

Engaging More Mentors for New York City Youth



Helping Big Brother Big Sister of New York City applicants provide support and inspiration for the next generation

Big Brothers Big Sisters of New York City (BBBS of NYC) is the city's largest youth mentoring organization.¹ Their mentor program plays a valuable role in young people's development, yet BBBS of NYC often faces a shortage of mentors, or Bigs, who identify as men. BBBS of NYC partnered with ideas42's Behavioral Design Center to increase the number of men completing their three-step application process. We designed a new series of emails to increase the number of applicants completing the application process (with some targeted interventions for men) and recommended changes to the process that could further encourage follow-through. In addition, we provided recommendations for other messaging strategies and content to incorporate in BBBS of NYC's outreach materials in order to increase the number of men applying.

Summary

Big Brothers Big Sisters of New York City (BBBS of NYC) matches young people, called Littles, with adults, called Bigs, for year-long mentoring relationships (some of which become life-long relationships). Over the course of that year and with support from BBBS of NYC, Big-Little pairs meet two weekends every month for four hours at a time. This commitment leads to real impact on Littles' lives: Littles in the program develop self-confidence,² avoid risky behaviors³ and improve their performance in and relationship to school.⁴

BBBS of NYC recruits and screens adults to be Bigs, prepares them for the role and matches them with their Littles. Their priority is attracting and retaining reliable adults to match with Littles. In recent years, they have faced a shortage of Bigs who identify as men. As a result, many boys who sign up to be Littles wait a long time to participate in the program.

There are two main ways to tackle this problem. The first is increasing the number of men applying to become a Big. The second is helping more men who apply to become a Big actually complete the three-step application process. Based on historical data, 30-40% of applicants who apply to be a Big never move on to the next step. This second approach involves closing an intention-action gap for those who apply: these men have demonstrated an intention to become a Big, but never complete the three steps to do so.

Highlights

- ▶ 30-40% of applicants who apply to be a Big Brother or Sister in NYC never move on to the next step.
- ▶ Making the application steps and overall commitment more salient and clear can help applicants advance through the process.
- ▶ Redesigning emails and processes using behavioral insights helped applicants follow through to become a Big.

¹ <https://www.bigsnyc.org/about>

² <https://www.bbbs.org/impact-self-confidence/>

³ <https://www.bbbs.org/impact-juvenile-justice/>

⁴ <https://www.bbbs.org/impact-on-education/>

The application process

1. First, applicants submit an online application form, including information about their gender identity, which boroughs they are willing to travel to as a Big, and why they want to be a Big. All applicants complete this step, indicating an intention to be a Big.
2. Applicants then attend an information session. These sessions were traditionally in-person but went virtual in March 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic.
3. Finally, applicants complete a two-hour interview with a BBBS of NYC staffer. BBBS of NYC assesses and selects applicants based on the information supplied during this process, along with background checks and references.

As part of their efforts to increase the number of men who become Bigs, BBBS of NYC has incorporated behavioral strategies like nudges and personalized support into their application process. Yet, BBBS of NYC felt more could be done to increase the number of these applicants who complete the process and follow through on their intention to become Bigs. In the course of our work together, we explored the barriers applicants face throughout the application process, and recommended messaging and process changes to address them.

Understanding applicants' experience

Any application process has some drop-off: as applicants go through the process, they learn more about the program and may realize it's not a good fit for them. Others might drop out because of a change in their life that affects their interest or ability to participate. However, some who are interested may drop off because of hassles in the process, confusion about how to move forward, or a misinterpretation or misunderstanding of the program or role—and this is where behavioral design can help.

BBBS of NYC's data showed a consistent level of drop-off throughout the process. For example, between 2014 and 2019, 32-40% of men who submit an application form (step 1) never attended an information session (step 2). Of those who attended the information session that year, 15-22% of them didn't move on to the last step: the interview. However, data alone does not tell us if behavioral barriers play a meaningful role in this drop-off, so we looked further.

To understand what might be keeping applicants from moving forward in the process, we applied to be Bigs (so we could experience the application process ourselves) and reviewed BBBS of NYC's existing data. We also surveyed 413 applicants, interviewed two BBBS of NYC staff who work directly with applicants, and interviewed seven applicants who either never attended an information session or never completed an interview. We included women and men who applied to be Bigs in our surveys and interviews. This allowed us to identify barriers that were leading to drop-off across both groups of applicants and those that were unique to men. This work revealed five key insights, the first four of which were leading to drop-off across all applicants:

1. **Many applicants did not move forward in the process because life got in the way.** In some cases, they just couldn't find time to attend an information session, or forgot, amid their busy lives. In others, being busy while in the process of applying made them feel they wouldn't have enough time to actually be a Big in the near term, so they put off moving forward in the process until their circumstances changed and they felt more able to commit.
2. **After submitting an application form, applicants were not always sure of the next step,** and often assumed they were supposed to wait to hear back from BBBS of NYC. While BBBS of NYC sends information to applicants about next steps, this finding suggests that information was not getting through to everyone.
3. **Applicants who attended the information session felt it framed being a Big as overly challenging,** which caused them to question whether they wanted to be one. In trying to set accurate expectations about the level of commitment required and the reality of Big-Little relationships, some facilitators of the information sessions played down the benefits of being a Big and emphasized the commitment and rules they'd have to adhere to as a Big.
4. **When they learned about the timeframe of the application and matching process, applicants realized that they were making a commitment that could start a year or more later.** After being accepted into the program as a Big, it can take several months (and sometimes over a year) to be matched with a Little. How long this takes for a Big is contingent on whether or when there's a Little who is a match. Men are matched more quickly because there are more boys than girls waiting for matches, but the process still takes a few months. Even though these factors were often explained to applicants, having to wait reduced their interest and excitement about being a Big.
5. **Some applicants were hesitant because they were not sure what the relationship with their Little would be like** or whether they would feel comfortable being a Big. This became even more salient to applicants amid the COVID-19 pandemic, when they would have to develop a relationship with a young person remotely. Most of the respondents who expressed this concern were men and/or did not have much experience with young people, suggesting a barrier that differentially affects men, leading these applicants in particular to drop out.

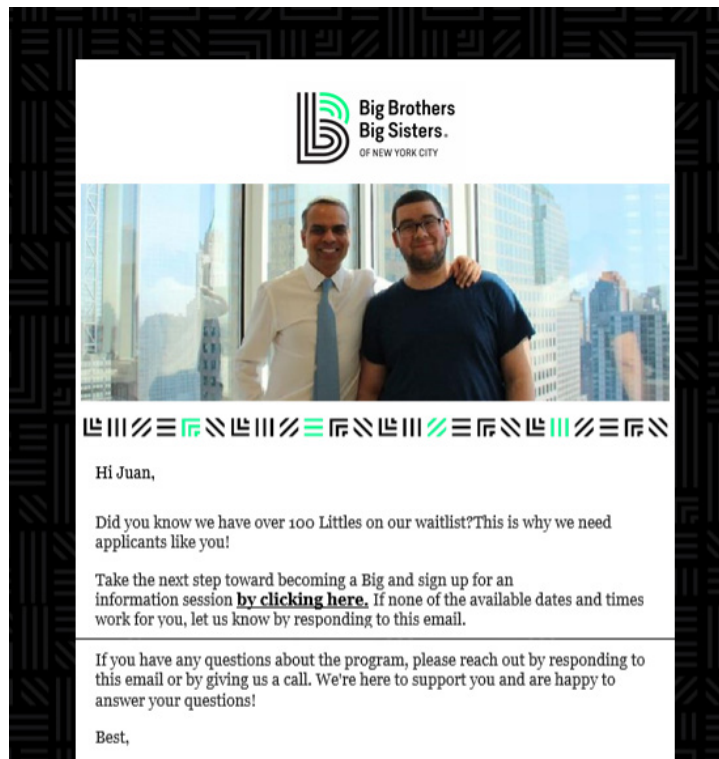
Reducing drop-off with behavioral insights

Even before the pandemic, email was the main form of communication BBBS of NYC used with its applicants to share next steps and send reminders. These emails are an important channel for addressing many of the barriers identified. Therefore, we redesigned the series of emails all applicants receive throughout the process, and user-tested our designs with recently-accepted Bigs. Our redesign:

- ▶ Clarifies what steps applicants have to take to complete the process
- ▶ Deploys reminders to keep next steps top of mind
- ▶ Uses action-oriented subject lines

- ▶ Indicates that the message comes from BBBS of NYC in the subject and/or sender line
- ▶ Offers to answer questions and help applicants complete steps over the phone or email

Nudge Message 04A: Info Session Sign-Up Reminder (Males)



In addition to these emails, we offered a number of recommendations regarding strategies BBBS of NYC could incorporate in various outreach materials and at several points in the application and onboarding processes. Many of these ideas are intended to reduce applicants' concerns about not knowing what to do or how to interact with a Little, such as creating checklists of activities that have worked for Big-Little pairs in the past. We also suggested sharing examples of Big-Little interactions involving a range of current or past Bigs. We especially encouraged sharing stories from Bigs who did not have much prior experience mentoring or developing relationships with young people, but were nonetheless able to build a successful relationship with their Little.

The redesigned emails and recommendations described above were aimed at reducing barriers all applicants face. To reduce drop-off specifically among men, we included additional reminders and tailored messaging for these applicants in our redesigned emails. For example, some of the reminders highlighted the number of boys waiting to be matched with a Big. Many men we spoke to mentioned that this information was one of the reasons they decided to apply. We also recommended a number of strategies beyond communications. For example, we suggested ways to restructure BBBS of NYC's data to enable more efficient processing of men's applications, which would further reduce the time they would have to wait to get matched. This restructuring could also benefit all applicants by helping BBBS of NYC more accurately estimate and communicate how long to expect the process to take. We also

recommended offering lighter-touch volunteer opportunities to men who may not feel like they know how to develop a relationship with a Little. These opportunities to interact with current Littles could help applicants develop their confidence and become comfortable with the role of being a Big, as well as keep them engaged with BBBS of NYC while their application is pending.

In addition to reducing drop-off, solving the shortage of Big Brothers will require encouraging more men to participate in the program. Thus, we also offered recommendations for how to target and engage men—especially those who are unlikely to consider applying on their own. We included ideas for new recruitment and referral sources and guidance on outreach messaging. For example, we suggested normalizing that many Bigs don’t have experience before they begin, highlighting that BBBS of NYC does not expect Bigs to have experience when they join, and sharing examples of how BBBS of NYC supports their Bigs.

Next steps

Based on our findings and recommendations, BBBS of NYC has already changed how they process applications. These changes aim to reduce the amount of time it takes for applications to be processed and for Bigs to be matched. Staff are also exploring introducing light-touch volunteer opportunities, expanding their recruitment sources, and potentially creating an even more personalized application experience to help applicants feel valued and ensure their questions and concerns are addressed. When reflecting on the partnership, our partner at BBBS of NYC shared: “[the BDC’s] expertise in behavioral science has been impactful. It allowed us to question and re-explore how we run the business...identify who our priority applicants are...and provide messages that resonate with where they are in the process.”

In early 2021, BBBS of NYC A/B tested our new redesigned emails against the original emails. In the A/B test, a randomly selected half of applicants received the new emails, and the other half received the original emails. BBBS of NYC compared drop-off rates between the two groups and found that our redesigned emails led to a **25% increase in the number of priority volunteers who persisted** with the process.

BBBS of NYC is also seeing other signs of increased efficiency. For example, priority applicants—applicants that BBBS of NYC can match immediately with Littles—are completing the first step of the process more quickly and are able to move through the application process more efficiently. This is because our redesigned emails direct applicants for whom there are no waiting Littles to other volunteer opportunities, freeing up staff resources. BBBS of NYC is now sending the redesigned emails to all applicants.

Even as the pandemic has changed the nature of one-on-one interactions—at least for the time being—BBBS of NYC is committed to making sure that adults and young people across New York City continue to experience powerful mentoring relationships.⁵ Regardless (and perhaps because) of the pandemic, it is critical to continue engaging more New Yorkers in these relationships that can play such a valuable role in youth development.⁶

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⁵ <https://www.bigsnyc.org/news/big-brothers-big-sisters-nyc-turns-virtual-mentoring-during-pandemic>

⁶ Tierney, Joseph, Jean Grossman, and Nancy Resch. “Making a Difference: An Impact Study of Big Brothers Big Sisters,” January 1, 2000.