

# Community Service: A Family's Guide to Getting Involved

It's easy to feel disconnected, as many parents juggle work, school, kids, and activity after activity. But some simple things can bring a family closer – playing a game, going for a hike, or cooking a meal together.

One of the most satisfying, fun, and productive ways to unite is volunteering for community service projects. Volunteerism also sets a good example for your kids and helps the community.

## Reasons to Get Involved

Why should your family lend a helping hand?

- **It feels good.** The satisfaction and pride that come from helping others are important reasons to volunteer. When you commit your time and effort to an organization or a cause you feel strongly about, the feeling of fulfillment can be endless.
- **It strengthens your community.** Organizations and agencies that use volunteers are providing important services at low or no cost to those who need them. When a community is doing well as a whole, its individuals are better off, too.
- **It can strengthen your family.** Volunteering is a great way for families to have fun and feel closer. But it can be hard to find the time to volunteer. Try rethinking some of your free time as a family. You could select just one or two projects a year and make them a family tradition (for example, making and donating gift baskets to care facilities for the elderly around the holidays).

## What Kids Can Learn from Volunteering

If volunteering begins at an early age, it can become part of kids' lives – something they might just expect and want to do.

It can teach them:

- **A sense of responsibility.** Kids and teens learn what it means to make and keep a commitment. They learn how to be on time for a job, do their best, and be proud of the results. But they also learn that, ultimately, we're all responsible for the well-being of our communities.
- **That one person can make a difference.** A wonderful, empowering message for kids is that they're important enough to have an impact on someone or something else.
- **The benefit of sacrifice.** By giving up a toy to a less fortunate child, a child learns that sometimes it's good to sacrifice and that there are important things besides ourselves and our immediate needs.
- **Tolerance.** Working in community service can bring kids and teens in touch with people of different backgrounds, abilities, ethnicities, ages, and education and income levels. They'll learn that even the most diverse individuals can be united by common values.

- **Job skills.** Community service can help young people decide on their future careers. Are they interested in the medical field? Hospitals and clinics often have teenage volunteer programs. Do they love politics? Kids can work on the real campaigns of local political candidates. Learning to work as a team member, taking on leadership roles, setting project goals – these are all skills that can be gained by volunteering and will serve kids well in any future career.
- **How to fill idle time wisely.** If kids aren't involved in traditional after-school activities, community service can be a wonderful alternative.

## Getting Your Family Involved

The Internet offers lots of sites with information about volunteer opportunities. You can also call a favorite charity, hospital, or church directly to see if they have any needs. Or contact a local volunteer clearinghouse, which matches up volunteers and community organizations and can help you find openings at nonprofit organizations in your area.

When looking for a volunteer position, remember that it may be difficult to find the perfect volunteer slot. Be flexible, and keep looking if the agency you were referred to doesn't meet your needs. It may take a while to find a perfect fit, but once you do, it will be worth it.

## Good Volunteer Jobs for Families and Kids

Families can do many volunteer jobs. Even the smallest child (with adult supervision) can pick up garbage at the park, playground, or beach. You don't even have to be part of a big effort to do this. Get your family together, find some garbage bags, and head out.

Or become involved in repair and renovation efforts for low-income residents. Younger kids might not be able to do the big jobs, but helping out by fetching a paintbrush or holding the nails involves them just the same.

Work at a community food bank or soup kitchen as a family. Find an organization that serves the elderly. Take food to people who are homebound and visit with them. Your kids can brighten a lonely senior's day instantly. Offer your family's help at the local animal shelter. Help plant flowers or trees. The possibilities are endless.

Whatever you choose to do, volunteering and community service can benefit both the community and your family. Get involved today!

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