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Good Works

Building a Big Family

Spouses and kids join in with Big Brothers and Big Sisters

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Hillary Howard and Adam Kahn became a Big Family to their Little Brother, Conner.

Sometimes when a Little Brother or Sister gets matched with a Big Brother or Big Sister, he or she gets more than expected — a Big Family.

That's what's happening for some children who are served by the local chapter of the national Big Brothers Big Sisters organization. The local group's primary program, which matches adults and high schoolers (the "Bigs") with children and teens ages 6 to 17 (the "Littles") in five counties of Southwest Michigan, has been teaming Bigs and Littles since 1958, but it always has more Littles than Bigs.

One reason for this mismatch, according to Amy Kuchta, CEO of the local group, is that many potential volunteers tell the organization they're worried that spending time with their Little will take time away from their own partner and children.

"People don't volunteer because there's a perception that you can't involve your family," Kuchta says. "They think only the Big can do something with the Little."

The solution, she says, is Big Couples and Big Families.

These programs are exactly the same as the Big Brother and Big Sister programs, except, instead of pairing a Little with one Big, they match a child with a couple or with adults and their children.

Andrew Schipper of Oshtemo Township started out as a Big Brother with 7-year-old Mark in 2012. When Schipper married Jenica in 2014, they became a Big Couple. Together the Schippers and Mark

head to the YMCA or have a pizza, Schipper says, and Mark often attends Schipper family gatherings, since Schipper has nieces and nephews about Mark's age.

"My wife's brother-in-law had done Big Brothers so she knew all about it," Schipper says. "A lot of what we do (with Mark) incorporates what we would be doing anyway."

The Big Brothers Big Sisters matchmaking process is a little like lining up a first date. Staff members interview the Big and the Little (and their families) to learn about their personalities and interests. After the initial match, it's up to the individuals to coordinate meetings. They typically meet every other week, or more often if there's a special occasion. BBBS staff members check in on the partnerships monthly.

"Most of our children come from single-parent homes," Kuchta says. "Volunteers expose them to new people, places and ideas."

A Big Brothers Big Sisters survey released in January found that 90 percent of Littles performed better in school after being matched with a Big. Nearly 97 percent of these Littles had improved self-confidence.

For Adam Kahn and Hillary Howard of Kalamazoo, being a Big Couple with 7-year-old Conner is a chance to introduce the values they want to pass along to the daughter they're expecting this summer.

"Conner is a middle child so it gives him a chance to be the main focus," Kahn says. The couple and Conner go to the movies together, and Conner visits their home. Howard says they're trying to sneak a little learning into their time together too.

"We're trying to do school activities and make it as fun as possible," she says. "We just wanted to spend quality time with someone. His mom mentioned it couldn't hurt to work on his math and reading."

Both Schipper and Howard say they're interested in staying with their Littles for as long as the children's families will let them. Howard says she realized her and Kahn's time with Conner was a success when he invited them to his sister's birthday party.

"He wanted to see us more than the two hours we had set that week," she says.

Conner and Mark are among the youngest Littles in the Big Couples/Big Families program, while 14-year-old Zion is one of the older ones. He's been teamed with WWMT news anchor Andy Dominianni and his family since 2011. The relationship has evolved, Dominianni says, so that now Zion visits his Big Family just once a month.

"He's transitioning into more of a friend situation," Dominianni says. "He has his own friends, a life of his own. When my daughter gets to high school, I hope he'll become her 'big brother.'"



[View in the magazine.](#)

The Need for Bigs

In 2014, about 1,200 Littles were partnered with Bigs across the area served by the local Big Brothers Big Sisters organization, which includes Kalamazoo, Allegan, Barry, Calhoun and Van Buren counties.

Currently there are about 300 children, mostly boys, on the waiting list to be matched up.

“Even if you just see (a Little Sister or Little Brother) a few hours a month,” CEO Amy Kuchta says, “it can have a huge impact.”

To get involved, visit

thinkbigtoday.org

or call 382-6800.