



the gift of being seen

HOW SMALL MOMENTS OF
ENCOURAGEMENT SHAPE THE WAY
YOUNG PEOPLE SEE THEMSELVES.

Every child deserves to have a trusted adult who sees the good in them. This guide will help you identify strengths and build confidence in the students you serve.

THE MENTOR'S ROLE

Many of the students in the Lunch Buddy Program spend their day surrounded by adults who are responsible for managing behavior, correcting mistakes, or improving their performance. Parents, teachers, administrators, and counselors do important work, but their roles often focus on the things students need to work on & do better.

The role of the mentor is unique in that it offers a different perspective. You are one of the few adults in a student's life who is there simply because you choose to be. Your job isn't to assign and evaluate work, or to ask them to complete any sort of task. While they may still see you as an authority figure, you aren't a source of academic stress. That lowers the pressure. When you show up, week after week, without expectations, you let them know, *"just as you are, you are worth my time."*

One of the greatest gifts you can give your lunch buddy is helping them to recognize their own strengths. In some cases, you might even be the first trusted adult to recognize the good in them. When a young person begins to see themselves as capable, interesting, kind, creative, or resilient, their sense of identity begins to shift. They will rise to the standard that you set for them, and for many kids, it'll be the key difference that makes them succeed. Remember, your role is not to fix a child, but to help them see who they already are, and what they might grow up to be.

NOTICING THE GOOD

When a child goes to school, they spend their day moving between adults whose job is to monitor, instruct, and correct them. Teachers, administrators, and coaches are essential in a healthy child's life, and their roles are invaluable; but the nature of the job requires them to point out what needs to change. When a child gets home, their parents may be juggling work, responsibilities, and financial stress, leaving very little time for anything beyond managing behavior and just getting through the day. Even when adults mean well, the feedback kids hear the most is critical and corrective in nature.

"Pay attention."

"Stop talking."

"That's not correct."

"You need to try harder."

"Why did you do that?"

Research consistently shows that many students (especially those who struggle academically, socially, or behaviorally) receive far more corrective feedback than encouragement in a typical school day. When the dominant message is that *you aren't good enough*, that voice can quickly become internalized. Eventually, their inner monologue will start to echo what they hear around them. *Something about me is wrong.*

Mentors are uniquely equipped to help balance that narrative.

Because your time together isn't focused on performance or correction, you have the freedom to notice things that often go unrecognized. When you point out their strengths (kindness, persistence, humor, curiosity) you help students develop a different internal voice.

I'm funny.

I'm creative.

I can figure things out.

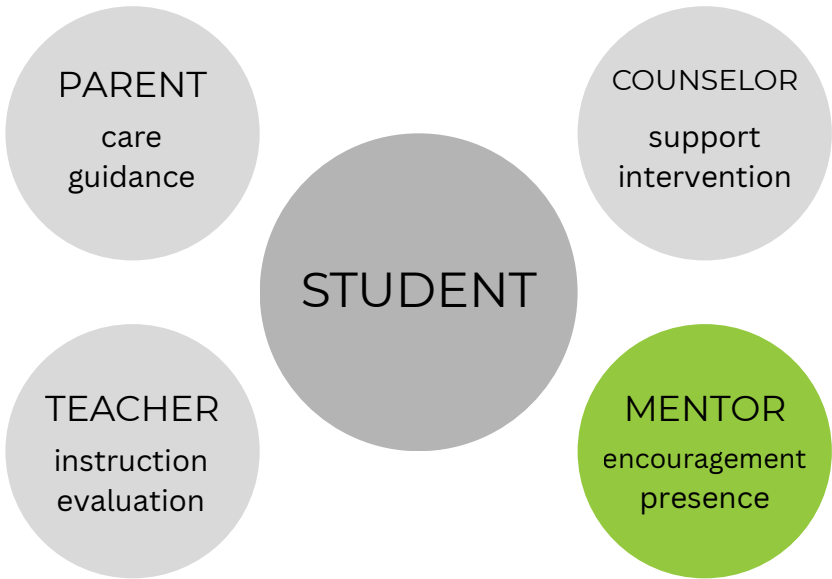
I'm a good teammate.

I'm good at helping people.

Real confidence begins to take hold when a trusted adult recognizes something genuine in a young person and puts it into words. Sometimes it only takes one person who notices the good in a child and says it out loud. It will take time, but those small moments of recognition can reshape the way a young person sees themselves.



CIRCLE OF INFLUENCE



A child's development is shaped by the whole village. educators, coaches, counselors, and community members, each contributing in important and distinct ways. As a mentor, your place in that village is completely unique. Unlike a teacher or parent, you aren't there to evaluate performance, enforce rules, or correct behavior. You're simply a role model, providing love, care, and trust without pressure.

A BROADER DEFINITION OF STRENGTH

Strengths are the positive qualities, interests, and abilities that shape a young person and help them grow and thrive. While academic skills are often the most visible and frequently measured indicators of student success, especially in a school setting, they're only one facet of a child's development. A student who struggles academically may still possess a wide range of valuable strengths that allow them to relate to others, solve problems, and navigate challenges.

Look for things like:



Sometimes a child's strengths are the very things that land them in trouble. In environments with strict behavioral expectations (like at school), being competitive, outspoken, witty, or funny can sometimes be seen in a negative light. Kids who naturally take the lead and others look up to might be labeled as a ringleader or a bad influence. But when acknowledged and guided constructively, these same traits can become the assets that contribute to a young person's confidence, motivation, and leadership potential.

What's seen a problem...

Could also be a strength.

too talkative

strong communicator

bossy

leadership potential

class clown

humor + social awareness

defiant

independent thinker

competitive

driven, motivated

pushy

assertive, confident

sensitive

attuned to others

shy

careful, observant

perfectionistic

high standards +
attention to detail

EVERYDAY CLUES + WHAT TO LOOK FOR

*“Where your attention goes, your life follows.”
— Winifred Gallagher*

Some of the most meaningful insights into your lunch buddy’s character will come from small, ordinary interactions. Pay close attention to the way a student talks about their interests, responds to challenges, or interacts with the people around them. It’s in these moments that mentors can begin to identify qualities that may not always be visible in the classroom.

First, consider how your lunch buddy treats other people. Notice the small social cues that reveal their true character. Do they help a classmate pick something up off the floor? Do they include others in a game or conversation? Do they show concern when someone seems upset? Simple acts of kindness or awareness can indicate empathy, leadership, or having a strong sense of justice. In students with frequent behavioral issues, I try to look for emotional intelligence. This isn’t the case for all behaviorally challenged kids, but it’s not unusual for traumatized children to learn to become hyperaware of the emotions of those around them, as a result, can be skilled at social and emotional work. As adults, many go on to work in fields like education, healthcare, and communication.

Take note of what energizes them. Many students who start off quiet, disengaged, or distracted suddenly come alive when the conversation turns to something they care about. Pay attention to the topics that cause them to get excited or talk more freely. Maybe they light up when discussing sports, music, video games, art, or a hobby they enjoy outside of school! This can tell you about their curiosity, passion, and creative interests that will come to form important parts of their identity.

Another window into a student's strengths is how they respond to challenges. Look for persistence, adaptability, and resilience. When something doesn't go their way, do they give up, or do they keep trying? Do they look for a different solution? Some kids love to take on a challenge, like figuring out a game, solving a puzzle, or working through a disagreement. You can probably explore this yourself by offering a challenging task during a mentoring session.

Finally, take some time to consider the way they think. Some students show strengths through the kinds of questions they ask or the way they approach problems. They may notice small details (the kind of details others overlook), connect ideas in creative ways, or offer perspectives that show curiosity and imagination. Some students have terrible grades, but in conversation, demonstrate strong critical thinking or creative problem-solving.

SAY WHAT YOU SEE + BE SPECIFIC

Instead of general praise, vocalize what you notice about your lunch buddy, and commend them for the specific behaviors that they do well. Give a little insight into the actions or qualities that you see in them, so they can process and attempt to replicate those behaviors.

Instead of a simple, “Good job,” try something specific:

- “You were really patient explaining that to me.”
- “I really enjoy your sense of humor.”
- “You’re really good at including other people.”
- “I’m proud of you for not giving up.”
- “You think about things in a really creative way. I bet you’re a good problem solver.”

If you’ve ever heard of the “compliment sandwich,” I’d like to introduce it’s close relative, the feedback formula. Instead of ‘sandwiching’ criticism in praise, this approach is a little bit more direct.

BEHAVIOR + STRENGTH + IMPACT = FEEDBACK

“That was hard, but you kept trying (*behavior*). That shows persistence (*strength*), and it helped you figure it out (*impact*).”

“Thank you for making sure everyone was included (*behavior*). You showed kindness and leadership (*strength*), and it made the whole group feel more comfortable (*impact*).”

SEEING IT FOR THEMSELVES

Eventually, the goal is for students to see their own strengths without needing someone else to point them out. During mentoring sessions, I recommend relying on socratic conversation starters, such as:

- “What’s something you think you're really good at?”
- “What do your friends usually come to you for?”
- “What’s something you’ve done lately that you’ve been proud of?”
- “What do you enjoy the most?”
(...about school, athletics, the arts, etc.)

It’s okay if a student struggles to answer. Many kids aren't used to thinking this way, and it can take a while for them to learn how to reflect. I generally think it’s appropriate to encourage them, even if they struggle to answer the question themselves.

- "I've noticed you're really good at making people feel comfortable."
- “You seem to have a lot of creative friends. I bet you inspire them with all your cool ideas.”



THE LONG-TERM IMPACT

Your lunch meetings may only last 20–30 minutes each week, but those moments matter more than you may realize. A student who truly believes that they matter, they have strengths, and an adult that they trust believes in them is far more likely to take healthy risks, persevere through challenges, and build positive relationships.

You may not see the results in a month, or even a year, but over time, your kindness and insight into their character will become part of the internal voice they carry with them. Helping build up their confidence is a gift that will last them a lifetime!

