

Young People Mentor Young Children at Umatilla Morrow Head Start

by Maren Symonds

Imagine that you are a professionally trained Head Start preschool teacher with 20 students in your charge. You've got lesson plans to prepare, reports to complete, interactions with caregivers to orchestrate, and a sizable number of exuberant youngsters to educate and manage. Now imagine that one or two of the children have behavioral issues – e.g., excess aggression, trouble adjusting to the schedule, difficulty socializing with others, or chronically disengaged. How do you attend to these special needs while still making forward progress with the rest of the class?

Krista Marksmeier, Mental Health Services Manager at Umatilla-Morrow County Head Start (UMCHS), had the answer. She contacted the local high school counselors to identify students with the maturity and heart for serving young children as mentors. She took special interest in those with prior experience (e.g., babysitting, day care) and the desire for a career in early childhood. *To her delight, there were several who fit the bill!*

After screening prospective candidates carefully and providing an appropriate amount of orientation and training, Krista paired the students off with children needing an extra dose of tender loving care. The mentors helped with language and literacy skill building, art projects, outdoor play, and group activities using teacher-specified goals as guideposts. In no time at all, they become trusted friends with whom children expressed their feeling and emotions.

“Our teachers really appreciate the personalized attention that our mentors provide. The young children have shown marked improvements in cognitive and social skill development, and teachers get more accomplished now that they're dealing with fewer distractions,” Krista said. “And the kids say that their mentors are fun!”



Mentors keep journals on the children's progress. They make notes on challenging situations and meet regularly with Krista and the teachers to debrief and receive guidance. As they learn new skills and pro-social behavioral techniques, the UMCHS mentors gain a firm handle on what it takes to work with pre-school-aged children. Most plan to continue in the field.

“It's not always a bed of roses. Some of the children can be really difficult at times. But even when the going gets rough, the mentors love getting to know the kids,” Krista said. “And they're

really proud when the children learn to control their impulses, or come out of their shells, or learn to read.”

Mentoring has proven to be a winning strategy four times over. Children get much needed support to help them overcome barriers to learning and social integration. Teachers get able assistants who ease their burdens and increase their effectiveness. Volunteer mentors get life-changing experiences that help set the course for their futures. And the early childhood sector gets a leg up on training the next generation of educators.