





give a little

Teach your teen the value of volunteerism—and make community service a family affair.

by Julie Halpert • illustrations by Andrew Bannecker

I stood at the front of the room, my 15-year-old son, Garrett, and 12-year-old daughter, Madeline, by my side. A line of hungry people dressed in jeans and sweatshirts snaked toward us. As they approached our serving station, Garrett heaped chicken, green beans, potatoes and rolls onto their plates. Madeline was in charge of the drinks. “Water or fruit punch?” she asked politely.

I loved seeing my kids treat guests at the homeless shelter with dignity and kindness. During a brief lull, Madeline whispered, “Mom, they look just like the people in our neighborhood.” After the meal was served, the same kids who fight about doing dishes at home willingly wiped counters, cleaned plates and mopped floors without complaint.

Sure, there had been some initial grumbling about sacrificing a summer evening, but by the time we got home that night, Garrett was saying he wished he could buy homes for everyone he’d seen. Madeline was surprised that despite their hardships, the shelter guests had joked with her. In the end we all agreed it was a worthwhile way to spend time together.

While experts say parents should get kids involved in community service as early as possible, it’s never too late. In fact, kids ages 8 to 18 may reap greater benefits from volunteering than younger children because they can feel emotionally connected to a cause—and can actively select projects that interest them. Here, the best ways to get teens fired up about giving back.

Be a charitable role model

“What’s most compelling for kids is seeing their parents’ joyful involvement for their own meaningful reasons,” says Elizabeth Berger, child psychiatrist and author of *Raising Kids with Character* (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers). If parents are generous and giving, kids are likely to adopt those qualities. So instead of saying that volunteerism makes the world a better place, show them your altruism. For example, prepare a dish for a charity meal while the kids are hanging out in the kitchen. Say something like, “Before I make dinner for our family, I have to finish this casserole, which will help raise money for an important cause.” When you get back from the event, tell the kids how appreciative the charity organizers were. Try saying, “It made me feel good to help

FC FACT

The most popular community service projects among preteens and teens:

- 1** Helping children in need
- 2** Advocating for the environment
- 3** Supporting homeless people

Source: Harris Interactive, Sept. 2009

Natural Born Helpers

While all humans have the inclination to lend a hand, teens possess additional idealism, energy and a fresh perspective, says Bill Hoogterp, senior adviser to HandsOn Network, a national organization that mobilizes volunteers. “Kids come up with great ideas because no one has told them they can’t,” he says.

Hoogterp also believes every person has a deep commitment to at least one issue—for example, education or animal protection—and the key is combining that concern with a fun activity. To help teens identify hot-button issues, expose them to as many things as possible, and pay attention to what has an effect. Did something happen at school or on the news that your teen thinks is unfair? Find out what resonates, then suggest taking action. “Service isn’t something we need to put into kids,” says Hoogterp. “In fact, we have to draw it out of them.”

73%

of U.S. kids between the ages of 12 and 17 have participated in a volunteer activity.

Source: Harris Interactive, Sept. 2009

others who are less fortunate.” Even if your kids don’t immediately follow your example, they probably will down the road—as long as they see you enjoying yourself, says Mary Gresham, a clinical psychologist in Atlanta.

Offer several choices

Start by asking the question, “What can we do to help the community?” The phrasing presumes it’s not a matter of if the family will participate, but how. Bring the family together for a group discussion, then suggest several types of projects and ask for input. “Kids will be more invested if they feel like they have a say,” says Jenny Friedman, author of *The Busy Family’s Guide to Volunteering* (Robins Lane Press) and executive director of Doing Good Together, a group that aims to inspire families to volunteer. If you’re dealing with an independent teen, put him in the driver’s seat by asking him to do some online research. For resistant teens, it’s best not to insist on participation right away. Try easing them into it instead. For example, if your daughter likes to knit,

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Go to momster.com/fc/volunteer to find out what other moms have done to incorporate community service into their families’ lives.



say, “Wouldn’t it be fun to make blankets for soldiers?” If your son is artistic, you could mention that one of his paintings could lift the spirits of a child with cancer. This may help them realize on their own that they have something special to offer.

Give a slight push

If all else fails, gently strong-arm them—kids don’t know what’s best. “Teens can’t understand the benefits of service until they’ve experienced them,” says Jim Youniss, professor and developmental psychologist at Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C. He once took students to an impoverished area, to help repair houses. “They had no idea people lived in that kind of poverty,” he says. “It woke them up.” Remember, you’re ultimately the boss. It’s okay to make a unilateral decision about what the family is going to do, say, Saturday morning from 9 A.M. to noon. Then temper it by adding, “We’ll try this once. If we don’t like it, we won’t go back.” ●

RESOURCES

1-800-volunteer.org
volunteermatch.org
handsonnetwork.org
familycares.org
doinggoodtogether.org
thevolunteerfamily.org
boxproject.org
makeachildsmile.org
hugsandhope.org

“Do we have to?”

Overcome obstacles that prevent kids from participating in community service.

PROBLEM

A quiet, anxious teen who’s uncomfortable interacting with strangers.

SOLUTION

Skip the soup kitchen. There are other ways to give back that don’t involve face-to-face communication. Try sending care packages to troops overseas or creating gift baskets for needy families. Tech-savvy teens can also help small organizations update their websites for free.

PROBLEM

A kid who values time with friends more than family.

SOLUTION

Let him bring a buddy. Friends can help make the activity more fun, says Debra J. Berg, guide to charity and volunteering at SelfGrowth.com. Or suggest that he sign up for a church or synagogue youth group that does service projects—it keeps the experience social.

PROBLEM

Homework, extracurricular activities and a social life leave little time for volunteering.

SOLUTION

Suggest a small commitment—as little as every other month, or a one-time project, like painting a mural on a community center building. Berg also mentions the benefits of volunteer vacations, which can be scheduled around school breaks.

PROBLEM

The initial excitement for a project wanes.

SOLUTION

Some kids are very passionate, but they can burn hot, then go cold, says Berg. To keep up enthusiasm, parents should remind them of the impact, says author Jenny Friedman. Say something like “I bet you made that little girl very happy by visiting her in the hospital.” It reinforces the value of community service and makes kids more likely to stick with it.