

Working Successfully with Teens: A Trainer Guide

It's not about giving advice.
It's about listening.

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INTRODUCTION

For some of us, working with teenagers is a scary proposition. Whether we envision tutoring a little monster version of ourselves at that age, being asked questions we didn't know the answers to even when we took the subject 5, 10, or more years ago, or we dread the personal interaction of it all, something just makes us want to shy away from helping these children.

This paper covers issues of attending skills, active listening, mentoring, self-esteem, and student learning issues such as preparing for tests, exams, and projects. There is also a section answering questions posed by tutors in the past regarding teen attitudes, motivation, and lack of authority due to age similarities.

By no means is this the definitive work on teen interaction. Supplemented with various published works, it is actually the accumulation of knowledge gained over many years of working and living with teens. The information contained here will facilitate a "Working with Teens" discussion in your training program. Also included are some overheads that may be used in your presentation. Please feel free to add your own experiences and thoughts to your discussion.

ATTENDING SKILLS

Attending is paying close attention to what someone else says and does. This includes verbal and non-verbal cues, asking clarifying questions, and encouraging continued conversation. Here is a short list of behaviours demonstrating good attending skills¹:

- Face the person
- Make eye contact; do not stare but do look at their eyes regularly
- Demonstrate an open posture
- Lean forward slightly but do not invade the comfort zone of the other person
- Try to ignore distractions and focus on the person
- Relax
- Use encouragers such as "tell me more", "give me an example", and nodding the head
- Show empathy (try to understand what the person is feeling)

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When speaking with someone, we should always be aware of non-verbal messages. A lot of what we understand in a conversation comes from non-verbal cues. Imagine you are talking on-line or through e-mail. You can't tell if someone is laughing, joking, or really sad unless they use acronyms such as LOL (laughing out loud), JK (just kidding) or :_((crying face). Often messages are taken out of context because of this. However, when speaking face-to-face we notice subtleties such as nail biting when nervous, a red, flushed face when upset, or a huge smile and animated gestures when excited. Through experience, we learn to interpret these clues and use them to determine the tone of the conversation. Try Exercise 1 in Appendix A.

As tutors, it is important to pay attention to how and what the student is saying, including subtext ("reading between the lines"). It could give you clues to areas the student needs to work on, helps develop a trusting relationship, makes the student feel important, and encourages the student to return.

ACTIVE LISTENING

Active listening is similar to attending but emphasizes perhaps the most important thing to remember when working with teens: **do not ask too many questions**. If you can remember this one thing, you are well on your way to having a good relationship with your teenage student.

To be an active listener, you must be open-minded and focussed on the person with whom you are speaking. You must keep in mind that you should talk very little, reserve judgement, and refrain from giving advice. The focus of the discussion should be on encouraging the student to talk.

Brackenbury, Cheryl. *Peer Helpers Plus*. Markham: Pembroke Publishers Limited, 1995, page 45.

First, a listener must want to help and listen. The listener must trust the person's ability to cope with his or her problem and offer encouragement to that end. Most importantly, all listeners must accept the fact that the person is unique and not judge the person.²

Here are “Ten Commandments for Good Listening³”, some of which will be looked at more closely in the following pages.

1. Stop talking! You can not listen if you are talking.
2. Respond to their feelings. In the first few minutes of the conversation, try to assess what the person is feeling. Then ask the student something like, “Are you feeling frustrated?” or “You sound angry.”
3. Remove distractions and use good non-verbal attending skills (eye contact for example)
4. Ask open questions.
5. Be patient!
6. Clarify or check that you heard correctly.
7. Summarize.
8. Go easy on argument and criticism! Avoid responses like “if I were you,” “I think you should,” and “don’t you think you should.”
9. Avoid statements of reassurance like “don’t worry about it,” “everything will be okay,” and “forget about it.”
10. Use the five-step approach to help them come to a solution. If you did nothing but asked these five questions, you would help the student resolve the problem:
 - i. What is the problem?
 - ii. What have you tried?
 - iii. What else could you try?
 - iv. What is your plan?
 - v. How did it go?

Commandment 2: Respond to their feelings

Responding to feelings can be a difficult task when put on the spot. First, you must identify the emotion (see Appendix B for a short list of emotions) and using that emotion, form a response that enables communication.

For example, the student says, “I hate the teachers at school! They don’t care about the kids.” If the response is, “That’s not a very nice thing to say. I think that some teachers really care,” the feelings of the student are ignored and he or she may feel as though the tutor is preaching. However, if the response is, “It sounds as though you are really angry,” the tutor is recognizing the student’s feelings and allowing further conversation.⁴ Try Exercise 2 in Appendix A to practice this.

Commandment 4: Ask open questions

There are 4 main types of questions: closed, open, informational, and feeling. Closed questions can generally be answered by yes, no, or I don't know. If used a lot, a person may feel as though they are being interrogated. Examples are: "Do you like school?" or "Why isn't your homework done?" Open questions encourage others to talk about themselves and are an effective way to gather information if practiced with active listening. Examples are: "What do you like most about school?" and "Can you tell me what part of the assignment was difficult to understand?" Informational questions are used to obtain facts and do not deal with emotions. Examples are: "How old are you?" or "What is your name?" Finally, feeling questions are about how the other person feels about a person, event, or object. Examples are: "How did you feel about the math test last week?" and "How do you feel about going to high school?"⁵

When speaking with others, the best questions to ask are open questions. This allows a two-sided conversation that should flow well. By allowing the other person a longer response, you may be able to pick out other topics to discuss or it could help you understand that person's difficulty. Here is one scenario:

Tutor: "Do you like math?"

Student: "No."

Tutor: "What don't you like about math?"

Student: "Fractions! I just don't get it!"

Tutor: "Well, let's take a look. Hmm, it looks like you're working on adding fractions. What part are you having trouble with?"

Student: "I just don't get how you can add them. I mean, it doesn't make sense."

Tutor: "I have an idea. Let's try drawing it out in pizza slices. Maybe if you see it, adding them will make more sense."

In the above example, the tutor started out with a closed question but quickly changed to an open question format and gathered some information about the student's problem. First the problem was math, then it was narrowed to fractions, and finally to adding fractions. By using open questions, you can ensure your time is spent dealing with the specific difficulties of the student. To practice using open questions, try Exercise 3 in Appendix A.

Commandments 6 and 7: Clarify and summarize

It is important as a listener that you understand what the other person is talking about. Ask clarifying questions such as "So, you met Peter in the parking lot, right? Then what

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happened?" This demonstrates that you are paying attention and also helps you follow along and condense a longer story into concise points. It may also focus the speaker on important actions. As well, you might want to paraphrase or summarize what was said including events and feelings. With a shorter summary, you can ensure both you and the speaker understood all the main points and can help lead to a resolution of the conversation or problem.

Commandments 8 and 9: Go easy on argument and avoid statements of reassurance

These two commandments can be viewed as part of the eleven barriers to effective communication. They all share the same negative characteristics; they: put down the other person, do not allow effective problem solving, do not make the other person feel better, and weaken communication as the other person tends to withdraw from the speaker. The following chart⁶ looks at each blocker in more detail.

Blocker	What It Is	Examples	Hazards
Advising	Giving your answer to another as a way to solve the problem	"Why don't you ..." "What I would do is ..."	- does not allow the person to work through the problem
Moralizing	Telling another what he/she should do	"You should ..."	- guilt - resistance
Ordering	Telling another to do something without a choice	"You have to ..."	- anger - resentment - resistance
Warning	Telling another his/her behaviour will result in consequences	"You'd better, or else ..."	- anger - prompts the other to do the opposite
Arguing	Trying to influence another to your way of thinking	"Yes, but ..."	- counter-arguments - person may feel inferior
Criticizing	A negative interpretation of another's behaviour	"You're too ..."	- person may get defensive - retaliation - person may really believe the judgement
Praising	A positive evaluation of another's behaviour	"You're the best at that ..."	- may be viewed as insincere - worry he/she can not live up to expectations

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Kidding or Teasing	Avoidance of problem by making jokes	"What a 'browner'."	- retaliation - does not solve the problem
Analyzing	"Figuring out" another person's behaviour	"You're acting that way because ..."	- frustration - fearful of other analyses
Sympathizing	Denying the existence of another's feelings	"I know just how you feel."	- feels misunderstood - does not help solve the problem
Changing the Subject	Changing the subject	"Let's not talk about those sad things."	- feels problems are not important

Communication blockers should be avoided in most conversations. When effective listening techniques are used, such as identifying feelings and asking open questions, it is easy to ensure these blockers do not hinder your conversation with your student.

Commandment 10: Problem solving

Taking what we have learned from commandments 8 and 9, it is important to realize that as listeners, our job is not to offer suggestions but to encourage the speaker to find their own solutions. While speaking with the other person, you will probably gather information on the problem and what has already been tried. Now, it is the listener's role to prompt the speaker with problem solving questions such as "what else could you do?" or "what are you going to do now?" Finally, when you see the person again, you might want to follow up on the situation and ask about the outcome.

In the following section, we will look at what conversation is appropriate in a tutoring situation and how you can avoid a counselling role.

THE MENTORING ASPECT

Mentoring is about listening and role-modelling; it is not counselling or advice-giving. As tutors working with teens, it is important to recognize the impact we may have on their outlook on school and their possibilities for the future. As volunteers, the role is even more pronounced; you are giving your time to enter their world and help them.

While working with teens, remember you are setting an example to be followed. Try to respect the school/organization rules such as clothing, piercings, electronics (e.g. no cell

phones), and behaviour (e.g. no foul language). Be on time and come prepared. By demonstrating that you care, you set a precedent some teens may try to duplicate.

The most difficult part of tutoring is the fine line between tutor and buddy. As tutors, your goal is to help the students with their school work. However, it is always a good idea to include a short discussion time. This helps develop a relationship and in turn, encourages the student to return which is the overall goal of our programs. By spending just five minutes of strictly “student-time” at the beginning of each session you can help the student feel welcome and be a good sounding board for current experiences or difficulties. However, your role is not one of counsellor so you should be sure to redirect the student to his or her homework after the designated time. To develop a smooth rapport and an equal give-and-take, share general details about your life such as interests, school career, and pets.

If you do have a good relationship with your student, you may find that he/she shares problems or concerns with you. Use listening and problem solving techniques to encourage the student to develop his/her own solutions. Oftentimes, these are relatively small problems such as an argument with a friend, a pet passing away, or a homework/test issue. If you or the student feels the problem is too large, direct the student to school/organization counsellors who are properly trained to address many situations.

SELF-IMAGE AND SELF-ESTEEM

Self-image and self-esteem are two areas most of us could use a little work in. Whether we are intimidated by others or feel we are not good enough in some way, everyone has self-doubts sometimes. Teenagers are constantly struggling with these notions as their bodies, relationships, and experiences change. It is important when dealing with children to recognize and help develop their self-image and self-esteem in a positive manner. The following chart⁷ illustrates the steps to building self-esteem.

The Steps to Self-Esteem	Developed by:
1. Self-Image <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How we feel about ourselves • It is our inner mirror • It is how we see ourselves 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Our successes and failures • The praise or the criticism we receive • Amount of acceptance and rejection

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<p>2. Self-Ideal</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who we want to be • Our dreams, expectations and goals <p>3. Self-Concept</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How we judge ourselves <p>4. Self-Esteem</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A good opinion of oneself 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Role models in our life • Encouragement we receive <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How close does our self-image match our self-ideal? • How reasonable are our goals? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If self-image = self-ideal = healthy self-concept for an extended period of time, this will equal self-esteem
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The first step is self-image. It is how we feel about ourselves and is affected by several outside factors such as praise or ridicule, acceptance or rejection, and success or failure. As tutors, we should be sure to praise the students for their successes and avoid negative remarks. Build in academic and personal success (“I like how organized you are today” or even “That’s a cool shirt. Where did you get it?”) each week. Be careful not to praise too much as this comes across as fake and invalidates the remark or even the action. Ensure your comments are sincere and applicable. If you have to speak to the student about their behaviour, be sure to treat the student with respect by quietly speaking with him or her. Use natural and logical consequences, preferably referring to the rules of the Homework Club (which should be posted at each gathering).

Second is self-ideal. This is who we want to be and what we want to accomplish. Teens are still learning about themselves and the world so they often seem to pick up and lose interest in various things quickly. One week your student may want to be a teacher and the next week the same student wants to be a fire fighter because they saw an interesting show on TV. They are investigating different roles and developing new ideas about careers and lifestyles as they learn new things. At this point, teens are influenced by role-models and encouragement. Working as tutors, we can have a great impact on a student’s self-ideal. First, we are role-models who are close in age and who come from a variety of backgrounds. We are also in the position to offer encouragement. For example, saying something like “I used to have trouble in school too but I worked really hard and now I’m almost finished university” can have an uplifting effect on a struggling child. Unfortunately, some children do not receive this kind of encouragement from family members so are eager to hear it.

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Self-concept is about judging ourselves and is based on the possibility of achieving our goals. This can be a difficult one for tutors; we see a child with a dream of being an astronaut who can not grasp simple multiplication. Although we recognize this may be an impossible goal, we can not tell the child this. One way we can help is by setting short-term, realistic goals with the child such as memorizing the multiplication chart. Each success brings the child closer to his or her larger goal.

The last step is self-esteem. When the other three steps reflect a positive, healthy person, self-esteem is developed and built. With good self-esteem, people achieve more and have greater successes in school and life; they will also rebound from failed activities more easily.

With self-esteem, children and adults can learn to take responsibility for their actions and their statements. As tutors, we should model speaking in a way that acknowledges another's feelings when talking about how that person affects us. This will help develop the student's self-image and self-ideal as well. This is achieved by using "I" statements.

You ^s	I
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - non-assertive - negative characteristics - they hurt more often than they help - they are used when someone is trying to get another person to change his/her behaviour - they are used when a person tries to be superior - they are usually a "put-down" (ex. "You can't do anything right!" or "You're crazy to think I would wait for you!") 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - assertive - positive characteristics - they do not put down or blame others - they encourage honest communication - they describe what is going on inside the person
<p>Examples:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. You make me mad when you yell at me. 2. You are really mean when you make fun of me by reading my mark out in front of the whole class. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. I feel angry when you talk to me with that tone of voice. 2. I feel embarrassed when you read our marks out loud so all the class hears.

“I” messages consist of three parts. The first is a statement of feelings and almost always begins with “I feel ...”. The second part is a statement of fact such as: “when you ...”. Finally, the third segment is the observed result of the behaviour; try using the word “because” to help create this part. To practise using “I” messages, try Exercise 4 in Appendix A.

These ideas can be modelled in tutoring by carefully thinking about what we say. For instance, if you are talking about a past math teacher, instead of saying, “Yeah, I hate math too. My teacher never cared” you could say, “Yeah, I had a hard time with math. I felt left out when the teacher never had enough time because I really struggled without her help.” Although this seems like a round-about way to state something, it demonstrates respect for the teacher and gives more information about you and what really happened. It can lead to further conversation with the tutor such as, “Really? That’s what happens in my class. What did you do?”

“I” statements are not only for tutoring; they are useful in everyday life. The next time you are frustrated or upset with someone, practice using “I” statements. Because you have to re-think your response, the pace of the argument is slowed allowing more time to think and react appropriately to the situation. You will find you express yourself better and by not insulting the other person, more is accomplished. Practice “I” statements in your next encounter. Even if you do use “You” statements, just using a few “I” sentences can really bring down the tension.

STUDENT LEARNING

Junior level and high school studies require a different set of study skills than used in elementary classes. These skills take practice and it is important to reinforce skills during Homework Clubs and tutoring through demonstration, discussion, and usage. As university student, tutors already know what behaviours bring school success and are experienced in the academic system. By modelling and encouraging study skills, the tutors can help the students along the road to academic success.

Please see Appendix B for several lists and charts that can be photocopied and distributed to tutors and students to evaluate and implement proper study habits.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Here are some answers to questions volunteers have when working with teens. Some of these have been covered in the previous text but are listed here for ease of reference. There is never just “one” answer so answers are listed as steps to try.

Q. The homework is too hard.

- A.
- ask the student to explain it to you
 - take time to look over the text or instructions and work through it with the student (this teaches thought-process and problem-solving)
 - ask if another student in the same class might understand (peer help)
 - find a tutor who is familiar with the subject
 - speak to the teacher

Q. The student asks questions I don't know the answer to.

- A.
- tell the student you don't know and explain you will find out the answer together (this will allow you demonstrate research methods)
 - look in the textbook for an answer
 - check the library for a book on the subject
 - use a search engine on the internet

Q. The student blames me because he/she didn't pass their test or do well on an assignment.

- A.
- don't dwell on the blame; the student is likely frustrated and discouraged
 - talk to the student about the test or assignment; discuss the teacher comments and correct incorrect answers
 - talk to the student about the steps taken to prepare for the test; refer to the test-taking strategies handout; give the student a copy
 - talk to the student about how the assignment was researched and written; offer suggestions for improvement
 - ask when the next test or assignment is and develop a strategy with the student so he/she will be prepared

Q. The student is not interested or motivated to attend the club; you believe the student is ashamed in asking for help.

- A.
- encourage the student to stay to complete homework; he/she doesn't need to use the tutors – they are just there “in case”

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- check on the student, but don't hang around unless invited or the student looks frustrated; give him/her space to work on their own
- do something fun at each club meeting to encourage return participation; this can be as simple as offering a small candy treat or a five-minute game of BINGO
- offer club-wide assistance by speaking for five minutes at the end of each session on how to improve homework, assignments, or tests

Q. I'm not sure how to be professional and a friend at the same time.

- A.
- being professional means keeping your distance. For instance, don't share phone numbers or e-mail, keep your contact within the club
 - being a friend means listening and not judging
 - get to know the student: name, school likes and dislikes, strengths and challenges; share similar things about yourself (I'm not very good in math either, but I really like reading)
 - if you get off track for too long, gently focus the student back on homework (I'm glad to learn that you like baseball. If you finish these questions before the end of the session you can tell me about your favourite player.)

Q. The student is bringing up issues that are not homework based.

- A.
- each club supervisor should be aware of the facility's support abilities; many schools have counsellors or social workers
 - if you get off track for too long, gently focus the student back on homework
 - if the issues are personal problems (family, boy/girl friend, bullying, sex, drugs) there are several things you can do
 - listen to what the student is saying; are they just talking? If so, try to refocus on homework. Do they have a problem? If so, read on.
 - explain to the student you want to help them and suggest he/she speak to a counsellor or school social worker
 - students may be afraid to talk to an older person; if he/she is hesitant offer to go with them to speak to the counsellor
 - if the student is still hesitant, ask if you can speak to the counsellor first
 - if the student still does not want to talk to someone, discuss the situation with the Frontier College supervisor to determine what, if anything, to do next

IMPORTANT: If the child is being abused, you must follow the Frontier College CAS procedure available from your Community Coordinator.

Q. When is a promise not a promise?

- A.
- a promise is not a promise when it involves the safety and well-being of the student or someone else
 - a student may ask that you keep a secret and promise not to tell anyone; you have three choices:
 1. Say you can't keep a secret. This is not recommended; you will lose student trust and security.
 2. Say you can keep a secret. If you choose this option and have to tell someone in order to help the student, you will lose the student's trust and have to deal with the anger of the student. However, over time, the student may realize you did the right thing.
 3. Say you can try to keep the secret but if someone is hurting them, you would have to get help. This is the best option. You are honest and upfront. The student can then decide whether or not to tell you.
 - if the secret is benign, such as "I think Mr. Thompson is hot", you don't need to tell anyone else
 - if the secret is more serious such as, "Jimmy is going to get beat up after school today" or "My boyfriend made me have sex with him", you have to report this to the Frontier College supervisor and take appropriate actions (contacting CAS, informing the principal if actions occur on school property, etc.)

IMPORTANT: If the child is being abused, you must follow the Frontier College CAS procedure available from your Community Coordinator.

Q. The student has a very poor attitude toward the club, other students, and leaders.

- A.
- each club should have a set of rules posted at each session; consequences should be consistent and also known
 - review the club rules with the student emphasizing courtesy and respect of club leaders and other students
 - explain the consequences of poor behaviour (loss of treat, removal from room, parental contact, removal from program)
 - speak to the Frontier College supervisor if behaviour continues and follow through on consequences

Q. I don't feel I can relate to the student's likes/dislikes (generational, economical gaps).

- A.
- relating does not mean you have to have experienced everything the student is experiencing; try to find broad parallels. For example, the student likes dance music and you like heavy metal. Perhaps both sets of parents did not appreciate

music selections. You can relate to what that feels like. Other examples include dating (12 vs. 16), piercing (belly button vs. multiple ear piercings), and clothing (less vs. baggy).

- for economical gaps, try relating your current university life; you do not have as much, you are often without money, and you do not have the family/friend support you once had. Think about how difficult you may find things now and try to imagine what it would be like if you were 14, did not have much, and your parents were seldom around to help you.

Q. My tutoring turns into counselling sessions! How can I get back to homework without seeming like I don't care?

A. - the first thing to do is direct the student to the appropriate school personnel such as a counsellor or social worker; explain that you appreciate their confidences to you but are not qualified to help them and will find someone who is

- if the student is uncomfortable with speaking to someone else, suggest going together or you can make the initial contact for the student

- if the questions are about high school classes, what university is like, and other academic-based scenarios, consider offering a club-wide 5-10 minute academic discussion topic at the end of each club session; this will allow you to easily defer questions

Q. My student has asked me out on a date (or is overly flirtatious)! What do I do?

A. - first, try to determine if the student is serious; oftentimes this is a dare created by friends. One way to discover the truth is to recognize the surroundings. Are there lots of people around or are you in a quiet corner? If you are not where others can hear, the student may be serious. If others are around, it is likely a joke designed to test you.

- next, let the student down gently, whether they are joking or not. Simply stating "I'm sorry, I'm seeing someone right now" is enough, whether you actually are or not. If the student previously discovered you were single say you just started dating last weekend. Although this may be considered a lie, it is the kindest, easiest, least-explanation-needed way. From a self-esteem point-of-view, when you state you are seeing someone else, you in no way diminish the person asking you. You are not rejecting them because they are young, stupid, geeky, poor, etc. You simply can not see them because of someone else. It takes the blame off them and you.

- if the student is persistent, try to avoid him/her and speak to your Frontier

College supervisor if necessary; they can talk to the student about the rules and respecting the club leaders

SUMMARY

As a final note, remember that as tutor, you play an important role in a teen's life. The Search Institute has identified 40 developmental assets to ensure young people grow up healthy, caring, and responsible. Nine of these are at least partially addressed by our tutoring programs: other adult relationships, adult role models, youth programs, achievement motivation, school engagement, homework, cultural competence (comfort around those of another culture/race/ethnicity), self-esteem, and a positive view of personal future.⁹

Working with teenagers does not have to be a difficult experience. Although the focus may be on completing homework, by being able to listen and not judge we give these students the chance to feel secure and important, elements that are needed in their growth as young adults. They don't want all the answers, they just want to be accepted. By combining tutoring with a bit of listening, we can achieve a happy medium.

ENDNOTES

¹ Brackenbury, Cheryl. *Peer Helpers Plus*. Markham: Pembroke Publishers Limited, 1995, pages 37-38.

² Harp, Roger. *Co-op Students Working as Classroom Tutors or with Children*. Concord: Career/LifeSkills Resources Inc., 2000, page 9

³ Harp, Roger. *Co-op Students Working as Classroom Tutors or with Children*. Concord: Career/LifeSkills Resources Inc., 2000, page 9.

⁴ Brackenbury, Cheryl. *Peer Helpers Plus*. Markham: Pembroke Publishers Limited, 1995, page 51.

⁵ Brackenbury, Cheryl. *Peer Helpers Plus*. Markham: Pembroke Publishers Limited, 1995, page 55-56, 59.

⁶ Modified from: Brackenbury, Cheryl. *Peer Helpers Plus*. Markham: Pembroke Publishers Limited, 1995, page 56-58.

⁷ Harp, Roger. *Co-op Students Working as Classroom Tutors or with Children*. Concord: Career/LifeSkills Resources Inc., 2000, page 3.

⁸ Modified from: Brackenbury, Cheryl. *Peer Helpers Plus*. Markham: Pembroke Publishers Limited, 1995, pages 26-27.

⁹ Search Institute. "40 Developmental Assets" for adolescents. www.search-institute.org, 2004.