Break Charity: Mentors Needed for Care Leavers

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If you've ever felt that you could make a real difference to a young person's life, you might be just what Break is looking for.

As a charity providing support to children and young people experiencing and leaving care, Break is on a mission to ensure that every care leaver has the opportunity to be paired with a mentor: someone who can make them feel seen, heard and supported as they navigate independence.

- There are more than 6,600 children and young people in care in the East of England at present, including approximately 1,100 in Norfolk and 950 in Suffolk
- Hundreds of young people in Norfolk leave the care system and begin to live independently each year – but a shortage of mentors means that many face the transition alone

Now, Break is encouraging more could-be mentors in East Anglia to sign up to its Volunteer Mentoring scheme, which matches care leavers with someone who can support and encourage them on their own terms. Currently, the list of young people seeking a mentor is far longer than the list of volunteers available, meaning many are going without.

What does a volunteer mentor do?

Every young person has a different background and different needs, so the type of contact they have with their mentor will vary and no two mentor relationships are the same. The main purpose of any mentoring relationship is to provide ongoing support – Break's mentors commit to spending time with their mentees every fortnight for at least a year – but what form that support takes varies depending on what the young person is looking for.

Time together may include casual social excursions and/or personal development tasks, but activities are decided by the mentor and mentee themselves. Examples include:

- going out for lunch or walks
- going bowling or the theatre
- helping the young person to access local community events and activities
- providing help with finding employment or educational opportunities

What kind of person makes a good mentor?

There are no specific qualifications or life experiences needed in order for you to be approved as a mentor, but open-mindedness, a non-judgemental attitude and a willingness to form a genuine bond with the mentee are all important.

When we spoke to recent care leavers about what makes a good mentor, one said "You don't need to have all the answers, you just need to listen" while another added "A good mentor should make you feel like you can talk to them about anything."

Some mentors may have hobbies or skills they can share, while others are simply great listeners who are open to sharing parts of their own lives with their mentee. Break provides all volunteer mentors with ongoing training and regular support.

"A volunteer mentor is a unique position, aiming to support, walk alongside, listen and help guide the mentee." Says Rebecca Lyons, Mentoring Lead at Break. "Many of the young people Break supports have had contact with care professionals throughout their lives, and it is so valuable to have someone there for them who they know is not just there because they're paid to be.

"The support a mentor gives can play a big part in a young person finding the confidence to overcome challenges, in turn helping them to have a brighter future."

Break's three-year strategy states that by the end of 2023, they aim to have recruited enough mentors for every child and young person they work with to be able to access one if they choose to.

Interested in mentoring a Norfolk care leaver? You can find out more about volunteer mentoring with Break here, and read about some real mentoring experiences here. Or, contact Break directly for more information.

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