

# MAKING AN IMPACT: BIG BROTHERS BIG SISTERS OF THE BLACK HILLS

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Everybody needs somebody. It sounds simple, doesn't it? However, for many children in our community, that somebody is lacking in their life. That is where Big Brothers Big

Sisters of the Black Hills comes in—by providing meaningful matches between adult volunteers “Bigs” and program participants “Littles”.

Incorporated in our area over 50 years ago, Big Brothers Big Sisters of the Black Hills has impacted thousands of families through their mentoring programs. Nicole Burdick, Executive Director at Big Brothers Big Sisters of the Black Hills, says that one-on-one mentoring is at the core of their mission and shapes the way participants interact. “One conversation, one meal, one book at a time, those little moments build up to give kids confidence and become who they are.”

The organization provides a range of programs that focus on different needs in the community. Current programs include: The Traditional program, South Dakota Youth Hunting Adventures, School mentor, Adopt-a-Class, Mustang Round-up, and Campus Kids.

*“Once you see those matches start to work, it gives you the fire to keep going.”*

As the nation’s largest donor and volunteer supported mentoring network, program participation is free. To become a Little, the legal guardian of a child ages 5-15 must complete the application, go through a short interview process, and then wait for their match. Becoming a Big is more in-depth. They must complete an application, attend a number of interviews, provide references, receive training, and have a thorough background check. “Parents trust their children into our care, and we work to make sure our volunteers are as safe as they come,” Nicole said.

After the Bigs and Littles have been interviewed, staff looks for a shared interest, a specific area where assistance is needed, or an immediate connection to help determine the matches. Once matches are made, they meet on a consistent basis, are periodically evaluated, and are provided constant support by the 10 person office staff at Big Brothers Big Sisters of the Black Hills.

Whether they need a positive role model, are looking for someone to enjoy the outdoors with, or even help with schoolwork, the focused attention the children receive is very important to their growth. René Suiter, a first year Big is a part of the Adopt-a-Class program at General Beadle Elementary, and has a first grade Study Buddy there. “That one on one interaction makes such a positive difference; you can see the change almost immediately,” she said.

The impact of the matches here and now can be obvious, but the letters and announcements that come in, thanking the staff for their influence while growing up, prove that they are truly making a difference in the long term, as well.

Whether people realize it or not, they have had mentors throughout their life. To be that conduit in placing the right person in a child’s life that needs a mentor helps fuel Nicole

and her staff. “Once you see those matches start to work, it gives you the fire to keep going.”

BY LINDSEY AKLEY

PHOTOS BY JESSE BROWN NELSON