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Today's families are stretched to the limits. Between school, work and overlapping and competing extra-curriculars, we are all tapped for time and energy. As a result, we don't always make time for the things we should, like volunteering together to better our communities. Because that would literally be one more thing to plan and coordinate for, right?!

Creating space to be engaged as a family in a mutual activity is an art in itself. How often can we all find an enjoyable activity where all family members can participate together, let alone one that is peaceful and purposeful? With an increasing need to make sense of an overwhelming world, finding opportunities to get out and give back is an awesome opportunity for families to recharge and reconnect.

### **Why Volunteer Together as a Family**

They say multitasking isn't the best ...except when it comes to family volunteering. The benefits of volunteering together as a family are many, including connecting with your kids, helping kids develop a "give back" mindset, contributing to making the community a better place, and having positive, quality, ~~forced~~ family togetherness.

(And not to mention, it's hard to engage in screen time battles when your hands are busy packing supplies or assembling sandwiches to help fellow community members in need.)



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## How to Find Opportunities for Family Volunteering

There are endless reasons why volunteering is generally good and positive and makes the world a better place, regardless of how old you are. Whether you're five or 55, helping people gives all of us a dopamine hit and an awesome brain boost.

Volunteering opportunities are all around us; however, they can be trickier to find when the volunteers are pint-sized. Some nonprofit organizations may not allow children younger than 14 to volunteer, even with a parent in tow. And when we're looking to plant the seeds of kindness in the next generation of leaders and activists, the earlier the better.

So how can you engage your family in volunteering and check multiple feel-good boxes at the same time?

1. Choose what interests your family the most. Does your family enjoy spending time outdoors, or is the luxury of A/C the only way you can get them to leave the house? Do the kids absolutely go nuts over sweet puppy dog faces and purring baby kittens, or do they prefer to interact and hang out with other kids? Is your familial crew creative and crafty, or do they prefer to sort, organize and assemble?

Tap into what will motivate and inspire your family to give up Saturday cartoons and lazy weekend mornings to get up and get out because giving back is the ultimate Weekend Warrior!

2. Research what projects and opportunities are available in your community. Oftentimes, the 5-13 age range is excluded from a nonprofit's in-house volunteer opportunities. But that doesn't mean there aren't volunteer possibilities for your family, you may just have to search more and get creative.

You can kick start the search for volunteer opportunities through national volunteering databases like VolunteerMatch.org, JustServe.org and GreatNonprofits.org. These websites enable you to search by city and zip code as well as by cause.

Once you know what causes and community concerns your family cares most about, start calling local animal shelters, homeless centers, food pantries and nursing homes. Ask to speak with their volunteer coordinator and explain that you are seeking family-friendly volunteer opportunities. Assure them that young children will be supervised and you will be hands-on with them throughout the volunteer project.

3. Volunteering is always more fun with friends. Once you have a project identified, ask the nonprofit if you can invite another family to join you. Whether it's playing board games at a local nursing home, or assembling peanut butter sandwiches, the community impact can be doubled and tripled when your volunteer crew is made of many.
4. Educate your family volunteers. When kids understand who they are helping and why, it creates a mind-heart-hands connection. Depending on the nature of the volunteer project, your family may not have direct contact with the benefiting clients or population. However, with some

pre-project education on your part, kids can still make a connection between their volunteer work and the positive impact it will have on someone else's life.

In the days leading up to the volunteer project, research local statistics and facts on the cause or issue you will be working in. If your family will be volunteering to sort donations at a food pantry, research how many people in your community live below the poverty line. Or if you are volunteering to call BINGO at a nursing home, learn more about senior isolation and the epidemic of loneliness amongst the elderly.

Whether it's around the dinner table or on the drive to the volunteer project itself, discuss as a family:

- What the volunteer project is, *i.e. We will be bundling diapers for families in need;*
- Why this volunteer project exists, *i.e. Sometimes families may be going through a hard time and may not have enough money to buy diapers for their baby;*
- The community need this project will help to solve or help make better, *i.e. When a family can get a bundle of diapers from their local diaper bank, they don't have to choose between buying diapers or buying groceries.*

5. Make the connection. During the volunteer project, when the family is not distracted by dings and devices, is a great time to engage them in discussion and reflection questions. Depending on the age and maturity level of your family volunteers, use the hands-on work to discuss the who, what and why this work matters.

Some great reflection questions can include:

- How do you think this project will help \_\_\_\_\_?
- How would you feel if \_\_\_\_\_?
- What else can we do to help \_\_\_\_\_?
- How did today's project make you feel?
- We all need help sometimes. When has someone helped you and how did that make you feel?

6. Keep it going. Kindness, compassion and empathy don't just happen. They are seeds that must be planted and continually nurtured. Make

volunteering part of your family culture and identify. Return monthly to a volunteer project and get to know the people, the neighborhood and the work. Engage the family regularly in discussions about community needs and what else you can do as a family to help. By exposing kids to different parts of town and connecting them with people they may not normally meet, their perspective is broadened, empathy is developed and kindness grows.

Volunteering is one the easiest ways to spend time as a family in a meaningful and intentional way. For a short period of time, your family crew is together, doing something good for someone else in the process. And maybe that's one way to check the box of *Family Time* in our frantically, busy lives!

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