

Offer Love and Hope One Child at a Time

During National Mentoring Month, let's remember Jesus' command to reach out to "the least of these."

David Staal

January is National Mentoring Month, but today all I can think about is my son, Scott. Just a few moments ago, I walked out of a pre-surgery holding area as nurses wheeled him into an operating room. Although he's now 18 years old, my heart felt squeezed as I watched him lying in a bed connected to an IV.

As a now-legal adult, he signed all his own paperwork when we arrived today (somewhat odd considering that I still pay for everything). When a nurse asked for his authorization so the medical team could disclose medical information to me, he offered a glimpse into the relationship we share. "Sure you can," he said. "I tell him everything—so you can too."

And now for the connection to National Mentoring Month.

A growing number of children watch one or both parents walk out of their lives, leaving them no one to tell "everything" to—their hopes, hurts, fears, dreams, problems, and other realities of life. A myriad of reasons exists as to why. Death and divorce sit atop the list as most obvious. But too many other children live somewhat abandoned lives in a home with one or both parents still around. The dad who's always too busy. The mom who's constantly angry or emotionally absent. The abusive parent. The overworked parent. The just-plain-mean parent. The list could go on and on.

For example, I know a second-grade boy who talks non-stop at school because every day when he goes home his step-dad sends him to his room for the evening; he can't stand listening to the young boy ramble.

So what happens to this little fella and the rest of the children in similar home environments? They build internal walls and keep "everything" inside.

And as "everything" accumulates inside a child, leaks begin to develop ...

Some kids act out frustration.

Others go very quiet.

Or sad.

Or ... angry ... confused ... problem-causing ... withdrawn and unengaged ... mischievous ... unmotivated ... obnoxious ... attention-seeking ... people-avoiding ... antagonistic ... unable to concentrate ... unwilling to learn ...

An uncomfortable list to read. Definitely an uncomfortable list to write. But oh so true.

Do parents deserve all the blame for problems kids face? Of course not. But whether by chance or by choice, an alarming number of parents go absent from kids' lives. Does the church have a role to play in all this? Of course.

Here's why: Kids who demonstrate any of the traits listed above go to school with the kids in your church. They play on the same sports teams. They sometimes attend your church. They live within eyesight, unless you live on a remote farm. In other words, they qualify as a neighbor. And they stand one caring, loving adult relationship from turning a corner and thriving in life.

Fortunately, forming loving, caring relationships should serve as a sweet spot for any and every church. Jesus offered clear instructions about neighbors.

Back to National Mentoring Month.

Millions of kids are in need of a positive relationship with an adult—a mentor. Someone to share "everything" with each week. Unfortunately, all mentoring organizations put together reach only a small fraction of those in need. I know; I work at one.

An issue of discouraging magnitude, until you consider how progress happens: One at a time.

In [Matthew 25](#), Jesus describes the criteria used to separate the sheep and goats. Consider his words (emphasis added): "Truly I tell you, whatever you did for *one* of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me" (v. [40](#), NIV).

Apparently, if people in churches want to interact with Jesus, a likely place to find him is in one-to-one serving roles. Loving that neighbor, one at a time.

Imagine the statement made by a church when they prioritize sharing love and hope with children. What kind of reputation will that church enjoy in the neighborhood or in the community? In a recent study by Kids Hope USA, 96 percent of at-risk children who met for an hour a week at school with a mentor from a local church were promoted to their next school grade. No reason to wonder why schools warmly welcome such programs.

The surgeon just came out to tell me that my son's operation went well. The relief I feel reminds me of stepping into a hot shower. I love him deeply and want to hear "everything" he's feeling today, tomorrow, and every day after.

And how I long for a mentor to show up in the life of every at-risk child who needs someone to tell "everything" to. Let's face it: A kid problem persists in our country. No, it grows. The only force large enough to treat this problem: the local church.

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Interested in David speaking at your event? [Click here](#).