

Charity begins at home

10 ways to raise your kids with a passion for philanthropy

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There is an increasing sense that the current generation of children is growing up a bit, shall we say, self-centered. It's not unusual to hear, "When can I get the next video game?" or "I want to eat here, not there" or, worse, "I'm not going to eat this!" – when you've just finished cooking a lovely meal for your family.

Parents wonder why their children may show a lack of appreciation or a reluctance to help out. Yes, kids today are undeniably more me-focused, but according to writer Todd Patkin, it's not all their fault. Patkin asserts that children simply aren't being taught by their parents, teachers, mentors and community to be a very thoughtful generation.

"I don't believe that kids are acting selfishly because they don't want to help; it's more that they aren't really sure how to help others and give back, because they aren't being taught," says Patkin, author of the new book "Finding Happiness: One Man's Quest to Beat Depression and Anxiety and – Finally – Let the Sunshine In" (StepWise Press; \$18; toddpatkin.com). "It's crucial for adults – especially those of us who are parents – to start early when it comes to raising our kids with a passion for philanthropy."

Parents are the greatest influencers when it comes to developing their kids' habits and behaviors, Patkin says. "If they see you giving back as a part of your regular life, they'll learn that behavior and carry it with them into adulthood."

Ready to help your child take the first steps from selfishness to selflessness? Here are 10 ways to get your children geared up for giving back.

Explain philanthropy to your children. Before your kids start selling candy bars to the neighbors with the intent to donate the money to charity, it's important to first help them realize that giving back doesn't just mean donating money. Before making a run to the thrift store with a car filled with old clothes and toys, explain that generosity is not limited to giving away things you no longer want. It's important, especially when kids are young, to start with the very basics of why it's important to give. For example, you might ask them, "If you did not have enough food to eat or warm clothes to wear on a cold day, wouldn't you want someone, even if you did not know them, to help you so you got the food and warmth you needed?"

"Kids will usually do what you say they should while they're under your roof, but they won't continue to pursue philanthropy throughout their lives unless they understand the 'why' behind it," Patkin stresses. "Explain to your child the charity work you do. Tell her why you do it and who it helps, and keep an open dialogue going in your household to help her understand what's going on. The more you talk, the better grasp she'll have on the concept."

It's never too early to start. Empathy is a concept that children can learn from a very early age, so look for and take advantage of teachable moments. You can start with something as basic as encouraging small children to share with one another. Ask them to consider how they'd feel if they didn't have a toy and how their feelings would change if a friend gave them one, for example.

Start with simple tasks. "You can find a variety of ways for children to volunteer their time at any age, all year round," says Patkin. "Smaller children can help to sort recycling or contribute to decorating posters for a bake sale or other event. Once your kids get a little older, they can donate a portion of their holiday or birthday money to a charity, or they can choose

a toy to donate to needy children. You can also involve your children in philanthropy through family-wide activities like sponsoring an underprivileged child during the holidays and helping to buy his school supplies, or visiting nursing home residents.”

Make it a part of everyday life. As most parents know, you’ll probably never have as much time or money as you’d like, so waiting for “just a little more” of either is futile. When it comes to giving back, there is no better time to start than now, using what you already have. You don’t need to possess unlimited time or money to get involved. You can find smaller, simpler ways to make helping others a part of your everyday routine.

“When many people think of philanthropy, they picture big-money donations and orphanages founded in third-world countries – and those things certainly qualify,” Patkin acknowledges. “However, the everyday efforts of ordinary people can also have an incredible impact. Just remember that since parents need to model good behaviors, you’ll need to ‘walk the walk’ in front of your kids. If you’re grocery shopping with your children, for example, buy an extra bag of pet food and drop it off at the humane society on the way home. Then encourage your kids to be giving during their own everyday tasks, whether that means sharing art supplies or helping clean up.”

Let your kids decide on the cause. The more you let your children become involved in the philanthropy process, the more they’ll be invested in what you’re doing. Bring your kids in from the beginning by allowing them to help choose which organizations the family volunteers for or donates to. They’ll feel more connected to the cause, and even the youngest members can be involved, even if it just means tagging along.

“It’s a good idea to sit down with your kids and ask them to identify a problem that they want to fix,” says Patkin. “If they’re very young, you might give them a few options to choose from, such as feeding people who are hungry or getting winter coats for people who don’t have them. Then you can all work on finding a corresponding organization. You might also think about volunteering to organize a charity project for your child’s classroom in order to kick off a ‘giving gang’ – a group of peers doing charity work together. This will encourage the type of positive peer pressure the world needs more of!”

Reinforce the value of a random act of kindness. Giving back is not always about a charity organization, a monetary donation, or volunteering. Kids

need to understand that having a heart for others is a way of life, not a series of appointments on your calendar. Show them that helping someone else and not expecting anything in return can happen any time, anywhere. In fact, it's often the small everyday acts that give us the biggest returns in terms of fulfillment and happiness, and they are things that are easy for kids to recognize and act on.

Teach them that "charity" can include a simple gesture. "Guide your kids by pointing out opportunities for them to take the initiative," says Patkin. "When you're out shopping, encourage them to help an elderly lady load her groceries into her car, and then offer to return her cart for her. Likewise, prompt your child to hold the door for a woman pushing a baby stroller, or whisper that he might offer the last piece of pizza to his younger brother. Soon, your kids will hopefully be taking the initiative all on their own!"

Explain that philanthropy is not one-size-fits-all. Kids naturally have more aptitude for some activities than others. The child who's a natural artist may be stymied and bored by the intricacies of baseball – and the same principle is true when it comes to giving back. It's important to tailor philanthropic work to a child's personality and interests. For example, you wouldn't take your daughter to the animal shelter if she were afraid of dogs.

"Just as the projects that individuals take on aren't one-size-fits-all, neither are the needs of the people these projects work to benefit," Patkin says. "It's important to explain this state of affairs to your child, especially if she is younger. Talk with her about how different people and situations have different needs. Some might want a hot meal, for example, while others may want someone to listen to their problems. Some places need clothes while others benefit more from monetary donations, and so on. Help her to understand why it's important for her to match her talents, passions and beliefs to these needs."

There's no substitute for real-world experience. Encouraging your kids to earmark a percentage of their allowances or donating some of their lesser-used toys to charity is a good start, but don't stop there. If your children can see where their donations are going and how they're actually helping others, the giving experience will be much more real. Consider taking a family trip to visit recipient organizations, so that your children can see where their money goes.

“Visiting charitable organizations in person tends to take giving to the next level,” Patkin says. “Whether you’re 7 or 70, you’re much more likely to stay involved in philanthropy if you can see how your efforts are actually making the world a better place. In order to keep the memories fresh, make a scrapbook of your child’s volunteering experiences. Also, you can look for real-world philanthropic opportunities that connect to your child’s interests and activities. If he has a summer reading list, for example, you might tie projects into the books he’s reading. If one of them is about dogs, volunteer at the animal shelter.”

Make it a family affair. When you give back as a family, your kids will see Mom and Dad as role models.

Do it together. You’ll all grow closer to each other because of this shared experience. Commit as a family to spend two days per month working with a charity or doing something to help others, even if that just means helping out elderly neighbors or volunteering at the church yard sale. You might also work together to raise money for a walk, fundraiser or other project, then walk together on race day, or go together as a family to present the money you’ve raised.

A good place to start is right here in O.C. Visit OneOC.org.

HOW KIDS BENEFIT BY SERVING THEIR COMMUNITIES

By Lara Krupicka

Eighteen-year-old Brandon Hockersmith of Fullerton teaches kids and adults about the ocean. Tobin Holcomb of Irvine has been a junior naturalist since she was 14, helping kids experience the outdoors. What do these two kids have in common? They’re among the estimated 15.5 million young people who participate in volunteer activities. Like many others, they are finding that they get back more than they give through volunteering. Here are some of the benefits:

Discover new interests

Volunteering gives kids a chance to try new things. In the process, they can uncover talents and interests they hadn’t been aware of. Some may even go on to pursue college studies and careers inspired by their volunteer

experiences.

Lori Whalen, director of education at the Environmental Nature Center in Newport Beach, has seen this in a student who developed an interest in decomposition through his work turning compost and creating graphs of the compost's temperature.

"He doesn't want to stop," Whalen says. "He finished last spring, and now it's fall and he's asking to start coming back. He doesn't have to."

Increased confidence

Youth volunteers gain valuable exposure interacting with the public that they couldn't get anywhere else. It requires them to exercise their communication and public speaking skills. In turn, this fosters confidence as students see the positive impact of their interactions.

"He loves engaging the kids and getting them to talk, rather than just standing there waiting for people to ask him questions," says Brad Hockersmith of his son Brandon's work as a docent at the Ocean Institute in Dana Point.

Whalen has found this to be true of her volunteers, as well. "They grow in speaking confidently on the phone after a month. They're fully competent. Those kinds of skills are valuable."

A broader perspective on life

Volunteer experiences also give kids a chance to get outside of their neighborhood and have contact with people who are different from them. Whether at a museum or a food pantry, volunteering opens up children's horizons. It exposes them to more of the world – in a controlled environment where they can feel safe.

Responsibility

While many volunteer opportunities are one-time events, kids can also sign up for regular shifts. Being committed to an ongoing position requires taking responsibility.

"The time management skills they get out of it is huge," says Hockersmith. He explains that volunteering "has helped Brandon realize what he has to do to spread things out so he can get everything done."

Enjoyment

When children connect with a volunteer position that fits them well, the common response is, "It doesn't feel like work." When the position and the child's interests match, to them it's more like a chance to get out and play. This in turn can be a good step in helping them discover their vocation.

Lara Krupicka is a freelance writer, wife and mom of three girls. She's had a blast watching her eldest daughter grow through her volunteer experiences, and she looks forward to someday joining her as a volunteer herself.

VOLUNTEERING: A FAMILY AFFAIR

With overloaded schedules and increasingly busy lives, many families are searching for ways in which to better engage with their children, both to strengthen family bonds and teach values and life lessons.

Family volunteering provides just that. Nonprofits throughout Orange County are places where families can create lasting memories while making a difference together. Children see volunteering as an adventure as they learn about pressing community needs, meet different people and engage in newly discovered activities. Their eyes and hearts are opened to real-life social issues. As families become part of a community solution, both parents and children are surprised by the thoughtful conversations that occur and how their beliefs and behaviors may change as a result of their volunteer experience.

Dan McQuaid, OneOC CEO and president, says, "It's great to see families come together in this shared experience. Whether the kids are as young as 3 or well into their teens, there is always something important they can do, and there is always a great sense of pride when they see the end result of their effort."

Get your family involved. Visit OneOC.org or call 714.953.5757.

PLACES THAT WELCOME YOUNG VOLUNTEERS

- Hospitals (think candy strippers)
- Animal shelters

- Museums
- Food pantries
- Libraries

For other opportunities, check out VolunteerMatch (volunteermatch.org), an online searchable database of organizations looking for volunteers. It allows you to search for kid- and teen-friendly openings.

1. Look for a one-time opportunity to try out the concept of volunteering, such as at a food pantry.
2. Volunteer side by side with your child. It can be a good bonding experience, and it models the spirit of volunteerism.
3. Watch for chances to pair your child's interests with a service activity.
4. If the first experience doesn't work out, try again.