



Getting to the Gold

Goals and activities are at the heart of the mentoring relationship. The key is to pay attention to the mentee's needs and interests.

BY ANNETTA MILLER

A FEW YEARS AGO, JOHNNY S. was one of Los Angeles's most prolific graffiti artists, or "taggers," as they are known in the inner city. Arrested multiple times on charges of defacing property, Johnny was ordered by the court to make restitution and perform community-service work.

But this time his service requirement had a different twist. A judge allowed him to enroll in Sentenced to the Stage, a mentoring-cum-performing-arts program sponsored by City Hearts: Kids Say Yes to the Arts, a Los Angeles-based nonprofit arts-education program. Under Sentenced to the Stage, Johnny got credit toward mandated community-service hours by attending theater and dance workshops. Johnny's foremost challenge in the program: to set a goal for what he hoped to accomplish and, with the help of the City Hearts staff, work toward applying it. "In his case, the first goal was simply performing," says City Hearts spokesperson Melissa Dobar. "And that eventually led him not only to a love of theater, but to an ability to make positive choices for his life."

Goal setting can be one of the most important parts of a mentoring relationship. Done in the right spirit, the process can help youngsters boost their self-confidence and make small but important steps toward

their future aims. But goal setting can be fraught with difficulty. Getting young people to look past the present and into the future can be harder than trying to coax an elephant through a china shop. By the same token, getting mentors to understand that goals must originate within young people themselves, and must not be foisted upon them from outside, can be equally difficult. How a mentor approaches this crucial juncture, says Shayne Schneider, founder of the Washington, D.C.-based organization Mentors Unlimited, can either solidify a relationship or set it back.

In most cases, goal setting becomes a matter for discussion only after a mentor-mentee relationship has entered its mid-life. With the delicate get-acquainted period past them, mentors and their mentees typically spend less time making small

talk and more time discussing substantive issues of their day-to-day-lives: schoolwork, drugs, teen pregnancy, ethics, to name a few. By this point, mentors are not only well tuned in to the child they are mentoring, they're often familiar with their mentee's parents, siblings and teachers. This is the time when the topic of educational goals and life plans naturally crops up.

Often, discussions about goals center on homework. Take the case of Emily Chen and her mentee, 14-year-old Deññys, a ninth grader in a New York City high school. When Deññys's usually good marks in Spanish dropped earlier this year, Emily resisted passing judgment. "I told her whatever grade you get is fine, as long as you're doing the best you can." Then she asked how she could help. In the course of the discussion, Deññys revealed that she knew her grades were slipping but had felt uncomfortable asking for help—even from her stepfather, a native Spanish speaker.



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- **Junior Achievement**
Teach kids how free enterprise works.
www.ja.org
- **Girls Inc.**
Help girls become strong adults.
www.girlsinc.org

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Pair of hearts:
Sisters Beatriz
and Veronica
in Los Angeles

The problem had gotten worse, Deññys said, when her stepfather became dismayed and hurt that she had not sought his help. Consequently, he took

away her television-watching privileges.

With some gentle prompting from Emily, Deññys began to offer solutions to her own problem. Could Emily, who had studied Spanish in college, help with her homework? And what if she were to draft a letter of apology to her stepfather—in Spanish? Deññys’s plan of action got quick results. Her carefully crafted letter evoked a big smile from her stepfather, and moved him to restore her TV rights. With both his and Emily’s help, she earned a perfect score—along with 20 extra-credit points—on her next Spanish test.

Emily and Deññys’s experience points to the key ingredient in helping mentees set objectives: active listening. “I tell people that listening is the most important factor in a mentoring relationship,” says Susan Weinberger, founder of the Norwalk Mentor Program in Norwalk, Conn. By resisting the urge to prescribe solutions or pass judgments, a mentor gives a young charge the opportunity to think through problems and come up with objectives he or she can live with. “I counsel mentors to ask questions like ‘What are you inclined to do?’ ‘What are your choices?’ ‘What do you think would happen if you chose this option?’” says Mentors Unlimited’s Schneider. “There’s a risk involved in giving kids unwanted advice, and that’s that it may alienate them so much that they won’t want to ask for help the next time.”

Many times, mentors can help encourage goal setting by showing rather than telling. Mark Clayborne, a mentor through the Big Brothers Big Sisters of America organization in Oklahoma City, subtly helped 13-year-old Jerald to think about his future by introducing him firsthand to the world of work. An attorney who practices civil law, Mark occasionally brings Jerald to visit his workplace. “Jerald doesn’t necessarily like going to the office that much,” says Mark. “But it shows him that while it’s good to play and have a good time, sometimes you have to work, too.” In recent months Jerald, who aspires to be a professional football player, has adopted a more pragmatic career goal as well. “I’d like to be a stockbroker during the off season,” he says.

While school and work settings can both be good venues for getting youngsters to think into the future, so can the community at large. Marc Freedman, author of “The Kindness of Strangers: Adult Mentors,

When young people and their mentors join together to perform a community-service act, there’s often a newfound basis for conversation

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Yo: A New York seal blabs at mentor Emily Chen and mentee Deññys at the Central Park Zoo

In another case, a mentor who had attended an Ivy League college was determined that his young mentee would follow in his footsteps and go to Yale. The boy's parents, meanwhile, wanted desperately for their son to attend their

alma mater in the South, a notion that galled the mentor. "Don't they know the doors that a Yale education can open?" he objected. Once again, it was the teenager who ultimately resolved the conflict. He was awarded a large scholarship at a third institution in the Midwest, and chose that offer over both his mentor's and his parents' suggestions. "A mentor may be really tempted to give personal advice," says Schneider. "But you don't want youngsters to be torn between adult values."

Ultimately, of course, setting goals pays off. Many mentees who learn how to create a goal and achieve it go on to pass that skill to their siblings or other children in the neighborhood. Take the case of Beatriz and Veronica, sisters who spent four years developing their writing and acting skills in one of City Hearts' drama programs. The two were later chosen to serve as mentors in a City Hearts summer camp, where they helped show younger acting students the ropes. And then there's Johnny S., the young tagger turned thespian. After performing in a Sentenced to the Stage production called "Slipping Into Darkness," a play about "kids and gangs, life and death on the streets and trying to find a better way," he began to set other goals for himself that included enrolling in college and studying accounting. Since then, Johnny has become a mentor to others in the City Hearts program. Says Dobar: "He's helping kids see that they can begin to make positive choices—just like he did." ■

Don't feed the animals: A frisky goat gets a bit too close for comfort for Emily and Deññys

Urban Youth and the New Voluntarism," observes that when young people and their mentors join together to perform services like cleaning up local parks or improving their schools, there's often a newfound basis for conversation. "The key," writes Freedman, "is finding the right task—one that interests both parties."

Sometimes it's the mentors themselves who learn the most important lessons about how goals should be shaped. Schneider cites the case of one young woman

whose mentee became pregnant during high school. The mentor, convinced that having a child would ruin her mentee's chances for a bright future, wanted to persuade the girl to terminate the pregnancy. The student's family, meanwhile, was strongly opposed to abortion. Schneider implored the mentor to help the girl talk about the choices available to her, and then back off. In the end, the teenager opted to find an adoptive home for the baby and continue with her education.



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