



Engaging Families in Service: Broadening Service-Learning's Reach, Impact, and Support

Source: Eugene C. Roehlkepartain, Search Institute, and Jenny Friedman, *Doing Good Together*, March 2009

For additional resources on this and other service-learning topics visit Learn and Serve America's National Service-Learning Clearinghouse at www.servicelearning.org.

When parents nurture their child's sense of compassion and commitment toward their community, we build a better world for now and for the future. While doing important community work, service-minded families are growing children and teenagers who are more likely to become civically engaged, thoughtful, caring, and generous adults.



The core principles of effective service-learning have potential to enrich family service through more intentional family engagement in planning and reflecting on their service experience. In addition, it provides a structured focus on learning and development goals that increase the likelihood that the service engagement will have a lasting impact on both those providing service and those being served.



Why Does Family Service Matter?

Research suggests that engaging parents and their children in service together has important positive outcomes for everyone involved. It benefits:

- *children and youth* by cultivating positive values, such as caring and empathy, and by developing a commitment to service both now and in the future.
- *parents* by giving them more quality time with their children and through all the other benefits of volunteering for adults, including increased interpersonal skills and improved mental and physical health.
- *families* by increasing their sense of cohesion, well-being, and connections to the broader community.
- *sponsoring organizations and civic life* by attracting more volunteers, increasing volunteer commitments, and bringing new energy to traditional volunteer opportunities.



What Are Challenges?

Despite the benefits, organizations typically encounter a range of real and perceived obstacles when seeking to engage families in service and service-learning:

- *Families are busy.* But rather than adding stress, family service can enhance family life.
- *Parents do not know about available opportunities for family service.* Low-income parents are much less likely to be aware of opportunities.
- *Age-segregated programming and difficulty finding appropriate opportunities.* However, organizations have found that engaging families in service can increase current and future youth participation.
- *Children—especially young teens—may not want to do some things with their parents, particularly in public.* That may affect the kinds of service they will perform.
- *Lack of experience in engaging families in service-learning.* Effective service-learning practices offer approaches that can overcome these challenges.



Using Service-Learning to Strengthen Family Engagement

Service-learning can be adapted and applied to strengthen how organizations engage families in service. Here are some starting points:

- *Inspire families about the benefits of service.* Once families understand the power of family service, they often become inspired to spend time serving others.
- *Build interest through short-term, “in-house” projects.* Also consider projects families can do off-site to assist you.
- *Start by making existing service opportunities more family friendly.* For example, offer flexible and short-term assignments to fit families’ schedules.
- *Engage interested families in investigating priorities and planning the program.*
- *Set goals for service and learning.*
- *Establish partnerships with local organizations to provide ongoing service-learning opportunities.*
- *Take time to prepare with families* for both service and learning as well as the follow-up reflection, celebration, and demonstration of learning and impact.
- *Make time for reflection.* The reflection component encourages conversation among family members about values, family dynamics, and other learning goals.
- *Demonstrate and celebrate learning and impact.* Create a forum for families to be recognized for their efforts and talk with one another about what they have accomplished.

Other Practical Tools on Family Service and Volunteering

Practical Guides for Parents

Friedman, J. (2003). *The busy family’s guide to volunteering.*

Price, S. C. (2001). *The giving family: Raising our children to help others.*

Vogt, S. (2002). *Raising kids who make a difference.*

Weisman, C. (2006). *Raising charitable children.*

Practical Guides for Program Leaders

McCurley, S. (1999). *Family-friendly volunteering: A guide for agencies.*

Porritt, K. (1995). *Family volunteering: The ties that bind—An introduction to preparing our agency for family volunteers.*

Scherer, C., & Fabyi-King, D. (2007). *Family volunteering: A guide for the workplace.*

Thoele, M. (2001). *Family serve: Volunteer opportunities for families.*

Websites

Doing Good Together (www.doinggoodtogether.org)

Family Cares (www.familycares.org)

The Volunteer Family (www.volunteerfamily.com)

For a more detailed discussion, including references and documentation, see the complete online fact sheet at http://www.servicelearning.org/instant_info/fact_sheets/cb_facts/engaging/expanded.php

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