



What Happens Now That I'm A Big?

You've been accepted as a Big. You've completed the enrollment process, the background checks and the training. You've met your new Little Brother or Sister and you're ready to start changing a child's life for the better, forever. Everything will be perfect, just like in the brochure, right? Except your Little doesn't say much on your first outing, and he or she doesn't seem enthusiastic about your efforts to interact.

Is the match in trouble? Did you mess up? How do you start building a meaningful relationship with this child? New Bigs often have common questions and concerns soon after being matched. But BBBS' professional staff is prepared to help Bigs, Littles, and families work through the twists and turns along this relationship road.



A mentoring relationship is like any other relationship. It takes time and effort to foster a sense of trust, companionship and comfort. And when a match is just getting started, patience, realistic expectations, consistency, and attention to the little things can go a long way.

"I have Bigs who worry about their Littles not talking when they're on an outing and thinking that their Littles don't want to be matched," match support specialist Rah-Taja Doggett explained. "I always encourage them to be patient, because it takes time for a relationship to flourish."

Staff members also encourage Bigs to remember that there are any number of reasons a child might not want to talk or open up right away. "Sometimes kids are shy or nervous," Ellen Harsch added. "It could be that they're a teenager, or that they don't know what to suggest for an outing."

To help Littles open up, BBBS' match support specialists recommend planning outings that are interactive and engaging and that don't put too much pressure or focus on the Little. "We encourage new matches to play card games or to do activities where they build or make things," said Christina Snell, a BBBS match support supervisor. "We also provide 'nice-to-meet-you' cards that Bigs and Littles can use to initiate conversations."

When Ellen and her Little Sister go out to eat they enjoy getting kids' menus that they can color while waiting for their food. This gives them something to do together, but it takes the pressure off of having a conversation.

One of the Bigs Christina works with uses a journal to foster communication with a reserved Little. "The pair has a match journal that they pass back and forth," Christina said. "When the Little is at home they can record their thoughts and ideas in the journal, or the Big can provide questions like 'What's the coolest thing you did this week?' Sharing a journal takes the pressure off discussing everything in person but it allows the Big to interact with their Little and to gain insight into what their Little is thinking and going through."

As a match progresses kids may or may not open up more, but seeds of trust can still be planted. "You build trust by being consistent and reliable, by keeping the plans you make and by reassuring your Little that you're there for them," Lauren Dolan said.

"We know that there are times Bigs can't be consistent," Sergio Guzman added. "But when Bigs can't be there or when they need to change their plans, we encourage them to give their Little a call to check in or to make plans for the next outing so the Little will know when they'll see their Big again and that their Big is thinking of them."

In addition to being consistent, BBBS' staff encourage Bigs to be realistic and flexible in their expectations about their matches. "Surveys show that our kids DO feel close to their Bigs and that it sometimes takes our Bigs longer to develop a sense of rapport than our Littles," said Joe Strychalski, BBBS' vice president of programs. "But Bigs don't necessarily see that. They come in with lofty goals and when the things they've imagined don't happen right away, they sometimes get concerned."

Joe cites his own experience as an example. Joe mentored a 14-year-old who never had any issues with not talking. "My Little talked a mile-a-minute," Joe laughed, "but he never said 'thank you' for our time together." When they'd go for several days without talking, however, Joe noticed that he would get a text from his Little saying, "'Sup? (What's up?)" "I realized that he wasn't going to thank me, but that initiating contact, being the one to suggest we hang out, and texting was his way of doing that. Sometimes it's just a matter of recognizing what small victories actually look like."

"Sometimes Bigs forget to look at the subtleties of their matches," Nick Rudomin agreed. "My Little will never be on my shoulders shouting at the camera like in the brochure. He's not going to have a deep conversation with me, but for him, showing up every week is his way of letting me know that he values our time together."

Occasionally Bigs need to see those small victories through the eyes of the parent. As Lauren explained, it's the Little's parents who see their child come home from a match outing full of excitement, or who experience a change in their child's attitude that confirms that they are enjoying the match and benefiting from it. Maintaining communication with a Little's parents can help Bigs better understand the difference they are making.

"Communication is so important," Ellen remarked. "I've seen matches deal with huge problems simply because everyone communicated with one another. I've also seen matches close without ever getting a chance because the participants didn't discuss what was going on. That is super frustrating because we have so many ways to help Bigs, Littles, and families address any issues they might be facing."

BBBS' program staff are talented problem solvers, but they also work very hard to equip Bigs with the tools they need to head off issues before they start. "At every step of the match process we provide Bigs, Littles, and families with the guidance and tools to succeed," Christina said, "but we're here if they need us. And it takes all of us, working together, to make each match as successful as possible, because it's not easy. No relationship is. But, as with any relationship, being there for one another is what matters most."

EDITOR'S NOTE: *BBBS' staff not only believe in BBBS' mentoring model, they have experienced it themselves. More than thirty-five percent of our staff, including our CEO, are current or former Big Brothers or Sisters.*

