

PART III: UNDERSTANDING YOUR LITTLE AND YOUR RELATIONSHIP

In the previous section we talked mostly about expectations—what you can expect life to be like as a Teen Big. This section is also about expectations, but with a slight shift in focus. In particular, we move from discussing what is expected of **you** to what your **Little** might be like and how the interactions with your Little are likely to change throughout the year.

TYPICAL CHARACTERISTICS OF CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS

The following pages detail some characteristics that will help you understand what your Little might be like depending on his/her age. As you review these items, keep in mind that they are generalizations. While they provide a description of children in general at each developmental stage, you may encounter something slightly different with your Little; this does not mean that there is something wrong with him/her. It just means that in some ways the child is not like the average child his or her age.

Ages 5 to 7

GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS

- Eager to learn, easily fatigued, short periods of interest
- Learn best when active while learning
- Self-assertive, boastful, less cooperative, more competitive

PHYSICAL CHARACTERISTICS

- Very active and need frequent breaks from tasks to do things that are fun and involve the use of energy
- Need rest periods; good quiet activities are reading books together or doing simple art projects
- Large muscles are well developed, activities involving small muscles are difficult
- May tend to be accident-prone

SOCIAL CHARACTERISTICS

- Like organized games and are very concerned about following rules
- Can be very competitive, may cheat at games
- Very imaginative and involved in fantasy playing
- Self-assertive, aggressive, want to be first, less cooperative the older they get, very boastful
- Learn best through active participation

EMOTIONAL CHARACTERISTICS

- Alert to feelings of others, but unaware of how their own actions affect others
- Very sensitive to praise/recognition and criticism/critique, feelings easily hurt
- Inconsistent in levels of maturity, often less mature at home than with outsiders

MENTAL CHARACTERISTICS

- Very eager to learn
- Like to talk
- Own ideas of fairness become a big issue
- Have difficulty making decisions

DEVELOPMENTAL TASKS

- Identification of gender differences
- Early moral development
- Concrete operations (begin to experience predictability of events)
- Group play

Ages 8 to 10

GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS

- Interested in people, aware of differences, willing to give more to others but expects more
- Busy, active, enthusiastic, may try too much, interested in money and its value
- Sensitive to criticism, recognize failure, capacity for self-evaluation
- Capable of prolonged interest, may make plans on own
- Decisive, dependable, reasonable, strong sense of right and wrong
- Spend much time in talk and discussion, often outspoken and critical of adults, although still dependent on adult approval

PHYSICAL CHARACTERISTICS

- Very active and need frequent breaks from tasks to do things that are fun and involve the use of energy
- Bone growth not complete yet
- Early maturers may be upset with their size; a listening ear and your explanations may help
- May tend to be accident prone

SOCIAL CHARACTERISTICS

- Can be very competitive
- Choosy about their friends
- Acceptance by friends important
- Team games popular
- Worshipping heroes, TV stars, sports figures is common

EMOTIONAL CHARACTERISTICS

- Very sensitive to praise and recognition; feelings hurt easily
- Because friends are so important, can be conflicts between adults' rules and friends' rules

MENTAL CHARACTERISTICS

- Fairness still a big issue
- Eager to answer questions
- Very curious, and are collectors of everything (but for only short time)
- Want more independence, but know they need guidance and support
- Wide discrepancies in reading ability

DEVELOPMENTAL TASKS

- Social cooperation
- Self-Evaluation
- Skill learning
- Team (cooperative) play

Ages 11 to 13

GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS

- Testing limits, “know-it all” attitude
- Vulnerable, emotionally insecure, fear of rejection, mood swings
- Identification with admired adult
- Self-image especially affected by physical appearance

PHYSICAL CHARACTERISTICS

- Small-muscle coordination is good, and interests in art, crafts, models, and music are common
- Bone growth is not yet complete
- Early maturers may be upset with their size; a listening ear and explanations will help.
- Very concerned with appearances, and self-conscious about growth
- Diet and sleep habits can be bad, which may result in low energy

SOCIAL CHARACTERISTICS

- Acceptance by friends important
- Cliques develop outside of school
- Team games popular
- Romantic crushes common
- Friends set general rule of behavior
- Feel a need to conform (dressing and behaving alike in order to belong)
- Very concerned about what others say and think about them
- Have a tendency to manipulate others (“Mary’s mother says she can go. Why can’t I?”)
- Interested in earning own money

EMOTIONAL CHARACTERISTICS

- Very sensitive to praise and recognition, feelings hurt easily
- Because friends are so important, can be conflicts between adults’ rules and friends’ rules
- Caught between being a child and being an adult, often critical
- Loud behavior hides lack of self-confidence
- Look at the world more objectively, but look at adults more subjectively

MENTAL CHARACTERISTICS

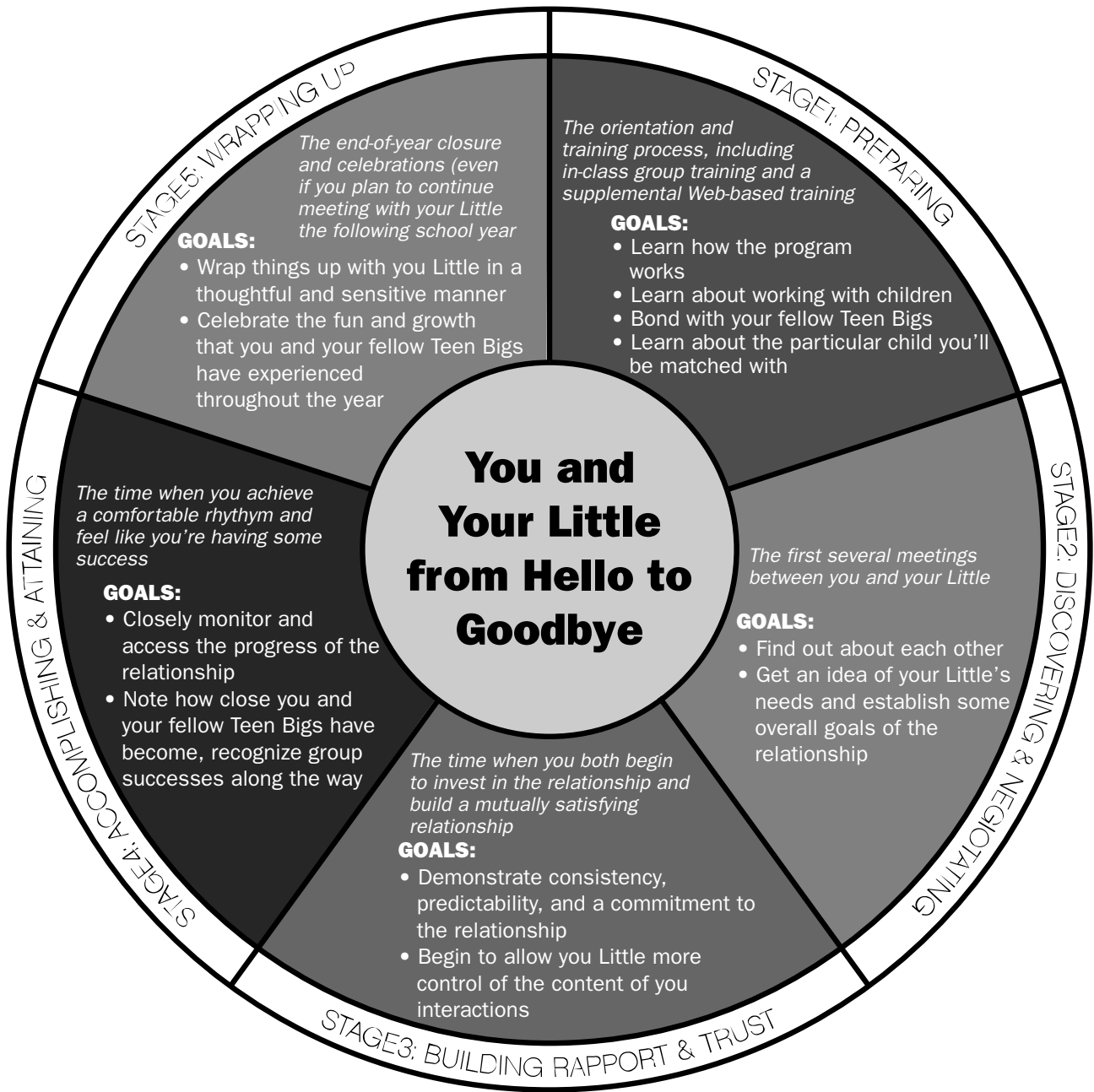
- Tend to be perfectionists (if they try to attempt too much, they may feel frustrated and guilty)
- Want more independence, but know they need guidance and support
- Attention span can be lengthy

DEVELOPMENTAL TASKS

- Social cooperation
- Self-Evaluation
- Skill learning
- Team (cooperative) play

RELATIONSHIP LIFE CYCLES

Just like most other relationships, a relationship with a Little has a life cycle. Things usually start off slow and a little awkward, and eventually your interactions become easier as you become more comfortable with each other. The information below gives you an idea of how this particular kind of relationship generally (though not always) progresses, along with some guidance on what you can do at each stage.



Tips for Stage 1: Preparing

- Ask questions. It's better to ask now than not know later when you are one-on-one with your Little.
- Think about what you are learning in the context of other relationships in your life. You may find that lessons learned in one relationship will help you build or repair another one.
- Remember that a child's participation in the program does not mean he/she is a "problem child." Littles represent a wide range of interests, and needs. Teachers, counselors, and some parents request mentors for students who they feel could use additional support.

Tips for Stage 2: Discovering and Negotiating

- In the first meeting, use the 5WC model presented on page ??? of the appendix. Be sure to establish expectations for the relationships in terms of safety and respect.
- Take the lead more in this stage than in later ones, asking more questions and planning more activities.
- Share appropriate information about yourself.
- Listen carefully to the details of your Little's life and family, so you can refer to these in later conversations.
- Be prepared to do more games and activities than to have in-depth conversations, especially if your Little is a boy.
- Think about what you and your Little want from this relationship. What is important to you? What is important to your Little?
- Share successes and challenges with your BBBS Coach and fellow Teen Bigs.

Tips for Stage 3: Building Rapport and Trust

- Be on time and do not miss sessions.
- Be patient. Building trust can take a while!
- Arrive with a list of potential activities (see Appendix) and ask what he/she would like to do for the day (within the structure and limits you provide).
- Expect some testing of limits. This is a way of determining if you will be consistent and committed even when the Little's behavior may be disappointing or difficult.
- Avoid using "shoulds" and learn alternative ways to suggest constructive behavior, like "how about if"
- End each session on a positive note, finding something your Little has done well and letting him/her know when you will be visiting again.
- Continue to share successes and challenges with your BBBS Coach and fellow Teen Bigs.

Tips for Stage 4: Accomplishing and Attaining

- Be prepared for highs and lows. It's possible that you'll feel much closer to your Little some weeks than on others.
- Do some focused thinking about how the relationship is meeting both your and your Little's needs. You might ask yourself ...
 - ✓ How well do I understand what my Little wants and needs from me? Have I set aside my own agenda to listen to my Little's concerns?

- ✓ Is my verbal and nonverbal communication with my Little effective?
- ✓ What are the strengths and weaknesses of the match between me and my Little?
- ✓ What is working best in our relationship? What is not working as well? What things about our interactions could change to make things better?
- Point out to your Little when you see significant milestones being achieved (and let him/her know how excited you are about this).
- Acknowledge the growth that you notice in the relationships among you and your fellow Teen Bigs, as well as the relationships between other Teen Bigs and their Littles.

Tips for Stage 5: Wrapping Up

- Prepare your Little for the end-of-year closure. Be sure that he/she is not surprised by the sudden change.
- Expect and plan to respond to feelings of anxiety or fear of separation.
- Discuss with your Little all that he/she has accomplished over the course of the year.
- Commemorate the experience with a group celebration with the other Teen Bigs and their Littles.
- Do NOT buy gifts. It can be seen as unfair by other Littles who may not get a similar gift from their Teen Big. Instead, decide as a group on something small that every Teen Big can make and present to his/her Little.
- Let your BBBS Coach know whether you plan to continue with your Little (or another child) next year.
- Have a party just for you and your fellow Teen Bigs!

