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October 11, 2011, 9:10 pm

Forging a Life-Changing Bond

By [DAVID BORNSTEIN](#)



[Fixes](#) looks at solutions to social problems and why they work.

Tags:

[children](#), [Families and Family Life](#), [Mentors](#)



Robert Caplin for The New York Times Christian Fernandez, 15, who is in the 10th grade, and his Friends of the Children mentor, Jeremie Knight, 27.

On Friday, I [reported](#) on an organization called Friends of the Children, which identifies children in kindergarten growing up in poverty and facing multiple risk factors at home and in their neighborhood — and then connects them with adult mentors for 12 years. The idea is to guarantee that these children have a consistent relationship with a caring and responsible adult whom they see

at least four hours each week, from kindergarten until high school graduation.

For children at risk, long-term relationships with dedicated mentors make a difference.

Friends has demonstrated on a modest scale that such relationships can be powerful: to date, of the 140 young people who have completed the full program, five out of every six have graduated from high school, 90 percent stay out of trouble with the law and 95 percent avoid early pregnancy and parenting. The National Institute of Child Health and Human Development is now funding a randomized controlled trial of Friends to evaluate and understand its results. The findings could influence other mentoring programs around the country.

In addition to its long-term approach, two differences between Friends and other mentoring programs are that its mentors are full time employees, not volunteers, and they commit to a minimum of three years, rather than one. Throughout the 12-year period, most of the children will have just three different mentors — which gives each one time to establish a trusting relationship. Because of this approach, the cost per child is higher than volunteer-based programs — currently \$9,000 per child per year. I asked readers whether society should bear this cost. They said yes.

“If society isn’t willing to pay \$9,000 per year for this, then we’re going to continue to pay billions per year to incarcerate millions,” wrote Michael K, from New York (10). “It seems to me that this is the cheap solution.” One of the obstacles, noted Dana, from Milford, Pa. (5) is getting policy makers to think differently. “Unfortunately, this country doesn’t have a great track record of investing in preventative interventions that are clearly shown to reduce the ultimate cost to society,” she wrote.

According to data supplied by Friends, during its 10-year history in New York, none of the 120 children it mentored there have dropped out of school. The expected drop out rate for this demographic is higher than 25 percent. During the decade, only two youths have gotten involved with the juvenile justice system and only one has become a teen parent. Based on government data, one would have predicted those figures to be four to six times higher.

Everyone knows that it is far more effective and cost-effective to help children develop in a healthy manner than to have to support or rehabilitate them as adults. But how much more cost-effective could it be? Mark Chussil, from Oregon (34) helped Friends put a dollar figure to the savings. He co-led a pro bono project through the Community Partners program of the Harvard Business School Association of Oregon which determined that for each child that Friends assisted, society would save \$838,030 – roughly \$715,000 more than the program costs — largely because the students are more likely to contribute to society than to become dependent on public resources or involved with crime.

As an investment, that’s close to a 700 percent return. “The program reaches break-even a very few years after a child graduates,” noted Chussil. “If a for-profit business could show results like that, we’d be lining up to buy stock in it.” (The only intervention I’ve come across that can beat this return is investing in early childhood education, [as the economist James Heckman has argued.](#))



Robert Caplin for The New York Times
Jeremie and Christian have been together for four years.

The core of Friends is the quality of the bond between the mentors and the children or youth. I visited the Friends house, a lively basement flat on 113th street in Harlem recently and spent time with Christian Fernandez, 15, who is in the 10th grade, and his mentor, Jeremie Knight, 27, a graduate of Florida A&M, who had studied juvenile justice and previously worked in an organization involved in foster care prevention. “I saw that a lot of kids didn’t seem to have anyone in their corner,” Jeremie recalled. “Everybody needs help — everybody.”

Jeremie and Christian have been together for four years and it was obvious that they have a warm and genuine relationship. They spoke about trips they’d taken together, including a recent one to a college campus. Jeremie gently ribbed Christian about his left hand dribbling and Christian said he’d been working on it. It was clear he looked up to Jeremie. I asked Christian how Jeremie had influenced him. “He helped me socialize and gave me a lot of help with my education,” he said.

In the previous year, Christian added, he’d gotten into a pattern of cutting class, smoking and focusing more on girls than school. Jeremie helped him refocus on his studies. “Without him, I probably wouldn’t be as on top of school as I am now,” he said. I asked him if any specific incidents stood out. While he pondered the question, Jeremie interjected with a smile: “Remember Mr. V.’s class?”

That brought a laugh from the two of them — and Christian recalled his sixth grade science class. Sixth grade is a threshold year for many children — it’s the first year of middle school, which brings heavier academic and social pressures, and it’s when many children who fall behind drop out of school emotionally, even if they don’t physically stop showing up until high school.

Christian had a conflict with Mr. V., who he thought disliked him. “I never paid attention, I was a jokester,” he recalled. “I just tried to aggravate him for the class to laugh. I was just destructive in that class.”

Jeremie sat in on the class a few times and then helped Christian think about how his behavior

affected his friends and could damage his future. He helped him understand how to “codeshift” — recognizing that behavior that’s fine with friends is not appropriate in school. Christian listened, settled down, and passed the class.

When I asked Jeremie the most important thing he had learned from mentoring, he said: “You’ve got to let the kid be comfortable being who they are. Don’t have a specific idea of what you want the kid to be.” Robert Houck, who directs the Friends office in New York, added that the most important quality for a mentor is the ability to listen. “Many adults don’t know how to listen to youth,” he explained. He noted that some mentors do better with young kids and some connect best with older ones. “Only about 25 percent work equally well with both groups,” he said.

Another benefit of establishing a long-term mentoring relationship is that the trust gets extended to the whole family. Jeremie has a good rapport with Christian’s mother, Yvette Pimintel, and together they discuss Christian’s progress in school and his development. “His mentor can take him to places where I would normally not take him because I don’t enjoy it — basketball games, baseball games, museums,” Pimintel told me. “Christian’s had three mentors and he’s loved them all. And they’re always checking up on him, making sure he’s doing what he’s supposed to do, something I can’t do because I’m at work.”

Because mentors enjoy the trust of families, they often get more truthful information about home life than public agencies, and they can use their influence to encourage parents to sign up for parenting classes, home safety programs, or services for addiction or domestic violence. In New York, Friends collaborates with 70 organizations which provide families with a wide range of “wraparound” services, everything from crisis intervention to mental health to summer camps.

Lindsey K. Robertson, Friends’ Clinical and Education Director in New York, added that it’s critical to find mentors who do not prejudge the families they serve. “If they use phrases like deadbeat dad, hopeless or useless mom, it tells us that their expectations about the situation may limit their effectiveness and creativity. When you have those attitudes, you often give up on people — and you don’t get to see what’s really possible.”

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Creating a human lifeline is a smarter way to help struggling families than to take the punitive approach. Unfortunately, public policies often get enacted out of moralistic and careless impulses that are politically expedient. That’s the case today, for example, with [states forcing people to undergo drug testing](#) in order to receive benefits like welfare, unemployment assistance and food stamps. When people fail the tests, it’s usually because they smoked marijuana. Such punitive measures alienate families from government and intensify the stress on parents who are already overwhelmed — while doing nothing to help them address their problems. This increases the risk

that their children will suffer from more dislocations and abuse.

Bringing a caring and resourceful adult into a family in crisis can offer new ideas and perspectives, and challenge people to solve their own problems. Jeremie told me that his biggest surprise as a mentor wasn't seeing transformations among the children – he expected that — but among the parents who subsequently took steps to improve their lives.

We all need examples and models to imagine new possibilities, especially if our experience has been severely limited. Houck told me that some of the children served by Friends in New York had never seen Central Park before their mentor took them there. And Robertson recalled the reaction of a young boy who was taken on a visit to the Big Apple Circus: “He said the fountain at Lincoln Center was the most wonderful place he'd ever seen. Then when he entered the circus tent and saw the lights, he literally burst into tears. It was so bright and beautiful, he said. He'd never seen anything like it. He just couldn't believe it.”

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David Bornstein is the author of “How to Change the World,” which has been published in 20 languages, and “The Price of a Dream: The Story of the Grameen Bank,” and is co-author of “Social Entrepreneurship: What Everyone Needs to Know.” He is the founder of dowser.org, a media site that reports on social innovation.

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1.

UnPC

Midwest

October 12th, 2011

8:09 am

"Unfortunately, public policies often get enacted out of moralistic and careless impulses that are politically expedient. That's the case today, for example, with states forcing people to undergo drug testing in order to receive benefits like welfare, unemployment assistance and food stamps. "

I don't know David. You seem kind of idealistic and judgmental too. Perhaps children indeed are better off being raised by non-drug parents who are motivated to put down the pipe and put their children first. It's great that this boy has 3 mentors, better still that he had one active father in his life. Rules that prohibit gaining public benefits if you use illegal drugs ... surely that teaches the children something too.

And \$9,000 annually? Paid for by taxpayers to essentially babysit and provide the basic parental role. Surely it would cost society much much less to do away with the subsidized births in the first place and adopt out early the children of unfit parents.

That sounds judgmental too, but studies have shown, it's nothing genetic in these youngsters. It's pure environment. If the parents aren't fit to parent, instead of paying outside others to do the basic job, isn't it better to give them true families who will?

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2.

Nilofar Ansher

India

October 12th, 2011

8:09 am

What a beautiful case study and impactful too. Governments and businesses would usually classify such programs as 'soft stories', workable in a limited, control group and not effective across a larger population or over the years. But Mentoring is a system of consistent and effective monitoring by a responsible adult friend - and Friends in New York is doing a good, steady job. Perhaps they need to conduct more workshops and outreach programs to set up chapter - networks in other boroughs and neighboring cities.

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3.

Ed

Kansas City

October 12th, 2011

8:09 am

Sounds like a worthwhile program, but do the math. Four hours a week with the child = 208 hours a year. At an annual cost of \$9,000 per child, that comes out to \$43 per hour. Now I doubt that the mentors are making all that much, so where is all that money going?

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4.

hen3ry

New York

October 12th, 2011

9:51 am

I would say that this sort of program if it's well run is worth the money spent. If it takes a village to raise a child why shouldn't society take more interest in children BEFORE they get into trouble. I remember when I was a child how hearing an adult other than my parents, say something sensible helped me to avoid trouble. And a mentor whose interests coincide with a child's can be an enormous help when it comes to introducing the child to others with those interests or abilities. Introducing a mentor into a child's life can help a child understand that there is no one way to live. It can help the parents too because a mentor can reinforce the message that the parents are trying to give the child.

As a teen I reached out to several adults when I was in distress because I felt that my parents could

not or would not help. (I was correct in my assessment because my parents reacted by telling me that I was crazy.) Without these adults I might not have made it to the ripe old age of 53 (next month). I'm grateful that these adults allowed me to be a part of their lives, that they gave generously of their time and their concern when I needed it. I try to do the same with others in my life and I know I can never repay the adults who helped me when I was a teen.

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5.

Dwayne Wharton
Philadelphia, PA
October 12th, 2011
9:51 am
Ed in Kansas City,

Each mentor actually works with 8 children, four hours per week, until children are in middle school and spend more time in group settings. Each mentor spends roughly 1,700 hours a year working directly with their 8 mentees. The remaining time is spent traveling up to 30 miles each way to visit with the children, participating in critical trainings and supervision, coordinating services, and tracking the progress of children over time. Using your equation, that comes out to \$4.33 per hour. Hope this provides some clarity.

Dwayne Wharton
National Deputy Director
Friends of the Children

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6.

Betsy
Somerville, MA
October 12th, 2011

9:52 am

UnPC @ #1:

1. Not all the parents of these children are using drugs or are otherwise unfit.
2. I imagine it would cost far more than \$9000 per child to legally take these children from their parents.
3. Many of these children HAVE been taken from their parents and are in foster care - that doesn't make their need for intense mentoring go away; on the contrary, it increases it.
4. Does it occur to you that these programs are actually preventing the kind of parenting that you abhor? By helping make these kids into responsible adults, the program will steer them away from early parenthood and drug addiction.

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7.

Sajidkhan

New York, NY

October 12th, 2011

9:52 am

We in America have been world leaders in educating our intelligence. Which boils down to graduating top class scientists, engineers and business executives...which translates into producing top class manufacturing and creation of real goods and real wealth. For a long time we remained the leaders by far but now others are catching up. What is bad for us is that others have begun to make not only the same goods, even their quality is catching up. But worse they can make the same goods cheaper. Not only do others not need to import these goods from us any longer, they are able to send these goods to us at cheaper rates. This forces more and more factories to close. Businesses loose money and workers loose jobs. This is a fact of life that is only going to get worse.

There is one area in education where we Americans are educating our emotional intelligence to a defective brain/mind level. This translates into a less than super mature emotional intelligence. So while our intelligence is super mature for the majority of Americans our emotional intelligence is at best one peg down at mature.

In our findings the mind represents intelligence and the brain represents emotional intelligence. For a few generations we got away with perfect minds and slightly skewed brains because our minds produced the goods that the whole world consumed and made us rich. And the dollar became as they say almighty. For decades we got away with the damage that the defective emotional brain caused by throwing money at every problem, it is never the best solution but it worked. Money may not buy pure happiness but it does buy comfort. So we had comfortable lives.

Whether it is Wall Street greed or emotionally challenged students, tense relationships, divorce and drug addictions, criminals, corruption and all other emotionally challenged behavior it is all due to our emotionally challenged brains.

In the mean time mentoring is a big plus.

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8.

probus1

Columbia, SC

October 12th, 2011

12:06 pm

This sounds like a good program. With empirical evidence to demonstrate its effectiveness, perhaps it may be a great program; however, this program is trying to fill a void that, at least to me, is lacking in our culture in general and is especially prevalent in the ranks of our poor, i.e. the cultural and familial bonds that build stable families, stress parental and spousal responsibility, and inhibit destructive behavior are severely frayed.

Perhaps it is our contemporary culture with its over emphasis on the self that is the larger problem.

Self-actualization seems to be the imperative. Professional athletes and Hollywood stars are our national heroes/ines. The number of children raised in broken marriages outnumber those that are raised in cohesive ones. The rate of unwed motherhood has continued to climb year on year end. Perhaps something rotten has taken hold of American culture since the great baby boomer generation came of age with its reknowned excesses.

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9.

an ambivalent mentor

ma

October 12th, 2011

12:07 pm

I've been a mentor for almost 3 years to young lady entering her tween years. She is totally devoted to our relationship and eagerly awaits every meeting. her mother constantly shows her appreciation by thanking me and inviting me to family gatherings. "my little" is shy but sweet and I've watched her go from a C/C- student in summer school, to a solid B/B+ student in nearly all her classes. her new found confidence is really remarkable. the program I work with, big brothers big sisters, is extremely supportive and well organized.

and yet I can't say this is something I find gratifying. I'm really sick of it. I hate giving up my sundays instead of getting to watch football or watch a B movie. I've found gas, food, craft materials, cookie ingredients, and the like to be an expense starting to weigh on my pocketbook. this is not a relationship you can simply do for "a while" - in my case this is probably the only time each week my little gets to run around and play freely since she lives on such a dangerous street. the few times I have taken a break for a few weeks has ended in tears and tremendous anxiety on her part. these kids need stability and abandoning them after just a year could do more damage than good.

I recognize that what I am doing is really important to this young lady and as a result I stick it out and try hard to hide any of my discontent and desire to be elsewhere. I will continue to do so for at least another year or two until she gets into high school. this is an incredibly generous gift to offer a child, but make sure you're ready for the time investment.

bottom line: I'm glad I did it, but I can't say I would necessarily do it again.

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11.

Nelson

NYC

October 12th, 2011

1:11 pm

This is great, but if you notice in the story, the young at-risk boy's mother is mentioned. But no mention of a dad. Again, a big part of the problem is that women/girls are mindlessly getting

pregnant without considering the long-term consequences of bringing a child into the world without a plan...without a reliable man at their side. Having a baby is not 'fun' or 'cool' or 'something cute' to fuss over. Within a very short time these girls/women realize just how serious it is to have a baby with no plan, no finances, no real father in the picture. But by then it's too late, and once again society has to pick up the slack for these girls'/women's poor choices.

Of course, society really has no other alternative, but instead of all these programs to 'fix' these problems, why isn't there more talk about getting at the root of the problem? Why are so many women and girls with no financial or emotional support, and with little education or respectable job prospects, having babies in the first place?

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[12.](#)

Erin

Las Vegas

October 12th, 2011

1:11 pm

It takes a village to raise a child.

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[13.](#)

Mom

Canada

October 12th, 2011

1:11 pm

I admire the honest answer from the "ambivalent mentor". This is hard work and you cannot abandon it when you get tired or bored. Basically these mentors are parenting these children and I find the program to be very worthwhile. The writer who suggests just taking away the child does not realize how much damage this would do, kids love their parents no matter how incompetent they are. So keeping families intact while providing a positive adult role model is a good solution. My kids are all adopted so I have some idea of the impact of being separated from your biological family.

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[14.](#)

D.S.S.

Long Island

October 12th, 2011

1:11 pm

The cost benefits from an economic standpoint serve as an interesting sidenote to the greater social importance of the impact these programs have on issues like crime prevention, public safety, quality of life, and social inequality. These things are worth investing in, even if the cost is somewhat more, which is why the argument that the positive externalities of the program will

actually provide long term savings is so much more effective. Giving kids a fair shot at life should be the real objective, but everything needs funding, and the benefits of the program, both social and fiscal, should not be overlooked by narrow minded policymakers who only want to balance today's budgets without thinking of the problems those trimmed plans will push to the future generations.

The response to these situations is often, "Blame the parents!" In many cases the parents really are to blame. So go ahead, blame them. It does nothing for the children who bear the fruits of their lack of emotional involvement, drug abuse, and inability to hold a job. Rehabilitation is a long road with historically poor results, and as stated by Bornstein and others, enormously expensive. Providing direction and positive influence early on is the right method to addressing the problem.

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