Mentoring on the Internet

by Sheryl Burgstahler, PhD

Most of us can think of people in our lives, more experienced than we, who taught us something new, offered advice, presented a challenge, initiated friendship or simply expressed an interest in our development as a person. They helped us negotiate an uphill path or find an entirely new path to a goal in our academic, career or personal lives. They showed us a world larger than our neighborhood. They pointed out talents we hadn’t noticed in ourselves and stimulated ideas about what we might be able to accomplish. They nudged us when we needed a nudge.

The Benefits of Mentoring
Each participant benefits from communication with several mentors. As participants move from high school to college and careers they too become mentors, sharing their experiences with younger participants. Mentors offer protégés:

INFORMATION: Mentors share their knowledge and experiences with protégés, often helping them realize they have more choices than they thought.

CONTACTS: Mentors introduce their protégés to valuable academic, career and personal contacts.

CHALLENGES: Mentors stimulate curiosity and build confidence by offering technology play in solving this problem?

Introducing protégés to mentors with similar disabilities is a strength of the DO-IT program. Most DO-IT mentors are college students, postsecondary faculty and other professionals who have disabilities. Mentors are selected after submitting an application form and undergoing a review process, including reference checks. Protégés are participants in the DO-IT Scholars, Pals or Campers programs who are making plans for post-secondary education and employment. They all have disabilities (including visual, hearing, mobility and health impairments) as well as specific learning disabilities.

Most mentoring in DO-IT takes place on the Internet. Electronic communication eliminates the challenges imposed by time, distance and disability that are characteristic of in-person mentoring. For example, participants who have speech impairments or are deaf do not need special assistance to communicate via electronic mail. Those who cannot use the standard keyboard because of mobility impairments use adaptive technology to operate their computer systems. DO-IT also facilitates communication in small groups through the use of electronic discussion lists. For example, one group includes both mentors and protégés who are blind. They discuss common interests and concerns such as independent living, speech and Braille output systems for computers and options for displaying mathematical expressions and images.

DO-IT’s mentoring program has received national recognition with The Presidential Award for Excellence in Mentoring for embodying excellence in mentoring underrepresented students and encouraging their significant achievement in science, mathematics, and engineering.” It was also showcased in the President’s Summit on Volunteerism and received the National Information Infrastructure Award “for those whose achievements demonstrate what is possible when the powerful forces of human creativity and technologies are combined.”

Joining the DO-IT Mentoring Community
The DO-IT Scholars program, which includes multiple on-campus summer study programs and year-round mentoring, is funded by Washington state and is open to Washington residents. However, private foundations and corporate sponsors from other states can propose funding scholars from other states.

The DO-IT Pals electronic community is open to all teens with disabilities who are interested in pursuing college and have access to electronic mail. They communicate with DO-IT mentors, receive useful college and career information from DO-IT staff and make friends. For your teen to join DO-IT Pals, send electronic mail to doit@u.washington.edu and request a DO-IT Pals application.

Also visit http://www.washington.edu/doit/Programs/ for more information about these DO-IT programs.

Dr. Sheryl Burgstahler is the director of the DO-IT (Disabilities, Opportunities, Internetworking, and Technology) program. DO-IT is funded by the US Department of Education, the state of Washington and many other organizations. DO-IT serves to empower young people with disabilities as they transition to college and careers through the use of computers, assistive technology and the Internet. “Tech Talk” is designed to address practical ways of integrating technology into educational, work and home environments.

Dr. Burgstahler will also answer readers’ questions through this column. Please send correspondence to Dr. Burgstahler, University of Washington, Box 354842 Seattle, WA 98195; fax: (206) 221-4171; e-mail: sherylb@u.washington.edu.
ing new ideas and opportunities that introduce protégés to advocating for themselves.

SUPPORT: Mentors encourage growth and achievement by providing an open and supportive environment.

DIRECTION: Mentors help protégés discover their talents and interests and devise strategies to attain their goals. One mentor explains, “I try to tell kids to listen to their hearts and think about what they really want to do... and go for it.”

ROLE MODELS: Mentors accomplish many of these goals by letting their protégés know who they are. As one protégé shares, “I’m less shy now that I know there are more people out there that are just like me.”

Mentors benefit from the mentoring experience as well. Protégés offer mentors:

CHALLENGES: Mentors develop their own personal styles for sharing their skills and knowledge via electronic communication.

NEW IDEAS: Mentors join an engaging community of talented students and professionals with a wide range of interests, abilities, and disabilities who are eager to share their own strategies for problem-solving and success.

FUN: Mentors share in the lives of motivated young people. Listening to them, hearing about their dreams and helping them along the road to success are just some of the fun activities!

Evidence of Impact
DO-IT has been studying the nature and value of electronic mentoring since 1993. Findings suggest that electronic mail can be used to initiate and sustain both peer-to-peer and mentor-to-protégé relationships while alleviating barriers to traditional communications such as time and schedule limitations.
mentoring relationships. But how do you know if one of these communities is appropriate and safe for your child?

As with any other activity in which you seek to involve your children, find out about the organization sponsoring and supervising the activity. Most chat rooms, discussion lists and bulletin boards are not monitored or supervised. If you find a mentoring community that seems appropriate for your child, ask about how mentors are chosen and trained or guided. Also, ask what guidelines are given to the protégés.

Most important before you allow your child to communicate with anyone on the Internet, talk with them. Set the rules for safe communication. Try keeping your Internet-connected computer in a busy place in the house and regularly monitor your child's use of the Internet. Child safety is an important consideration whenever children are using the Internet, a topic I will cover in next month's issue of EP.

Guidelines for Mentors and Protégés

To ease mentors into their new positions, the following are a few suggestions for new mentors:

• Get to know the protégés. What are their personal interests? Academic interests? Career interests?
• Introduce yourself to the group. Share your personal interests, hobbies, academic interests and career path.
• Explore interests with protégés by asking questions, promoting discussion and pointing to resources.
• Encourage participation in activities and try to attend activities when possible. Mentor-protégé relationships are strengthened through face-to-face contact.

Remember that developing meaningful relationships takes time. Give yourself and your protégés time to get to know one another.

Protégés should also remember that mentors are valuable resources to them. Relationships developed with mentors become channels for the passage of information, advice, opportunities, challenges and support with the ultimate goals of facilitating achievement and having fun. To get to know mentors and develop this relationship they are encouraged to:

• Introduce themselves and share their personal, academic and career interests and plans.
• Ask mentors about their hobbies, interests and experiences in academics and careers.
• Seek mentors' advice about college preparation, entrance and success. Ask about career options. Discuss disability-related accommodations and strategies.