



Big Brothers Big Sisters
of Massachusetts Bay

Questions and Answers for Parents, Guardians and Referrers

Why should I consider getting a Big Brother or Big Sister for a child?

We specialize in finding, screening and carefully matching caring adult volunteers ‘Bigs’ who want to make a positive difference in the lives of children who can benefit from having another trusted friend they can turn to as needed.. Our matches’ friendships develop individually based on the interests of the Big and Little, with the support of our professional staff who check in regularly to see how the match is going and who are there to answer questions and provide advice. Typically, a child will spend time with a Big enjoying “low cost or no cost” activities such as playing board games, sports, enjoying free tickets to events, washing a car, going hiking, eating or just hanging out and laughing out loud. Together they decide what kinds of activities they want to do. Our staff provides suggestions, and they consult the parent or guardian if there are any questions or concerns, such as allergies or physical considerations, that the Big needs to be made aware of to ensure the safety of the Little during outings.

Do you work with other Big Brothers Big Sisters agencies?

Yes. In some locations we may refer you to either Big Sister Association of Greater Boston or to Jewish Big Brothers Big Sisters of Greater Boston. This is determined by the zip code entered in the inquiry or application process. The questions and answers in this document apply to the programs run directly by Big Brothers Big Sisters of Massachusetts Bay, including our operations in Attleboro, Fall River and on Cape Cod and The Islands

How old does a child have to be to be enrolled as a Little?

Children who are at least 7 years old and have not yet passed their 13th birthday can be enrolled. Based on our history of match relationships, our findings indicate that youth enrolled within this age range are most likely to be successfully matched and benefit from our programs; once matched, we continue to support matches for Littles up to 18 years of age or when they graduate High School. Eligible youth must complete the enrollment process prior to being considered for a match with a Big. Because it may take some time between the time you refer a child to the

time we are able to set-up a home visit to begin the enrollment process, we ask that parents/guardians and others **refer a child at least six months before the child's 13th birthday.**

What the difference between “referring a child” and “enrolling a childt”?

Referring a child is when a Parent/Guardian or other source refers a child to us who meets the eligibility requirements stated in the Youth FAQs and provides us with basic contact information on the child and some preliminary information for us that assists us with assessing the youth's needs. The actual enrollment process for a child begins on the date when we conduct a home visit and interview to meet with the parent/guardian and child, to determine what type of volunteer would best suit this child. Following a home visit, our trained professional staff make a judgment about whether a youth is likely to be matched successfully in our program. Not all youth who have a home visit will be accepted into the program.

We try very hard to match each child with a volunteer who has similar interests but because this process must also consider geography and schedules, it can sometimes take several months depending upon the number of volunteers enrolled living in or near where the child lives and proximity to public transport. In some cases we are not successful in making a match.

Do you enroll every child who applies?

No. As a non-profit working in this current economy, we have a limited supply of volunteers and resources and in some areas we have many more families who are already waiting to get their children enrolled than we are able to serve. We try to set realistic expectations with parents/guardians when they first contact us. We reserve the right to not enroll more children than we think we can match within two years. However, we want to help, and we will let the parent/guardian know if we think a child fits our program or if he or she would be better served elsewhere.

How does the matching process work?

As part of the enrollment and matching process, our professional staff meet with parents, children and volunteers to find out more about each party. Based upon the background, life experience, schedules, personalities and interests of both our volunteers and youth, we propose to each party what we believe are the best match options. Only when the volunteer, parent and child all agree do we formally schedule a match meeting at the child's home where the Big and Little and parent/guardian meet each other for the first time. At the match meeting someone from our

staff also attends to make the introductions, revisit the program's guidelines and to answer questions. Once the match is made, one of our match support professionals will check in frequently with the parent/guardian, the Little and the Big, particularly at the earliest stages of the match, to see how the friendship is developing and to offer ideas and opportunities and to provide one-to-one coaching/training as needed. This also provides a structured way of identifying challenges and strengthening the communication between the Big, the Little and his family and agency staff. Keeping in touch with agency staff throughout the match is one of the requirements of the program.

What's in it for a child?

Having a Big for a year or more can have a significant impact, both short and long term; this is described more fully in the Our Program section of this web site. From the youth's perspective, having a Big means that for a few hours a month, he or she experiences a different perspective and has someone to bounce ideas off. There's someone else to call or e-mail when inevitable questions arise. The longer a match lasts, the more likely that it will help your child develop new ideas, habits and opportunities that can have a long-term impact on their future.

What's in it for the volunteer?

Volunteers tell us that being a Big is one of the most rewarding experiences they've ever had. For a few hours a month they get to 'be a kid again' but, even better, in building a friendship with their Little, they feel they are making a big difference in the life of a child and in the community

Who are the Bigs?

Our Bigs are 18 years of age and older and come from all walks of life. They are professionals, craftsmen, college students, etc. What they all have in common is that they want to be a Big Brother or Big Sister because they understand that no child can have too few caring adults in his or her life. Many Bigs want to repay the helping hand or mentor who assisted them when they were growing up.

How do I know if a child will get along with this stranger?

As the oldest and largest mentoring organization in the country, we have helped to create thousands of friendships, but each new match must spend time together getting to know each other. Before we introduce a volunteer, we first get to know the parent(s) and the child, so we

can make the right match for the child. Big Brothers Big Sisters of Massachusetts Bay matches a Little with a Big based on *common* interests, personality and geography. Since our Bigs are volunteers from all walks of life, we also make sure that the children we enroll in the program can benefit from the friendship of typical caring adults rather than specialists or youth development professionals. If we judge that a child cannot be well served by a Big, we will suggest alternative services.

Do your volunteers know anything about kids?

Bigs are parents, grandparents, singles, brothers and sisters – caring adults who want to make a difference for a child. Although they are generally not child development professionals, behind the scenes, they all have access to our team of professionals—the Big Brothers Big Sisters of Massachusetts Bay Match Support Team—to give helpful advice and encouragement if they need it.

How much is this going to cost me?

Any costs to the parent should be nominal; the focus of the match should be on the Big and Little doing every day things together. But we do require that parents, Bigs and Littles each play a part in making a match successful. How can they do this? By returning phone calls and e-mails to the Match Support professionals in a timely manner as needed, by honoring meeting plans when they're made and by commenting openly and honestly as each match develops.

When do Littles and Bigs meet?

In the Community-based program it's up to the Big and Little to set a convenient time and place, but most matches meet on the weekends. Site-based matches generally meet during weekday lunch periods or after school

Do you make cross-gender matches, e.g. matching boys with women volunteers?

No. Our programs are based on same-sex matches.

Am I able to ask for a match with a child of any specific ethnicity, language or national origin?

Our goal is to make matches that provide a high-quality, long term experience. Although we do not discriminate, we try as best we can to take into account the preferences and interests of volunteers, youth and parents. The more preferences a parent/guardian, Big or Little has the

longer it may take to get them matched. That said, we celebrate and are very proud of the many, many wonderful cross-cultural matches we have served in Massachusetts Bay.

What sort of background checks do you do on volunteers?

All volunteers and employees are subject to background checks including an extensive interview, obtaining references from people who know the individual well (family, employer, etc) and conducting criminal offender (CORI) and sexual offender (SORI) records checks.

Do any of your volunteers have criminal records?

We handle each situation on a case by case basis. It is important that potential volunteers disclose this to us and address it fully. In some instances an offense may not be an obstacle because it is minor or occurred long ago. If we decide to go forward, we will always share the facts with the parent/guardian of a child we are considering for a potential match. The parent/guardian has the final say on whether or not a volunteer is a right match for their child.

Do you have any volunteers who speak foreign languages?

At this time we are only able to serve English and Spanish speaking families, and hope to expand this as resources allow. Fluency is very important for us to be able to support a match to the best that we can and on a regular basis.

Will you match youth living in temporary housing or expecting to be relocated?

Generally, no. This is because we want matches to last at least one year and longer if possible. This is most likely to happen if the Big lives within a reasonable distance (5-10 miles) from the Little's home. When a match is interrupted by a move, it can be very disappointing for a Little.

Does the child have to want a Big Brother or Big Sister to be accepted into the Big Brothers Big Sisters program?

Yes, this is not a compulsory program. In fairness to our volunteers and especially the children who want 'Bigs', we want any child referred by a parent/guardian to know about the program and to be interested in getting matched with a Big. Friendships can't be forced if the participants aren't open to the idea of being friends or when someone is participating half-heartedly.

Can a child become a Little if the custodial parent or guardian does not agree?

No. All adults involved in the child's life must support the idea of the child having a Big.

Do you need to have approval from both parents and the custodial parent's domestic partner?

Yes, if both parents are engaged actively in the child's life. Typically, we expect all adults involved in the child's life to support their participation in the program as we are all looking out for a child's well being. However, if the child's biological parent is not involved, we do not require his/her support and approval but strongly encourage it and welcome the opportunity to provide them with information about our programs and answer any questions.

Can a child who has physical, emotional or developmental challenges be a Little?

The Big Brothers Big Sisters programs are based on the ability of a child and non-specialist volunteer (who is supported by our staff) to make effective connections that lead to a long lasting friendship. If a child has psychological or medical diagnoses or conditions, behavior issues, traumatic experiences, abuse, or other challenges that have an impact on his/her behavior, it may not be possible to make a match that has good prospects for success. We encourage youth professionals to refer to "Qualifying Criteria for successful Matches" before referring a child with moderate to severe behavioral challenges.

Can more than one child be enrolled?

Although we treat each situation individually, we will do our best to enroll additional children in the same family. In some areas of Greater Boston we partner with Big Sisters Association of Greater Boston to serve girls and with Jewish Big Brothers Big Sisters Association of Greater Boston to serve other children in need.