

A match made in Salem

Mentor program provides adult support for local youths

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Some local youths are getting a helping hand from a mentoring program operated by one of the oldest charities in Salem.

Children's Friend and Family Services is a nonprofit organization that provides counseling, mentoring and parenting and child psychology services to area families.

"We have found that mentoring a child improves their communication, their self-esteem and their scholastic achievements," said Dorrie Kimkaran, director of the mentoring program.

Children's Friend's mentoring program, originally started in 1996 by a Haverhill man, is designed to match an at-risk adolescent, called a mentee, with a compatible mentor. The mentors volunteer their time, positive attitude and encouragement to the youth.

The pairing of a mentor with a child is called a match and Children's Friend work very hard to make all matches perfect.

A youth is considered at risk when they are in danger of not reaching their full potential. According to Kimkaran, youths that are considered highly at risk include runaways, those in the CHINS program, or those referred by DSS.

On the other hand, adolescents from single parent families, or those who are in need of positive individual attention, are also ideal candidates for mentors.

Deborah Stephanides, a mentor from Salem, was matched with 8-year-old Stephanie from Lynn in

Interested?

The mentoring program at Children's Friend and Family Services has been busy since the start of the year because of holiday spirit and New Year's resolutions.

However, there are still approximately 100 youths waiting for a mentor. For more information on the mentoring program or how to get involved, call 978-744-7905 or visit www.childrensfriend.net.

November.

"I just adore her," Stephanides said. "It is nice to see the difference you can make."

Stephanie lives with her grandmother, and does not have a telephone. Stephanides provides Stephanie with the opportunity to do simple things she can't do at home such as use the computer, or watch movies in addition to doing outside activities. Stephanides is amazed by how appreciative the young girl is.

Kimkaran knows the benefit of the mentoring program because she is a mentor herself, and has a mentee for her 14-year-old son.

Kimkaran, a single parent, is glad her son has the opportunity to spend time with a male role model that has similar interests. She said the experience has "been perfect for him," and has seen improvements in both his self-esteem and grades.

Being a mentor is "very fulfilling" and also fun, Kimkaran said. It's important for the child to want to be involved with the program, she noted.

Becoming a mentor

The average mentor is between 40 and 50 years old, and the youngest current mentor is 18.



Diana, a mentee, presents a recognition award to Senate President Travaglini. She helped disperse the awards to government officials during State House Youth Mentoring Day in January.

Those who are interested in becoming mentors are invited to attend quarterly orientations. The orientation will introduce potential mentors to the program, and clarifies what will be expected of them.

Possible mentors undergo a comprehensive screening and training process. A CORI check is run on each mentor, which is an extensive background check for any criminal record in all 50 states.

"We are very protective," Kimkaran said.

The Children's Friend conducts a series of interviews in order to arrange the perfect match of a mentor with a child. They obtain referrals from schools, and perform reference checks because they want to cover all aspects of the participant's lives.

After being successfully paired with a child, a mentor is expected to make a one-year commitment to the program. Children's Friend asks the mentor to spend at least six hours per month with their mentee.

"You get more in return than you give," from the program, said Stephanides, who makes a point to see her mentee once a week.

She also receives e-mails with

coupons and announcements of drawings for dinners or other activities that the mentors and children can do together.

Families usually hear of the mentoring program through word of mouth, referrals from schools or from clinical staff. The agency also tries to make businesses aware of the program, and encourages employers to spread the word to employees.

The Children's Friend and Family Services, currently located at 48 Bridge St., will be relocating to a larger location at 110 Boston St., formerly the Endicott School, in April.

The bigger space will lead to growth of the mentoring program. Presently, the mentoring orientations take place offsite, but they will soon be held onsite in a new conference room. In addition, the conference room will be able to house functions and a holiday party.

The Children's Friend and Family Services originally started as the Salem Seaman's Orphan Society in 1837, which was a home for children whose fathers were lost at sea. It is the oldest children's charity in northeast Massachusetts.