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How can you make a difference and help a child in need? Be a 'Big.'

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Mentors make a difference. Outside researchers make it clear. By wide margins, children who have a mentor are more likely to graduate from high school, less likely to be absent, and more likely to avoid the juvenile justice system, than peers who do not have a mentor in their life. (File photo by Ann Benoit)

By Clifford Kulwin

Every Monday morning, children across New Jersey return to school. Brightly decorated classrooms await, with teachers fresh from a weekend of recharging their own batteries.

Many children walk in the doors well prepared for school: academically, financially and emotionally. They come from stable home environments. Their parents have guided them to understand the importance and excitement of education and ensured they are well rested and well fed. These confident children know their parents will always be the emotional backstop all children need.

Alas, some children are not so lucky. Un- and underemployment leave many families struggling to ensure a safe and nurturing home environment and adequate nutrition. Single parents are often inescapably over extended; they cannot be the presence they want to be in their child's lives,

An innocent child in any kind of need is a tragedy. Perhaps, society's most fundamental question: how do we help them?

There are more "solutions" to this problem than I can count. There is at least something good about all of them. But there is one unquestionably amazing way to help children from challenged homes, and most amazing of all ... it's free.

A decade ago, I met Carlos Lejniaks, the president of [Newark-based Big Brothers/Big Sisters](#). He is extremely likable and when he invited me to join the newly formed advisory council, I agreed, simply because he asked. I confess; it was all personal.

But I will always be grateful to Carlos. If it had not been for this invitation I would never have been exposed to the extraordinary world of mentorship.

Here is what I learned: A typical “Big” spends four to eight hours a month with his or her “Little.” During a typical visit they may share a meal, take in a movie, play basketball, walk along the river, explore a park or engage in one of a hundred other mundane activities.

Except of course that, to a child, nothing done with an adult they know cares about them can possibly be mundane. Bigs are role models, Bigs are emotional support systems, Bigs offer wisdom. Bigs care.

And most important, Bigs make a difference. Outside researchers make it clear. By wide margins, Littles who have a Big are more likely to graduate from high school, less likely to be absent, and more likely to avoid the juvenile justice system, than peers who do not have a Big in their life.

It is hard to believe just four hours a month can make that difference. But it can.

Rocky was a Newark third grader when his mother, Sylvana, called Carlos’ office. Rocky’s father disappeared years ago. Sylvana worked twelve to fourteen hours a day as a cleaner to support Rocky and his younger sister, as well as Sylvana’s own mother. Sylvana wanted to be around more, but she couldn’t. And Rocky had no male role models.

A school counselor suggested Sylvana call Big Brothers/Big Sisters. Rocky was matched with Josh, a young lawyer in a Newark firm. Once a week, Rocky and Josh got together. They might get burgers at Krug, walk the distance of Weequahic Park, or go bowling. Whatever they did they talked. And talked.

Rocky is halfway through sixth grade. He is not a perfect student but his grades are pretty good. His behavior is excellent. He helps his mother around the house and, so far, has done a good job of resisting some of the temptations in his neighborhood. Sylvana has seen a remarkable change over these three years. She is a wonderful mother and Rocky has some outstanding teachers. But Sylvana credits Josh with much of who Rocky has become. And Rocky himself does as well.

I did not know this 10 years ago, but I do now. Bigs make a difference. I volunteer with numerous organizations, but there is none of which I am prouder than Big Brothers/Big Sisters.

Every Monday, kids across New Jersey return to school. For many, we do not know if it begins a week of frustration and anxiety or a week of accomplishment and confidence. What makes that difference could be you.

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