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- Sunday Sections**
- A&E
 - CareerBuilder
 - Travel & Explore
 - Viewpoints

- Weekly Features**
- Food & Drink
 - Your Home
 - Movie Preview
 - Wheels
 - Yes

- Communities**
- Ahwatukee
 - Chandler
 - Gilbert
 - Glendale / Peoria
 - Mesa
 - Phoenix
 - Scottsdale
 - Southwest Valley
 - Sun Cities / Surprise
 - Tempe
 - ¡Extra!

- 7-Day Archive**
- Sunday
 - Monday
 - Tuesday
 - Wednesday
 - Thursday
 - Friday
 - Saturday

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- [Archives \(from 1999\)](#)



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Find someone to trust

Groups try to match kids with mentors

Marissa Belles
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Finding a positive role model for youth has never been easy.

Several Valley organizations, however, are trying to match teens with adult mentors from the community. The programs have different features, but offer similar themes of goal-setting, relationship building and community service.

Randy Mettler program coordinator for Phoenix-based Quest 4 Kids believes instilling goals at a young age will benefit kids for the rest of their lives.

"Our program matches up fifth-graders with mentors in the professional world with the hope of instilling the goals that will lead to higher education," Mettler said.

"The program follows the kids into high school and, if they decide to go on to the enrichment program, we will pay the tuition to any in-state university."

Sometimes goal-setting starts out small with day-to-day objectives.

Danielle Smith is the caseworker for WINGS, a program dealing with girls who have been abandoned or abused. By pairing these girls up with strong female role models, the program attempts to re-instill trust.

"Part of what makes mentor programs so successful is that unlike a parent or guardian, a mentor doesn't take on a role as disciplinarian," Smith said.

The same holds true in other programs, says Tammy Tai, program coordinator for the Greater Phoenix Youth at Risk Foundation. Fifteen-year-old Naomi Armente has been in the program since March and finds it easier to confide in her assigned mentor than her parents.

"I can tell her things and I don't have to worry about getting in trouble,"



Emmanuel Lozano/The Arizona Republic

Clifford Wong of Phoenix is a mentor for New Pathways. Here, he spends some time with Emily Flores, 4, at the Salvation Army, where Wong and older kids he mentors do volunteer work.

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said Naomi, who has bonded quickly with April Adams, a local businesswoman who became a mentor in hopes of giving something back to the community.

"I wanted to do something proactive and by helping teens find out who they are and what they want from life gives me a great sense of satisfaction," said Adams, who mentors Naomi and Jessica Ruiz.

She plans to continue her relationship with them after her 6-month commitment is up and perhaps even mentor another teen next year.

Despite the required training and preparation, some mentors found that dealing with adolescents was more challenging than they realized.

Layne Thomas, a construction worker, is mentoring 14-year-old Josh Soto. He found out early on it was essential to establish ground rules.

"Because you are not a disciplinarian, you don't have the authority to act as one," said Thomas, who didn't know how to respond when Josh acted up during a meeting.

"We sat down after that and created some basic rules so we can talk out the problem without him flying into a tantrum.

"I really think he wants to be here, and he is just going to be a challenge to get through to."

The mentors acknowledge that entering any new relationship will bring ups and downs, but most have faith that in the end it will be worth it.

"Someone told me once that if a person has one person they can trust, it will make all the difference in making right and wrong decisions. That . . . is what the heart of being a mentor is all about," Adams said.

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