

Who is a 'VIP' for Kids? Not Parents!



By *Jamie Wells, M.D.* — September 13, 2016



Jamie Wells, bottom, with article co-author Jordan Wells

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My co-author and niece, Jordan, said to me, “I want to write an article with you on role models.” Since she is my life coach and I cut her cord when she was born, the mere suggestion was heartwarming and completely exhilarating.

I charged her with the task of finding the research to support her hypothesis that they matter to children and youth development, in general. Because National Aunt’s Day — obviously there is one— is in July and the requisite Niece Day is in December, we split the difference and did the analysis now.

Passionate about psychology and understanding behavior and its origin, her theory was the advice itself and point-of-view from a non-parental adult is different from what a parent can offer. These supportive non-parental adults (SNPAs) don’t make demands, she says, whereas parents tell you what to do constantly which can lead to frustration and resentment. An aunt, for example, is more relaxed and “cooler.”

Yes, to my contemporaries, she actually used the word “cool” to reference me. Drop the mic, this may only happen once in a lifetime for me.

SNPAs give more advice as a child or adolescent often need a person to trust or confide in who is not their parent. From her perspective, the relationship is all beneficial because of mutual respect and a “continuous loop of positive reinforcement.” They don’t bark orders so you actually listen and want to do the task. Additionally, Jordan underscored the importance of obtaining another point-of-view with a varying background that wasn’t the identical refrain from parents that

adolescents tend to receive repeatedly.

We are an example of how an adolescent and VIP (aka very important non-parental adult) get along well and how the relationship grows and transitions from infancy to college applications. How well we communicate, interact and accomplish things together while inspiring one another to learn more is evidence for her presumption.

“I teach you things. You teach me things,” she espouses. Let’s see if her research confirms her speculation.

One study’s results were consistent with conventional wisdom that mentoring relationships have positive effects on developing youth from a diversity of backgrounds. In fact, “youth who reported a natural mentoring relationship were more likely to exhibit favorable outcomes in the areas of education/work, problem behavior, psychological well-being and physical health (1).” It was further determined that longevity was a significant contributing factor to greater depth of bond and influence (9.1 years on average). Over 40% were extended family members with daily involvement. While appreciating exclusive mentoring is insufficient to address all the needs of at-risk youth, cultivating “comprehensive, multi-faceted interventions offers the greatest promise (2).”

Another from the Journal of Youth and Adolescence states, “recent evidence suggests that relationships with committed, caring adults in adolescents’ lives within these contexts are the most important assets for predicting higher levels of PYD” (aka positive youth development) “and lower levels of risk behaviors (3).” The ‘contexts’ references families, schools and out-of-school-time activities. It goes on to reaffirm those with VIPs in their lives have lower depressive symptoms, lower risk and problem behaviors with greater school achievement. The traits of ‘warmth, acceptance and closeness’ are most linked to these results (4).

The recurring theme in the studies we reviewed was more research needs to be done on the impact of these alliances and how to maximize the benefits of their reach in youth programs and varying spheres. Additionally, they convey that regardless of level of parental involvement, albeit intense to laissez faire, VIPs or SNPAs exerted a positive impact (5).

Personally, growth is bidirectionally rewarding in natural mentoring relationships. I am forever changed by my extraordinary bond with Jordan. Doing things like this together allows both of us to learn by example. Being her cheerleader and admiring her endless wonderful attributes is a true joy in my life.

Shifting for the remainder of this piece to her voice, allows me to encourage her autonomy, reflect my limitless respect for the woman she has become and nurture the depth of character and intellectual curiosity she possesses.

Advice from adults is something I really take into consideration, especially, when given by people who have gone through major life changes and enjoyed plenty of adventures. It’s refreshing to hear different outlooks beyond your own household. Their unique lessons and stories impart a broader perspective. Great advice can be something as little as being an aggressive walker when navigating around people on the New York City sidewalks. *Ok, that’s just NYC-Aunt Jamie Survival Tips 101. Back to Jordan.* Or, it can be something as valuable as teaching you the

insight to know when another person is hurtful, it is often a reflection of their shortcomings and insecurities. Basically, developing an understanding that absorbing what others may project can be damaging.

Parents are groomed from parenting books and advice from other mothers and fathers on how to care and bring up children. Whereas, VIPs tend to act on what they know.

Another notable thing about having a non-parental role model is having that person to go to with anything. Often, it is challenging to discuss meaningful concerns or worries with your friends because they just don't get it. Sometimes, I get into situations that are way above my friends' level of life experiences. In times like these, I go to Jamie because she can offer tools that will guide me to dig myself out of the holes I've made. Always without judgment or harsh criticism.

Yes, as my aunt mentioned earlier, I did refer to her as "cool"- in her own dorky and witty way. I do look up to and confide in her. You can't always tell your parents everything you do because they may not approve and might reprimand you. Because a VIP typically lacks that power to punish, yell, and make you feel bad about something you did, it's much easier to tell them things. Don't get me wrong, my parents are my world, but there are some things that I simply cannot tell them. When I tell Jamie instead, since she doesn't have that authority, it gives me a sense of freedom. If she doesn't condone what I did, then she can guide me in the right direction with advice for the future.

I never want to disappoint my parents in the process. Furthermore, what child doesn't want to make their parents proud and impressed?

SOURCES:

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