

Invigorate Your Program with Teen Volunteers

Fonda Kendrick | August 10, 2008

As the director of the children's department at my local library, I have just now had a chance to stop for a moment and take a deep breath. Our eight-week Summer Reading Club has just officially drawn to a close. Since the reading club encourages children to read for pleasure and also helps to keep their reading skills sharp, we take it seriously. The club requires constant staffing of the children's desk for eight weeks, logging hours read and distributing small prizes as incentives. Sometimes it takes two or more people at once to take care of the crowd!

Last year, in an attempt to take some stress off our limited staff, the young adult director recruited some middle school and high school students to assist with the club. This was the first time our [library](#) had sponsored a teen volunteer program. Over the last two years, it has been a learn as we go process. So, in case you are considering adding teens to your volunteer force, here are a few tips that might come in handy:

Understand each volunteer's motivation.

Teens volunteer for a variety of reasons. Include a question on your volunteer application to find out what that reason is. You may be surprised by the responses! Some may be drawn to your agency due to a future career interest or volunteer requirements for a high school class or another organization. Others may want the experience to add to a college resume. Still others simply want something to do during the summer to fill up spare time, while a few might even get volunteered by their mom or dad. Once you understand why a teen is there, you may have a better feel for which tasks to assign him or her.

Orientation is a must.

Even if the volunteer task is a simple one, make sure to take the time to hold an orientation for new teen volunteers. Let them know about your organization's philosophy and goals. Outline their duties and clearly designate a staff person to whom each volunteer reports. Engage teens by explaining how their time is helping both your organization and the demographic you serve. If volunteers are working directly with your clients, clearly explain what behaviors you expect of them as well as those that are not appropriate. Also be sure to include information about your dress code.

As part of your standard orientation, include a contract for each teen to sign that allows either your organization or the volunteer to discontinue your partnership, for any reason at any time. Although rarely needed, this kind of agreement may decrease hard feelings or bad press on the off chance that termination is necessary.

Make teens feel like they are part of the team.

You may get a mixed response from staff when you announce that teens are going to become part of your volunteer pool. It's important that you try to get your staff onboard with the idea. Let them know that the teens are to be treated with the same respect given to adult volunteers. You can also make the volunteers feel more at home by introducing them to all staff members that will have close contact with them. On their first day, you may want to welcome the volunteers with snacks or a goodie bag, a t-shirt with the organizations logo, etc.

Pair teens with mentors.

At least for the first couple times a teen volunteers, pair him or her with a mentor. This can be either an adult staff member or an adult volunteer who is familiar with the task. The mentoring serves several purposes. Of course, it allows the adult to model the task and also to provide the teen with additional feedback, instruction and tips, but it also gives the adult the opportunity to see if the task is a good fit for the volunteer. Perhaps more than anything, it allows the teen to start to interact with others within the organization and feel more connected and comfortable. (Remember, this may be a teens first attempt at doing something like this, and s/he may feel nervous at first!) Then, as the teen gains skills and confidence, you can reduce supervision to your comfort level.

Plan ahead.

Brainstorm with your volunteer coordinator and appropriate department heads to compose a list of additional tasks that teens can do. In the case of our Summer Reading Club, the flow of participants can be sporadic. If activity at the children's desk is slow, we let the teens know about additional tasks that need to be done. It's important to have this list ready, because believe me there's nothing worse than being put on the spot and not being able to think of anything for a bored volunteer to do!

Limit volunteer time.

Let's face it: kids are kids. We shouldn't necessarily expect them to have the attention span we demand of adults. Especially for a younger teen, I strongly suggest limiting the [number of times per week s/he volunteers](#) to once or twice a week is best. Along with that, keep it to only two or three hours at a time.

Be prepared to be flexible.

When setting up your volunteer schedule, make sure to ask each teen when s/he will not be available to volunteer, including vacations, sports practices, etc. I'll warn you, though, that you will still find holes in your schedule, as unexpected things will creep up. As always, make sure that you have a back-up plan for staffing, if needed.

Recognize teen efforts.

This can be done in a variety of ways. Catch them in the act of doing something good and praise them. Thank them at the end of their shift. More formally, you can promote teens as they gain experience. You can also reward them with small incentives, a picnic, or a pizza party at a recognition event.

If you are looking to ease into adding teens to your volunteer program, consider offering some parent-teen volunteer opportunities. This would allow you to rely in part on parents for teen supervision/guidance and evaluate how teens would do on their own as volunteers within your organization.

However you choose to implement them into your volunteer force, teens can provide a fresh outlook and new vitality to a volunteer program. And, although it may take a little extra time and effort, just remember that teens' volunteer experiences now may affect their willingness to volunteer later as adults.

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