



# Big Sister Association School-Based Mentoring Training Guide and Resource Manual



**Big Sister Association**  
of Greater Boston

*Little Moments. Big Magic.™*

161 Massachusetts Avenue  
Boston, MA 02115  
617-236-8060

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# About Big Sister Association of Greater Boston

*Cultivating confidence, competence and caring in Greater Boston's girls*

**Confidence...** Big Sister empowers girls to believe there is no limit to what they can dream, do and achieve.

**Competence...** Big Sister invests girls with the knowledge and skills they need to make healthy decisions for themselves and their futures.

**Caring...** Big Sister encourages girls to develop authentic relationships based on kindness, trust and respect.

Since 1951, Big Sister has been helping girls reach their full potential through positive mentoring relationships with women. Big Sister is the largest mentoring organization in Greater Boston exclusively serving girls. We offer two one-to-one mentoring programs, Community-Based and School-Based, and two group mentoring programs, TEAM (Team Enhanced Approach to Mentoring) and *Life Choices*, all of which are specifically designed to acknowledge, address and affirm girls' innate strengths and unique perspectives.

## **Our Little Sisters:**

Big Sister matches girls ages 7 to 15 in 69 cities, towns and communities in Greater Boston. Little Sisters come from a wide range of backgrounds, cultures and family situations. All of our girls have one thing in common: they all desire the friendship of an adult mentor.

## **Our Big Sisters:**

Our Big Sisters are women like you! Big Sisters come from a wide range of backgrounds, cultures and family situations. Their most important qualities are that they are enthusiastic, compassionate and willing to share their time with a girl.

## **Our Partners:**

Big Sister is a proud affiliate of Big Brothers Big Sisters of America. We could not offer the depth of programs and activities that we do without the generosity of our partners. Big Sister has partnered with a number of local corporations that allow employees to volunteer during the workday, as well as colleges which encourage their students to give back. In addition to our corporate and academic partners, we collaborate with other social service organizations, groups and affinity clubs in order to further our work.



## Mentoring Works

A Big Sister can help girls resist negative behaviors and embrace the opportunities for their futures because they are encouraged to think differently about themselves and what they can do with their life.

Research has proven that Big Sister's mentoring programs have a powerful and positive impact on the girls we serve. A landmark study of mentoring program by the independent research firm Public/Private Ventures found that girls with a Big Sister are:

- **46%** less likely than their peers to use drugs
- **27%** less likely to start drinking alcohol
- **52%** less likely to skip school
- **More trusting** of their parents or guardians
- **Experiencing better relationships** with their peers



## **The Role of a Big Sister**

The role of the mentor or “Big Sister” may come easily for some, but mentoring is not always easy. It takes awareness and patience to develop a relationship which could positively impact a young person. Understanding your role as a mentor will prepare you for developing a relationship with your Little Sister and enable you to set realistic expectations.

### **The role of a Big Sister includes:**

- Friend
- Confidant
- Someone to listen and just “be there”
- Consistent adult
- Someone who offers guidance
- Cheerleader (“You can do it, I believe in you!”)
- Coach (peer issues, life skills, dealing with a conflict with a teacher, etc.)
- A model of pro-social behavior
- Someone who celebrates and brings out her Little Sister’s strengths and helps her to see her full potential
- Someone who exposes her Little Sister to the many options she has open to her

### **The role of a Big Sister does not include:**

- Therapist
- Teacher or tutor
- Parent
- Savior
- Someone who has all the answers
- Fairy godmother
- Santa Claus/Gift giver



## **Building Relationships: Principles of Positive Youth Development**

Developing a supportive relationship with your Little Sister will take time. It is important to remain committed to this relationship by connecting with her at a natural pace. The following are some guidelines to help establish rapport in the beginning stages of your relationship:

- ❖ Reach out. Your Little Sister may be shy at first or unsure of what to say to you. Initiate conversation by asking open-ended questions like, “What are your favorite things to do on a Saturday?” Begin with something fairly general before getting too personal. These “ice breakers” are slow, safe ways of getting to know each other.
- ❖ If your Little Sister chooses to share family/home/peer issues, listen and accept her feelings without being judgmental.
- ❖ Be consistent—both with your meetings and your guidance. Always try to keep your set meeting time and day. If you are unable to come to the school at your designated time, always call the school so that they can relay the information to your Little Sister. This will encourage her trust in you. Calling in if you are running late or unable to make a visit is an important role-modeling example.
- ❖ Don’t be afraid to set limits. Let your Little Sister know where you stand by being open and honest with your feelings. If she asks to do something that you think is dangerous or inappropriate, clearly set the limit and explain why.
- ❖ Don’t expect perfection in yourself or your Little Sister. Ordinary human mistakes are inevitable and can always be addressed or re-addressed. You can set an example by handling mistakes in a responsible, positive way.
- ❖ Be patient. Your Little may test you. She may want to see how you react to certain questions or situations. Remember not to be a disciplinarian or a pushover. Discuss the question or action with her and make sure she knows that you care.
- ❖ Focus on your Little Sister’s abilities and acknowledge her accomplishments. Help her identify her strengths and help promote and build on them. She may have challenges that she is facing in her life, but she also has many strengths.

# The Mentoring Life Cycle

As is true for almost all new relationships, it will take time, consistency and effort to develop a positive relationship with your Little Sister. Outlined below are the general phases of a mentoring relationship life cycle to help guide you, shape your expectations and support you.

## **I. Getting to Know You:**

The first stage of the relationship is a time to get to know each other. During this time both of you are observing and assessing each other. You will learn to trust each other and discover your roles through:

- ❖ **Communication:** Listening is often the most overlooked aspect of communication. The most important thing you can do for a child is listen. It's important to remain engaged and non-judgmental.
- ❖ **Bridging differences:** You will encounter differences not only in age, but also possibly in racial/ethnic background and/or socioeconomic status. Take time to get to know your Little Sister and her experiences so that differences can be addressed and respected.
- ❖ **Testing:** Testing is a normal part of child development as children begin to establish their own identities. It can also be a form of protection from disappointment, as well as feeling out how much you can take and if you can be trusted. Your Little Sister may be slow trust you due to prior inconsistent relationships in her life. She may test your commitment with unreasonable requests, difficult behaviors, or withdrawal. The need to set limits is important. Children feel more comfortable knowing where you stand; it offers a sense of security.
- ❖ **Planning the initial meetings:** Predictability leads to trust. Be on time for visits and follow through on agreements.

## **II. Strengthening the relationship:**

Successful mentoring relationships are youth-driven. As the adult, you will need to take responsibility for maintaining this relationship and making it purposeful, while also engaging your Little Sister in decision-making. The key is collaboration and allowing her to have a voice.

- ❖ **Choosing activities:** Be open to suggestions and sensitive to your Little Sister's interests. She may not feel comfortable initiating requests in the beginning of your friendship. It may be helpful to offer suggestions of activities to do together and allow her to choose, thus empowering her to make decisions.
- ❖ **Celebrating accomplishments:** Young people need positive reinforcement. Some children may not believe they are capable of reaching their full potential until they are recognized for their achievements. Encourage her to envision a wide range of options in her future. Help her see how she can use her strengths in all aspects of her life. Support and acknowledge these accomplishments no matter how small.

## The Mentoring Life Cycle, continued

### III. Growth and Maturity:

As your relationship continues to grow and develop, the closeness in the relationship will grow. As trust builds, and your Little Sister comes to see you as a consistent, caring person in her life, she may begin to reveal more about herself—either directly or indirectly.

- ❖ **Invite conversation about important issues without “pushing”:** Difficult issues at home or school can manifest in your Little Sister’s behavior. Help her to identify feelings; ask questions but don’t pry. Your role as a mentor is unique and the trust that you have established may make it easier for her to confide in you. Respect this trust and assure her that your relationship is confidential with the exception of safety issues. Again, remain non-judgmental.
- ❖ **All relationships have ups and downs:** Conflicts and challenges may also arise as you move past the surface of getting to know each other and into a deeper level of connection. Communication, openness and a willingness to explore what’s happening in the relationship is critical. It is important to be in touch with your social worker any time things are feeling challenging in the relationship.
- ❖ **Youth need validation:** Peer pressure and other issues facing kids today are very real to them. It is important to give credence to these issues regardless of how trivial they may seem to you. If your Little Sister is upset, ask her to tell you how she feels. Be sure to listen and keep an open mind.
- ❖ **Seek out support from Big Sister staff:** The more support you receive, the greater your impact may be. Mentoring can be difficult and draining. Support from your agency social worker can validate your feelings on a situation, help you feel less burdened and offer you feedback where and when you need it most. Asking for support demonstrates the parallel process of mentoring.

### IV. Closure of the relationship:

Saying “goodbye” and ending a relationship is difficult. However, if done in a sensitive and tactful way, it can be a growing experience for your Little Sister. She can learn that the ending of your formal relationship does not mean rejection, but rather a change in your relationship as both of you move on. The end of your formal mentoring relationship can be a chance to celebrate the special relationship you have had and reflect on the growth of your Little Sister and your relationship while you were together. It can also be an opportunity for your Little Sister to experience a healthy, planned ending, which helps her to develop her “saying good-bye” skills, an important life lesson. Saying good-bye can also bring up a lot of difficult feelings for both Big and Little Sisters. We encourage you to talk to your social worker about the “good-bye process” to ensure that you work through your feelings, so that you can plan a thoughtful, planned and meaningful good-bye process with your Little Sister.

When it comes time to say good-bye to your Little Sister, we encourage you to refer to the **“Recipe for a Positive Ending”**, on the next page that provides some helpful tips on planning and preparing for your final visits together.



## Recipe for a Positive Ending

### Some food for thought...

- ❖ For an adult to say goodbye to any good friend is difficult, but for a child, it is much more difficult since her capacity to fully understand the situation is limited.
- ❖ Often, her feelings of anger, hurt and/or anxiety get in the way of understanding why you must say goodbye. Your Little Sister may see you saying goodbye as abandonment or rejection, and old feelings of earlier losses may resurface.
- ❖ It is important to be aware of your own feelings in ending the relationship. You may feel guilty, anxious or sad. Please do not let these feelings get in the way of taking the initiative to say goodbye. It is important that you don't put off the goodbye—remaining honest, realistic and open about your plans will benefit your Little Sister. One important thing to keep in mind when talking with your Little Sister is to try to be as concrete, specific and clear as possible in a way that you think she can comprehend.
- ❖ Endings, if done in a sensitive and tactful way, can be a growing experience for your Little Sister. She can learn that while you're ending the formal relationship it does not mean rejection, but rather a "change" in the relationship as both of you move on with the next stage of your life.

### Guidelines for your last few visits...

- ❖ If applicable, let your Little Sister know why you are leaving and what you will be doing. Plan to tell her a **month in advance (3-4 visits)** that you will be leaving/the visits will be ending. This will help her deal with feelings of anticipatory loss in your presence and will give her time to prepare for the goodbye.
- ❖ Plan activities that both of you have enjoyed in the past. Also, let your Little Sister know, as specifically as possible, how many more times you will be seeing her. Such structure will likely give your Little Sister some sense of security during this difficult time.
- ❖ Talk about good times, and bad ones too, without blame. Share yours first and ask for hers. Recollection of old memories will remind your Little Sister of the positive aspects of this relationship.
- ❖ Verbalize feelings: yours first and then your Little Sister's. If she does not respond verbally, your acknowledgement is still crucial. Let her know you are aware of how she might be feeling and allow her to express her feelings if she is able. For example, you might say: "I am feeling sad to be saying goodbye. How do you feel? You may be feeling sad, too, or maybe a little angry?"
- ❖ Speak with your social worker to discuss this ending process as well as to share your insights and feelings about the relationship.

# Effective Communication

Effective communication is a skill. Communicating with young children is much different than communicating with adults. You can set the tone in the relationship by listening and talking with your Little Sister in a manner that lets her know that what she has to say is important to you. Listening may be the most important communication skill a mentor can possess.

## Tips for Effective Listening:

- Pay attention
- Maintain eye contact (but be aware that not all Little Sisters will feel comfortable with a lot of eye contact; in some cultures, it is considered disrespectful for young people to look their elders in the eye)
- Listen for the whole message (is there something she is trying to tell you that is she isn't saying with words?)
- Ask for clarification if you are unsure of what she is saying
- Do not interrupt or finish her sentence
- Do not rehearse your response

## Tips for Talking with Girls:

- Use “kid friendly” language and vocabulary that she will understand
- Use “I” statements instead of “you” statements
  - Example: “I get confused when you talk so fast, can you slow down a little?” instead of “You talk too fast, I can’t understand you!”
- Make suggestions or ask questions rather than giving direct orders
- Be clear and selective in giving advice; allow your Little Sister to develop her own opinions and sense of judgment
- Use open rather than closed statements
  - An open response lets a child know that you acknowledge what she is saying as well as what she is feeling. This type of response lets your Little Sister know that you are trying to understand what she is saying. On the other hand, a closed response indicates to a child that you are not willing to accept or try to understand what she is saying.
  - For example, a Little Sister says: “I hate school. It’s awful and it’s way too hard.”
    - **Open** response: “It sounds like school has got you down right now. What’s going on?”
    - **Closed** response: “School isn’t awful. It’s fun. You should like school!”

## Additional Communication Tips

- Keep your sense of humor, HAVE FUN, and be silly!
- Create an atmosphere of openness, honesty and acceptance.
- Avoid talking to a Little Sister like a peer. Limit the amount of personal information you give to a child.
- Sometimes we may feel the need to “fix” or take care of a problem. What your Little Sister may need is merely to be heard and understood. Listen, listen, listen.
- Provide words of encouragement-“way to go,” “thanks for your help,” “that’s terrific,” “you really know how to show that you care,” etc.
- Make sure you and your Little Sister understand each other and have clear expectations.
- Learn to deal with silence. Your Little Sister may not always be in the mood to talk and that’s okay. It is important to be flexible and tolerate the quiet times.
- Use “what if?” questions to find out how your Little Sister might solve a problem. Asking your Little Sister “what if” questions gives her a chance to problem-solve and think ahead about personal safety and how to cope with some of life’s unexpected problems. It also takes you out of the position of having to have all the answers.
  - Example: You ask your Little Sister: “What if a fire started in your kitchen while you are home alone? What would you do?” Or, “What if someone bullies you in school and says they’ll hurt you? What could you do?”
  - Let your Little Sister tell you what she would do in that situation, then help her decide what the best thing to do would be.
- Non-verbal communication is just as important as verbal communication. A smile, a frown or having your back to your Little Sister when she is talking to you and the tone of your voice communicates whether you are listening and interested. Eye contact with your Little Sister is the best way to let her know that you do want to listen. Studies indicate that 60 percent of communication is through body language, 30 percent through tone of voice, and only 10 percent through the actual content of what is said.

## Conversation Starters

- ❖ What kind of music do you like to listen to?
- ❖ If you could have any pet, what would you choose?
- ❖ What is your favorite TV show?
- ❖ What is your favorite cartoon?
- ❖ Have you ever traveled to a different state? To a different country?
- ❖ What rules would you make if you ran the school?
- ❖ What is something that you like about yourself?
- ❖ What is your favorite animal?
- ❖ Who is your favorite famous person?
- ❖ Do you know what you want to be when you grow up?
- ❖ Do you like school? What is your favorite subject?
- ❖ What do you do like to do on the weekends?
- ❖ What is your favorite thing to do when you are not in school?
- ❖ What is your favorite food?
- ❖ Would you like to live in another country?
- ❖ Do you like sports? What is your favorite sport?
- ❖ What is your proudest achievement?
- ❖ If you could travel anywhere, where would you go?
- ❖ What do you usually do after school?
- ❖ Do you like movies? What is your favorite movie?

## What Girls Need During Their Developing Years

Girls' minds and bodies are consistently changing throughout their elementary school years. While mentoring programs are not intervention programs, they can help young people make decisions or, if need be, seek professional help regarding any serious issues they might be facing. In order to help kids have a healthy sense of themselves, manage peer pressure, learn about issues regarding their emerging sexuality and increase their ability to talk about issues that they face in their lives, the following tips may be helpful.

- Girls undergo rapid physical, social, emotional and intellectual changes.  
**Therefore, they need to explore who they are and what they can become.**
- Girls change at different rates, according to highly individual "internal clocks".  
**Therefore, they need diverse activities that can appeal to a wide range of skills and interests.**
- Girls are constantly growing.  
**Therefore, they need a lot of physical activity, as well as time for relaxation.**
- Girls are interested in sex, sexuality and the capacity to reproduce.  
**Therefore, they need accurate, age-appropriate information and guidance about sexuality.**
- Girls can be painfully self-conscious and critical. They are continuously defining themselves. Each girl will vary in maturation and ability.  
**Therefore, they need many opportunities to achieve and to have their competence recognized by others.**
- Girls seek limited independence and autonomy. They may imagine themselves to be invulnerable to negative risks.  
**Therefore, they need adult guidance in setting limits, but they should be allowed to help make the rules within those guidelines.**
- Girls identify with their peer group: they want to belong and they are developing deepening friendships.  
**Therefore, they need opportunities to form positive relationships and experiences with peers.**
- Girls develop new talents, energies and feelings.  
**Therefore, they need outlets for creative expression.**
- Girls begin to identify more strongly with their race, culture and gender.  
**Therefore, they need relationships with diverse adult role models and opportunities to explore and celebrate their racial, cultural, and gender identities.**
- Girls are at a uniquely vulnerable time in their lives.  
**Therefore, they need reassuring and informed adults and a more caring society.**

# Girls' Development During the School-Aged Years

The following list some general characteristics of girls' physical, social, emotional and mental development during two developmental stages—ages 8-10 and ages 11-13. Although the following can be helpful in understanding some of the issues and behaviors common to girls of these age groups, these guidelines should not be viewed as “hard and fast” expectations.

## AGES 8-10

### **General Characteristics**

- Interested in people, aware of differences, willing to give more to others, but expects more
- Busy, active, full of enthusiasm, may try too much, accident-prone, interested in money and its value
- Sensitive to criticism, recognizes failure, capacity for self-evaluation
- Decisive, dependable, reasonable, sense of right and wrong
- Spend a great deal of time in talk and discussion, often outspoken and critical of adults, although still dependent on adult approval
- Highly value clothing and foods

### **Physical Characteristics**

- Are very active and need breaks from tasks to do things that are fun for them and involve use of energy
- Bone growth is not yet complete
- Early maturation; may be upset with their size, a listening ear and your explanations will help
- May tend to be accident-prone
- Self-conscious about sexual development

### **Social characteristics**

- Competitive
- Choosy about their friends; being accepted by friends becomes quite important
- Team games become popular
- Worshipping heroes, TV stars, sports figures are common
- Dislike playing alone

### **Emotional Characteristics**

- Sensitive to praise and recognition; feelings are hurt easily
- Because friends are so important during this time, there can be conflicts between adults' rules and friends' rules; you can help by being honest and consistent
- May become frustrated when they don't like a job

### **Mental Characteristics**

- Their idea of fairness becomes a big issue
- Eager to answer questions
- Curious and are collectors of everything. However, they may have limited attention spans
- Want more independence, but know they need guidance and support
- Wide discrepancies in reading ability

### **Developmental Tasks**

- Social cooperation
- Self-evaluation
- Skill learning
- Team play

# **Girls' Development During the School-Aged Years, continued**

## **AGES 11-13**

### **General Characteristics**

- Testing limits, "know-it-all" attitude
- Vulnerable, emotionally insecure, fear of rejection, mood swings
- Identification with admired adult
- Bodies are going through physical changes that affect personal appearance

### **Physical Characteristics**

- Small-muscle coordination is good, and interests in art, crafts, models and music are popular
- Bone growth is not yet complete
- Early maturation; may be upset with their size; a listening ear and explanations will help
- Concerned with their appearance, and very self-conscious about growth
- Diet and sleep habits can be bad, which may result in low energy levels
- Girls may begin menstruation

### **Social Characteristics**

- Being accepted by friends becomes very important
- Cliques start to develop outside of school
- Team games become popular
- Friends set the general rule of behavior
- Feel a real need to conform; they dress and behave alike in order to belong
- Concerned about what others say and think of them
- Have a tendency to manipulate others ("Tamara's mother says she can go. Why can't I?")
- Interested in earning own money

### **Emotional Characteristics**

- Sensitive to praise and recognition; feelings are hurt easily
- Because friends are so important during this time, there can be conflicts between adults' rules and friends' rules
- Caught between being a child and being an adult
- Loud behavior hides their lack of self-confidence
- Look at the world more objectively; adults can be seen as subjective, critical

### **Mental Characteristics**

- Tend to be perfectionists; if they try to attempt too much, they may feel frustrated and guilty
- Want more independence, but know they need guidance and support
- Attention span can be lengthy
- Beginning to move from concrete thinking (what is) to abstract thinking (what might be true)
- Can't always perceive long-range implications and consequences of current decisions

### **Developmental Tasks**

- Social cooperation
- Self evaluation
- Skill-learning
- Team play

# Self-Esteem

Self-esteem is a fundamental belief in yourself: an assurance that you have personal value and potential. Self-confidence is a belief in your abilities to achieve. All children want to do well and feel good. The difference a Big Sister can make in helping to build a girl's self-esteem is significant.

## **Be generous with praise:**

- ❖ Directly praising your Little Sister or telling another person about her accomplishments while she is present are great ways to help her feel good about herself.
- ❖ Tell her the positive things that you have seen her do and praise her for acts of kindness.

## **Do not do things for your Little Sister that she is capable of doing on her own:**

- ❖ Babying a child sends the message "I don't think you can do this." Try giving hints to a child who seems to be struggling.
- ❖ Let her ask for help. Once she asks for help, only then should you HELP, do not do it for her.
- ❖ Try to let her figure things out for herself. Developing the ability to work out problems is crucial for the development of independence and self-esteem.

## **Visit your Little Sister consistently each week:**

- ❖ Visiting your Little Sister each week will send her the message that she is important.
- ❖ Showing excitement when you see her will let her know that she matters to you.
- ❖ Remembering what your Little Sister says from week to week will send the message that she is being heard.

## **Improving Your Little Sister's Self-Confidence in Academics:**

- ❖ Her belief in her ability to successfully complete schoolwork will make her more willing to try to achieve and succeed in and out of school.
- ❖ Talk with her about struggles you had in school. Children often feel alone in their struggles. Admitting your difficulties may help ease this feeling for the child. Also, a child is more likely to open up to you when you present yourself as being vulnerable.
- ❖ When you are working with a child who is feeling especially down about their abilities, give them an activity related to the task at hand that you know they can do (such as a word find or a game she likes and is good at).
- ❖ Give concrete reminders of past success. Kids need tangible reminders of their achievements. A mentor could even make a "Best Mathematician" or "Best Reader" award for the child out of construction paper and aluminum foil!

## **Statements that help build self-esteem:**

- ❖ Great job!
- ❖ I like how you handled that.
- ❖ I see that you have been making a real effort.
- ❖ I know you can do this.



## **Building Bridges as a Big Sister: Addressing Differences**

*A Big Sister and Little Sister relationship is a special opportunity to learn about another individual— both similarities and differences— while creating a special friendship.*

- ❖ The qualities that you possess as a Big Sister are what matters most. You and your Little Sister may come from different racial, cultural, socioeconomic and/or religious backgrounds, however, in spite of those differences, there is tremendous potential for connection. Your skills, warmth, personal experience and shared interests with your Little Sister, as well as a capacity to provide sensitive support and an openness to the nuances of cultural differences are what matter most in building a positive, trusting relationship.
- ❖ Differences can create opportunities for Big Sisters and Little Sisters to learn and grow. As you continue to get to know each other, you will share and learn about each other's culture, traditions and personalities, which can be enriching for both Big Sisters and Little Sisters.
- ❖ People generally feel strongly about their values, although they may find them difficult to talk about. Values are general principles that are of fundamental importance to an individual—such as equality, tolerance, honesty, privacy, security or education. Mentoring relationships can offer the opportunity to learn about your Little Sister's values and share some of your own, while remaining open and non-judgmental.
- ❖ Remember that you can provide support to your Little Sister even if you haven't experienced what she is experiencing. Let her be the expert on her own experience and tell you what she wants to tell you. Approach these conversations with openness and curiosity and listen intently.
- ❖ Be yourself. Sometimes, with the best of intentions, we try to relate to young people by using their slang or dressing like them. Little Sisters can see through this and may find it difficult to trust people who are not being themselves.
- ❖ It's important to go back to a conversation if you feel you have missed an opportunity to support your Little Sister or share a new or different perspective.
- ❖ Your Big Sister social worker is here to help support your match. Call your social worker if it seems as if any differences between you and your Little Sister are getting in the way of you building a relationship. She can help you think through what's getting in the way and help you strategize how to approach it or talk about it with your Little Sister.

## Responding to a Disclosure of Abuse

Anyone working with children is required by state law to report any disclosures of abuse to designated local and state agencies. You will need to speak with the school contact before you leave the school if your Little Sister tells you something that indicates that she is in immediate danger. We also require that you call and speak with your Big Sister Social Worker who will be responsible for follow-up with the child and the school. You are not expected to seek additional details about the disclosure from the child. Please review the following information on how to handle this kind of situation calmly.

### **Your attitude:**

- ❖ Respect the need for privacy and speak quietly.
- ❖ Reflect on your face a calm and reassuring attitude.
- ❖ Don't look panicked or shocked.
- ❖ Recognize your own feelings around abuse—the pain, powerlessness, anger and fear. By doing so, you are less likely to project your distress on to the child.

### **Your behavior:**

- ❖ Determine the child's immediate need for safety and talk so that you will not be overheard.
- ❖ Use the child's vocabulary and talk at her pace.
- ❖ Don't ask probing questions which can cause anxiety and guilt in a child who seeks support.
- ❖ Avoid questions that contain conclusions.
- ❖ Be non-judgmental and supportive.

### **Your conversation:**

Reassure the child that it is safe to talk to you even when the subject is painful. Although your relationship is confidential, do not promise to keep her disclosure a secret. It is imperative to inform her that you need to tell an adult about what she has shared to ensure her safety. She may become angry about this "breach" in confidentiality; however, you agreed to help keep her safe—this was something that was covered in the match meeting. Generally, children are relieved that adults are doing the appropriate thing and treating the incident(s) seriously. Avoid being critical of the offender. The child may care for that person regardless of what has happened. Reassure the child that she is not to blame for the situation.

## Thoughts on Gift-Giving

The Big Sister Association of Greater Boston's mentoring programs help girls discover and embrace their innate strengths and abilities. We emphasize the "intangible" aspects of the match relationship: friendship, encouragement, respect and love that develop between a Big and Little Sister. These are the things that are most important in the mentoring relationship and they are what help your Little Sister feel good about herself and what truly makes a difference.

We understand that many Big Sisters want to give gifts to their Little Sisters to express their feelings about the friendship and that this desire is natural. Gifts may be large or small, such as treating a Little Sister to lunch or buying her something she wants or needs. In our experience, however, "gifting" is a complex issue that can become a challenge within the match relationship. While it may not be the Big Sister's intent, gift-giving can shift the focus of the friendship from the emotional to the material. In School-Based Mentoring, gift-giving presents particular challenges because Little Sisters often compare what other Big Sisters give them for gifts. This can lead to confusion and hurt feelings.

Gifting is challenging because it can mean many different things to different people. Big Sisters, Little Sisters, and their families may have different interpretations of gift-giving. We've found that Big Sisters give gifts for many different reasons, some of which include:

- Showing the Little Sister, "I want to be your friend and I care about you."
- Wishing she could do more for and be more for her Little Sister
- Feeling unsure of what to say or do; the gift is something to focus on
- Feeling guilty for having more material wealth than the Little Sister
- Wanting to give Little Sister things that the Big Sister didn't have growing up

Gift-giving is not the answer to these issues. If you are having these thoughts and feelings, we encourage you to talk to your social worker about them so that she can help you work through them and find alternatives to gift-giving to express your feelings and your friendship.

It is fun to do something special for your Little Sister and is natural in any friendship. However, there are many ways to make your Little Sister feel special that do not involve material gift-giving (i.e. preparing special activities, making awards for each other, making cards for each other, etc.). The most important thing to keep in mind is that your friendship and your time are your gift. Showing up consistently each week with enthusiasm and a genuine excitement to see your Little Sister are the most valuable gifts you can give and will leave the most lasting impact.

**We ask Big Sisters to keep their focus on the friendship. Gift-giving is not an expectation of the role of a Big Sister. However, on certain special occasions, it may feel natural and appropriate to give a gift. Gifts should be limited to something small, low-cost and meaningful at your Little Sister's birthday or major holiday.**

*Big Sister's social workers are happy to discuss any further questions or concerns about gift-giving that you have!*

## Match Activity Ideas

### Relationship Building (especially helpful during your first several visits)

- ❖ Have your Little Sister give you a tour of the school/site.
- ❖ Find fun ways to talk about both of your likes and dislikes, career options, friendship/friends, TV shows, family, pets, travels, hobbies, school, sports, heroes, games, favorite movies and special occasions.
- ❖ Make up stories; record them in a journal.
- ❖ Plan to both watch a TV show and talk about it during your next visit.
- ❖ Find out each other's birthdays, holidays you each celebrate and remember to celebrate them together during your visits.
- ❖ Discuss "future" plans. Imagine your futures—one year from now, five years from now, etc.
- ❖ Show & Tell. Bring in things from home that are important to you to share with each other (such as photos of your family/friends, etc.).
- ❖ Find out if either of you know games that you can teach the other and play those (dominoes, jacks, pick-up sticks, card games, twenty questions, M.A.S.H., etc.).
- ❖ Draw your self-portraits or do each other's.

### Reading Together

- ❖ Go to the school library together.
- ❖ Read a book, each reading a paragraph or page.
- ❖ Read the same book and share your thoughts about it.
- ❖ Read poetry and talk about why you like certain kinds.
- ❖ Read newspapers and look for special features—comics, sports and special events.
- ❖ Read magazines (bring one from home if you like) and discuss.
- ❖ Find out your Little Sister's special interests and check out books on that subject.
- ❖ Open a dictionary to any page and read new words. Make up new word games.

### Writing

- ❖ Write a journal together and add to it every time you visit throughout the year.
- ❖ Write short stories or your autobiographies and illustrate them.
- ❖ Create an "I am Special" book including pictures, stories, etc. relating to your Little Sister.
- ❖ Compile a "wish" list or a "things to do" list.
- ❖ Describe, "What I want to be when I grow up".
- ❖ Write letters to each other. Being a pen pal gives your Little Sister practice in writing. Speak with your Social Worker first, as she will need to get permission from your Little Sister's parent/guardian for this to happen.
- ❖ Design/decorate your own stationery.

## Match Activity Ideas, continued

### Academic Enrichment

- ❖ Play *Memory*, *Checkers*, *Chess*, *Mastermind*, *Mancala* and other games to enhance concentration skills.
- ❖ Play *Hangman*, *Boggle* and other word games to improve vocabulary.
- ❖ Do crossword puzzles, word searches or mad libs together.
- ❖ Play math games with flash cards.
- ❖ Use globes, atlases and maps to learn more about the United States, the world and the universe.
- ❖ Use the computer lab, if available.
- ❖ Give your Little Sister assistance with academics when asked.
- ❖ Help your Little Sister organize schoolwork, materials or school supplies when asked.
- ❖ Check homework if asked.
- ❖ Make your own calendars (or make them for each other).
- ❖ Learn to count to ten in a foreign language.

### Just For Fun

- ❖ Do arts and crafts (draw, color, cut and paste, use clay, etc.).
- ❖ Bring in a paint by numbers kit to do together.
- ❖ Act out a story.
- ❖ Sing a song or play an instrument.
- ❖ Play word games (i.e. “I’m going on a trip, and I’m going to take...” or “I spy...”).
- ❖ Play board games—for fun, not just to win.
- ❖ Put puzzles together.
- ❖ Collect and share stamps, stickers, postcards or pictures.
- ❖ Take photos and keep an album or make a scrapbook together.
- ❖ Attend special school functions with your Little Sister (class assemblies, awards ceremonies, etc.).
- ❖ Design and do a project together.
- ❖ Learn magic tricks together.
- ❖ Make a collage by cutting up old magazines.
- ❖ Read comics or tell jokes/riddles to each other. Be silly!
- ❖ Make friendship bracelets for each other or for your friends (out of string, beads, etc.).
- ❖ Take turns showing off your favorite dance moves or teach each other a new one!
- ❖ Play on the playground together.
- ❖ Get active together: throw a ball around, shoot hoops and jump rope.

Great websites to check out for activity ideas:

#### GENERAL:

[www.familyplay.com](http://www.familyplay.com)  
[www.atozkidstuff.com](http://www.atozkidstuff.com)  
[www.enchantedlearning.com](http://www.enchantedlearning.com)

#### INTERACTIVE WEBSITES FOR YOU AND YOUR LITTLE SISTER TO PLAY TOGETHER:

[www.eduplace.com](http://www.eduplace.com)  
[www.figurethis.org](http://www.figurethis.org)  
[www.sciencebob.com](http://www.sciencebob.com)  
[www.girlsinc.org](http://www.girlsinc.org)

## **FAQ's**

### **What if I can't make it to the school on my regular visit day this week, how do I reschedule?**

The best thing to do is call the school and request that the school contact person or the person who answers the phone let your Little Sister know that you can't come on your regular day. Please let them know when you will see your Little Sister next, and whenever possible, please visit on another day that week.

### **What can I do as a Big Sister to help my Little Sister get excited about school?**

Your role as a Big Sister is not as a tutor or an instructor. As you spend time together and share thoughts and dreams, you help your Little Sister envision her future. Also, by giving her positive feedback on her reading, printing and even drawing, she'll realize her strengths and potential. You can also incorporate fun learning activities that encourage academic and learning skills into your visits.

### **What are some ways that I can engage a really quiet Little Sister?**

Not all kids are the same... your Little Sister might be quiet and reserved at first and need time to open up. The first thing you need to do is to be patient. Try to find out what her interests are if she'll tell you. You will probably need to take the lead and suggest a few different activities and let your Little Sister choose from them. It is often helpful with a shy or quiet child to involve yourself in "doing" something (such as an art project, even just coloring) to help make her feel comfortable and take the pressure off of talking. While your hands are busy, you could ask your Little Sister some light, open-ended questions about herself. You will need to take the initiative in starting the conversation. Tell your Little Sister about your weekend, what you do (for work or school), and other facts or stories about yourself. This models for her how and what to talk about with you. As hard as it may be, try to be comfortable with the silence if she does not open up, and convey to her that it is okay to be a quiet person. It's okay for the two of you to spend your time just playing a game or working on a project and not talking much; it makes an impact on her when you come back to see her each week even though she is not talkative with you.

### **How do I find out more about my Little Sister and what is important to her (i.e. what is her family like and how does she spend her time at home?)**

You can ask some questions about your Little Sister's family and home as part of the getting to know you process, but she may not choose to talk about it until she feels more comfortable. Or she may never bring them up – and that's OK! Your Little Sister may feel that the latest news about the most popular music groups is more important and more interesting than what's going on at home.

## **FAQ's, continued**

### **What's the best way to talk about differences with my Little Sister?**

First, don't be afraid to acknowledge differences, either between you and your Little Sister or in the world around you. Take some time to think about your own feelings about differences, prejudices and stereotypes. It is important to pay attention to your own feelings, experiences and judgments because we all have them. Conversations with your Little Sister are an opportunity for learning and we encourage you to be open and sensitive about differences and values in all of your discussions. Please talk to your social worker about any questions you might have regarding these discussions.

### **My Little Sister wants to invite her friends along during our match visits. What's the best way to handle this?**

A good place to start is reminding her about the match contract that you both signed, agreeing to keep your visits one-to-one. This may be a good time to remind your Little Sister how important you feel your time is together. We have found that Little Sisters may feel nervous about meeting one-to-one and including their friends may initially feel easier. It is important that you don't take this behavior personally. When and if this comes up, please talk to your social worker about it. She can help you figure out why your Little Sister might be asking for friends to come along, and if an exception to the guideline is appropriate.

### **What do I do if I think there might be concerning issues (i.e. abuse) going on in my Little Sister's life?**

While this does not occur often, any concerns that you have should be reported to your Big Sister social worker immediately. If you think that your Little Sister is in immediate danger, you should report this to the school contact or some other school administrator right away. If your Little Sister discloses something concerning, it is important that your Little Sister feels that she has been heard and understood. As part of the match contract, we state that "everything the Little Sister talks about with her Big Sister is confidential unless she is in an unsafe situation; then the Big Sister will let the school contact person and the agency social worker know." Please refer to our section on "Responding to a Disclosure of Abuse" in the Big Sister manual for more details.

### **What happens during the summer and next school year?**

We encourage matches to have letter contact during the summer if the Little Sister's family agrees to it. Some matches also like to be able to communicate through phone and email, which we allow as long as we have permission from the parent or guardian. Follow-through is very important with any summer contact arrangements you may have with your Little Sister. Some matches may also visit each other out in the community during the summer months, through our School-Based PLUS Program. If this is something you are interested in, please speak with your social worker. There are additional steps to be taken for matches to become "School-Based PLUS." We also encourage you to continue your match relationship into the next school year. Our goal is long term matches, as we know this has a greater impact on the Little Sister and is a more rewarding experience for the Big Sister.

## **FAQ's, continued**

### **What types of opportunities will I have to meet other Big Sister volunteers?**

Throughout the year, we offer informal “Gather and Gab” groups for Big Sisters from all of our schools and sites. Gather and Gabs are an opportunity for Big Sisters to meet other Big Sisters, to talk about their match experiences, ask questions and gain some helpful tips. We also host celebrations at the end of the school year at the school for the matches.

### **What if I want to spend time with my Little Sister outside of the school?**

Our School-Based Mentoring program is designed for in-school visits. During the first year, contact outside of school is not permitted. However, if after one school year in the program, you decide that you want to visit your Little Sister outside of the school on a consistent basis, and your Little Sister and her family want to do this as well, you may be able to transition into our Community-Based program (where you would meet your Little Sister outside of school only), or our School-Based PLUS program (where you can meet your Little Sister both in school and outside of school). Your social worker can provide you with more information about these programs.

**Big Sister social work staff are here to support you and your Little Sister and to ensure a positive experience for both of you. Please do not hesitate to call your social worker with any questions you may have.**