

# the benefits of TEEN mentoring

story by Vicki Louk Balint  
photo by Dan Vermillion



Hotline volunteer Stephen (17) of Phoenix takes a call at Teen Lifeline while Colin (18) of Glendale monitors the conversation.

## Someone to listen and care

Most of the teens that call Teen Lifeline, a peer counseling hotline, “just want somebody who cares to listen to them,” says Michelle Moorhead, executive director. Teen Lifeline, which also offers peer mediation services on school campuses, provides more than 70 hours of training before peer counselors even pick up the phone. Moorhead estimates the hotline takes about 4,000 calls a year. Nearly 22 percent of the calls involve kids who are suicidal. “A lot are in true crisis,” she says. “They feel like giving up. They can’t handle it anymore.”

Teen mentors empower other teens to solve their own problems. “We never give advice, says Teen Lifeline peer counselor Colin, 18, of Glendale. (Teen Lifeline does not divulge last names of their peer mentors.) “We just give them ways to help themselves. We are helping them find their own solution.”

## Benefits to mentors

When troubled teens share their concerns with mentoring teens, it enhances the mentors’ knowledge base and communication skills. Nicole, 17, of Scottsdale, who works the phones at Teen Lifeline, values the support system the experience offers peer counselors. “We don’t just talk about the callers, but also what is going on in our own lives, with our supervisors.”

Through mentoring programs, teens learn the art of accepting others and respecting their differences. Encounters with a variety of callers “helped me realize that you don’t know somebody’s story,” says Colin. “The homeless guy could be the

happiest guy in the world, and the rich kid driving his dad’s BMW could be the saddest person in the world. You can never tell what somebody’s been through.”

Teen mentors learn communications skills that help them with their own personal relationships and often become the ticket to new opportunities. Marriage and family therapist Frances Mills-Yerger, Ph.D., developed the Workshops for Youth & Families program, which teaches teams of “peer leaders” to assist in running day- and week-long summer workshops based on group interaction and structured exercises. Workshop participants are generally “good kids” seeking to develop interpersonal and leadership skills. Peer leaders learn how to listen attentively, develop trust, respond without blaming or sounding judgmental and show compassion for others.

Mills-Yerger, who founded Workshops more than 20 years ago, says the payoff down the road can be huge. “A lot of these kids have gone into the helping professions themselves; they might become resident advisors in a dorm, run for office. Kids that come through the program flower and blossom and do well in interviews. They adjust. They have a way of engaging adults. People notice they can listen.”

## Same message, different messenger

The brilliance of Workshops is that peer mentors say the same things parents might say, says Tamara Rounds, M.S.W., L.C.S.W. But there’s a difference: the words are coming from a teen, not an adult. “So suddenly the ears perk up,” says Rounds, a Workshops presenter who also teaches clinical counseling at Arizona State University. “Teens go through a pretty extensive training and then they translate that to teenage language.”

Moorhead says that an instant connection happens when Teen Lifeline volunteers pick up the phone, creating opportunity for open discussion, setting judgment aside and, at least for the moment, taking consequences off the plate.

## Positive role modeling

Teens’ influence is powerful when they take on a mentoring role and, as a result, other teens want to join them. A ripple effect occurs, says Rounds, who describes the power of what happens when teens observe and experience one of their peers in a leadership role: “They become encouraged and inspired themselves to raise themselves up so they can contribute back to other teens in the community.”

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Vicki Louk Balint, of Phoenix, is the mother of Cory (23), Frankie (19), Robert (15) and Emily Anne (13). Reach her at [vicki@raisingarizonakids.com](mailto:vicki@raisingarizonakids.com).

## More information

Peer Solutions, Inc./Stand and Serve  
602-225-0942 • [peersolutions.org](http://peersolutions.org)

Teen Lifeline  
602-248-8337 • [teenlifeline.org](http://teenlifeline.org)  
Hotline number: 602-248-TEEN (8336)

Workshops for Youth & Families  
480-882-6011 • [orho.org](http://orho.org)

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