

Helping Children Learn the Lessons of Volunteering

By Ann Hamilton

Question: Although I think it is ok for children to be paid for some work that is done I would like my child to learn that sometimes we do things to help others and not necessarily to get paid. Unfortunately, my child believes that any work he does should come with dollars attached. How do I help my child learn to help others through volunteering?



Answer: It is certainly fine for school-age children to receive some money for work they perform. Some children have a nice little business shoveling steps, decks and walkways and you don't want to diminish the entrepreneurial spirit.

You are also right in thinking that your child should learn about volunteering. Volunteering helps children build strong, positive character. Some the characteristics of people with strong, positive character are that they: show compassion for others; have respect for people, places and things; having a strong sense of responsibility; and, are good citizens who are concerned for their community. What better way to learn and practice some of these things than through volunteering.

The concept of volunteering can be started while children are young. One of the first things to do is ask yourself how you volunteer in your community. Children learn from parents and guardians what it means to volunteer and the satisfaction that comes from helping others in need. If you don't volunteer your children may not believe it is important to do so. Consider volunteering as a family as soon as your child is old enough to help. Bringing food to a collection box is just one example of volunteering as a family. Another is helping an elderly neighbor with shoveling.

When you volunteer, get in the habit, whenever you can, of taking your children with you. Children learn what they live and if they see you and other adults donating time and energy to charities, neighbors and church activities, they will follow your lead. We're not talking about just putting money in an envelope or the collection plate, but actually taking the time to serve community dinners for the needy, visiting a neighbor or friend who needs comfort, helping with a fundraiser or community clean-up.

As children age, the concept of giving back to the "village" that raises them has many benefits. Recent research has indicated that children who participate in charitable work feel more connected to their community, feel better about themselves, have higher self esteem and are less likely to be pessimistic about the world. Although sometimes it is hard for teens and pre-teens to find summer work, volunteer work is not hard to find. As children age, volunteering is a great way to teach them skills that they will need in the work world, including teamwork, attention to detail, being consistent and on-time, as well as patience and perseverance.

While volunteering at the local food pantry or helping with roadside trash collection are ways to volunteer, volunteering initially starts at home. Perhaps your child has unused toys or clothing that are in good shape that can be donated to charity. Before major holidays and birthdays, have your child help you sort through unused items and help deliver them to charitable organizations. Talk about the experience and why it is important to help those in need. This experience can be very hard for some children, always keep the age of the child and their stage of development in mind. What you hope will be a positive experience may be a trying experience for your child if she is not ready to give away toys.

Another way to promote volunteering and helping others is to hold a 'charitable' party. Some children have birthday parties in which children bring a new or gently used toy to donate to charity. You provide the gifts for your child to open. Other children have had parties in which guests bring food for food pantries or pet supplies for a local shelter.

Whatever you chose to do, make sure it is a positive experience for both you and your child. Positive volunteer experiences as a child contributes to positive character development as well as volunteering as an adult.

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