

**2<sup>nd</sup> Regional Conference on Tutoring & Mentoring**  
**Perth, Western Australia**  
**Sept 30<sup>th</sup> – Oct 2, 1999**

***One<sub>2</sub>One Projects***  
***The YWCA of Sydney's Big Sister/Big Brother Programme***

**by**

**Shauna McIntyre**  
**Big Sister/Big Brother Case Manager**  
**YWCA Sydney**

## **Introduction**

The YWCA of Sydney is a charitable organisation which promotes the care, welfare and self-esteem of children, adolescents and women of all age groups. The YWCA sees itself as not only a membership movement or a community service agency, but as an action-oriented service provider, which works for change. Included in the many programmes the YWCA operates is the Big Sister/Big Brother Programme.

The Big Sister/Big Brother Programme is a well established, professionally-run mentor programme that provides 'at risk' young people with a structured and supported, one-to-one friendship with a caring adult. The Programme aims to promote positive youth development and prevent youth problems from escalating.

Over the last 20 years the Big Sister/Big Brother Programme has worked with hundreds of children and young people, matching them with adult mentors. In the last five years, the Programme has developed the highest standards in screening volunteers, monitoring and supporting matches. The young people are referred for a variety of reasons, but they all require adult friendship and support in their lives. Quite a number have been involved with the juvenile justice system or are clearly heading for it when they join our Programme.

## **Programme Outcomes**

Our immediate objectives are to assist the young people on the Programme to:

- Develop a stable, trusting and ongoing friendship with an adult.
- Cope more effectively in their day-to-day lives and to develop their potential at home, school and in the community.
- Explore new opportunities for social and recreational activities, to help lessen their isolation.
- Reduce the risk of them harming themselves or others.
- Access opportunities for learning new skills and increasing self-esteem and worth through participation in challenging recreational activities.
- Learn more responsible and effective behaviour which will help them deal with future difficulties.
- Increase their the social network/support with peers, through bi-monthly group outings.

We take a preventative approach and have had considerable success in producing long-term, lasting solutions and breaking the cycle of disadvantage. Although the concept of formal mentoring programmes like ours is a fairly new idea in Australia, it has a long and distinguished history in the USA and Canada.

The Big Brothers-Big Sisters of USA has been running for over 90 years and has over 70 000 dedicated volunteers. This has had a hugely positive impact on the social fabric of countless USA communities. Recently the Big Brothers-Big Sisters of USA sponsored independent private research into their programmes, and made some startling findings. The research reported in their paper *Making a Difference*, found that having a Big Brother or Big Sister for a single year:

- reduced first-time drug use by 46%
- lowered school absenteeism by 52%
- cut violent behaviour by 33%.

Additionally, it has also been found a significant increase in self-esteem is experienced by the young person.

### **Who are our Mentors?**

Our Big Sisters and Brothers are a dedicated group of volunteers who agree to act as a mentor and friend to a young person in need. The majority of our mentors are aged 25 - 35, employed, and have attained a high degree of success in both their personal and professional life. Each one is put through a rigorous screening process that takes around four months. They then attend a weekend training programme before they are matched with a suitable young person.

### **The role of the Mentor**

The Mentor is to be a positive role model and friend to the young person. They do not take on a parental or authoritarian role with the child. Their role is more to guide, listen, care, and model consistent positive behaviour. Many Big Sisters and Brothers also assist with school work, discuss issues and problems as they arise, and encourage participation in sporting, cultural and artistic activities.

Each Mentor agrees to spend between two and four hours each week with their Little Sister or Brother, normally at the weekend. We encourage the 'match' to choose a cheap or free activity to do together each week eg the beach, bushwalks, visits to museums/galleries, watching sporting activities, painting etc. Clearly the particular activity depends on the age and interest of each child/young person.

### **Gender/cultural issues**

Over 50% of our young people referred come from non-English-speaking background (NESB) or Aboriginal families, and participating mentors are from a range of backgrounds including South Pacific Islanders, Middle Eastern, Japanese, and South East Asian. Many of our matches are cross-cultural, and have been successful on the basis of the care taken in finding mentors whose values, skills and qualities are beneficial in developing positive friendships with a young person.

Ninety percent of referrals are boys, but boys represent only 40% of performing matches due to the difficulty in recruiting suitable men as mentors. All girls have Big Sisters as their mentors, but only a quarter of boys are cross matched (with a Big Sister). The issue of recruiting appropriate men is an ongoing one and the Programme is constantly challenged to find new and creative ways of encouraging men's participation in this area of volunteering.

### **Identification of need**

In operating the core BS/BB Programme the needs of young people drifting from welfare to juvenile justice systems were identified and we believed a good mentoring friendship could address these needs. This would require a project which was adequately resourced, had professional mentoring standards, and had adequate time to develop the project and observe outcomes.

### **The One<sub>2</sub>One Projects: A new initiative**

The BS/BB Programme has received three-year funding from the New South Wales' Attorney General's Department and the Department of Juvenile Justice to run two innovative mentoring projects, based in Parramatta and the Coffs Harbour/Clarence area. The Projects will match young people who have been diverted from the court system through the Young Offenders Act, 1997.

The pilot projects will target children and young people who are deemed to be at a high risk of drifting further into the Juvenile Justice system. The One<sub>2</sub>One Projects will target many of the main factors which cause young people to initiate criminal activity.

The following factors have been identified as being critical in the initiation and maintenance of juvenile crime:

- social isolation
- family stress and breakdown
- boredom and lack of excitement
- lack of positive role models (especially serious for boys growing up in mother-headed families)
- low self esteem

- peer pressure
- need for quality attention
- emotional, physical and sexual abuse
- neglect
- negative school experiences
- anger and depression, and
- lack of services and facilities.

The One<sub>2</sub>One Projects aim to address these factors and reduce the risk of a further drift into crime by providing young people with a positive adult role model/mentor who provides consistent friendship. It is the nature of friendships the Programme promotes that is unique in this mentoring project.

We see the challenge of this new project to be creating a model that is able to match up to 35 young people, who have been either cautioned or referred to a Youth Justice Conference, with a suitable mentor, while maintaining the highest programme standards. It is not difficult to match young people with a mentor. The challenge is matching young people with a *suitable* mentor in a way that allows the young person's needs to be met and provides adequate support for the volunteer to allow the friendship to flourish. The paper *Making Sense of Mentoring*, by the Corporation For National Service, discussed the issue of the quality of the matches on a mentoring programme:

“Programmes have learned to exercise greater care in their recruitment tactics. This director shifted away from screening people in, to 'screening them out' - letting them know about the harder realities of mentoring from the start so that only those individuals genuinely committed would become involved. In retrospect he concludes: We lost some people - the total number of mentors we could claim in the programme went down - but the percentage actually performing went up.”

The objective therefore is to have performing matches that are sustainable over time.

We see an integral part of producing a working model, with performing matches, as ensuring that adequate family support is available. Our experience in running our programme has demonstrated that one of the risks to the 'match' is parental issues, and therefore we cannot separate the child's issues from the parents'. This is backed up by research that demonstrates that providing support and training to parents of delinquent and at-risk pre-adolescents works in preventing crime. (*Preventing Crime: What works, What Doesn't, What's Promising*, Jeremy Travis, Director, National Institute of Justice)

Our model takes a long-term approach, works to bring about lasting change, doesn't work just to prevent juvenile crime but helps to empower the young people who can then make a positive contribution, and is cost effective.

### **The Models**

Each of the two projects will be staffed by two, full-time caseworkers and a part-time family support worker. The management will be provided by the Big Sister/Big Brother Programme. Advisory groups will be formed for the projects in both areas, to ensure that appropriate professional expertise and local factors and concerns are available to the programmes.

#### *Coffs/Clarence Model*

Working in partnership with local community organisations that have local knowledge, expertise and broad representation of stakeholders -- including non-government agencies, government departments, business and residents -- is a priority for the Programme. BS/BB brings to the partnership the experience and expertise in running a mentoring programme. Within a community-development framework, we see our role as working closely with local people to establish the project; train, resource and support workers; introduce mentoring standards and systems; monitor the ongoing progress of the friendships and the project, and over time letting go, and handing over responsibility for the project to the local community organisation.

A challenge in establishing the project in this area is that the Police Service Local Area Command covers a geographical spread that the local communities would normally consider as two, fairly-separate and different areas, centred respectively around Coffs Harbour and Grafton.

#### *Parramatta Model*

The YWCA maintains an office in the Parramatta area, which means that the Big Sister/Big Brother Programme can manage the project and co-ordinate local services in this area more easily than in Coffs Harbour/Clarence. Therefore, less formal partnerships have been developed with a network of community organisations, government agencies, local business and residents in the Parramatta area. An Advisory Committee will be established with representatives from these groups. This is to ensure that the Big Sister/Big Brother Programme does not work in isolation from the rest of the community and works to ensure that young people and families are reconnected with local community supports.

## **Standards**

Standards provide the framework for service delivery and serve to better protect the children and young people, and safeguard the integrity of the match process. The standards define the purpose to be achieved and the quality of service desired.

New Programme Standards have been written against which to evaluate the performance of the projects. Standards cover areas such as screening, supporting, reviewing and maintaining healthy match relationships. These standards, based on the Big Brothers/Big Sisters of America, are developed:

“... in order to define the minimum level of acceptable service ... and ... it is our belief that any agency meeting these minimum practice requirements will be providing quality service to its clientele... By providing service in compliance with these standards we can better protect the children we serve and safeguard the integrity of the match process.”

(Big Brothers/Big Sisters of America Standards and Required Procedures for one-to-one service, 1994)

Our experience demonstrates that the biggest drop-off rate of volunteers will be between the initial enquiry and first interview, because of our practice of 'screening out' rather than 'screening in'. While the objective will be to achieve the target of 35 matches, it is important for us to be clear that the safety of the young people or the integrity of the Programme will not be compromised in the process.

## **Mentors/Volunteers**

### *Recruitment*

A recruitment strategy will be developed in consultation with local community organisations, government departments, and local businesses to ensure its appropriateness and relevance to local conditions. The plan will draw on the successful recruitment strategies of the current BS/BB programme and will, where appropriate, target culturally-appropriate mentors based on the backgrounds of the young people referred.

## *Screening*

The YWCA's Big Sister/Big Brother Programme takes its Duty of Care extremely seriously. We pride ourselves on having the highest standards of volunteer screening. The children and young people we deal with are particularly vulnerable, which makes it vital for us to ensure that the adults they come into contact with can be trusted and will have a positive influence on their well being.

Although we believe that our screening process is of the highest standard, no organisation can say with absolute certainty that no undesirable person will ever infiltrate its programmes, so it is equally important to have adequate processes and procedures to deal with this eventuality. The Big Sister/Big Brother Programme works with the parent/guardian to supervise each match, to ensure that a healthy, positive relationship is developing. If we have concerns we will always act quickly and appropriately in the best interests of the young person.

Our screening process has been developed over a number of years and is largely modelled on the successful Big Brothers-Big Sisters of America screening model. Additionally, we monitor the latest trends in screening both nationally and internationally. On average only around one in 10 prospective volunteers becomes a mentor on our programme. Implementing a rigorous screening process ensures that we have a highly motivated, skilled and caring group of people to match with the young people referred to us.

Our screening process involves:

- short initial telephone interview
- information pack sent to the enquirer
- face to face interview of 60-90 minutes
- application form completed
- four written references received and checks conducted
- police security check
- MMPI (Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory) psychological profile conducted and analysed
- second interview of 90-120 minutes
- weekend training course, including overnight stay
- home visit and final decision by the team.

This process normally takes around four months to complete which means we have an opportunity to assess a person's suitability over an extended period.

Information gained through the screening process is assessed against selection criteria which include:

- good communication skills
- appropriate motivations
- values which reflect BS/BB Programme philosophies

- stability in significant areas of the applicant's life (family background, relationships, work, home etc)
- commitment
- adequate social networks
- ability to meet own personal and sexual needs in a mature adult way, and
- personal autonomy.

The strengths and weaknesses of each applicant are taken on balance, and professional judgements are used in making a final selection.

### *Training*

It is vital to the success of the match that the volunteer receives adequate training. We aim to ensure that our volunteers are highly skilled and motivated and have access to appropriate training and information. To achieve the annual target of 35 matches, 40 mentors would be trained over 3-4 weekends. This allows for a drop out rate of up to five mentors.

We provide both pre-match training (Learning & Development Programme) and ongoing post-match training (Skills Development Programme). The Learning & Development Programme involves a weekend training course for volunteers who have made it through our extensive screening process. Each Mentor has to attend a weekend training session before they are matched. This training session is conducted outside Sydney so it involves an overnight stay. The training weekend has seven sessions and includes topics such as: motivations and role of Mentors; duty of care and confidentiality; volunteer rights and responsibilities; communicating with young people; self-esteem; testing/setting limits; drugs/alcohol; family issues; abuse/neglect of young people; programme guidelines; financial issues; and the role of DCS and Juvenile Justice.

We also invite a current Big Sister/Big Brother and their 'Little' to come and talk to the group about their experience on the Programme.

### *Skills Development Programme*

As part of our monthly volunteer support meetings, every quarter we run a Skills Development Workshop for our Mentors. These are either run by our staff or by an outside speaker invited to give a talk on a relevant topic. We have run workshops on legal issues, the effects of witnessing domestic violence on children, the effect of parental substance abuse on a child's development, and alcohol and substance abuse by young people. These workshops are well attended and allow the Mentors to have access to information that will help them to form a positive relationship with their 'Little', and to cope with associated issues.

## **Matching Process**

The matching process begins with a meeting between the Caseworker, parent/guardian, young person and mentor.

### *Match Agreement*

The Match Agreement, which provides the guidelines, roles and responsibilities for each match, is read out and agreed to by all parties, by the signing of a formal agreement. Each participant is given 24 hours to decide whether they wish to proceed with the match, after which time, if all are in agreement, the match formally begins.

### *Length of Match*

The volunteer initially agrees to see the young person for a 12-month period. We understand that this is a big commitment for a volunteer to make, and sometimes means that a potential mentor decides against volunteering, but from our experience we feel it is vital for the 'match' to set up this expectation because:

- it is important that the young person knows that the Mentor is going to be around for a significant length of time
- that the volunteers understand that we expect them to meet their commitment to see their 'match' for the agreed 12-month period, even if it's difficult.

It is important to note that the vast majority of 'matches' go on for much longer than the initial 12-month period, with the average 'match' lasting over two and a half years, and some running for as long as seven years. Again our aim is to support ongoing, performing matches.

## **Supervising a Match**

### *Formal Match Reviews*

Volunteer supervision includes:

- weekly contact between Case Manager and both family and volunteer for the first 6-8 weeks
- a formal three-month review conducted with both parent/child and volunteer, and
- a formal Annual Review.

Once the volunteer is matched with a Little Sister/Little Brother they are expected to keep in weekly contact for the first 6-8 weeks, which then drops down to fortnightly if the friendship is going well. Case notes are kept whenever there is contact with the volunteer and the family and problems/issues are addressed as soon as they arise.

### *Volunteer Support Meetings*

Additionally the Programme holds monthly Volunteer Support meetings, which gives the Mentors the opportunity to discuss issues/problems, share ideas about activities and generally to receive support from each other and Programme workers. Attendance at these meetings is compulsory for the first four months of each 'match', then strongly encouraged.

### *Group Activities*

An important aspect of our model is the group activities. We have found that as well as having their own mentor it is extremely important for the young people to feel that they belong to a programme.

### *What happens if there are problems in the Match?*

It is normal for most matches on the Programme to experience some 'teething problems' early in their relationship. Normally these can be worked out by the child, parent and Mentor, with the support and assistance of the Case Manager. It does sometimes happen that for some reason the 'match' simply does not work. In these instances it is the responsibility of the Case Worker to intervene and close the 'match', if appropriate. We will not allow an unhealthy relationship to continue, risking the emotional well being of the child/young person.

### **Ethical issues raised by the project**

The One<sub>2</sub>One Projects raise a number of ethical issues which we plan to address in the following ways:

- Participation remains voluntary for young people

Assessment processes initially by Police Youth Liaison Officers, or other police officers, and Youth Conference Administrators, and then by project workers will guarantee that young people are able to choose to participate or not. All project information will reinforce this right.

- Involvement in project not to be written into conference outcome plan

To guarantee the freedom and safety of the young person's involvement in the project their participation must not be written into the outcome plan arising from the Youth Justice Conference. If there is a difficulty in the match, which requires the match to be closed, the young person must not be disadvantaged by a failure to complete their outcome plan. A mentoring relationship could be discussed at Conference, but is to be kept separate from the outcome plan.

- Requirements of funding body don't compromise the quality and integrity of the project and the needs and safety of the young person  
The project will not compromise standards nor put at risk the safety of the young person to reach the target of 35 matches. While we are confident that our model is capable of creating and supporting 35 matches, we will not match young people if suitable mentors are not available.
- Confidentiality of volunteers  
All results of the mentors screening process including interviews, references and tests remain confidential and are used for the sole purpose of assessing applicants' suitability for the Project.
- Payment for activities  
Volunteers are not expected to pay for the costs of the young person with whom they are matched. It is understood by mentors that activities are to be inexpensive, or of no cost. Young people/families are responsible for paying their own costs and are made aware of this through programme information and the match agreement.
- Confidentiality of young person/families  
Every care is taken to ensure that information regarding the young people and their families remains confidential. The mentor relationship is a confidential one and information will generally not be disclosed, except in circumstances where the interests of the young person, or a legal obligation, require it.
- Role of volunteer/mentor  
The role of the volunteer/mentor is that of a friend and not an extension of the Juvenile Justice system. Protocols will be put in place to make clear to all participants that these roles are to be kept separate and distinct.
- Adequate support/training for volunteers  
Ongoing support and training for mentors is a priority for the project and is reflected in the model and funding. We expect that the successful mentors may be very challenged by the young people accessing this mentoring project, so the provision of ongoing one-on-one support as well as monthly volunteer support meetings and skills development training is essential.
- Referrals from cautioning or conferencing  
We have learnt that the young people who attend conferencing generally have higher support needs than those receiving a caution. The young people referred to conferences are generally older (14 -16 years), and have a higher representation of those who are estranged from their families. These factors combined make the task and success of mentoring much more difficult.

From our own experience with very disadvantaged young people, we have learnt that some needs are outside the capacities of a mentoring relationship to support, in which case we refer on to more appropriate services. For this project, we would need to have the professional autonomy to decline referrals if our professional assessment indicated that the needs of a young person are too great for a volunteer mentor to support and address. We also need to be in a position where that assessment decision is respected and supported by the other stakeholders. If this becomes an issue, we need to have a process where it can be addressed with the Attorney General's Department.

### **Links with local communities**

The Big Sister/Big Brother Programme is committed to working co-operatively with local agencies and workers, who have the expertise in local needs of young offenders and their families. With our extensive mentoring experience, linked with local knowledge, resources and skills, we believe we have a model that will be successful in addressing the needs of these young people at risk. The mentoring relationships will be seen as the central support within a larger network of support into which we would link young people and their families.

### **Sharing our Experiences**

The Big Sister/Big Brother Programme would be happy to work with and share resources/experiences with any other groups interested in setting up a similar programme, and would encourage people to phone us to discuss their ideas and plans. This is an exciting new initiative for the Big Sister/Big Brother Programme forging new ground in the area of Juvenile Justice in NSW.

**Shauna McIntyre:** Over the last 13 years Shauna McIntyre has gathered a wealth of experience from her work in Child and Family Welfare as well as the Community. Her roles included child sexual assault counsellor, community trainer for management committees and disability workers, social worker with adolescent boys and their families as well as coordinator of the Big Sister / Big Brother Programme. Shauna is interested in mentoring as a strategy for working with disadvantaged and at-risk young people, and the power of ordinary friendship to make an 'extraordinary' difference in young people's lives. She is currently working on a three-year pilot mentoring project for young offenders.

Contact details: YWCA of Sydney, 5-11 Wentworth Avenue,  
SYDNEY NEW SOUTH WALES 2010

Tel +61 2 9285 6250 Fax +61 2 9283 2485

email [ywca-syd@zip.com.au](mailto:ywca-syd@zip.com.au)