

THE PARENT LETTER



About Our Kids:
A Letter for Parents by the
NYU Child Study Center

VOLUME 5, ISSUE 6

FEBRUARY 2007

HOW TO GET YOUR CHILD AND TEEN INVOLVED IN THE COMMUNITY

Staying connected to each other is not easy for many families today. Parents and children go off in different directions – to work, school, athletic and social events, and many other activities. Statistics tell us that Americans spend only 40 minutes a week actually playing with their children, and kids spend more and more time in after-school activities – sports, hobbies, clubs, and religious instruction. As everyone's schedule becomes more and more crowded, it's more difficult to find family time. One way of staying connected is for parents and kids to volunteer for community projects. In addition to the obvious benefits that volunteering brings to the people and organizations that are helped, it also brings a number of positive benefits to the family.

- Children who see their parents volunteering learn to believe in the value of working to help others and in the importance of giving back to their community.
- Bonding occurs when families work together as a team and focus on a task.
- Children and adolescents gain self-esteem and develop confidence as they discover that what they do can make a difference.

Children learn a lot

Not only do children derive satisfaction and a sense of pride from volunteering, they get a lot of important learning experiences. In addition to learning about an individual's responsibility to the community and to others, they:

- Gain a wider perspective on the diversity of life styles – they learn to respect people of different backgrounds, abilities, ethnicity, and income levels.
- Learn how to make and keep a commitment – how to be on time and complete assignments.
- Acquire practical skills in a variety of settings – politics, hospitals, clinics, schools, and clubs.
- Learn to work as a team and to take on leadership roles.
- Appreciate the individual's stake in the community.
- Learn they have control of what happens in their own lives and communities.
- Develop a realistic sense of the quality of their own lives by giving their time or something concrete to others.

How parents can help

Model concern and active participation in community life. Be involved in your children's lives – attend sports and other events, PTA meetings, and participate in community activities. Children do best when they live in a home where each individual's contribution to the well-being of the family and functioning of the home is appreciated. Volunteering translates these attitudes and qualities to the world at large. It is never too early to engage children in charitable activities – teaching toddlers to share toys, having your child accompany you when bringing home baked cookies to a neighbor at the holidays, encouraging your teen to volunteer in an after-school program – these actions allow children and teens to appreciate what they have, understand their value as a person, and gives them a sense of their ability to contribute to the good of the world.

Getting started

Contact community agencies such as hospitals, clinics, religious organizations, boys and girls clubs, and charities. Many local communities have volunteer clearinghouses, and the Internet also lists many volunteer opportunities. Think about practical matters such as your child's interests and abilities, your own interests and abilities, location, amount of time available, method of transportation, and other logistics. Since your child will be learning about work ethic and responsibility, avoid becoming a negative role model and making unrealistic time commitments. Younger children, for

example, may need shorter sessions than teenagers. Consider your child's individual temperament. A shy child may need to start slowly; an overly exuberant child may function best with structure.

Start early. Positive early experiences with other people and with their community form the basis for children's growing appreciation of the wider world. Families and children can volunteer together for some jobs – helping clean up a playground or a beach, simple repairs in low-income housing, working at a community food bank or facility for elderly people, visiting the homebound, helping at an animal shelter, or taking on a home baking project for fundraising. If your child has a particular interest, you can use it as a springboard into volunteering. For example, a child who loves animals may enjoy helping out at an animal society.

Children of all ages can participate in community service projects and programs. Young and early elementary school children want to please others and are willing to share. They would benefit from short, one-at-a-time, action-oriented tasks and projects that are active rather than sedentary. With supervision, young children can plant flowers to beautify schools or parks, help serve snacks to shut-ins, collect food and clothing for emergency relief, or clean up a playground.

Middle school kids are enthusiastic about contributing to a cause, and although they are capable of planning, they still need some adult guidance. Children of this age can tutor younger children, sew, make, or repair items needed for local shelters, or raise money for a charity of their choice.

High school students, capable of relating and responding to the concerns and needs of others in a more mature way, can take a broad view. They can identify community needs and create plans of action, provide childcare, teach children and adults how to read, and work in schools, clubs, and community organizations.

For service project ideas, visit www.servenet.org and www.networkforgood.org.

Summary

Through active involvement in their own community, children and adolescents can learn about the caring and sharing, giving and taking that lead to a sense of belonging to their family and to a wider community. In contrast to the much publicized self-centered and materialistic attitudes of some young people, many of today's teens have stated that they dream of more than "career of material success," according to a survey by the Horatio Alger Association. They aspire to "lives in which their emotional needs are fulfilled in a family environment and a community of friends and neighbors. At the same time, today's students expect to give back to their communities [and] their greatest motivating factor for seeking further education [is] having the ability to make a difference, to change things for the better."

Written by Anita Gurian, Ph.D. of the NYU Child Study Center.

ABOUT THE NYU CHILD STUDY CENTER

The NYU Child Study Center is dedicated to the research, prevention, and treatment of child and adolescent psychiatric disorders. The Center offers evaluation and treatment for children and teenagers with various disorders including anxiety, depression, ADHD, learning or attention difficulties, Autism, eating disorders, and trauma and stress-related symptoms.

We offer a limited number of clinical studies at no cost for specific disorders and age groups. To see if your child would be appropriate for one of these studies, please call (212) 263-8916 or visit www.aboutourkids.org/research/studies.html.

The NYU Child Study Center also offers workshops and lectures for parents, educators, and mental health professionals on a variety of mental health and parenting topics. The Family Education Series consists of 13 informative workshops focused on child behavioral and attentional difficulties. To learn more or to request a speaker, please call (212) 263-8861.

For further information, guidelines, and practical suggestions on child mental health and parenting issues, please visit the NYU Child Study Center's website, AboutOurKids.org.

AboutOurKids.org

**Giving Children Back Their Childhood
NYU Child Study Center**

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The Parent Letter has received generous support from Joseph Healey