

Youth Volunteerism

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This NebGuide discusses the benefits of volunteerism for youth and provides readers with suggestions on how to encourage youth to volunteer.

While negative stereotypes abound on the outlook, lifestyles and attitudes of young people today, most youth in the country are actually healthy, happy, and productive members of society. In fact, the majority of youth in the U.S. engage in some form of volunteer activity, and more youth (59 percent) serve as volunteers compared to adults (49 percent).

Why should youth volunteer?

When youth volunteer, almost everyone involved reaps the benefits. Over \$60 billion is estimated to be contributed annually to the U.S. economy by virtue of volunteer services. Volunteering also helps various service organizations, for instance, by cutting down costs of operations and making services available to a larger audience.

When youth volunteer, the larger community also benefits. Volunteerism promotes positive citizenship among youth by encouraging them to be more engaged in their own communities. Youth who volunteer feel more connected to their community, are more likely to show concern, and to stay in or return to their communities. Thus, youth volunteerism contributes substantially to community vitality.

Finally, while volunteerism is focused on helping others, perhaps the biggest benefits to volunteering are reaped by the volunteers themselves. Studies suggest that youth volunteerism contributes to identity development, enhancement of skills (including increasing job marketability), increased self-esteem, development of empathy for others, and other improvements related to positive youth development. Often, volunteer endeavors also facilitate the development of significant relationships. Through these activities, youth are able to meet like-minded individuals, as well as a possible range of people they would otherwise not encounter.

What encourages youth to volunteer?

Youth become involved in volunteer work for various reasons. Youth volunteers surveyed by the Bureau of Labor Statistics mention the following factors as encouraging them to become involved:

a) *They were approached/asked by an organization.* Approximately 40 percent of youth volunteers say that they became involved simply because they were approached

by an organization. In other words, simply exposing youth to opportunities, perhaps having them talk to recruiters, can often lead to volunteerism.

- b) *They were asked by someone in a school or organization they are involved in.* Approximately 21 percent of youth get involved because people in school ask them. Schools and other organizations in which youth are involved can be effective tools to involve youth in volunteer efforts. School officials should be aware of this, and consider inviting recruiters to talk to students.
- c) *They were asked by relatives or friends.* Approximately 16.5 percent of youth volunteers report that they became involved because they were asked by people they knew, particularly by friends and family. Directly communicating an expectation for service, or providing direct communication, can encourage youth to volunteer.

What discourages youth from volunteering?

Several reasons discourage youth from volunteering. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the top reasons include:

- a) *Lack of time and other responsibilities.* Young people today are getting busier and busier. Between school, sports, after-school activities, and other events, it is often difficult for them to find time to do anything else. Among youth and across all age groups, lack of time is stated as the number one reason (64 percent) for not volunteering. Youth also state that family responsibilities become a barrier.
- b) *Practical concerns.* Sometimes, even if youth have the time and are willing to volunteer, they are faced with simple practical barriers such as lack of information, lack of transportation, or expenses. Adults can help youth past these logistic and practical barriers by simply going through the steps needed to commit to volunteering.
- c) *Lack of interest or non-enjoyable activity.* Youth who do volunteer sometimes lose interest because the activities are too difficult, too easy, not rewarding, or simply not a good match for their talents and interests. Too-difficult tasks can easily become frustrating; too-easy tasks can become boring. Any of these reasons can cause youth to lose interest and engagement.
- d) *No one asked.* Finally, another top reason why youth don't volunteer is that they simply weren't asked. Sometimes, all it takes for youth to start thinking about volunteering

is for them to be approached and given information about opportunities.

Action steps for parents and educators

Becoming involved in causes that help other people is an essential component of positive youth development. The experience of volunteering provides youth with the social and practical skills that can help them succeed in life, and get them engaged and more invested in their own communities. While youth today are engaged in a host of activities such as sports and other endeavors, volunteerism can help youth in many unique ways and have innumerable benefits for development. Below are some suggestions on how parents, educators and other adults can encourage youth to volunteer.

1. *Provide youth with information about volunteer opportunities.* One of the top reasons that youth do not volunteer is very simple — they do not have the information about opportunities. Parents and involved adults should help youth find opportunities in their own communities, schools, local organizations and churches. It might just take a few phone calls, visits to volunteer sites, or even searches on the internet to receive more information. Adults should also help youth consider their choices. This includes studying available information to make sure that the activities are safe, lead by competent people, that experiences offered are engaging, and that activities are well organized.
2. *Invite/Ask/Encourage youth to volunteer.* After finding information about volunteer opportunities, it is also important to invite the youth to volunteer, or to directly communicate expectations for service to others. Many youth report that they did not think of volunteering because nobody ever asked them.
3. *Help youth work through practical barriers.* Go through the practical issues and logistics of how the child/youth could actually volunteer. Help them think about and work through issues such as scheduling, transportation, how to put in an application (if there is one), and other steps entailed in volunteering. For instance, the top reason youth do not volunteer is lack of time. Parents can help youth structure their time better, and consider the amount of time they might want to commit to volunteer work.
4. *Help youth find an opportunity that fits his or her interest/skills.* Many youth drop out of volunteering because the activity is too hard, too easy or simply uninteresting. There are a host of opportunities that can match each person's interests and skills. Consider whether the potential volunteer enjoys face-to-face interactions (e.g., mentoring) or solitary activities (e.g., community gardening). Also, try to help youth find volunteer opportunities that are age-appropriate.
5. *Alert youth to the rewards of volunteering.* While the essence of volunteering is really to provide service without rewards, there are some tangible benefits that youth can

get out of volunteering. Alert youth to these practical benefits. For instance, point out to youth that they can gain skills that might improve their marketability, and that volunteer activities enhance their resume. These benefits might make them more attractive to future employers or colleges. Many schools also have service learning components, so youth might actually get school credit for their services.

6. *Be a role model.* It goes without saying that parents and other adults can encourage youth to volunteer by being volunteers themselves. Getting youth to volunteer is more effective if the person asking sets a good example. If the person asking is a volunteer or volunteered in the past, youth are more encouraged to volunteer.
7. *Make it a family event.* Parents are always looking for ways to have family time, and to find activities that the whole family can do together. Finding a volunteer activity, or even starting their own, could be a great opportunity for a family to be involved in something together. Perhaps a family can think of something to do each month to help others.

Recommended resources

ServeNet: Provides information on volunteer opportunities in your community (based on your zip-code). <http://www.servenet.org/>

Youth Service America: Provides information on promoting and strengthening volunteerism among youth, ages 5-25. <http://www.ysa.org/>

United Way: Lists ideas for volunteerism and discusses benefits of activities. <http://www.unitedway.org>

Note: This NebGuide is based on:

de Guzman, M. R. T. (2007). Youth volunteerism: A tool for positive youth development. *UNL Community Programs, 2007*. Retrieved April 8, 2007, from <http://communityprograms.unl.edu/programs.html>.

Selected References

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Adolescence & Youth**
Issued August 2007

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