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Helping a child is as easy as giving a bit of your time

Mentoring - Volunteers, who are in high demand, can make a big difference for a youngster in need

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Three years ago, software engineer Tavish Ledesma, fresh out of college, wanted to get more involved in his community. Hoping for a one-on-one volunteer job, he chose mentoring. Since then, every other week Ledesma and "little brother" Zach, 12, spend hours together having fun.

"We've both grown as individuals," said Ledesma of Beaverton. "Zach, quiet and shy at first, is now always bubbly, talking and smiling. He's made me more positive, and I appreciate the simple things Zach appreciates. It's like hanging out with a friend."

Mentoring is a way for an adult to lend a hand to a struggling child, whether one who is high risk, at-risk or simply in need of a friend. Adults who want to mentor can find countless volunteer programs in Washington and Clackamas counties, each with a different focus.

Mentors can be school- or community-based, a mix of singles, couples, families with children or retirees. What they have in common is a desire to help a child. And they are in demand.

More than 800 boys are on the waiting list for mentors at Big Brothers Big Sisters Columbia Northwest, according to Susan Baumgardner, partnership development director.

Girls tend to get paired up more quickly, Ledesma said, because more volunteers are female. Many organizations require that mentors and the children they're paired with be the same gender.

The organization covers five counties -- Washington, Multnomah and Clackamas, plus Cowlitz and Clark in Washington state -- and has two programs, school- and community-based mentoring, according to Baumgardner. Youngsters ages 6 through 16 can sign up; mentors must be 16 or older.

Mentors and kids are matched by interests. Baumgardner picks up her 17-year-old "little sister" on weekends to play catch, chat, walk the waterfront, take MAX to get ice cream or make cookies.

Prospective mentors need a background check, said Baumgardner, references, a DMV check if community-based, and three hours of training.

"Our mentees are not high-risk but at-risk," she said. "They can live in poverty, have a sick family member or deceased parent."

Metropolitan Family Service serves the tri-county area and draws senior mentors to two programs, according to Beth Jacobs, volunteer development and recruitment coordinator.

Experience Corps seeks volunteers older than 50 to tutor and mentor children in elementary and middle schools. Foster Grandparents is for those 60 and older to work with children in a variety of settings. With its tax-free stipend, it is geared toward low-income seniors.

Trillium Family Services also serves the tri-county area with its Family of Friends program that matches mentors with children, according to Marcia Escudero, recruitment coordinator.

"We encourage singles, couples, families with children, and retired people -- anyone who has a heart and wants to spend time with a child," Escudero said. "We tell families to set another place at the table and teach what they know."

Younger mentors are sought by Inukai Family Boys & Girls Club in Hillsboro, according to Sarah Patschke,

teen coordinator. Mostly Washington County residents mentor in an after-school program for first- through 12th-graders.

The Cinderella Program of Washington County is designed to motivate and educate girls between the ages of 7 and 17, said Christina Snively of Oregon Mentors, which oversees youth mentor program members.

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