

Volunteerism: A Tool for Positive Youth Development

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While negative stereotypes abound on the outlook, lifestyles and attitudes of young people today, most youth in the country are actually healthy, happy and productive members of society. In fact, the majority of youth in this country engage in some form of volunteer activity, and many see the value of helping others.

When youth volunteer, benefits are reaped by almost everyone involved — the targeted population, the community and most especially the volunteers themselves. Volunteerism has important implications for positive youth development. Among other things, it encourages a sense of service and responsibility toward others, provides a venue for developing skills and relationships, and facilitates the development of various social skills such as empathy. It is thus essential that young people are encouraged to participate in volunteer endeavors.

Benefits of Youth Volunteerism

Youth volunteerism has multiple benefits. Here are just some of the positive impacts:

Benefits for the targeted group

- Volunteers help lower operation costs of organizations. This allows organizations to make services available to larger audiences.

Benefits for the immediate and larger community

- Volunteers make social services available to more people in the community — often helping the neediest of the population, or other entities (e.g., parks, museums) that benefit the whole community.

- Volunteers contribute to economic vitality. Annually, youth volunteerism contributes over \$35 billion to the country's economy in terms of volunteer/work hours.
- Volunteerism promotes positive citizenship. Youth who volunteer feel more connected to the community and realize they have the ability to make things happen.
- Youth who volunteer are more likely to stay in or return to their communities.

Benefits for the volunteers themselves

- Volunteer work provides opportunities to learn new skills and provides valuable work experience. This enhances work marketability and increases chances for college acceptance.
- Volunteer work provides opportunities to develop friendships and meaningful relationships — often with like-minded peers and others.
- The experience of volunteerism can help develop many social competencies — identity development, compassion, sense of agency (realization of one's ability to make a difference), leadership, confidence and self-esteem.
- Youth volunteerism provides many of the 'developmental assets' of youth (See Search Institute's 40 Developmental Assets for youth ages 12-18, www.search-institute.org/assets/40AssetsList.pdf). This includes empowerment (e.g., youth serve as resources for the community, youth provide service to the community) and positive identity (self-esteem, sense of purpose).



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How to Encourage Youth to Volunteer

Several factors promote volunteerism among youth. Here are just some of them:

- Ask them to volunteer. Most youth say that they first get involved in volunteerism because they were asked by volunteer organizations.
- Give them information. Sometimes youth do not think of volunteering simply because they are not aware of the available opportunities (and benefits).
- Help them take care of practical concerns — for instance, lack of time is one of the biggest reasons why youth don't volunteer. As such, help them work through schedules and other practical issues such as finding transportation to get to volunteer sites.
- Reward them. Give them praise/recognition for their work.
- Help them find volunteer opportunities that are developmentally appropriate, and that match their interests.
- Be a good role model. Parents and other adults who encourage youth to volunteer are more effective if they themselves volunteer.

References

Bureau of Labor Statistics (2005). Volunteering in the United States, 2005. Retrieved August 1, 2006, from www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/volun.pdf.

Youth Service America (2006). Facts and figures on youth volunteering. Retrieved August 1, 2006, from www.ysa.org/nysd/statistics.html.

Resources

ServeNet: Provides information on volunteer opportunities in your community (based on your zip code). www.servenet.org/

Youth Service America: Provides information on promoting and strengthening volunteerism among youth, ages 5 to 25. www.ysa.org/

United Way: Lists ideas for volunteerism and discusses benefits of activities. www.unitedway.org