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. Volunteerism is a great way for families to have fun and feel closer. But many people say they don't have the time to volunteer after fulfilling work and family commitments. If that's the case, 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. By volunteering, 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. Cutting back on recreation time to help clean up a beach tells kids 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.

Volunteering on Your Own

If you've never been involved in community service before, volunteering as an individual may be a good place to start. Want to improve your computer knowledge? You may get free on-the-job training. Have you been out of the workforce raising children? Volunteering may be a painless way for you to get back into the routine of working before taking the plunge into a paid position.

And if you're looking for a career change, community service is a networker's dream. You can meet people who may offer opportunities you've never thought of. You can sample different workplaces and see how you like various fields. Your volunteering will definitely help others and may help you, too.

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 look up "Volunteerism" in the phone book in the Human Services section (often in the blue pages).

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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.

Be prepared to answer questions such as:

What are your interests?
What are your skills?
Do you have any special needs?
Do you have a method of transportation?
How many hours a week do you have to volunteer?
Why do you want to volunteer?

You will probably be interviewed again once the clearinghouse matches you with an appropriate job. Some situations require more information. If you want to work with kids, for instance, you may have to undergo fingerprinting and criminal background check.

Be sure to be just as thorough when you question the organizations. Find out exactly what’s expected of you before you accept the volunteer position. Be realistic and ask specific questions.

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.

Once you do become involved, be responsible to those who depend on you. Be on time, dress appropriately, and let the volunteer coordinator know if you can’t make 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!

Reviewed by: Steven Dowshen, MD
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PEATC Workshops and Events - June 2014

Tuesday, June 3, 2014 — “When the School Says NO!”, a workshop with Hank Millward from the Virginia Department of Education. 7:00 pm - 8:30 pm, PEATC Office, 100 N. Washington St., Suite 234, Falls Church, VA 22046. Please register at 703-923-0010 or partners@peatc.org.

Tuesday, June 3, 2014 — PEATC Commercial for Special Education Students at George Mason University (GMU). 7:00 pm - 8:00 pm, GMU Thompson Hall, Room 2021, 4400 University Drive, Fairfax, VA 22030. To register, please contact Margaret Weiss at mwweiss9@gmu.edu.

Wednesday, June 4, 2014 — SAVE THE DATE: “Is Your Child a Target of Bullying?” Workshop: sponsored by Henrico County Public Schools Parent Resource Center. To register, please contact Renee Soniat, Parent Resource Center, Henrico County Public Schools at (804) 328-8117 or resoniat@henrico.k12.va.us. Location and time: TBA.

Tuesday, June 10, 2014 — “Pláticas: No espere que la disciplina se convierta en un problema! Don’t wait until discipline becomes a problem!” - IN SPANISH ONLY, 7:00 pm - 8:30 pm, PEATC Office, 100 N. Washington St., Suite 234, Falls Church, VA 22046. Please register at 703-923-0010 or partners@peatc.org, or join us online at: https://cc.readytalk.com/r/dgyhgdylxuc6eom.

Wednesday, June 11, 2014 to Friday, June 13, 2014 — “Parents as Collaborative Leaders” Regional Training, Region IV, Holiday Inn, 111 Hospitality Drive, Front Royal, VA 22630. For more information or to apply, please go to: http://www.peatc.org/newsmanager/news_article.cgi?news_id=567&no_popup=0.

Thursday, June 12, 2014 — SAVE THE DATE: Webinar on the topic of when to hire an advocate presented by Kelly Bishano. Time and registration information TBA.

Tuesday, June 24, 2014 — “Positive Behavioral Supports” or “Understanding Special Education” workshop, 6:00 pm - 8:00 pm, sponsored by Lutheran Family Services of Virginia’s Essential Pieces, location at St Paul’s Lutheran Church, 807 W. Mercury Blvd., Hampton, VA 23666. Register by contacting Hollie Stephens at (757) 722-4707X1316 or hstephens@lfsva.org.

Wednesday, June 25, 2014 to Friday, June 27, 2014 — “Parents as Collaborative Leaders” Regional Training, Region II, Hilton Garden Inn Chesapeake/Suffolk, 5921 Harborview Blvd. Suffolk, VA 23435. For more information or to apply, please go to: http://www.peatc.org/newsmanager/news_article.cgi?news_id=567&no_popup=0.

Good Neighbors, Make Good Neighbors - by Christian Jacobsen

Robert Frost claimed that, "good fences make good neighbors"- but if you have intentions to create a happy and safe neighborhood, then forget the fences, walls and barriers and instead, think about what you can do to contribute and lead by example. After all, being part of a community is directly related to a sense of well-being - so, why not start close to home, in your very own neighborhood.

There are some simple steps you can follow, that may seem self-evident. But every little bit will count as you forge toward creating a great sense of community in your neighborhood. Begin by the simplest of greetings and when you have the chance to say, “Hi” to a neighbor passing by, then by all means do so. You need to encourage the openness to get to know the people in your neighborhood. Once you start the trend, hopefully others will follow and more spontaneous meetings will occur.

Organize a block, or street party. Creating social opportunities that are just for your neighborhood, offer a fabulous way to get people together and chatting. The wonderful thing about these gatherings is that you can learn more about the people who surround you, and begin to tune into what sorts of issues and concerns, hopes and dreams others might have for the area. These sorts of events may seem scary to dive into. But someone needs to be the first to extend an open invitation, so why not make it yourself? Likewise, if you’re relatively new to the area, these sorts of gatherings can be a great way to learn the inside scoop on the community. You might also become acquainted with other neighborhood newbies - this can be a great way to start a lasting friendship.

If you have a concern about a particular issue that's affecting your neighborhood, chances are others are also concerned. Organize an informal gathering to discuss issues that concern you - anything from crime, new development to city maintenance, or whatever you feel will improve your area. Having a collective vision as a neighborhood will only strengthen the neighborhood’s sense of community and work to make for a better quality of living.

If you can, offering your services to someone in need will promote some of the best in old fashioned community ethics. Maybe you notice a family gearing up to head out for a holiday - can you offer to do some watering for them, or to just keep an eye on the house? In many cases folks have already arranged for such things, but by being the neighbor who offers a helping hand you’re truly promoting “neighborly” behavior.

Promoting the creation of a neighborhood watch programs is yet another healthy way to create a safer neighborhood, but also to get people together on a regular basis. The most important aspect in creating a better neighborhood, is to promote such social interaction.

Another idea is to create a neighborhood fundraiser for a charity or for other neighborhoods in need. This is a wonderful way to get people thinking about all the positive aspects of their neighborhood, that might otherwise be taken for granted - to reflect on what you have and not to complain about what you haven't. When people can get together with a focus on other people, the best of the human spirit shines through.

On this note, an idea might be to create a fruit tree clearing group in which homeowners volunteer excess fruit on their trees and neighborhood volunteers get together to pick the fruit. The fruit can then be donated to local food charities. Such an event brings neighbors together in the spirit of giving, and makes everyone feel like their neighborhood has contributed to the well-being of the entire community. And, so they have!

ARTICLE SOURCE: http://goarticles.com/article/Good-Neighbors-Make-Good-Neighbors/10139686/

Family Engagement Corner

Developing Life Long Learners: Preventing Learning Loss Over the Summer - By Rhonda H. Pratt, Family Engagement Specialist

Children are often excited about this time of the year. They look forward to closing their books and engaging in fun activities with family and friends. However research shows that when children are not actively engaged in learning over the summer they lose several months of learning; the gap can be broader for children with special needs. As a result, when they return to school they often incapable of demonstrating skills previously learned and often struggle as new curriculum information is introduced. In an effort to develop lifelong learners and ensure that children maintain their skills during the summer it is important that parents find activities within their community that will support their children’s learning. Below are some tips to help parents keep their children engaged in learning during the summer months as, it is the perfect time to show children that learning can be fun.

Participate in a Summer Reading Program

Most local libraries offer a free summer reading program. They offer specific activities for all age groups from preschoolers to teens. It is a perfect opportunity to encourage students to read a wide variety of genres while playing challenging games and winning prizes. Children might even think about writing a letter to their favorite author, interviewing a librarian or a neighbor from a different culture. There are many ways parents can support their children in becoming lifelong learners.

Learning about My Neighbor

Children can enhance their social and academic skills during the summer when they get to know their neighbors. Encourage your children to create their own invitations and invite neighborhood kids and their parents to a picnic on the lawn. Perhaps your children can invite the neighbors to bring a dish that represents their culture and children can play/teach each other traditional games from their homeland and discuss other traditions from their culture.

Cultural Field Trip

Take your child on a virtual field trip so that they can learn about different cultures and take a trip around the world. Or perhaps there is a nearby museum you can visit which represents difficult cultures. Talk with your child about the different exhibits and give them an opportunity to ask and answer questions about what they see. When you return home set aside ten to twenty minutes to write a story with your child about their trip to a foreign country. Encourage your child to create an illustration for the story you two have written together.


You will be surprised at how setting aside just 30 minutes a day will make a big difference in your child’s social and academic development.
Early Childhood Corner
Taking the First Step with New Neighbors - by Debra Alcott, Early Childhood Specialist

As a military spouse, I have had the opportunity to live and visit many countries all over the world. During those visits and permanent duty locations our family submerged ourselves in the culture. We have found the best way to do that over the years is to get to know our neighbors and the local pulse of our town or village. Often times, we could not speak the native language of our neighbors.

As a teacher in early childhood education, and living in those various places, I’ve had the experience of working with children and parents of different countries and cultures. Often times, I could not speak the native language of my students and parents.

In both instances, we learned to communicate to each other. And it usually started with a smile. Taking the first step toward knowing each other was the hardest, but reaped bountiful benefits.

Often, we find that children have it right all along. Simply by observing their behaviors in a Kindergarten classroom we can find helpful tips that would work in any neighborhood, place of work, and for any culture:

1. Smile - smiling is contagious and promoting an approachable and friendly demeanor can set the tone to any relationship. Do you want to hang out with someone who is constantly frowning or with someone who is happy?

2. Be Kind – someone once told me you may regret a specific behavior you chose to make, but you will never regret being kind to someone. And it’s free!

3. Take Turns – even children know when they aren’t being fair. Allow everyone to join in whether it’s a game or a conversation.

4. “The Golden Rule” - Do unto others as you would have them do to you – act toward someone the way you would want them to act toward you. Simply put be mannerly and respectful.

We may not all speak the same language, but we have the same fundamental needs of acceptance and kindness. Take the first step with your neighbors no matter their culture that your children use with their “classroom neighbors”. Reap the benefits.

Compartiendo y Aprendiendo
¿Recuerda la primera vez que llegó a Estados Unidos? Cada uno tiene memorias de las primeras experiencias que tuvieron al llegar a este país. Todo era nuevo, un nuevo sistema y una nueva manera de vivir. Tuvo que aprender todo por experiencia y a veces con ayuda de familia, amigos y extraños. Mientras aprendía también compartía. Usted compartía su cultura con otras personas incluyendo personas de otros países latinoamericanos. Usted también aprendía la cultura de otros y la cultura y sistema de Estados Unidos. En esta edición le damos a que siga compartiendo y aprendiendo.

- Partícipe en la Asociación de Padres y Maestros (“PTA”) de su escuela. Aunque al principio sea difícil el inglés, después de un tiempo se dará cuenta de cuanto inglés ya aprendió tan solo al participar. No se olvide que también puede pedir un intérprete mientras que aprende inglés. Hágase un tiempo en su horario para participar y comprométase a ser un miembro activo.

- ¿Tiene su vecindario reuniones o asociaciones? Partícipe en estas. A veces el vecindario organiza reuniones de vecinos donde se habla asuntos del vecindario y a veces se comparte comida. Aproveche estas oportunidades para compartir la comida tradicional de su país y también para conocer más de la cultura. A demás es una buena oportunidad para que su hijo conozca a más personas. Aprendiendo más de la cultura le ayudará a abogar mejor por su hijo porque conocerá más de la perspectiva de los maestros.

- ¿Es miembro o líder de un grupo de apoyo? Organice algo con su grupo para apoyar y ayudar a la escuela y también unase como grupo con otros grupos de apoyo en la comunidad y organice un evento.

A veces porque algo es extraño o no estamos seguros de lo que significa no participamos, pero pregunte y tome iniciativa al buscar esa información. No se conforme con lo que escuche, más bien investigue. Hay muchas organizaciones que están dispuestas a ayudarle y también a proveer información en su idioma y desean su participación continua. Se sorprenderá del interés que ellos muestran al aprender más de usted y cuanto ellos quieren apoyarle.

Latin Corner
Sharing and Learning
Moving to a new country means a lot of learning and sharing. In this issue, we encourage parents to continue learning and sharing with their neighbors through participation in their communities.

Coming to a new country for the first time is an experience nobody forgets. Everyone has a story to tell. Everything is new: a new system and a new way of living. Many things have to be learned through experience, and sometimes things are learned with help from family, friends or even strangers. While there is a lot of learning, there is also a lot of sharing such as sharing cultural traditions with others. There is also learning of one or many cultures. In this issue, we encourage you to continue sharing and learning!

- Participate in the Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) meetings of your school. Even though it may be hard at the beginning because of the language barrier, you will be surprised at how much English you have already learned after having participated for a while. Don’t forget that you can also ask for an interpreter. Set some time a part to participate and commit to being an active member.

- Does your neighborhood have meetings or an association? Participate in these meetings. Neighbors meet to talk about neighborhood news, ideas, and concerns. Share some of the traditional dishes from your country if your neighborhood organizes a potluck. These meetings also help you learn more about the culture. This is also a good opportunity for your child to get to know people. Learning more about the culture can help you better advocate for your child in school since you will be more familiar with the culture.

- Are you a member or leader of a support group? Organize something with your group to support your child’s school and also join other support groups to organize events.

Sometimes we don’t participate because something is strange or we don’t feel sure about something. Don’t just go with what you heard, find out more about it. There are many organizations that are ready to help you, to provide information in your language and even encourage your participation. You will be surprised at how much people are willing to learn from you and how ready they are to help you.