

COOPERATIVE EXTENSION

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Young Volunteers: The Benefits of Community Service

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Community service has been an important part of 4-H for many years. In 1927 the 4-H pledge was adopted and included the importance of service in the third line. "I pledge my Hands to larger service." Ever since then, every time a 4-H member or volunteer recites the pledge, they are reminded of the importance of serving their "club, community, country and world".

Why is it, however, that youth volunteerism is so important? What are the benefits to the recipient of volunteer efforts, and what are the benefits to the individual who volunteers? Understanding the answers to these questions can help program leaders and members plan for more effective community service projects that maximize the benefits to everyone involved.

A Picture of Youth Volunteerism

Youth in our country are volunteering in increasing numbers. Some youth

volunteer as part of a school based service-learning program. Others are involved in service projects at their church. Young people involved in youth development programs such as 4-H or Scouts typically perform community service projects, either as requirements or enhancements to their other project work.

Young people are increasingly seeking out opportunities to improve the world by volunteering their service to projects they deem to be important. Consider the following statistics:

1. Teenagers volunteer 2.4 billion hours annually – worth \$34.3 billion to the US economy.
2. Youth volunteering has increased steadily over the past ten years, with 30% of youth participating in volunteer activities at least once a month in 2000.

3. Out of 13.3 million youth, 59.3% volunteer an average of 3.5 hours per week, versus 49% of the adult population volunteer an average of 4.2 hours.

Communities enjoy benefits far beyond the financial aspects when youth contribute to service projects. When youth volunteer, adults tend to volunteer also, resulting in a life long volunteer. The community gains a generation of young people who care about where they live and are willing to make a commitment to improvement.

Personal Benefits to the Youth Who Volunteer

While benefits to the communities served can be translated to a monetary figure, the benefits reaped by the young people offering their service have a positive impact on them personally both immediate and into the future.

1. Youth who volunteer just one hour or more a week are 50% less likely to abuse alcohol, cigarettes, become pregnant, or engage other destructive behavior.
2. Teens say the benefits received from volunteering are: Learning to respect others; learning to be helpful and kind; learning to understand people who are different; developing leadership skills, becoming more patient, and better understanding of citizenship.

3. Youth who volunteer are more likely to do well in school, graduate and vote.

Beyond the personal benefits, young people as a whole are rewarded in our society when they volunteer. Many adults hold negative beliefs about young people in general. They look odd and dress wildly. They travel in large groups and engage in rowdy behavior while playing loud music. The media portrays negative images of youth who get into trouble and commit crimes for example. Sixty-one percent of American adults are convinced that today's youth face a crisis in their values and morals, look at teenagers with misgiving, and view them as undisciplined, disrespectful and unfriendly.

Young people perceive these negative beliefs. Only 20% of young people perceive that adults in the community value them. When presented with images of young people doing community service, the opinion of adults might be changed. Volunteer opportunities provide an environment for people of different generations to work together for a common goal, as well as offering an opportunity for mutual understanding.

Future Benefits

The skills and developmental assets gained by young people who volunteer early in life translate to future benefits for them personally, and for society.

1. Young people involved in community service are more likely to have a strong work ethic as an adult.
2. Youth who volunteer are three times more likely to volunteer as adults.
3. Eighty-one percent of Americans who have volunteer experiences when they are young give to charitable organizations as adults.

Why Do Youth Volunteer?

Some youth volunteer to fulfill the requirement of a school, or youth group assignment. Although these projects may be required of the assignment, the young people are typically choosing to be involved in programs that have such requirements. The research data tells us that youth get involved not only for personal reasons, but also for reasons that reach far beyond them as individuals.

Major reasons cited by teens for volunteering:

1. Youth feel compassion for people in need; they can do something for a cause in which they believe; they believe that if they help others, others will help them.
2. Seventy-three percent of young people think their efforts can have a positive impact on their communities.
3. Teens rank volunteering, the environment and eating

healthy, as top three activities they consider 'cool'.

4. Youth who volunteer gain important job skills and experience, while exploring career options.
5. Young volunteers expand their social circle and enhance their social awareness.

Increasing Youth Volunteering

The evidence is strong that young people do volunteer. They reap benefits personally, and their community reaps benefits now and in the future. How do we encourage young volunteers to continue their service activities? And, how do we encourage new youth volunteers? There are some ways that adults working with youth can encourage them towards volunteering:

- Ask them to volunteer;
- Encourage youth to get involved in volunteering at an early age;
- Encourage children and young adults to participate in community groups, faith based organizations, student government, and school projects;
- Encourage a positive self image so that young people are able to help others and
- Be a mentor in your community;
- Provide young people with opportunities to take courses that include and even require community service.

Young people volunteering for their communities is a tremendous win-win situation for the young volunteers, the organizations and communities they serve. The benefits are reaped now, and in the future.

References and Links

The information in this fact sheet and additional information on young volunteers performing community service may be found at the following web locations:

National 4-H Council <http://fourhcouncil.edu>

National 4-H Headquarters www.4h-usa.org

Corporation for National Service www.nationalservice.org

National Service-Learning Clearinghouse www.servicelearning.org

National Youth Leadership Council www.nylc.org

Youth Service America www.ysa.org

The Points of Light Foundation www.pointsoflight.org

America's Promise – The Alliance for Youth www.americaspromise.org

Make a Difference Day www.usaweekend.com/diffday/

SERVEnet www.servenet.org

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