



I recently heard a seventy-six year old man share his reflections on the people who influenced his life. It was fascinating to hear how his parents, friends, teachers, coworkers, and even strangers had stimulated his creativity, motivated him to venture outside of his comfort zone, and helped him to believe in himself. This got me to think about the impact people have on one another and why it's so important to have a variety of mentors in life.

I recall a man who was paralyzed from the chest down and used an electric wheelchair. He paid a visit to a young man with a similar condition during his rehabilitation. Midway through this social call, the visitor said, "Excuse me, I have to leave for a bit to pay the meter." The young man said, "You drive?!" The visitor said, "Yes, I drive. Would you like to see my van?"

The two of them wheeled out to the street. The visitor proceeded to show the young man how he operated a power wheelchair lift and explained how he used hand controls for the brakes and gas pedal. Surprised and

excited, the young man said, "I had no idea this was possible!"

People from all walks of life have the ability to positively influence the lives of others. It could be during a casual conversation with friends or during an exchange of ideas with co-workers to sharing stories with children or young adults. As the New Year begins, consider the following 5 suggestions to improve your ability to be a positive role model and mentor for someone who lives with or without a disability.

5 Key Traits of a Positive Mentor

1. Demonstrates an unbiased and open mindset.

It's natural to form an opinion on what a person can and cannot do based upon your own personal knowledge and experiences in life. Be intentional in ridding yourself of preconceived notions of what is and is not possible based upon a person's appearance of their capacity to move, think, speak, and learn. Your openness to see a person beyond their disability will help resonate and reinforce similar behaviors in themselves and others.

2. Encourages and enables opportunities to discover personal interests and passions.

Encouraging individuals with disabilities to experience a variety of activities can help them discover their passions, reveal hidden talents, and fuel ambitions in life. Exploring one's interest across a broad spectrum of activities, such as art, literature, sports, outdoor recreation, electronics, science, technology, music, culture, and spirituality helps an individual to recognize their personal interests and passions. This also helps them acquire skills in sharing stories. Being able to talk about favorite pastimes, musical tastes, special talents, current events, or projects provides ample icebreaker topics for conversations with others. Having topics and activities to talk about can reduce anxieties when meeting new people and build self-confidence in social situations. Developing these "soft skills" can support positive interactions at school, work, and in the community throughout life.

3. Enhances self-awareness and skills that promote a positive personal presence.

First impressions occur within seconds of meeting someone and influence future interactions with others. Effective mentors are mindful of this and support individuals in becoming self-aware of their persona. "Do you smile when you say hello, make eye contact when shaking hands, listen patiently, refrain from interrupting, and genuinely engage with others? Do you stand up or extend yourself to greet someone or when you say good-bye?" All of these traits along with one's posture and body language help others get a sense of one's self-confidence, respect, and likeability. Whether you are an introvert or extrovert, polite and respectful interactions set the stage for positive encounters and invites sociability. These and other cultural courtesies enhance interpersonal skills for people of all ages and abilities.

4. Reinforces the importance of addressing conflict and building relationships.

It's not unusual for people to shy away from confrontational communications. When uncomfortable interactions occur, be proactive in addressing feelings and sharing thoughts in an objective and non-defensive way. Be mindful of not taking things personally and discipline yourself to see other's points of view. This helps all parties feel heard and respected and opens opportunities to work collectively with others. Focus on the situation at hand in order to encourage an honest exchange of ideas. Once views are shared move forward in a productive manner.

5. Promotes successful development of social and business networks.

The word "networking" can conjure concerns and anxieties for anyone who feels they have limited resources. Partnering with a family member, friend, classmate, or coworker can help ease tensions and allow your mentee to be themselves. Your mentee may be surprised by an invitation to have someone join them in attending an event, joining a class, or volunteering in the community. Start with identifying people, places, and events that spark their interest. Something that they think they'll enjoy. Working with others can help individuals begin to venture comfortably to new territories. Once there, help them set their sights on connecting with one or two people. This makes it more manageable to follow up afterwards. A few connections build into many connections in no time.

Developing strong communities of support helps individuals build self-confidence and encourages their ability to try new activities. Most importantly, knowing that someone believes in them and is there for them as a trusted sounding board is motivating. Use your power to be a positive influence and role model. You'll share and reap great lessons and make a powerful impact in someone's life.



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