

PART II: LIFE AS A TEEN BIG

Being a Teen Big will probably be different than any experience you've ever had. It will be both rewarding and challenging. Rewarding because of the personal fulfillment you'll get out of helping a young child. But challenging because you may have to think and act differently than you're used to. Let's take a look at how you should approach your life as a Teen Big.

YOUR ROLE

What are Teen Bigs? They're trained Big Brothers and Big Sisters who happen to be teenagers—mostly juniors and seniors in high school. So what do Big Brothers and Big Sisters do? Pretty simple. They become the best friends they can be to their Littles. But what does this look like? Is it exactly like your other friendships? Not exactly. Obviously, you're not gonna study for a science test with your Little like you might with another friend. As a friend to your Little, your role is different in some important ways.

Here are some ways to think of your role as a Teen Big:

- **Good listener** who will be there when needed
- **Fun person** who is a pleasure to hang out with
- **Tutor** who will help with schoolwork
- **Teacher** who will encourage learning
- **Coach** who will help build skills and confidence
- **Guide** who helps with setting and achieving goals
- **Motivator** who encourages others
- **Confidant** who can be trusted implicitly
- **Role model** who is admired and looked up to

These make sense, right? But it's just as important to recognize what your role should not be. As a Teen Big, your role is NOT ...

- **Parent figure** who acts like a mom, dad, or other authority figure
- **Therapist or counselor** who tries to analyze everything said or done
- **Cure-all** who tries to provide solutions every problem
- **Missionary** who promotes his/her religious beliefs or personal values
- **Advisor** who offers advice at every step of the way

Some of these may seem a bit out of place to you. For example, you might be thinking, “Okay. I get that being a friend to my Little is a little different than being a friend to my high school peers. But how can I be a mentor to somebody without giving advice or trying to solve their problems?”

That’s a reasonable question. Here’s the short answer: By helping them to make their own decisions and find their own solutions.

And now for the longer answer. (To avoid confusing pronouns, we’ll assume your Little is a boy in this explanation.) One way to think of your overall goal with your Little is that it is to develop a relationship that helps him realize his potential to be a healthy, happy, and productive person—basically, to help him learn how to succeed on his own. Now take a quick look back at the list of roles we said that a Teen Big should **not** play. If as a Teen Big you’re always analyzing things, offering solutions, and giving advice to your Little—put another way, if you’re always telling him what to do and think—it would be pretty tough for him to develop the ability to make independent decisions and succeed on his own. Try to keep this in mind when you’re with your Little.

SURPRISES AND MYTHS

Wouldn’t it be great if before you enrolled in a class you could sit down with a group of students who have already taken that class and ask them what it’s **really** like? We think so, too. Unfortunately, we can’t tell you much about your future classes. But we **can** apply this same principle to your experience as a Teen Big.

As your BBBS Coach helps prepare your group for the Teen Big experience, there will most likely be other students in your group who did this last year. You should definitely take the opportunity to ask them about all the ins and outs.

Over the years we’ve done that very thing. We’ve talked to former Teen Bigs about their experiences, asking them to tell us everything—the good and the bad. Below is a summary of what they’ve been telling us, both the pleasant surprises and the myths that they think you should be aware of.

Surprise #1: Kids can really amaze you.

Sure, it’s true that Littles are involved in the program because somebody thought that they could use mentors, but you shouldn’t automatically think of them as “troubled kids.” They can be smart, funny, thoughtful, playful, caring, and even just plain silly. Just about all Teen Bigs have discovered that their Littles have many strengths and positive qualities. Learning and encouraging these positive qualities is a large part of what makes the program fun for Teen Bigs!

Surprise #2: You and your Little may develop very strong emotional bonds.

Believe it or not, you’ll probably find that you and your Little have many interests in common. Maybe it’ll be sports or computers or TV or music or school or even all of these. In many cases these common interests make it seem like the friendship flourishes all by itself. And as you already know, it’s pretty easy to develop strong connections with someone when you have things in common.

Surprise #3: The bonds you develop are not just with your Little.

The Teen Big experience is not just a one-to-one thing between you and your Little. You'll be hanging out with a group of other high school students who are doing the same thing you are. You and your fellow Teen Bigs will be meeting regularly with your BBBS Coach to talk about your experiences and to plan for upcoming sessions with your Littles. These meetings are great not only for sharing ideas, but also for getting to know each other. Many Teen Bigs have found that some of the best things about the program are the bonds they develop with their fellow Teen Bigs.

Surprise #4: You may learn a lot about yourself.

Ultimately, you and the other Teen Bigs are there to help each other be good mentors to your Littles. But there's a really good chance that each of you will find that being a mentor has opened the door to new experiences or interests for you. You may surprise yourself at how well you can relate to children. Or how caring you are. Or what a great role model you can be. Who knows—maybe you'll discover that you want to do this kind of thing for a living!

Sounds like a great program so far, right? Well, that's because it is. Will it be fun? Yeah. Will it be a great experience for you? Almost definitely.

But ... you've got to have realistic expectations. Don't be surprised when you see that the realities of working with your Little are not always ideal. Here are some of the myths that former Teen Bigs have asked us to dispel for you:

Myth #1: It will always be easy.

Developing a close, positive, and caring relationship with someone can be hard work. And keep in mind that there's a pretty good chance that the child you'll be matched with has not had a whole lot of experience with these kinds of relationships. There may even be some emotional wounds that cause him/her to be standoffish at first. Here are some of the common challenges Teen Bigs can encounter:

- You cannot relate to some of the life experiences that your Little has had.
- Your Little does not show much interest in you and your life.
- Your relationship does not develop as quickly as you believed it would.
- You procrastinate and wait until the last minute to plan activities.
- Activities are canceled or missed because of miscommunication between you and your Little.
- Your Little is not sharing much about him/herself.
- You and your Little run out of ideas for activities to do together.
- Your Little does not want to do anything you suggest.
- Your Little does not let you know what he/she wants to do.
- Your Little does not seem appreciative.
- Your Little's social skills are not improving in spite of your efforts.

Throughout this Handbook we'll be giving you some ideas on how to handle situations like these. But for now we'll just remind you that you'll always have backup. Whenever you have questions about what to do, you've got your BBBS Coach and a team of other Teen Bigs to turn to for help.

Myth #2:**I will be able to see day-to-day transformations in my Little's life.**

With a lot of hard work, you can reasonably expect your Little to be somewhat more confident, competent, and caring at the end of the school year than at the beginning when you started meeting. But these changes probably won't be very dramatic. Changing from a C student to an A student or from a depressed introvert to a self-assured live wire all in one year? Not likely. Any transformations will probably be more subtle—so subtle, in fact, that it may be impossible for you to notice any major changes in a matter of days, weeks, or even months.

Myth #3:**It's okay for me to adopt a "Do what I say, not what I do" philosophy.**

Kids are pretty smart. They can tell when someone is not being genuine. It will be just about impossible for you to help your Little make good decisions when you're making really bad ones for yourself. That's why you've been asked to sign an agreement that details the commitments you'll have to stick to while you're a Teen Big. Along with being a role model comes the need to be responsible.

Myth #4:**I can quit any time without any real damage being done to my Little.**

Being a Teen Big is not for everyone. It's a big commitment and responsibility. You're signing on to be a trusted, caring friend. If you quit the program in the middle of the school year—even if it's for a very good reason—you risk disappointing or even crushing a child who may have few people he/she can count on. So if you're not in it for the long haul, you might want to talk to your BBBS Coach to see if you should reconsider.

Okay. That's about it for the introduction to what life will be like as a Teen Big. You should have a pretty good idea now about how to approach the experience—including knowing what your role is and some initial things to expect for yourself. Hopefully you are really excited about what's to come—not oblivious to some of the challenges there might be, but optimistic and enthusiastic about all the great times you'll have with your Little and your fellow Teen Bigs.