



## Volunteering in an age of suspicion

**Question of the Week:** Monday, March 30, 2009 United Feature Syndicate

*I am out of work and want to volunteer as a mentor at the local high school. When I contacted the principal with a summary of my business skills, she said they'd call if they had a need but she didn't sound encouraging. My wife says schools worry about child safety and lawsuits. I see these kids just "hanging out," or worse, and really want to help. Any suggestions?*

### **Answer:**

When the research is so clear on the benefits of mentors in young people's lives, and the need is so great, it's too bad that a few nationally publicized cases of abuse have put a "big chill" on many youth-mentoring programs. "Despite clear evidence of the positive effects, some schools and youth organizations fear legal responsibility for misconduct and have instituted policies that erode the very reasons mentoring works in the first place," says Stephen Wallace, CEO of SADD (Students Against Destructive Decisions, [sadd.org](http://sadd.org)).

The National Education Association (NEA) deems as inappropriate behavior "taking students to lunch, outside social activities or receiving and writing personal notes." And yet, those behaviors can build effectiveness. When a friend and I recently served as mentors in a high school program, we communicated by e-mail with students, drove them to events and got them lunch. After all, they were teenagers, requiring "fuel" for maximum performance.

While schools should be cautious, they shouldn't toss the baby out with the bathwater. The worst stories get exaggerated media attention, yet the world may not be quite so dangerous after all, says Wallace. "Federal statistics do not support the notion that our children are facing increasing risk of harm. Neither does data from the Crimes Against Children Research Center at the University of New Hampshire showing that sexual and physical abuse cases nationwide continue to decline.

How can you become an effective mentor?

-- Find an organization that can use your skills. For example, Junior Achievement educates students about entrepreneurship and financial literacy. It trains its mentors, many of who come from the business community. FIRST Robotics inspires young people to be science

and technology leaders teaching them teamwork and organizational skills. Debate teams and civic clubs often seek local mentors. Ask what organizations are in your high school.

-- Find a specific need and fill it. The principal may not be the best place to start. For example, a Chicago writer helps students navigate the college admissions process in a high school with a grateful overwhelmed guidance counselor. David Caplan, a retired international businessman, offered ideas about how he could help City Year New York grow, says City Year executive director Itai Dinour. "If he hadn't come with that vision, we might not have known how to use his deep experience, contacts and wisdom."

-- Be willing to undergo screening and background checks. Most national organizations have streamlined systems for vetting volunteers. For example, after completing an online application for Big Brothers Big Sisters, a staffer contracts the applicant, requests references and sets up an in-person interview and background check.

-- Join a local organization with established programs. Local service organizations such as Rotary or Lion's Club often have strong relationships with schools.

-- Consider informal mentoring. "A trusted mentor can help teens of friends, neighbors and extended family navigate the teen years," says Wallace. "You may want to teach business skills, but what many teens need most is a good listener who cares about them, respects them and offers sound advice."

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