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Putting the men back in mentoring

Oregon groups struggle to attract male role models for fatherless boys

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While 13-year-old Dustin Brumitt hikes or watches movies with his new mentor, his younger brothers are back at the family's Tigard apartment -- wishing somebody would hang out with them, too.

The Brumitt boys signed up for Big Brothers Big Sisters two years ago after their dad died. Joe, an 11-year-old skateboarding nut, hopes to "get to know a person and have a person get to know me." Seven-year-old Zach has more specific qualifications: "He would pull me when I go Rollerblading."

But, like thousands of boys in Oregon, the Brumitts must wait.

Not enough men are stepping up as mentors at a time when boys need them, even as studies show that adult role models boost kids' self-esteem and keep them out of trouble. Mentoring advocates hope to solve the problem in Portland, which has become a hot spot thanks to a national group, dozens of active programs and a full-time mentoring professor at Portland State University.

But many guys don't see themselves as nurturers. Some would rather paint their toenails fuchsia than start an emotional discussion with a child. And a handful get scared by stories of inappropriate relationships.

"Mentoring is kind of a fuzzy term. And it's an intimidating term," says Wade Trimmer of the Belmont Foundation, a new faith-based program for boys without dads at home.

There's clearly a need. Big Brothers Big Sisters alone has a two-year waiting list for boys wanting mentors; girls get placed right away. Many single moms, especially, look for men to spend time with their sons.

Oregon Mentors, a state advocacy group, hopes to expand from 24,000 mentors statewide to 40,000 by 2010. To make that happen, mentoring programs are crafting guy-friendly recruitment pitches and activities.

"Sometimes mentoring is portrayed as sitting down and talking, or kind of 'huggy,' " says Carolyn Becic, director of Oregon Mentors. "We're saying, 'Go play basketball. Go hiking. The relationship will come.' "

The gender gap is stark.

About 70 percent of the 1,500 children waiting for mentors with Big Brothers Big Sisters' Columbia Northwest chapter are boys. Volunteers: 70 percent women. That means girls get a "big" as soon as paperwork is processed and a good fit is found. Boys often wait a couple of years, their names filling a dry-erase board at group headquarters.

Other groups report equally lopsided numbers. At Start Making a Reader Today, where co-ed matches are common, 81 percent of the 7,000 active reading buddies are women. Among Portland Impact mentors, it's two-thirds.

Some groups have so many women volunteers -- and so few girls referred -- they ask teachers and social workers to identify girls who could use help. But moms often call Oregon Mentors about one-on-one attention for their sons. "And there's really nowhere to send them" without a wait, Becic says.

A 1995 study of Big Brothers Big Sisters showed children with matches did better in school, had better family relationships and were less likely to use drugs than those on a wait list.

Karen Brumitt contacted Big Brothers because she wanted a role model for her boys. As a woman, she

says, "I don't know what's going on in their heads." Dustin, who got matched this fall, is thrilled.

Moms think they should be able to raise a daughter alone, says Tom Keller, who studies mentoring as a Portland State University professor. It's easier to ask for help with boys.

Plus, Keller says, boys often act out when they have problems; girls tend to internalize feelings. "Things get noticed with boys," he says.

Keller is considering gender as the focus of a mentoring conference he'll host next summer. Part of the goal: understanding the shortage of men.

About 41 percent of women and 31 percent of men in the Portland area volunteer, according to a study by the Corporation for National & Community Service. Little research has been done on mentors. But, in one survey, men and women who volunteer said they mentored at equal rates -- which contradicts many groups' experience.

As the Belmont Foundation got started this year, Trimmer announced an information session at his church. Not a single man showed. When a woman in the congregation organized a project to help single moms, a few dozen female volunteers turned out.

Trimmer had more success when he changed tactics, personally asking guys he respected to mentor. He also tried to get to the bottom of the turnoff. Some men were wary of the time commitment; others worried about handling an emotional situation. Many associated "mentor" with superhero. "Guys were thinking, 'I have to be perfect if I'm invested in a kid's life. I could screw this kid up.' "

Like many groups, the Belmont Foundation tailors its recruitment pitch to men.

New volunteers, who start this month at Buckman Elementary School, receive a worn baseball glove. It's a symbol, Trimmer says, that mentoring is as easy as, "Want to play catch?"

Oregon Mentors might host focus groups to get inside guys' heads. And the staff targets companies with the message that mentors make good managers.

The Portland-based National Mentoring Center urges groups to have men do the asking. And it makes sense to recruit where guys hang out -- sports events, civic clubs -- says Michael Garringer, who handles the group's communication services.

In the meantime, he encourages groups to match women with young boys. Attention from any caring adult makes a difference, he says.

Many groups, including Big Brothers Big Sisters, are trying a small number of co-ed matches. But CEO Lynn Thompson wants a long-term solution such as men as "sports buddies" for outings to watch and play games.

"Some men wonder, 'What would I do with a child? Would I be good at this?' " Thompson says. "They could picture themselves in this kind of activity."

That approach made a huge difference at Mentor Portland, a Boys & Girls Aid program that pairs volunteers with children who live in foster homes or have parents in prison.

A few years ago, the male contingent dwindled to a half-dozen. But 44 percent of last year's recruits were men.

A new brochure, featuring pictures of boys and their mentors, invites volunteers to "discover the adventure of mentoring" by camping and rock climbing. The staff worked with a consultant, changing everything from the colors to the wording.

Elaine Monterastelli, the recruitment director, also posts online ads for male mentors.

"A lot of men don't mentor," she says, "because they're never asked."