

A LEADER LAB™ Brief

From Chaperone to Mentor

What actually happens between the day your leaders sign up and the day a student starts to trust them — and how long it really takes to get there.

The Real Talk

You Didn't Volunteer to Babysit

Every summer at BigStuf, we watch it happen — a leader shows up nervous on day one, unsure what to say to a table full of teenagers, and by day five they're the one a kid corners at 11pm to talk about something real. Camp compresses the timeline. But your ministry back home doesn't run at camp speed.

Here's the truth LEADER LAB™ keeps coming back to: showing up is not the same thing as being trusted. And getting trusted doesn't happen on a schedule you control. It happens on a schedule the research actually tracks — and it's longer than most volunteer terms.

0–3

Months — the danger zone. A leader who bails here can leave a student worse off than if they'd never shown up at all.

~12

Months — the point research shows a relationship actually "takes."

24+

Months — where the deepest, most durable trust shows up.

Read that first stat again. **Worse off than if they'd never shown up.** That's not a guilt trip — it's just the data. A student who attaches to a leader who then disappears loses more than a mentor. They lose a little bit of their willingness to trust the next one who walks through the door.

The Research

Twelve Months Isn't a Suggestion

Grossman & Rhodes (2002) went back through Big Brothers Big Sisters match data and found something that's held up ever since, in camp ministry and everywhere else relationships get studied: real, measurable benefit for a young person kicks in once a mentoring relationship crosses the **12-month mark**. Not before.

Relationships that fizzled out in 3 to 6 months? No real benefit. Relationships that ended before month three? Actual measurable harm — declines in self-esteem and confidence, worse than students who never had a mentor to begin with.

"Because duration tends to imply close relationships and strong programs, match length is considered one of the best benchmarks of overall program effectiveness."

— Grossman & Johnson, cited across two decades of mentoring research

Twelve months isn't a magic number. It's a floor. And what the data rewards is the exact thing volunteer culture tends to quietly punish: sticking around after the newness wears off.

What Actually Moves the Needle

It's Not Charisma. It's Coaching.

What separates the leader who's still there in month twelve from the one who quietly fades by month four? Personality? A natural gift with teenagers? Nope.

McQuillin and Lyons ran the numbers across 29 program-level factors and 1,400+ mentoring programs nationwide, hunting for what actually predicts whether a match lasts as long as it's supposed to. One thing stood out above the other 28 combined: **how often the volunteer gets ongoing coaching and support** — not just at onboarding, but all year long.

This is the whole idea behind LEADER LAB™. It's not a once-a-summer pep talk. It's the monthly check-in that keeps a leader in the game past the point where it stops feeling new and starts feeling like work.

The Mechanism

Trust Is a Rhythm, Not a Moment

Search Institute's Developmental Relationships Framework breaks trust-building into five moves: express care, challenge growth, provide support, expand possibilities, share power. The very first action under "express care" is simple — **be dependable. Be someone I can trust.**

Not "be impressive." Not "be fun." Dependable. Present on the Tuesday nobody wants to show up for. Present the week after the blow-up. Present when there's nothing exciting happening — just a folding chair, a bag of chips, and a kid who isn't talking much tonight.

That's it. That's the mechanism. Trust doesn't happen in one big scene — it stacks up, one dependable week at a time, until a student stops bracing for you to leave.

Take It Home

What To Actually Do With This

1

Commit Leaders to a Full Year — On Purpose

Don't let "the school year" or "one semester" be the silent default. Say the 12-month mark out loud when you recruit. A leader who knows the finish line is a year out shows up differently than one who thinks they signed up for a season.

2

Protect the First 90 Days Like They're Fragile

Because they are. Build in extra encouragement and a clear "who do I call when this gets hard" contact for every new leader in months one through three — the highest dropout window, and the highest-harm window if a student gets attached and then loses them.

3

Run Your Own LEADER LAB™ All Year

Camp isn't the only place leaders need coaching. Build a recurring, non-negotiable monthly touchpoint back home — the single strongest predictor of a leader lasting the distance wasn't personality, it was how often someone checked in on them.

4

Build a Team, Not a Hero

Recruit toward several caring adults per student, not one deeply devoted volunteer carrying the whole weight. Redundancy isn't a backup plan — it's the design.

5

Say the Word "Dependable" Out Loud in Training

Teach your leaders that showing up on the boring weeks IS the job — not the thing they tolerate while waiting for a meaningful moment. The boring weeks are the meaningful moment. They're just wearing a disguise.

Bring This to Your Team

Three Questions Before Your Next Leader Meeting

Don't rush these. Sit with them.

Question 01

If a leader walked away from your ministry today, at month two, would a student be better off — or worse off — than if that leader had never shown up?

Question 02

Who's checking on your leaders in month six, once the excitement wears off and it's just become a Tuesday night commitment?

Question 03

Does every student in your ministry have more than one dependable adult — or does your whole program quietly ride on one or two people who happen to be great at this?

Chaperones Supervise a Room.

Mentors stay past the point where it stops being new. Twelve months is the number. LEADER LAB™ is how you build a team that can actually hit it.