

Big Friend: A Tutorial Program

VERNA KEENE BAKER*

THE most effective teachers for some children, some of the time, are other children. Time, space, and personnel can make it possible for two children to work together as a team in a one-to-one relationship. An older student, nine to thirteen years of age, teams with a younger student, five to eight years of age, in order to meet the needs of one or both members of the team.

We have known for many years that children often learn games and songs from other children. We are attempting to extend this same way of learning to achieve knowledge, skills, and attitudes at home and at school.

A "Big Friend" program, which is a part of our differentiated staffing at Holmes School, has contributed successfully toward growth in self-direction and self-worth, according to testimonials of students, teachers, and parents during the past nine years.

Friends Meet

The Big Friend program began at Holmes School when a teacher expressed concern about three of his older students who lacked a feeling of self-worth. One student was much overweight, one an epileptic, while another needed opportunities for a wide variety of experiences which he could select and direct. Approaches that might help these

children were discussed. Finally, through combined efforts of the staff, we agreed that these students might develop more confidence if they participated in experiences requiring their own direction and leadership.

Each of the three older students was teamed with a younger student. Each teacher predicted social and academic benefits for the child involved in one-to-one relationship experiences.

Two of the three teams continued to operate, but one member of a team wanted to quit because he said, "My little friend won't do what I want him to do."

The relationship of Big Friend to Little Friend provides the younger child with someone of his very own to help him with his problems. It also helps the older pupil who assumes responsibility for assisting the younger member of the team.

Value of the Program

The Big Friend program has mushroomed from three teams to more than 60 teams at present. When a teacher identifies a child (older or younger) who might benefit from a one-to-one learning experience, he contacts the director of the program.

* Verna Keene Baker, Principal, Holmes School, Mesa, Arizona



Both children benefit from a one-to-one learning experience.

The program director is a teacher who applies for this role each spring and who must be accepted by the School Council. The director works with all teachers to compile two lists, one of younger students who need help and one of older students whose identified needs might be met in a team arrangement.

Other tasks of the director are to:

1. Consult with teachers about matching a Big Friend with a Little Friend
2. Prepare a written schedule of times when teams may work
3. Arrange for space where teams will work
4. Meet with Big Friends and explain: (a) time they will meet with their Little Friends, (b) teaching materials they will use, and (c) methods they might use to help their Little Friends achieve their tasks
5. Prepare a paper including: (a) name and room number of Little Friend, (b) name and room number of Big Friend, (c) time for the older student to call for and then return the Little Friend to his room, and (d) a list of skills with which the younger child may need help
6. Conduct sessions with the older students about: (a) displaying and explaining

uses of new materials, (b) discussions with Little Friends, (c) making materials, and (d) problems of their partners.

The Big Friend goes to his Little Friend's classroom and escorts him to their assigned work space. At present the location for most teams is the dining room, where there are 40 round tables to accommodate as many as 40 teams, each half hour, every morning from 8:30 until 11:00. The younger child's teacher assumes responsibility for the work or play activities to take place during the half hour. For example, a six-year-old student who needs help with printing may have his Big Friend's assistance for 30 minutes.

Often, when help is not immediately available from the teacher, a child may even forget what he wanted to know. Sometimes this results in negative behaviors requiring even more of the teacher's time. At Holmes School, a Big Friend may be able to supply this immediate attention.

The younger child's interests may be more fully developed by a Big Friend who has similar interests. Another benefit of the program is in decision making, which begins when a student decides whether he wants to work on a team and continues until he chooses to stop working on a team.

An Aide Contributes, Too

An aide for the Big Friend program is available to answer student questions. At first, children seemed to resent an aide, saying they could direct themselves. We explained that the aide was to assist them only if they asked for help. We agreed that under ordinary circumstances they could direct themselves very well.

Each morning the aide loads a cart with a variety of resources children may use after completing assigned tasks. The aide also: assists children in obtaining games, answers questions about their work tasks, prepares resources, types and binds books children have written, prepares flannel board stories, and makes and files dittos.

One advantage common to older children is the gaining of insight into their own problems as they help younger children: use

microscopes, match numerals, make items for bulletin boards, work on art projects, read together, look at slides, use the telephone, practice handwriting skills, listen to stories, use individual filmstrip projectors, work math problems, play with reading games, play with math games, or use manipulative objects so as to understand math better.

As the Big Friend directs another individual, he becomes more skillful in directing himself. A Big Friend who helps a younger child with motor coordination exercises is referred to as "coach."

Involvement in this program offers a wide variety of opportunities for changes in behavior. An older child who learns slowly and feels uncomfortable in group situations may feel challenged and become more sensitive when he learns that even a younger friend needs to work slowly. Young children who have problems at home or at school often function more comfortably knowing they will be with their friends every day.

Students Respond

Teachers and the director encourage students to ask for conferences, and teachers call students together to evaluate their team experiences. Some actual comments of the children from these meetings are: "I get more attention," "I'm a better reader, writer, and I'm good in arithmetic," "It helped me understand smaller children," "I'm happy I am one



When the teacher is busy, an older student may supply immediate attention.



The younger child's interests are shared by a Big Friend.

of the lucky ones who has the chance to tutor," "I get to where I can associate with people," "When I read her stories it helps me in reading," "It makes me think more and makes me think ahead," "A tutor has more experiences with people," "I'm not nearly as shy."

The older student is challenged to complete his own tasks, and to organize his time so he may have the half hour with his Little Friend. Serving unselfishly, the Big Friend grows in his ability and desire to help others. Other values developed are:

1. *Leadership*—the Big Friend is responsible for his Little Friend and is a model in behavior and attitudes.
2. *Initiative*—the Big Friend prepares materials and plans activities.
3. *Self-direction*—as the Big Friend directs another individual, he becomes more capable of directing himself.
4. *Study habits*—the Big Friend organizes his time so he can help his Little Friend for 30 minutes.
5. *Unselfishness*—the Big Friend's efforts are directed toward his Little Friend's interests and needs.
6. *Opportunity for success and development of self-worth*—an older, slower student who has difficulty achieving success finds ways to help his Little Friend feel successful. □

Copyright © 1973 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.