

Family Volunteering

Put this good idea to work

During the past five years or more, everyone's top 10 list of trends in volunteerism has included "family volunteering" – service done by all or some members of the same family together, as a unit. Funders, especially the Kellogg Foundation, have provided substantial grants to study the idea.

"Family Matters" is one of the more visible Points of Light Foundation projects, complete with its own National Family Volunteering Day each November and a national awards program. The media has also been attracted to the subject, producing a spate of articles examining sample projects.

The concept rarely fails to evoke intellectual interest from many different types of people, as in "gee, that sounds great." However, given the positive press, there are still far too few organizations actively recruiting families to volunteer.

Philosophically, family volunteering is a strong concept. It's good for the families who do service, good for the community at large, and good for the host organizations.

When it works right (more on that in a moment), families who volunteer together share the bond of a common interest and devotion to the same cause. It's a form of valued "quality time" between parents and their children. It ought to be fun, too.

organization, too. The most important benefit is that when a family accepts a volunteer assignment together, the agency gets many hands at once to do a job. This is especially helpful if a project needs intensive staffing. Bringing in a family of four or five to do the work substitutes for having to recruit four to five individual volunteers.

There are also many times in which having volunteers of varying ages provides better service to clients or consumers of varying ages. Here are some real examples of family volunteering assignments that demonstrate the benefits:

- Visiting a homebound client. A family can commit to a weekly visit and, even if only one member of the family can go in a particular week, the family can assure that a visit will indeed be made. Depending on the client, the presence of children may bring great joy.

- Being campground monitors. Families who camp out on summer weekends can enjoy their time outdoors while also serving the park to assure compliance with rules, fire prevention, and other camp concerns. Having volunteers of varying ages allows peer-to-peer monitoring, too.

- Hosting international exchanges. Every member of the family is clearly involved if a foreign visitor needs to be welcomed into the home for a period of time.

- Working at clean-up and other beautification projects. This is ideal because there are tasks suitable for every age and skill group.

- Staffing a booth or activity at a fundraising event. This allows for sufficient coverage of that booth, yet everyone can get a break. Plus, the younger volunteers can interact with other young people who come to the booth.

In truth, the right family team can tackle just about any assignment. It will depend on their interests, skills, and hobbies.

What's a 'family?'

This is a world in which "families" come in all shapes and sizes. There are families of blood ties and intentional/chosen families.

There are nuclear families and far extended ones. It doesn't matter how people self-define their own family. What matters is that there are two or more people who have a strong relationship with each other and who come from at least two generations.

One special type of family unit is a divorced, non-custodial parent with his (usually) or her children. Too often this parent is a playmate, looking for fun things to do on visiting days. Volunteering together may be a very satisfying activity that allows this parent and children to share something special with each other while doing good in the community.

A whole family can volunteer together, or just one parent with one or more children, or a grandparent and grandchild together, or a group of siblings – there are so many possible permutations. Similarly, even if a family commits to the same organization, they do not necessarily have to work together at the same assignment. They may arrive together and then separate to do different things during the same shift.

So, if family volunteering is such a hot idea, why isn't there more of it going on? Part of the answer lies in a lack of creativity on the part of agencies to develop group assignments that a multi-generational unit could do. But there are some other realistic concerns.

Agencies may be wary of the possible risks of involving children in volunteer work, either for the safety of the children themselves or for fear of harm done by the children to clients. In family volunteering, however, the parents are right there to supervise as well as to permit the activity to go on. So there is a built-in safety factor.

If you and other managers at your agency really believe that young children can't be accepted as volunteers, you can still have a family volunteer program for parents (or other adult relatives) and pre-teens or teenagers. Older children can be more independent and really carry their weight on the family team.

There may also be some suspicion that it's the adults who decided to volunteer and dragged the children along. It's very important for every member of the family to be committed to the project. Volunteer program managers need to interview all the family members before accepting the family as a team.

Training needs to be adapted to different age groups. All members of the family should be trained (or at least get instructions), but the methods that will reach the adults may be different from what the children need.

Families will almost always need to volunteer on a Saturday or Sunday, unless it is during a school break. For some groups this provides a great source of weekend help; for others it may limit the possible assignments.

Many groups do have families who volunteer together, but this occurs spontaneously, at the initiative of the family. Consider making a conscious effort to recruit family volunteers.

It may even be possible to collaborate on this with another community organization seeking family activities. A nearby faith community, for example,

might welcome the idea of encouraging a number of families to volunteer together as a group. A parent-teacher organization might like to sponsor a volunteering project as a way to reach more parents for its own needs. You might even contact a group such as Parents Without Partners and propose a day of family service for their year-round calendar of activities. See what connections you can make. ■

Susan J. Ellis is president of Energize, a Philadelphia-based training, publishing and consulting firm specializing in volunteerism. She can be reached via email at susan@energizeinc.com. Her Web site is www.energizeinc.com