two. Read more about Allison at alliemooney.com.

6. Sometimes, let the kids figure out the answers

Educator Art Costa developed the concept of Habits of Mind (www.instituteforhabitsofmind.com), a set of 16 skills people need to be successful. The concept can be summarized as "knowing how to behave intelligently when you don't know the answer." Keep this in mind when working with children and let them figure a lot of things out for themselves. For example, if you see a sentence written incorrectly, stop yourself from saying "you need to start each sentence with a capital and end with a period." Instead say, "This sentence would be complete with two additions. Can you figure out what they are?"

There are four main personality types - playful, powerful, precise and peaceful, and you can get along well with them by letting their "type" come out in a good way.

7. Think outside the box

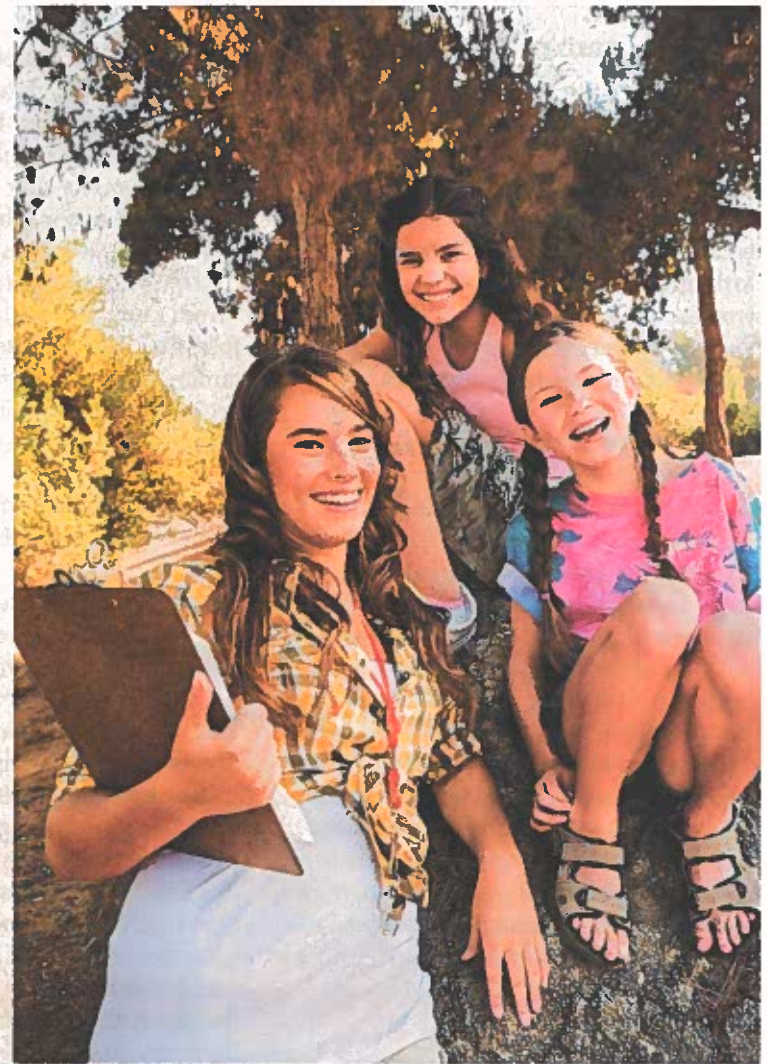
A friend of mine volunteered to mentor a girl from a local school and spend time with her each week. The girl was studious, polite and oh-so-quiet. My friend tried talking, asking questions and revealing things about herself in hopes of getting to know the girl and somehow helping her. For weeks, she got nowhere and grew frustrated. Never one to give up, she did some research and found that art can often be used as a way for children to expression themselves without having to verbalize feelings. Soon, my friend was carting art supplies to her weekly meetings with the girl. The girl still did not say much, but at least she was creating something and seemed to look forward to my friend's visits.

8. Be clear about what you want – and be prepared to work for it

Jacqueline Edelberg recently shared with me the story of how she started changing her neighborhood elementary school from scary to sanctuary: "When my girlfriend and I ventured inside Nettelhorst, our neighborhood's underutilized and struggling public elementary school, the new principal asked what it would take for us to enroll our children. Stunned by her candor, we returned the next day armed with an extensive wish list. The principal read our list and said, 'Well, let's get started, girls! It's going to be a busy year,'" Edelberg remembered. "We were eight park moms who galvanized neighborhood parents and then organized an entire community to take a leap of faith, transforming a challenged urban school into one of Chicago's best. I led eight moms in a Chicago diner to make our dreams come true." You can read about the effort in *How to Walk to School: Blueprint for a Neighborhood School Renaissance*, by Jacqueline Edelberg, with a foreword by Arne Duncan and afterword by Rahm Emanuel. Also view www.youtube.com/watch?v=XPZr6BYJSGc and www.howtowalktoschool.com. As Edelberg says, "If eight park moms could pull our little neighborhood school out of its 25 year nose-dive, surely other driven parents could do the same thing."

9. Listen

Carey Beam, a volunteer with Rolling Readers Space Coast, a Brevard County, Florida program encouraging reading among underprivileged children, keeps one thing in mind when she meets with students: She doesn't have to accomplish much beyond being there and opening her ears. "We are sharing time over quality literature," Beam said. "As a mentor, I feel the most important skill is the



ability to listen. Many children don't have the undivided attention of a caring adult, and the mentor can fill that role. I found that the silence in a pregnant pause can really do wonders for young children to collect their thoughts and convey the most heartened ideas they are not normally able to express." She half jokes that her Top Ten tips are: 1. Listen. 2. Listen. 3. Listen. 4. Listen. 5. Listen. 6. Listen. 7. Listen. 8. Listen. 9. Listen. 10. Don't expect too much. Which leads us to...

10. Hope for the best

"How do you know if you have made a difference?" asks Susan Thomas, executive director of Rolling Readers Space Coast, where Carey Beam volunteers. "Sometimes you do not. The child may not show changes from your effort until the very last part of the year, or a time in the future. As a mentor, you need to believe that your efforts matter. Usually the bond forms, and your heart is changed forever. Just give your best. What more can be asked?"