

Our communities' children and youth deserve someone to look up to, talk to, and celebrate their successes with. A person who listens and offers support during difficult times. A person who brightens their day and inspires them to be their best selves. A teen mentor would be the perfect person to do this!

This summer, I met some amazing kids through volunteering at Meet Up Chow Down. I became aware of the impact a positive conversation can have on kids and youth in our communities through that experience. Although my main purpose was to serve lunch to the kids, I discovered that some of them were lonely. I took the time to listen, learn, and laugh with them. I believe there is a need in our community to improve the lives of youth by providing them with a teen mentor who can give them hope, support, and guidance. We should identify ways to improve and expand current mentorship programs in our communities. Younger youth often can identify more with high school or college-age students.

Developing a program that has mentors between the ages of 16 – 20 could have additional benefits. Some benefits are that youth may feel more comfortable talking with someone they can better relate to and look up to. It's easier to identify with someone closer to your age, and they can see the importance of staying in school, trying their best, and not using drugs or alcohol.

The United Way could partner with local schools, youth organizations, key clubs, student councils, and sporting teams to promote volunteering as a mentor and train the volunteers. Developing this program would be advantageous for the participants and volunteers. The younger a person is when they begin volunteering, it becomes more ingrained, and they become more connected with the community. It also promotes a sense of worth knowing your impact on improving someone's day.

Having teen mentors who are involved in community activities, school activities, and sports will spark their interest in developing a healthy lifestyle.

The United Way and its partners could host events at local schools, parks, skating rinks, gyms, etc., to connect kids with mentors.

This program would align with United Way's values and beliefs as it would positively impact the youth in our community and the teen mentors. The program's benefits would be decreasing drug usage, increasing school attendance, increasing kids' participation in physical activity, and improving youth and teen mentors' mental health and well-being.

I believe connecting teen mentors with youth in our community is crucial to give them a better understanding of the world at a younger age, leading to a more mature and well-rounded generation. This will provide them with more opportunities to see the success of teens who have been in their shoes, motivate them to reach their full potential, and offer hope. Implementing this program would help younger generations grow, thrive, and gain knowledge while, most importantly, having fun in the process.

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