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WORK & FAMILY MAILBOX

Teens Helping Seniors Learn Tech Skills

Columnist Sue Shellenbarger answers readers' questions

By SUE SHELLENBARGER

Q: Regarding your article on teens helping senior citizens learn technology, I am a library director and I am trying to recruit teens to help seniors with social networking, e-readers, iPads and so on. Can you offer some suggestions on how to train teenagers to provide this service? And what kind of formal certification process could we set up?

— P.K., Pittsburgh

A:I am not aware of any certification program for teens, but you might consider developing an informal training regimen and enlisting community agencies and other resources to help implement it, says Pamela Norr, executive officer of the Central Oregon Council on Aging, Redmond, Ore. The government-funded aging agency in your area (eldercare.gov) may be able to help identify adults skilled in teaching seniors to use technology, says Ms. Norr, who has developed a training program for teens. Computer-skills teachers at your local high school may be able to help.

Most teens and young adults preparing to work with seniors need to be trained in "soft skills," including the patience to guide older adults as they learn, says Jean Coppola, associate professor of information technology at Pace University, New York. Adolescents also need to understand common limitations among seniors, such as vision or hearing difficulties, says Ms. Coppola, who teaches college students to tutor seniors in tech skills. They also need to be able to motivate seniors with goals, such as communicating with family or playing games online, so they can tailor lessons to suit seniors' interests. Other needed skills, Ms. Norr says: Speaking slowly and clearly, without jargon; explaining basic online security and privacy rules and recognizing scam emails. A website, SeniorConnects.org, offers lesson plans for introducing tech skills to older adults.

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