Mentoring: A Case Study in the Importance of Showing Up

Make a habit of two things—to help, or at least to do no harm. – Hippocrates

Excerpt from <u>Stand by Me: The Risks and Rewards of Mentoring Today's Youth</u>
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Thirteen-year-old Cameron Nichols was the envy of his neighborhood when his mentor, Rick, picked him up at his home for their first outing. Cameron had already bragged to his younger brother and neighbors that his mentor was a firefighter, but when Rick pulled up to his apartment building in a fire truck, Cameron was floored. He beamed as he waved goodbye to the small crowd of neighbors who had gathered on the sidewalk. But behind his exuberant smile, Lillian Nichols sensed her son's anxiety. As the truck turned the corner on that warm autumn day, Lillian's eyes filled with tears. "Lord," she prayed to herself, "please let this work out for Cameron."

Cameron needed a break as far as relationships were concerned. Although it had been nine years since his biological father, a police officer, had moved out, Cameron still felt the sting of loss. "Cameron was very close to Ed [his father] and, in some ways, still is. He would do just about anything to get Ed's attention, and was so happy when they were together...But Ed was an alcoholic, so temper and mood swings always clouded his moments of kindness. I couldn't deal with it anymore...but try explaining this to a first grade boy."

Visitation was arranged, and every other weekend Cameron stayed with his paternal grandmother and saw his father. After only a few months, however, his father was often late or absent from the visit. Weekends began to come and go with no trace of Ed. Sometimes Cameron would not hear from his father for two to three months at a time. According to his mother, Cameron's painful weekends of waiting and anticipation seemed to drain him of energy for school or friendships. He put up intense struggles each morning, and his teachers reported that he seemed to suffer through days in a state of loneliness and distraction.

Desperate to help her son, Lillian sought out a mentoring program at Cameron's middle school. Cameron was assigned to Rick, a kind and respectable man who took an immediate interest in the boy. "Cameron was definitely a happier child when he was meeting with Rick," recalls Lillian, "and he didn't complain about going to school. On the days he saw Rick he'd be really excited."

Rick seemed to relish the mentoring role as well, taking Cameron to the fire station and high school baseball games, throwing passes with him, and making plans for summer outings. But by late spring, after nearly seven months of consistently meeting for an hour or more each week, difficulties began to overwhelm Rick. His wife's mother developed a serious illness, and he was given additional responsibilities at work. His relationship with Cameron was one of the first casualties of these new stresses.

"I wasn't aware that Rick wasn't showing up, at least not at first," said Lillian. "I would ask Cameron if he had seen Rick and he wouldn't respond. His not wanting to tell me is the same thing with his dad. Sometimes his dad will see him and sometimes he just doesn't bother. But Cameron is always willing to make excuses for him. I see that same protecting with Rick."

As the calls became less frequent, Cameron began to show more serious signs of distress. Lillian recalls, "There were problems in school. I was getting reports from his teachers that he would spend a whole lot of time staring out the window. And he wouldn't study at home either; he was just glued to the window. He has become more irritable, more inward. He shuts himself in his bedroom and hates to go to school."

When the coordinator of the mentoring program tried to intervene, Rick promised to be more consistent and resisted her suggestions to formally terminate the relationship. But he could no longer sustain steady contact. Ignoring the signs, Cameron continued to hold out hope. As the school year ended, he began to anticipate his summer plans. "Rick had made all sorts of promises to Cameron," reported Lillian, "water-skiing, cookouts, going fishing on some lake--then he didn't show up or call or anything...The low point, I think, was his thirteenth birthday. Rick called Cameron and asked him what he wanted. He said that he would come to his party. Cameron delayed the party waiting for Rick, who never did show up...Cameron was crushed. I think that he began to expect less of Rick after that...I asked him yesterday if he had seen Rick and he said no. Then, I asked, 'Did you see him last week?' and he said, 'I don't think so.'"

Hoping to ease her son's pain, Lillian began to explore the possibility of finding another mentor for Cameron on her own. She even approached the youth leader at her church, who agreed to give it a try. But when she brought it up, Cameron insisted, "No, I really like Rick." In tears, Lillian responded, "Cameron, this is not your fault. This is hard on any kid and I don't want you putting any more of this on yourself."

Cameron's situation is far from unique.
According to analysis of data from a national Big Brothers Big Sisters study:

- Youth who were in matches that terminated within the first three months suffered **significantly larger drops** in feelings of self-worth and perceived scholastic competence than youth in the control group

- Youth who were in matches that lasted more than twelve months reported **significantly higher levels of self-worth, social acceptance, and scholastic competence**; they also reported that their relationships with their parents had improved, [and] that school had become more rewarding

- Even after controlling for potential selection bias (i.e. more well-adjusted youth may be more likely to sustain a mentoring relationship), **shorter-lasting relationships were associated with heightened problems, and the positive effects of longer mentoring relationships increased with time**