

## KIDS 'N KINSHIP

# Mentoring program builds lasting relationships

*Everyone benefits from partnerships between mentors and local kids who need role models*

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Daniel Benson is a volunteer firefighter. Garrett Zimmel is a 7-year-old boy.

Talk about a match made in heaven.

For a little more than a year now, Benson and Zimmel have made a pretty good pair. They go to Minnesota Wild and Minnesota Twins games. They just hang out. And, yes, they spend a fair amount of time at the fire department exploring the trucks.

"It's a pretty big deal," Benson said.

Benson, an Eagan resident, connected with Farmington resident Zimmel around Christmas of 2008 through Kids 'n Kinship, a Dakota County organization that matches kids with individuals or families who want to serve as mentors. For Zimmel, who has a single mother and three younger siblings, it's a chance to have a male role model in his life.

## More kids waiting for mentors

Could you be a Kids 'n Kinship mentor? Here is just one of the kids looking for a connection in Farmington.

Emma, age 5, lives with her mom and siblings in Farmington. She can't wait to have a mentor of her own because her older brother has been matched with a mentor for over a year now. Emma enjoys finding butterflies, making snow angels and snowmen, riding her bike, coloring and playing dress up and imagination. She would love to learn to dance like a ballerina. Emma is a girly girl who likes sports and animals too. She is waiting for an active individual or couple (please with pets) to mentor her.



For Benson, who volunteered with the Big Brothers program when he was in college, it's a substitute for the kids he figures he'll never have.

For everyone involved, it seems to be a good deal.

"It does as much for me as it does for him I'm sure," Benson said. "You get to relive your childhood. Probably everyone who has kids says the same thing. The

things you liked to do when you were a kid you get to do again."

The program is similar to Big Brothers/Big Sisters, but Kids 'n Kinship encourages couples or families to volunteer together.

Kids 'n Kinship has been around for 37 years. It matches kids and mentors in Farmington, Rosemount, Burnsville, Apple Valley, Eagan and Lakeville. Currently there are 11

Farmington kids matched with mentors through Kids 'n Kinship. There are another 12 on a waiting list.

Some kids wait two years or more before finding a mentor.

That's where Ingrid Henry is looking for help. Henry oversees the Kids 'n Kinship program for Farmington and Rosemount. She said the organization is always looking for people willing to connect with a child. The program has a particular need for volunteers interested in working with boys. There are more boys than girls in the program, Henry said, and fewer men who volunteer to serve as mentors.

Benson is doing his part to spread the word. He serves as a spokesperson for Kids 'n Kinship and he runs informal recruiting efforts just about everywhere he goes. He's spread the word around the Eagan Fire Department, and one of the firefighters there is currently going through the process to become a mentor.

Kids 'n Kinship asks volunteers to commit to an hour or two a week. The activities don't have to be elaborate. The program gets donated or discounted tickets to sporting events or museums, but an outing can be as informal as

hanging out for a while and talking. Last weekend Kids 'n Kinship held an ice skating outing for all of its volunteers.

There are many reasons kids come to Kids 'n Kinship. Some are referred by school social workers who believe they could benefit from another adult influence. Others, like Zimmel, are signed up by their parents.

Britt Zimmel found out about Kids 'n Kinship through a friend. Garrett doesn't have a relationship with his father, and Britt was looking for a good male role model.

With three younger siblings, Garrett doesn't always get the one-on-one attention he might like.

"I just thought it would be really good for him to have someone who was just for him," Britt said.

Kids 'n Kinship tries to match mentors and kids based on similar interests, and Garrett and Benson seemed to get along immediately. They've gone bowling and tubing. They built a robot together.

"Garrett was really excited," Britt said. "I don't think they could have gotten a better match for him. They did a great job."