



## The Stages of a Match Relationship



You hear the stories, you see the results, and you're interested in becoming a Big Brother or Sister. What is one of the most important things you need to know before becoming a Big?

It takes time.

"It takes time," said Ellen Harsch, enrollment supervisor at BBBS. "It takes time for any person to build a relationship with someone else, but it especially takes time for kids to build trust and to form meaningful relationships, particularly with new adults that they don't know at all."

This is something new Bigs can easily forget at the beginning of a match as they get caught up in their enthusiasm to help, to mentor, and to make a difference. The time factor can also get lost behind preconceived notions regarding how a match "should" progress. Consequently, BBBS holds training sessions for Bigs to help them understand the common stages of match relationships.

"Every match is different and moves through the stages at their own pace," Ellen continued. "But when you look at matches across the board, there are a lot of similar patterns. And it is important for Bigs to understand these stages so that they know what to expect and that they are not alone. For example, if your Little doesn't immediately trust you, this is normal. Other Bigs experience this too."

The first stage of a match relationship – the **"Early Development Stage"** – is about building trust. At this point, Bigs and Littles are trying to figure each other out. Littles may try to get their Big's approval or to impress them.

"At the beginning of any relationship you're nervous, excited, and unsure but committed to the relationship," said Christina Snell, match support supervisor. "There's an emphasis on getting to know one another, talking, asking questions, and being consistent in the time you give. If you don't see each other and get to know one another, it's hard to build a strong relationship."

Being consistent with communication and time is critical during this early stage, especially during the first 3 months. For Bigs with younger Littles, it's even more important, as parents are working to feel comfortable with the Big/Little relationship as well.

"We had 8 and 9-year-old siblings in a match who were home-schooled by their mom and the match had to adhere to a rigid schedule," said Christina, "because younger kids work better with a schedule and so do parents. With every match, the parent or guardian, the Little, and the Big all need to work together to find the rhythm and pace that works best for them so that they are all on the same page."

"At the beginning of a match, if the parent doesn't offer as much support, a Big may also need to be prepared to take the initiative to keep match activities and plans going," Christina added.

After the initial stage, matches move into what is described as the **"Growth Stage."** This is probably the most crucial period in the development of the Big/Little relationship, possibly even a turning point in the relationship. It is common during this stage for Littles to test their Bigs to learn more about them and to find out how much they can get away

with. The Little may also be observing the Big to find reasons not to trust them or to determine whether the Big will leave.

“During the Growth Stage matches often say, ‘Okay, we know each other. We’re in an established relationship. Now what?’” Christina said. “This is when they need to start exploring interests and activities, and doing new things that might be outside of their comfort zone, just to keep the excitement alive and the relationship moving forward.”

“This is also when Bigs may start wanting and needing more input from their Littles. Bigs will sometimes say ‘I’d like my Little to give me ideas for match activities,’ ‘I need them to say thank you,’ or ‘Does my Little really like me?’” Christina said. “At this point Bigs sometimes start to question the match. For example, if a match is doing the same thing all the time – going out to eat or to the movies, the Big may tell us ‘There’s got to be more to the match than this.’ But when we ask the Little about the match they’ll say ‘This is everything to me. This is just what I need.’ So, we remind Bigs that their Littles just enjoy being with them. They don’t care as much about the type of activities they do with their Bigs as they do about the time spent together. This is also a stage at which BBBS’ match support team can offer suggestions and recommend new activities.”

The next stage in the match relationship is the **“Maturity Stage,”** a point at which the match relationship has become more positive and realistic, and where activities are often less structured. By this point most Bigs have shed their preconceived notions regarding the match and their Littles. Bigs have also often seen their Littles grow and develop.

“This is the coolest level. This is when they really get it,” said Christina. “By this point the Big has shown that they’re committed to the relationship, that they are not going anywhere, and that they know they’ve just got to keep the conversation going. Both Big and Little realize that they are in the match relationship to be friends, and that the Big needs the Little as much as the Little needs the Big.”

According to BBBS’ match support team, this is also the point when both Bigs and Littles need to be reminded of the importance of their relationship. “People get really comfortable in relationships and may feel taken for granted,” said Christina. “At this stage, we offer a lot of positive reinforcement and feedback. We let the Big know that their Little’s family has a lot of good things to say about them and that they are so grateful for the time they give. And we let the family know how much the Big looks forward to spending time with their child. This support reinforces and validates the relationship so that Bigs and Littles know they are on the right track.”

Helping Bigs, and families, understand the natural stages of a match relationship is another way BBBS provides match relationships with the support they need to thrive. “We want happy participants,” said Ellen.

Happy participants lead to positive mentoring relationships, which lead to more kids succeeding in life. It’s all just a matter of time.

