

Children Should Be



We in the volunteer community have done a lot of talking in recent years about reaching out to new, untapped sources of volunteers. But are we really willing to adapt our existing management styles and procedures to the requirements of new groups? This question can be raised for any new type of potential volunteer, but is especially pertinent to the somewhat unexpected proposal to recruit children under the age of 14 as volunteers.

Since *Children as Volunteers* was published in March, I have encountered varying reactions to this subject. While some volunteer leaders have shown enthusiasm and shared success stories about projects they already have tried with youngsters, too many colleagues have resisted even the thought of programs involving children as volunteers.

Too many immediately dismiss the idea. They say, "We cannot use children in my setting." When pressed for tangible evidence of such restrictions, they admit, "We don't use children and won't consider it."

Many of us do not know what regulations or guidelines exist to limit our work in volunteerism — and what the difference is between legally binding policies and suggested operating guides. Perhaps the research necessary to clarify whether children could indeed be recruited as volunteers will produce better information to support volunteers of all ages. Rather than assuming restrictions for the volunteer programs we lead, we should expand the boundaries of citizen participation whenever possible.

Another reaction to the suggestion of involving children is suspicion that the effort to supervise children will drain the organization without providing added services. The experiences of directors of volunteers who have experimented with very young volunteers demonstrate that children are well worth time and attention, and are an exciting and productive volunteer force.

Even if utilizing youngsters under age 14 sounds extreme at first, the process of debating the pros and cons will encourage more creativity in our practice of volunteerism. Identifying the work children can do, for example, will stimulate additional ways to involve teenagers, a group generally underutilized. Getting a new perspective on training or recognition because of the need to adapt to children will result in some livelier events for adults as well.

This discussion has important implications for how we perceive our role as volunteer leaders. Do we have a responsibility to provide opportunities for the widest possible range of citizens who contribute their services voluntarily? If so, are we actively exploring ways to accommodate the special needs of each group of volunteers? It is true that successful involvement of children requires flexibility, but our job is to adapt programs to enable anyone with the right match of talents and desire to be of service. Children deserve to be recognized for what they already are contributing as volunteers and the chance to use their talents to benefit their communities without adults' preconceived expectations limiting their accomplishments. —S. J. E.

Seen AND Heard

By Susan J. Ellis

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IT HAS BEEN SAID THAT AS A COUNTRY we are ambivalent towards our children. In many ways we cater to them, while systematically excluding them from most things. Volunteerism is no exception. There are countless volunteer efforts to assist or serve children, but there are remarkably few programs that allow children to help others. For the most part, we as adults tend to see youngsters only as recipients of aid, never as givers of it. Yet, as we all seek to maximize available resources, can we afford to overlook our youngest citizens?

Children economically are consumers rather than producers. Child labor laws forbid most employment prior to age 14, while acceptable work for pay (delivering papers, mowing lawns) is usually perceived as more important to the child's personal development than as a

contribution to the economics of a community. Since our society overemphasizes money and earning ability as major indicators of a person's value, it is automatically assumed that children have minimal worth as social contributors.

But volunteering is the only type of work in which earning power is irrelevant to successful completion of a task. So boys and girls, as volunteers, can demonstrate their abilities by handling tasks suited to their skill level—which might be much more advanced than if they had the opportunity to show in any other way. There are many volunteer assignments for which the major criteria are enthusiasm and the willingness to work hard. Volunteer programs that have attempted to involve children under age 14 have found these youngsters so pleased to help that they participate energetically and lend their fresh perspective to the adult situation.

In point of fact, children already are an active part of many volunteer efforts, but their participation is largely invisible, and therefore undervalued. Children routinely pitch in to help adults with all sorts of projects requiring extra hands: preparing mass mailings, setting up fair booths, loading cars, taking tickets, running errands. Have you ever attended a fundraising event, for example, at which children are not obviously helping out? But such volunteer efforts are neither recorded nor recognized formally. Too often, *parents* are considered the "volunteers," while their children are the "helpers." The fact that these sons and daughters had an important impact on the success of the overall project is rarely acknowledged.

Everyone loses when the help given by youngsters is taken for granted: The organization misses the chance to credit additional support; parents overlook the opportunity to praise their children

for family teamwork; and the children never see that they were part of a project bigger than themselves. If we want to develop a personal volunteer tradition in young people that will carry on into adulthood, we must give recognition when it is earned.

Some organizations may feel that they already make a formal effort to utilize the volunteer services of children under age 14. But closer examination reveals that all too often children are used for their *bodies*, not their minds. The proliferation of "a-thons"—bike-a-thons, read-a-thons, rock-a-thons, etc.—do allow for youngsters to raise money and show support for a cause. Yet, these activities rarely tap the minds and ideas of those participating. Children have fun and expend energy for a good cause, but their roles are extremely limited. Usually there is no continuity or follow-up after the event. For those children who want to do more extensive volunteer work, there are few assignment options.

While many might agree with the theoretical concept of children as volunteers, it is a different matter to put it into practice. The first step is to be willing to experiment with ways to utilize children in your program and to adapt existing administrative procedures to the special concerns of this age group. All too often the unknowns of working with youngsters stop program leaders in their tracks—and the idea never gets tried. As with all program challenges, however, the steps of involving children as volunteers become manageable when examined one at a time. Implementation follows the same process, in the same sequence, as developing a volunteer program for adults. There are different emphases, considerations and techniques, but the basics remain the same.

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There are four options for ways to involve children under age 14 as volunteers. You should consider the potential of each for your program:

Individual children: Children can be recruited one by one for special abilities and to match certain needs. This allows for flexibility in scheduling and focused supervision.

Groups of children: Youth organizations and school classes often seek community service projects. Recruitment, assignment and some supervision responsibilities can then be shared with the group's adult leader. The children may be scheduled all at once, allowing for concentrated supervision at planned intervals. Training time is reduced and larger projects can be tackled. Members of a group motivate each other.

Parent/child teams: This option means recruiting both parent and child to volunteer together for the same job. Variations on this theme include couples and one child, whole families, or teams of older and younger siblings. This option is superficially the easiest to manage because of the additional supervision and guidance provided by the related adult relative. However, because of the parental relationship you will need to ensure opportunities for the child to contribute independently as well. (Note: One way to test the water on the whole idea of children as volunteers might be to ask adult volunteers already on board if they would like to ask their children to join them. This also can be a recruiting plus for adults anticipating child-care expenses while volunteering.)

Non-related adult/child teams: This option means pairing two different age groups of volunteers—it can include matching teenagers with children—to do a job together. This model maximizes child supervision, while allowing each volunteer to contribute equally. You can even recruit parent and child together, but "mix and match" them with nonrelated adults and children scheduled at the same time.

Regardless of the options you select, there are numerous models you can

adopt for assignment development. These include one-shot activities and/or ongoing projects, help given to an institution and/or to individual people (indirect or direct services), volunteering that is cross-generational (child to adult), peer-to-peer (child to child), or "mixed" children (children of one age serving children of another age).

The planning process should also involve salaried staff and adult volunteers, both of whom have the right to present their concerns and their ideas. Further, consider creating an advisory group of children to help you plan. These youngsters can be of real assistance in designing assignments boys and girls could and might like to do.

Finally, planning must consider some special needs unique to children. These include:

Transportation: Most children are not independently mobile, so you may need to explore ways to provide rides or at least reimburse bus fare.

Work space: Depending on the type of work the children will do, you may need to provide smaller tables and chairs, or lots of chair cushions! Allow for elbow room and a minimum of distractions.

Refreshments: If you presently provide only coffee or tea, consider the option of juice or milk (adult volunteers might delight in this particular adaptation, too). Have flat-bottomed cups at the water cooler so that youngsters can take a drink back to the work area without spilling it.

Restrooms: Assess usability by children and proximity to their work site.

Getting around: If you have a large, maze-like building, you may need an escort plan for children. Stairs and elevators likewise might pose a problem for very young boys and girls.



In our book, *Children as Volunteers*, we describe 49 examples of actual volunteer assignments children handle today. The potential variety of things youngsters can do is limitless, though to

NCJW Project Teaches Kids About Volunteering

By Linda Thornburg

Don't stick your head in the sand
Come on now, lend a helping hand
Stand up tall and tell us all
How you can lend a helping hand.

A cheerleader/narrator/singer dressed in a clown suit is chanting. The children, charged with excitement, clap their hands and sing along. With the help of some well-known puppet characters, they have just spent 40 minutes learning about volunteering.

The scene is a New York City elementary school, where a puppet show produced by the National Council of Jewish Women is being tested for the first time. The recep-

find the best assignments will take creativity and some experimentation.

It is difficult to speak about all children as though they are a homogeneous group. The abilities and interests of children—as of adults—will vary according to their levels of personal development, so assignments should always be tailored to match the performance capabilities of each boy or girl. The following are some general guidelines to keep in mind:

—Find things children want to do and don't assume they'll do anything "because they are young."

tion to "I Can Be A Volunteer" is promising. The second graders in the audience talk to the characters, giggle, clap and pick up the words to the songs easily. To reinforce the ideas that without volunteering it would be a sad, sad world, and that volunteering isn't just for adults, these novices to the volunteer universe will spend some time over the next few weeks exploring the concept more fully and developing their own volunteer activities.

"We wanted to spread the concept of volunteering to kids," says Roberta Stim, voluntarism coordinator for the National Council of Jewish Women, whose committee on volunteering put together the show. "So we went to a teacher's college to see what kind of material on children and volunteering existed. We found very little. Those educators we talked to thought our initial idea of a puppet show was educationally sound and they backed us all the way."

With a grant from the Council of Essex County, N.J. Section, the committee developed a package of skits, narration and song that can be presented by high school students or adults to children in kindergarten through third grade.

The skits feature a reporter who investigates the concept of volunteering, a boy who discovers that cleaning his room has more advantages than just living in less clutter, three characters who find that helping someone else often brings unexpected rewards, and an entire neighborhood that learns the meaning of togetherness. Because all the

characters are familiar to any child who watches television, the young audiences are immediately receptive to the ideas behind the skits.

The program package, which sells for \$150, contains everything a group needs to put on the show except the six puppeteers. A guide to implementing the show suggests ways to approach a school, tells how to prepare the presentation and gives tips on rehearsal and publicity. The kit also includes the puppets, gloves, stage and curtains (with directions for assembly), an audio-cassette of a typical presentation, a book on puppetry and an activity book containing short stories that depict various volunteer activities and suggested topics for discussion.

To complete the project, NCJW used the talents of many different

groups. The Children's Television Workshop, for example, helped the committee develop its idea. Professional educators wrote the scripts, a professional puppeteer developed the narration and songs, and a member's husband designed the stage. Two sheltered workshops produced the pipes and curtains.

The committee has sold 20 of the 30 kits it manufactured to NCJW sections throughout the country. The Council has had numerous inquiries from other groups, but wants to give its own members the first chance to buy.

Their next project? "We hope to develop a similar program for grades four through six," Stim says.

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—Avoid sex-typing what girls or boys like to do—let them decide.

—Build on the openness of children to new situations, which they usually approach with fewer preconceived notions than adults.

—On the other hand, do not assume lack of prejudice, since children tend to express the opinions they hear at home—and sometimes embarrassingly say what's on their mind.

—Ask what the child will get out of this assignment.

—Also ask, "Does this job meet a real need?"

—Define assignments as a series of short-term tasks with identifiable goals or products, so that children can see immediate results. A sense of accomplishment is a powerful motivator.

—Plan for some variety within each assignment so that varying attention spans can be accommodated.

—Identify whether literacy is needed to accomplish goals and, if so, what reading level is required.

Written job descriptions are as useful for children as for adult volunteers. All the same elements should appear, but the language and tone can be less for-

mal. For example, you can use a question-and-answer format on colored paper. Larger print is helpful.



There are many avenues open to locate young volunteers. Keep in mind that you can try to reach children themselves or work through their parents or

teachers to find good candidates. Also, consider recruiting in nonschool settings so that you can be certain children are choosing freely to join your program.

When you interview and screen young potential volunteers, you should be concerned with *choice*. Does the child really want to volunteer, or is this the idea of the parent or youth group leader? This also means speaking with each group member individually.

If you are working with an organized group, clarify the role of the adult leader as liaison to you. For example, which of you will be responsible for following up on a child's absence or for enforcing rules? How will you keep in touch with each other? Who has the final word on what issues?

If you decide that a child is not appropriate as a volunteer, understand that the parent may be more upset than the child at this seeming rejection! Focus on the developmental level of the boy or girl (e.g., "We need someone who can read without assistance") so as to leave the door open for reapplying when the child has outgrown the particular stumbling block.

Parental permission is a good idea and offers you the opportunity to explain the volunteer program and your expectations. You might develop a "parent data sheet" to accompany the child's application form, providing such important information as emergency contacts and family insurance coverage. Record the transportation arrangement approved by the parent so that you can be sure it happens as planned.

Making It Work

Once you have accepted a young volunteer, the same good management techniques apply to children as to adults. This means orientation and training, though tailored to the child's educational level. Supervision and recognition are also tasks that will follow naturally from the work performed, with some modifications to match the age of the volunteer. You may find yourself running an ice cream party instead of a banquet at the end of the year, but the change might be fun for everyone!

Legalities and Liabilities

There are lots of bugaboos about the legalities of involving children as volunteers, which can stop you in your tracks if you don't anticipate them. Legal questions are undoubtedly important to answer, but be aware that others might place the fear of liability in your path as an insurmountable obstacle. This tactic is often a smokescreen hiding greater resistance to the whole concept of young volunteers. Your counter-tactic is accurate information. Armed with the facts about law and insurance, you can prove that such issues do not have to stop the progress of your program.

One misconception is that because child labor laws forbid the employment of children under age 14, it must therefore be illegal to recruit youngsters as volunteers. This is not true. In fact, there are no laws even discussing this issue! In a free society such as ours, we may assume permission to do something unless there is a specific law against it. Federal child labor laws give reasonable limits on the extent to which children may be exposed to "hazardous" work. Volunteer assignments should certainly maintain the common-sense standards for salaried youth employment, but *there are no federal restrictions on involvement of children as volunteers*.

As with everything else, labor laws vary from state to state. Check your state's definitions of "employee" and "volunteer," age restrictions on employment, and description of "hazardous" work. Look for supplements to and annotations of your state's child labor laws for any relevant applications to volunteering. If nothing expressly *forbids* children to volunteer, you may assume a green light.

It is a good idea to contact your state's department of labor and your organization's lawyer to get an authoritative answer on any legal questions. This includes getting advice on such things as the wording of a parental consent form.

Insurance is another subject that can be blown out of proportion in impor-

ance. Keep in mind that children are routinely covered by insurance carriers for all sorts of dangerous activities, such as team sports. So your task is to clarify exactly what your present insurance covers and to assess what additional coverage you need. Be sure to get *written* answers to your questions from the legal department of your insurance carrier. If you feel your situation warrants additional insurance either to protect the child or to protect the agency from liability, look around for the best deal. A good place to start is the carrier underwriting your local school system's insurance program.

Designing insurance coverage forces one to imagine the worst possible scenarios. Once you have answered your questions and taken the necessary precautions to protect the children and the organization, do not let fear limit you! The potential for a wonderful experience far outweighs the chance of something horrible happening.

By involving children, leaders of volunteer programs have a remarkable opportunity to demonstrate the philosophy that all citizens have something to contribute to society. Children are a volunteer resource available everywhere (often right under our noses) for those managers creative enough to recognize the potential.

As adults, we are the ones to teach children the importance of community service. By participating early in volunteer activities, youngsters learn the satisfaction and other benefits that come from freely offering to help others. Neither school work nor low-level salaried jobs teach *citizenship* in the hands-on way that volunteering does. Volunteering is training for truly participatory democracy. And while children learn all this, they are of real help at the same time!

The challenge is to begin *seeing* what children are doing already and what they can accomplish when given the chance. Acknowledgement of children's help with fundraising events, neighborhood fairs or school projects is a first step towards entrusting them with other kinds of volunteering. Integrating youngsters into existing adult volunteer programs involves "self-fulfilling prophecy": If you approach children as a source of innovation and energy, their contribution will justify the effort you make to adapt program elements to them. ♥