

Today's Family

LAKE COUNTY

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Creating lifelong friendships

Being a Big Brother or Big Sister can change a child's life (and yours) forever

By Deanna R. Adams
Today's Family Writer

When Mentor realtor Dennis Ames and his wife, Karen, realized their daughter Morgan, would probably be their only child, Dennis began thinking about how they could incorporate another child into their lives.

"After talking to a friend who was a Big Brother, I decided that might be a viable option," Ames says. "I always wanted a boy, and this way I could be helping another child."

So he contacted Big Brothers Big Sisters, a national organization that provides children, ages 6 through 15, with quality mentoring relationships by way of supportive adults and educational programs. The Northeast Ohio branch, based in Painesville, covers the Lake, Geauga and Ashtabula areas. "Single parents are on the rise, and it's our mission to give children who lack a father or mother, a positive adult role model in their life," says Lynne Strah, Director of Marketing and Communications. "We work hard to match the right adult with a child based on mutual interests so both parties enjoy a unique friendship."

Rather than an authority figure, "Bigs" (as the adults are called) are encouraged to focus on being a friend—someone the child can have fun with and be able to talk to easily. Dennis was matched with his "Little" in 2002, when Jacob was six years old. Since then, the boy, who lives with his grandmother in Willoughby, has become an integral part of the Ames family life.

"Everyone who knows us knows Jacob," Dennis says. "He's part of our family. He's with us during Christmas and birthday parties, all those kind of events."

Quality time does not require a lot—if any—money. Bigs and Littles often play board games together, hike, ride bikes, or simply share a pizza. Dennis and Jacob do all that and more.



"When he was little, we went to Chuck E. Cheese a lot," Ames says. "But now that Jacob is a teenager, we go to Captains and Indians games. We've gone to the Browns camp, and sometimes we even golf together."

Most important, Dennis adds, he's present at the boy's sporting events. "I go to his baseball games, football games, wrestling matches. I try and support him as much as I can. And I have to tell you, I have a blast."

The most memorable time they've spent together, by far, was when the Ames family took Jacob on a trip every child

dreams about.

"When our daughter was seven, my wife and I discussed taking her to Disney World," Ames says. "And because she and Jacob got along so well, we thought, hey, maybe we can take him, too. He was nine then, so they were both at a great age. I told my wife, this is an experience we alone can give him. It didn't cost us much extra, just air fare and his family helped with that."

The vacation became a memorable event in their lives. "Yeah, that was really cool," Jacob says. "I remember going on my first roller coaster there. I was scared at first but after I did it, I went again. It was sweet."

Jacob, a ninth-grade honor student, adds that he would recommend anyone getting a Big Brother or Big Sister. "It's a great experience," he says. "Dennis and the whole family are real good people." Then he adds, "Dennis seems like a dad to me. I can talk to him about anything and we have a lot of fun together."

After nine years of creating a close bond, Jacob surprised Dennis one day by asking how long he would be his Big Brother. "I guess he thought that next year when he turns 15, that would be it for us. I told him no way, buddy, I'm here as long as you want me to be. I've watched him grow from a little boy into a nice young man. So I want to be around to see him get married, have kids. . . I told him, I'm your friend for life. And I meant it."

For more information on Big Brothers Big Sisters, visit www.bbbsneo.org or call 440-352-2526.