

The Many Flavors of Family Volunteering

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We all know that the 1950s home with a mother and father (married to each other) and two children (theirs) is far from the realities of our era, when the term "family" has expanded to encompass all sorts of permutations of relationships. Yet, there has been quite a bit of attention in the past decade to the concept of "family volunteering," through which two or more relatives, usually intergenerational, contribute their time and talents together.

Benefits to the Organization

Collectively, a family group can work as a team, bringing many hands to a task. If children or teenagers are part of the mix, the related adults are there to assure the organization that the youngsters will be supervised. So this is a great way to bring young people into a setting, injecting energy and fun into projects.

If a family with several members commits to a long-term task or adopts a specific shift, client, or project, there is a greater chance of dependability and consistency, since not every member of the family needs to show up each time, so long as someone from the family maintains the regular commitment.

Benefits to the Family

In today's hectic, harried world, most families struggle to find "quality time" with each other. Traditional volunteer recruitment only makes things worse by targeting individual adults and asking them to spend even more time away from home. By recruiting the whole family, an organization is offering them a special opportunity to designate time for a collective activity - while also doing good in the community.

Further, volunteering can give each member of the family the chance to shine as an individual as well as to cooperate as a team. And that brings the benefit of showing each other something rarely seen by staying home: how family members behave in public and are viewed by others. Adults don't often observe their children outside of play or school, and seldom in a situation in which they are expected to use their skills for an external goal. Conversely, few children get to see their adult relatives from a new perspective; not as mom, uncle, or grandpa, but as a colleague.

Special Opportunities

Consider some of the following types of modern families who might be recruited as volunteers if the assignments offered match their needs.

Couples without children may actually welcome the opportunity to interact with children who need some sort of service. In some cases, childless couples (or individuals) actually love children and are sorry that they do not have any of their own. This makes them more interested in and patient with the children of others! Newer or younger couples may appreciate the chance to test themselves

around children and see how they like the interaction, or observe each other as potential parents. Why ask couples with children of their own to leave those youngsters at home to go out to volunteer with other children? Go right to those for whom this doesn't feel like a conflict of interest.

Couples, single parents, or guardians with children of any age might be especially interested in volunteering to work with children of different ages. Young boys and girls get a chance to work with teenagers, or vice versa. A good time to do this might be when an older child departs for college, leaving the younger ones without that "big brother" or "big sister." For single parents, the volunteer opportunity is also a way to spend time with other adults, too - something which they might value but rarely do. So a "single parent shift" in which several similar families are invited to volunteer together might be popular. This idea might also appeal to the growing family category of grandparents raising grandchildren.

Volunteering can be an important chance for other *extended family members* to interact with nieces and nephews, cousins, godchildren - whoever is important to them but they don't see as often as they'd like. Why not schedule shared community service time and get to know one another in new ways? It's often overlooked that older siblings, particularly if there is a big age gap between them, may be interested in pairing with their younger siblings.

Volunteering can be extremely powerful when divorce turns the *non-custodial parent* into a "visitor" in his or her children's lives. It's forced and ultimately unappealing to look for ways to play together during a visit. Perhaps sharing a volunteer activity that they've all chosen and enjoy would offer a way for this broken unit to share a common project or cause, and keep learning about each other. Doing intentional outreach to such non-custodial parents might be really effective for the right organization.

With remarriage and blended families, adults can struggle with learning how to step parent as much as children find themselves coping with a step parent, step siblings, and perhaps half siblings. Again, the right volunteer opportunity can introduce all the new family members to each other through a common project. It's team building while serving others.

Just Ask

Sometimes all that's needed is to drop the seed of the idea. Mention to volunteers already on board that perhaps they'd like more time with a relative or two (or best friend, for that matter). Would they want to invite their teenage son, granddaughter, cousin, uncle, or sister to join them in this cause they clearly care about? They may only have to ask.

By Susan J. Ellis, president of Energize, Inc. (www.energizeinc.com), an international training, consulting and publishing firm specializing in volunteerism. This was the Tip of the Month for March 2015.