

Children as volunteers: To serve is a chance to grow

by Susan J. Ellis

Psychologists often say that people can enhance their good feelings about themselves by helping others. Children are no different. Volunteering is a way of helping others. And in a tight economy when public service and related public programs are in greater need of resources, volunteerism becomes extremely important.

Children under age 14 (the age at which part-time working papers may be granted) have few ways to be productive in our society. When volunteering, children work according to their individual skill levels, and their enthusiasm and energy often count more than experience and credentials. The accomplishment of community service tasks provides a real chance for developing high self-esteem.

Children's participation in volunteer efforts is largely invisible to adults and is often taken for granted. We typically think of adults as volunteers and forget that children often are an active part of many volunteer efforts. Children pitch in when adults need help with mass mailings, loading cars, setting up booths, carrying packages, and cleaning up. But are these activities recorded and recognized officially? Has there ever been a PTA project in which members' children did *not* work behind the scenes?

PTAs can acknowledge volunteer contributions made by even the youngest children. The following are some suggestions.

- Use the word *volunteer* with children. They like the adult sound of it and enjoy being labeled with such a big word.
- Offer badges, buttons, or some form of visual identification to the young volunteers while they are helping out.
- Ask children which activities they prefer.
- Keep records of the young volunteers' work and report their service in the final evaluation of a project.
- Write thank-you notes to the children.

Such recognition is useful for activities directly sponsored by the PTA and also will encourage children to volunteer in the school and the classroom. A school volunteer corps could be developed, and the PTA could supply badges, certificates, and other forms of recognition.

Whether a volunteer project serves a school or a neighborhood, there are four ways to recruit children as volunteers.

Individual children. Children can be recruited one by one—matching each child's ability to a special need.

Groups of children. The group can be an entire class, a club (such as the school's community service club), or children who share an interest in a project. Advantages are that training time is reduced, larger projects can be tackled, and members of the group motivate each other.

Parent/child teams. This can mean one parent and his or her child, two parents and one child, or entire families. This option

seems the easiest to manage because the related adult can supervise and guide. Because of the parental relationship, however, it is important to ensure that children have opportunities to contribute independently.

Non-related adult/child teams. This option means pairing adults other than a child's parents with the child to do a job.

The prevalence of divorce today provides some surprising potential for volunteerism. The divorced parent who does not have custody of the children frequently finds himself or herself in the role of "play parent." He or she is challenged to find agreeable activities for both child and parent. Many organizations therefore are recruiting the non-custodial parent and his or her child as a volunteer team. Volunteer-



ing gives the adult and the youngster the opportunity to share something meaningful, to have fun, and to learn new things about each other. The self-esteem of both volunteers is enhanced, while the community benefits from the service offered by the team.

Once the decision is made to involve children as volunteers, all the principles of good adult volunteer management apply—planning, defining job descriptions, recruiting, training and orientation, supervision, and recognition.

Some people will raise questions about the legal issues and insurance liabilities of recruiting children as volunteers. Child labor laws do not affect youngsters who volunteer for community service. If necessary, seek advice from lawyers and insurance agents. Following this, develop

parental permission forms and get clarification on insurance liability.

In researching the book, *Children as Volunteers* (on which this article is based), more than 45 projects that demonstrated how children can help their communities were identified. Many of them can be adapted for use by your PTA. Here are some examples from that study.

Children are assigned to clean up a small area such as a city block or a playground. They collect trash, make sure that there is an adequate number of trash cans, and prepare signs asking people not to litter.

Eleven-year-olds are matched with residents of a geriatric home. Twice monthly they visit with their resident for one hour. Once a year the children bring their senior partners to school for Grandparents Day.

Teamed with their mothers, a group of 5-year-olds assists with a spring orientation program for incoming kindergarteners and their parents.

Sixth graders conduct a blood pressure screening clinic for teachers, building custodians, and parents.

Youngsters build and maintain a community nature center.

Children aged 8 and older are trained as museum guides.

A group of children aged 10 to 14 writes and tapes a weekly cable television news show for children.

Developing their own teaching materials, bilingual children teach their native language to English-speaking friends.

Emotionally disturbed youngsters aged 6 to 15 lead group tours of a farm center, help care for the animals, and assist with a weekend program for physically disabled youth.

Fifth and sixth graders teach an introductory computer course to their parents and other adults in a school district's Community Education series.

As these projects reveal, children who are volunteers are helping themselves while performing a service that will help others. As a result of the children's efforts, their feelings of self-confidence and self-worth are enhanced. Everyone benefits when children volunteer. □

This article was based in part on the book Children as Volunteers by Energize Associates (ed. Susan J. Ellis), Philadelphia: Energize Books, 1983. For price and ordering information write: Energize Books, 5450 Wissahickon Avenue, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19144.

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