



BEING A SIGNIFICANT ADULT

Significant adults are essential for children and young people. Your child or young person will look up to you to help guide how they behave in relationships, at school, and when faced with challenging decisions. They may also look up to relatives, peers or teachers and often also to celebrities such as entertainers or athletes and famous characters. While your child may look to celebrities for inspiration in terms of trends and fashion, it is the significant adults with whom they have regular and positive interactions who are the most powerful role models. From your influence your child will develop the personal values that will stay with them for the rest of their lives.

What The Research Says

Studies have shown that significant adults have a variety of positive influences on a child or young person's life. The presence of a caring non-parental role model correlates directly with the indicators of a child's positive wellbeing. They are less likely to demonstrate challenging behaviours and more likely to complete tasks they begin, show interest in learning new things, and be engaged at school.

Research has shown that significant adults have an extraordinary impact on young people and can influence:

- Increased self esteem.
- Reduced use of alcohol, cigarettes, and drugs.
- Improved school achievement and high school graduation rates.
- Higher aspirations for their careers.

Evaluation has also shown the Time for Kids has a truly transformative effect on the lives of children in need.

In 2006 Professor Mark Halsey from Flinders University undertook a formal evaluation of the Time for Kids program. His research provides a snapshot of the experiences of past Time for Kids children who were asked about the overall impact of their Time for Kids family or friend on their lives.

Professor Halsey's research shows that early intervention with children experiencing a number of risk factors can protect them from becoming involved in homelessness, truancy, and the child protection or juvenile justice systems.

Other findings from the research include:

- Time for Kids provides children with exposure to alternative activities, experiences, learning and opportunities than were otherwise available to them.
- The understandings of life options and pathways available are expanded for children in the program, in many cases changing their life choices and outcomes.
- Children have a deep feeling of being cared-for by their Time for Kids family or friend, largely due to the volunteer nature of the relationship.
- Children experience reduced emotional stress and associated risks for poor life outcomes.
- Children develop stronger resilience and coping skills and are able to respond constructively to the challenges in their lives.

Significant Adults As Protective Factors

There are a variety of ways and reasons why children and young people interact differently with non-parental adults than with their parents. As a stable and protective person in their life, the child you care for will develop trust in you to see and guide them through any challenges that arise. They are also more likely to listen and accept advice from you as an important person in their life.

Over time children will respond positively to role models who they come into contact with regularly and who take an interest in their lives and wellbeing. Children who have a strong connection with even just one significant adult are much less likely to do anything to threaten that bond. As a result they are usually less likely to engage in high risk activities later in life.

To be a significant adult in a child's life you don't necessarily need any special skills. The best role models are:

- Good listeners.
- Supportive.
- Willing to work towards a child or young person's overall development.

“Research and practice show that having ongoing support from at least one permanent, caring adult can make an enormous difference in the life of a vulnerable youth” (Howard & Berzin 2011).

Your Role As A Carer

We all learn by observing and copying others. You will be a powerful influence on your child or young person's life, helping them learn who they are and where they are going. Children will be guided by the behaviour you model.

The stronger your relationship is with your child the more of an influence you will have on their core values and choices about their future. In contrast, their friends are more likely to influence everyday behaviour, such as taste in clothing and music.

Throughout the course of your relationship with your Time for Kids child you will:

- Empower the child you care for to make informed decisions through positive role-modelling.
- Support them to grow up safe, happy, healthy and resilient.
- Provide opportunities and skills for them to work, learn and engage in their community.

They will learn from what you do and how you behave, particularly when it comes to things like managing frustration and distress, what you eat and how you look after yourself. It might also be helpful to talk with your child about how their behaviour affects other people as this will help them to control their own behaviour.

Children and young people are often looking for someone to listen to them and offer advice on occasion. It's not necessarily *what* you do with your Time for Kids child but the *way* you do it that makes the difference.

“They were just there, being themselves, doing what they always did. It was the simple things. Like being asked what I wanted for dinner; being offered the most comfortable chair in the house; having my friends to my own birthday party; even the experience of talking about experiences. I would never have been given these choices at home” – excerpt from an interview with ‘Matthew’, former child in Time for Kids program

You will have an important role in supporting the child you care for to develop healthy self-esteem, feel valuable, and learn to trust themselves and their decisions. By encouraging your child to discover and become the person they want to be they will be more equipped to manage challenging situations with confidence.

Some tips for positive role modelling:

- Always show kindness and respect to others.
- Role model safe and productive ways to resolve disagreements. Some children may never have witnessed adults resolve differences of opinion without raised voices or sometimes even violence.
- Admit to mistakes and take responsibility for your actions. This will teach your child you care for that it is alright to make mistakes and think about ways to learn from them.
- Send an important message about healthy lifestyle and body image by eating well and not being critical of your own body.
- Include children in family discussions. This will let them know their voice is heard and you see them as special and valued.
- Encourage children to make decisions in age-appropriate settings. This is a great learning experience for making both choices and mistakes in a safe and protective environment.
- Approach challenges in a calm and productive way. Opportunities for children to learn persistence in situations where their goals may not be achieved easily will help develop resilience for future challenges.
- Encourage them to follow their passions; you might also introduce them to a new hobby or special interest.
- Encourage them to try new things – you never know when you might uncover an unknown talent!

- Involve children in household chores and tasks to teach independence and future living skills. It will also show them how to work together as part of your family team.
- Remind them that they are not alone.
- Engage the child in activities they are good at.
- Stay positive!

Developing Leadership

You also play a critical role in challenging children and young people with the idea that they can be, and often already are, leaders. You may observe certain opportunities and provide the child with information. More importantly, encouraging your child to believe they can influence what happens in their lives, families, school and community will assist them to have more confidence in themselves and their abilities.

How Much Of An Impact Are You Really Having?

Sometimes it might be hard to see how much of an impact your time and care is truly having. This might be because you see your child so regularly, or perhaps over time it is difficult to remember how far removed things were when they first began.

We are often asked how some children are always so happy and carefree during their visits. To that we say, 'Keep doing what you're doing!' Children who are happy and resilient are telling us that they want to be with you and are enjoying a much needed break from what may often be a stressful or chaotic home life.

One thing we can assure you is that your connection with your Time for Kids child will have a truly transformative effect on both their life and yours, today and many years into the future.

Time for Kids' carer resources are available to download from www.timeforkids.com.au.

To discuss any issues raised in this resource, please call us on 8245 8100.

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