

ROLE MODELS OVERVIEW

More and more teens come from families in which one or both parents are usually or always away from home. In these situations, who can youth rely on as surrogate role models for the absent parent(s)? What kinds of people do teens emulate? What qualities do teens find admirable? How can youth workers present teens with positive role models?

Role models are those people teens look to when searching how to react to and deal with life. In role models, they find guidance on how to live gracefully, be successful, and be adult. Historically, parents have been the prime role models for teens. Even when teens do not acknowledge their parents as role models, parents have a tremendous impact on how the teen comes to terms with developing into an adult. Numerous studies reveal the negative effects of an absent parent. And yet, even when both parents are present, teens find additional role models outside the family.

Other selected role models may include extended family, teachers and coaches, youth leaders, celebrities, historical figures, employers and co-workers, rock musicians, famous athletes, politicians (less today than in previous years), and friends. These other role models can be valuable not only for the teen from the single parent household, but also for the average teen who spends less and less time each year with parents.

Current statistics indicate that kids do not receive much time from their parents. Parents do not take the opportunity to either be role models or assist in selecting other role models. This is unfortunate, because one of the key things teens search for in role models is someone who is accessible, accepting, willing to listen.

Average hours per week parents devote to undivided child care (1995 estimates, "Time for Life," Penn State University Press):

	Women	Men
Employed	6.6	2.5
Unemployed	12.9	2.6

Arlie Hochschild, author of *The Time Bind*, spent several months interviewing employees of a large corporation. In her study, she found that many employees were distraught about their busy, disheveled lives, yet, "few of the employees were take any steps to carve out more time with their families—they weren't

taking unpaid family leave even if they could afford it, and they weren't applying for flextime or job sharing." Hochschild suggests that for many people, home and work have switched in priority: "home is a frantic exercise in beat-the-clock, while work, by comparison, seems a haven of grown-up sociability." (Shapiro, L. [1997, May 12]. The myth of quality time. *Newsweek*, p.64)

Role models can be positive and negative, depending on the qualities and behavior being modeled. Teens need help processing why they admire certain role models. Mostly, teens want advice and for someone to revere. Interaction greatly enhances any benefit a teen derives from a role model. Processing life experiences with role models helps a teen understand why he or she that respects that individual, and clarifies whether the role model's qualities are worth emulating at all.

CONCLUSIONS

- Teens are looking for role models who will help them celebrate their own personhood.
- Being a role model is not a profession. And yet, regardless of age, all adults can be and probably are someone else's role model without even knowing it.
- An awesome responsibility of youth workers is to share our lives with young people every day.

IMPLICATIONS

1. Teens need someone to listen to them, either as a role model or as someone interested in the teens' role models.
2. Teens need questions posed to them in order to help them clarify their own values and how their role models exhibit these ideals.
3. Many teens feel that they have no role models. These teens need to be introduced to role models. If a parent does not increase time spent with a teen, and other role models (coaches, teachers) are unavailable, a Big Brother/Sister program is an option. Introducing teens to great people through movies or books may also be helpful in finding a hero.
4. Being a significant adult to a teen takes time, commitment, and unconditional love. Do not become part of another's life without understanding that responsibility.
5. As youth workers, it is important to be responsible and understand one's own past and present role models. What we share has usually been passed on to us by others.