



What a 7-Year-Old Taught Me About Life

This post was written as part of the #Mentor series, which is tied to LinkedIn's student editorial calendar. Follow the stories or write your own.



Victoria Chang,
Demand Planning Analyst,
Estée Lauder

The choice to become a Big through Big Brothers Big Sisters of New York City (BBBS of NYC) was easy, for two reasons.

Firstly, I love hanging out with children—while I was in college, I learned that my interest in children's literacy and my uncanny ability to make animal noises made me an excellent candidate for volunteering with Jumpstart, an early education organization serving preschoolers in low-income areas. It was there that I realized that the things that amuse children tend to amuse me too, which might explain why we get along so well.

The second reason is the need for mentors. When I'm not exploring the city with my Little, I'm an analyst, so I'd like to share some data points that speak for themselves:

- Students who meet regularly with their mentors are 52% less likely than their peers to skip a day of school and 37% less likely to skip a class (Public/Private Ventures study of Big Brothers Big Sisters).
- Youth who meet regularly with their mentors are 46% less likely than their peers to start using illegal drugs and 27% less likely to start drinking (Public/Private Ventures study of Big Brothers Big Sisters).
- Nationwide, more than 30,000 Littles are waiting to be matched with a Big (Big Brothers Big Sisters).

Despite having made up my mind, it took me months to get the ball rolling on my Big application... Don't give me that look. The distractions of a new job, warmer weather and New York City had me saying "I'll look into it next month..." I'd subconsciously been organizing my life into neat little categories of work, family, social, fitness, etc., and carving out time for mentoring was a conscious effort.

But it's an effort worth every second. I've been matched for almost a year with my amazing Little, and I tip my hat to BBBS of NYC because we're a great match. She's also a downtown girl (she lives in Chinatown, I'm in the Lower East Side), we share an enthusiasm for ice cream trucks (King Cone for her, Strawberry Shortcake bar for me), and like me, although she puts forth a tough exterior, she has boundless compassion for others.

I take her out on excursions every other week, which means twice a month we visit a new museum, another borough, a new adventure. Our goal, in a word, is fun. We accomplish that every time we meet, and she has taught me a lot along the way.

Before our first outing, I nervously took a look at whether or not I was worthy to be a mentor to her, asking myself: Am I ready to take this 7-year-old to Central Park Zoo in the bustling heart of Manhattan? Can I teach her something new? Set a good example? Be polite and courteous even when being pushed around on a crowded subway? How long can I keep on with this charade?

I had been swept up in a whirlwind of ambition: build your career, build your personal brand, build your success and take no days off. It was all quantifiable too via salary, social media followers, and appointments on my calendar, to name a few. Keeping up with these measures left little time for self-reflection. I'll admit that I checked my email and my Instagram more often than I checked my conduct, and it had been a while since I thought about the real indicators of growth.

I took an honest look at where I was when I was her age, and what I had accomplished since then. Had I grown more patient, considerate, and open to new opinions and lifestyles different from my own over the years? Was I wiser for it? It felt good to shift gears and focus my attention on making sure my behavior matched my values as I prepared for my first outing as a Big Sister.

It sounds so simple, right? When I'm with my Little, it really is. We swap stories, talk about our favorite things, and I attempt to answer her many questions. I've taught her how to count down the stops on the MTA subway and that it's much easier to shake the sand off your feet when it's dry. She's taught me to celebrate every small success and not to take myself so seriously—how to laugh at myself and pat myself on the back more often. Having a mentee whose opinion I value so highly has taught me a lot. I take pride in setting a good example for her and it's made me a better, happier person.

Victoria Chang is a Big Sister at Big Brothers Big Sisters of New York City. To become a volunteer mentor or to learn more about Big Brothers Big Sisters of NYC, log onto www.bigsnyc.org/BeABig or call 212-686-2042.