

## **Winning in the beginning! Why wait?**

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*This paper will focus on winning in the beginning. By teaching children leadership success skills and character traits, while improving their vocabulary and reading skills, they can be set up for success in school and life at an early age. By mentoring children in one-to-one and small group settings, using age-appropriate award-winning literature and games, it can change their behavior and thought processes and orient them toward success. The MentorSuccess Program uses four different mentoring strategies and operating models with a focus on Kindergarten through fifth grade students. It uses one-to-one mentoring in a Lunch Buddy setting with carefully scripted creative and higher-order thinking questions. The program also uses small group learning called Library Buddies, where mentors read carefully selected books on leadership skills and engage in questions and answers to small groups of children. The third approach is an after-school program of one-on-one instruction. The fourth strategy involves an in-class small group mentoring model emphasizing leadership success skills activities. This presentation describes the program's results with 64 students in one-on-one and small group settings and is based on proven research-based mentoring approaches. It will demonstrate to participants how these unique concepts can be used to boost children's success and learning at an early age.*

## **Winning in the beginning! Why wait?**

To understand the heart of the program it would be helpful to share some actual observations about students the program was privileged to work with. The names are changed but the results are real.

Two of the students mentored this past year could be described as very talented with both reading over three years above grade level. The boys were selected for the program by school leadership because they experienced very painful life events. Anthony (age 11) was an adopted child who came out of a very violent foster home. His new home proved to be very loving and encouraged him to make great strides in academic areas although he still struggled with building relationships and trusting other people. Things turned challenging when his loving adoptive father was diagnosed with ALS.

Eddie (age 9), also way above grade level and an extremely creative young man, became quite disruptive in class and appeared to have attention deficit disorder. Upon medical examination specialists determined he had suffered numerous concussions within the last year due to falls and sports injuries, not abuse. In addition, his father abandoned Eddie and his mother as school began and had been absent for over four months when Eddie entered the program.

Both boys would normally not qualify for a mentoring program for at-risk students but because of the nature of our program, being foundation funded and not restricted by government guidelines, they entered the program in September and by school year end, showed tremendous social-emotional improvement based on parental, mentor, and teacher observations and their own assessment. They began paying attention in class, became more self-confident, and built trusting relationships with their mentors and with others. As an unintended consequence of the program the boys became best friends, which was a first for both boys.

A third student, McKenna, a very boisterous first grader, could be described as disruptive in class, had a hard time making friends, but academically successful, reading at over three grade levels beyond her grade. By the end of the mentoring program she remained an enthusiastic student but now she knew how to work with others, make friends, and take turns when engaged in games.

What all three of these students have in common, besides being academically advanced, is that they had socio-emotional challenges keeping them from being successful at school. Too often these students would be labelled with behavior problems and despite their high intelligence, would soon be experiencing rejection and failure in the school setting. The MentorSuccess program is designed to reach students having such academic challenges. The focus is on providing structured, customized, and focused mentoring to help children develop leadership success skills and character traits. While the program is not primarily a reading program or academically oriented it is literature based and involves a lot of reading and interaction between students and mentors. Preliminary research indicates it has tremendous impact on improving student's academic performance beyond their baseline measures.

There is a tremendous need for a mentoring program that is concerned with developing a student's social emotional learning. In 2007, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation funded a long-term study in the state of Washington to examine the effectiveness of mentoring programs for youth with different profiles of risk—for example, academic struggles, behavior

problems, or mental health concerns. After six years of involvement in mentoring, the strongest program benefit, and most consistent across risk groups, was a reduction in depressive symptoms—particularly noteworthy since almost one-in-four youth involved in the study had reported worrisome levels at baseline. Findings also suggested gains in social acceptance, academic attitudes, and grades. One primary finding of the study for practitioners and funders suggests placing a stronger emphasis on the mental health needs of youth and the benefits that mentoring can provide in this area including suicidal behavior, academic and social difficulties, and increased risk for substance abuse and teen pregnancy (Herera, Dubois, & Grossman, 2013).

One of the primary social-emotional goals of the program is helping students develop their level of empathy for other people. Our program defines empathy as the ability to understand and share the feelings of others. As indicated from longitudinal studies on students entering college conducted from 1979 through 2009 there is a rising concern about the decrease in empathy and the resulting rise of narcissism among American students. There are several possible causes for this social problem (Konrath, O’Brien, & Hsing, 2010).

One possibility is that the rise in screen time and a resultant decline in reading could be a partial cause of this decrease in levels of empathy. Reading seems to play a role in developing empathy. The Dutch scholar Jemeljan Hakemulder (2000) reviewed dozens of scientific studies and concluded they indicate that reading fiction has positive effects on the reader’s more development and sense of empathy (Hakemulder, 2000). Unfortunately, students appear across the board to be doing less reading. Another challenge to halting the decline in empathy is that it appears people do not take the time to read stories to children any more. Instead screen time is growing to over eight hours a day for American’s aged 16-45 and even more for younger children (Brown, 2014). This screen time usage has huge impact on ability to read non-verbal emotion cues which are crucial to developing relationship skills (Uhls, Michikayan, Morris, Garcia, Small, Zigarou, & Greenfield, 2014). It used to be just television, then video games, but now it is electronic gadgets of all sorts. It also appears that we are losing the importance of story sharing and telling that seems to be crucial to good social development of all children. In Jonathan Gotschall’s book, *The Story Telling Animal*, he writes this about the similarities of stories across all cultures:

Why do stories cluster around a few big themes, and why do they hew so closely to problem structure? Why are stories this way instead of all the other ways they could be? I think that problem structure reveals a major function of storytelling. It suggests that the human mind was shaped for story, so that it could be shaped by the story (Gotschall, 2012, p. 56).

Other people who have studied humans in diverse settings across the world also find storytelling and sharing to be not only a universal human trait, but also a key activity where it seems people go to practice and learn the key skills of human social life such as building relationships and expressing empathy (Boyd, 2009). For example, researchers at Princeton University scanned the brains of storytellers and listeners and found there was neural coupling taking place.

The brains of the story teller and listener light up not just in areas controlling speech and language but also, more significantly, in areas known to be involved in processing social information crucial for successful communication, including the capacity to understand the beliefs, desires, and goals of others (Stephens, Silbert, & Hasson, 2010).

Polly Wiessner, in her work on pre-literate people, found that 81% of the talk around campfires had to do with storytelling concerning values, relationships, and beliefs, while daily interaction was almost all gossip or economic based discussion, with only 6% storytelling. Brain scanning on the pre-literate participants seemed to indicate that firelight caused their brains to switch to visionary functions. She called her study “*The Embers of Society*,” as she believes storytelling plays a key part in making us into humans that can empathize and relate with each other (Wiessner, 2014).

Research conducted in 2013 by the American Academy of Pediatrics found that eight-to-ten-year-old children, on average, spend eight hours a day with various digital media while teenagers spend 11 hours in front of screens. In addition, the study found that one-in-three young children are using tablets or smartphones before they can talk. The researchers in the longitudinal Konrath study mentioned earlier, think the over-emphasis on social networking is partially to blame for the decline in empathy. They say this is because the ability to sense the feelings and thoughts of others is learned based on seeing their faces, watching their body language and hearing their voices, none of which are often available when using social media.

In his article in *Scientific American*, Ferris Jabr (2013) remarks that as society continues to grow and engage technology, it appears to initiate the beginning of neglect in reading books and magazines. When using electronic devices, like Notebooks and iPads, the brain does not function at the same levels or in the same ways as when reading hard text from books or when engaging in the activity of writing. Part of the problem is that screens do not have the defined pages and completeness that books do, and so the brain does not make the visual connections of the size of the book when using an electronic format. In addition, other studies he describes have shown that when using electronic devices for reading and information, it appears

that instead of reading for knowledge the reader tends to scan or just glance over the material. The result is comprehension decreases and the reader has trouble remembering what they are reading and the content of that reading (Jabr, 2013).

As an answer to these issues listed above, MentorSuccess is trying to build a love of reading and story-telling within students. This is done by encouraging mentors to read with the children, not to them, providing carefully designed open-ended creative and critical thinking questions that encourage the children to engage with the book and interact with the mentor. These books are also selected for key character traits and leadership success skills that are shared with students.

Another area the program has chosen to focus on is encouraging creative thinking in children. It is an area of concern because it also appears that the creativity levels of children in America are dropping. Researchers using the Torrance Test of Creative Thinking have noted that while IQ scores have risen gradually since 1990, creative thinking scores have significantly decreased over the 20-year study (Kim, 2011). Of special interest to our program is that the decrease is most significant for the kindergarten through third grade. They attribute the drop to several issues. It appears adults are listening less to children, standardized testing is shifting school's emphasis to drills and rote learning and away from critical thinking and creative efforts, and there is less time and resources spent on the arts (Kim, 2011). The researchers call this the creativity crisis.

Creativity is an activity that is not usually conducive to large group settings by its very nature but seems to thrive in mentoring and small collaborative groups. It is defined as the activity of producing something original and useful. A mentor can greatly assist by collaborating and providing guidance during deliberate practice, or mental training, helping the structure and the function of the brain change in response to the one-on-one training and guidance (Ericsson & Pool, 2016). The noted anthropologist Augustin Fuentes (2017) refers to this as collaborative creativity and writes:

...Humans acquired a distinctive set of neurological, physiological, and social skills that enabled us, starting from the earliest days, to work together and think together to purposely cooperate. Our genes tell only one aspect of how we became creative at increasing levels of complexity (Fuentes, 2017, p. 5).

Only after such extensive and intensive collaboration and adaptability can the brain engage in creative flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997). Creativity is extremely valuable to us as a society as it enriches us culturally and economically. In *How Google Works* (Schmidt & Rosenberg, 2014) the authors point out that the only way to succeed in business in the twenty-first century is to continually create great products and 'the only way to do that is to attract smart creatives who are trying to do something different' (Schmidt & Rosenberg, 2014, p. xv).

The MentorSuccess program has found that through mentor encouragement, carefully selected highly creative materials, and interaction with young children using open-ended questions, that mentors can stimulate more creative thinking. So far this has only been documented by teacher and mentor observations, with the student's enthusiastic agreement.

Based on the research cited above, it appears children can best develop relationship skills by talking and reading with engaged adults, and not spending hours on end interacting with a screen. The MentorSuccess program is a way to counteract these negative cultural trends that have encouraged the rise in narcissism and the decline in empathy and creativity among young children. How does the program work? It has three distinguishing components.

- The program is structured. The structure in the program provides easy-to-follow instructions for mentors. The mentors have carefully scripted directions to help them guide student activity and learning assignments. The unique three pocket student folders have step-by-step critical thinking and creative thinking questions for the mentor to use with the student and simple surveys to find out areas of student interest and strengths. This provides the structure that students and mentors need to be successful.
- Each student folder is customized to the individual interests and strengths of the student. The award-winning children's literature is carefully analyzed and is appropriate to the student's age, reading level, and especially to their self-identified interest areas. The literature is also customized to the character traits and leadership success skills they need to develop. Games are also used to emphasize key skills such as planning, team building, goal setting, and collaboration.
- The mentoring experience is focused on the student's learning needs, at the student's preferred pace, adjusted to their learning style, and focused on a productive interaction between the student and the mentor.

It is a program emphasis that mentors read with the student, not to them. The program uses award-winning literature chosen to be both highly engaging and creative—and whether in one-to-one or small group settings, mentors are trained to ask open-ended, scripted, creative thinking and critical thinking questions to get the students to interact with them and the literature. In addition, a defined list of character traits and leadership success skills is included that mentors discuss and reinforce with the students. Carefully selected games that emphasize collaboration and team effort are also very useful in

teaching students how to interact with others.

What are the results of the MentorSuccess program? This was the first full year (2017-2018) of running the MentorSuccess program at the Cornerstone Christian Academy (CCA) in Vancouver, Washington. It involved 20 students and 10 mentors in the one-on-one mentoring Lunch Buddy program and another 44 students in the small group Library Buddy's program. Evaluation forms were designed looking at critical social-emotional learning factors. The feedback from the students, teachers, and principal proved overwhelmingly positive. Every student saw improvement in their self-image, confidence, ability to build friendships, schoolwork, and behavior. The results proved so positive that the His Heart Foundation has chosen to fund the program in two more public schools in Woodland and Vancouver, Washington, for the 2018-2019 school year and continue the CCA program next year. Close to thirty mentors are already signed up in the new schools and they will be trained in August and September.

Based on the preliminary results from the program it is believed the answer to the opening question is that more resources need to be put into programs that help children win in the beginning. There is no reason to wait!

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