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AGES 0 TO 2

Volunteering with babies and toddlers

By Tera Schreiber

NO DOUBT ABOUT it: Bringing a baby home can really slow your family down. The world suddenly becomes divided between places you can bring your kids, and places you can't. This can put a crimp on parents looking for meaningful ways to get involved in their community. But it doesn't have to be that way; when it comes to volunteering, many organizations welcome tots to tag along — or even join in — when their parents volunteer.

For parents taking time away from the paid workforce, volunteering can keep skills sharp while building up resumes. Giving back to a favorite cause can help you meet others who share your passion. And while a newborn won't remember the work, he will love to hear stories about how he was the youngest member of the crew stuffing envelopes for a political campaign. Incorporating volunteer work into the lives of young children can make an impression on them, and help parents model their values.

Fortunately, ample child-friendly volunteer opportunities exist in the Puget Sound region. Joanna Barger of Seattle has volunteered on the

friendliest environment she's found for including her children. She's been a committee volunteer at Great Starts Birth & Family Education in Seattle for the past four years. "Unlike some other volunteer jobs, the Great Starts meetings have always been set up to be very baby-friendly," Hogan says.

Sometimes, children can be involved more directly in giving back. Friend to Friend recruits and matches volunteers with elderly and handicapped persons living in Nursing, Assisted Living, and Retirement Homes. Friend to Friend volunteers make a commitment to visit one resident friend at least a couple of times a month at their convenience, for one year. Marilyn Soderquist is Program Director for Friend to Friend. "Volunteers are welcome to include children," she says. "Others bring their spouse or pet along on visits. It is a simple visitation program that brings joy to a place and person where it is needed most."

Bremerton resident Kelly Sciarrotta volunteers for Friend to Friend, visiting Christa Shores, a retirement community in Silverdale, with her five-month-old and three-year-old daughters once a week. Sciarrotta says, "The experience has been very positive for us and our children. My kids glow with the attention and love they receive from the residents." The girls' own grandparents live in other states, so Sciarrotta says the visits are a high point for the family.

Not every volunteer opportunity requires parents to take kids out of the house. Sometimes you can give back while wearing spit-up-stained clothes in the comfort of your own home. Many organizations will gladly give volunteers work that can be done via the phone or computer. Toy Rescue Mission, a Tacoma organization that refurbishes toys to needy children and seniors in nursing homes, will gratefully send volunteers home with books, dolls and other toys that need to be cleaned or sorted. "Volunteers can also knit or sew lap blankets for seniors, blankets and clothes for dolls, or Christmas stockings for teens," says Karol Barkley, President of Toy Rescue Mission.

Barkley echoes the sentiments of so many organizations that rely on volunteers. "While the holiday season is busy, volunteers are needed year round," she says.

Volunteering can help inspire a spirit of generosity in you and your children during the holiday season — and may even get you in the habit of giving back to your community all year long. ☐

Tera Schreiber is a freelance writer from Seattle who has enjoyed sharing support for charitable causes with her children since their infancy.

AGES 3 TO 5

Cultivating generosity in your preschooler

By Lisette Austin

THEY'RE LEAVING BABYHOOD behind; getting more social, and starting to learn that it's not all about *them*. Preschool is the perfect age to start talking about the importance of helping other people. A worthy goal — but where to start? Social service programs rarely cater to this age group. But many preschools and daycares have found ways to engage young children in service work, while giving parents ideas on how to nurture generosity at home.

At Medina Montessori School, director Anne-Marie Ryan is always looking for ways to actively

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Board of Seattle Midwifery School with her kids in tow since the birth of her first child six years ago. "My kids came to bulk mailings, events, and many, many meetings," Barger says. "Despite the occasional distractions of children, the staff and volunteers have always made my family feel welcome, and my children are now very comfortable in this adult setting. I imagine they feel something like I do when others bring their kids to meetings or activities — I usually find their multi-generational presence adds to the richness of my volunteer experience."

Dana Hogan of Seattle is an experienced volunteer. She likes giving her time to an organization that serves expectant and new parents, because it's the



A preschooler learns about giving.



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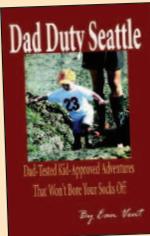


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encourage her 2-to-5-year-old students to think about the needs of others. So, five years ago, when Northwest Harvest sent a flyer asking for help with a food drive, she came up with a simple yet engaging idea. She packed up her students (along with some parents) and took them to Whole Foods Market.

Using money normally earmarked for school field trips, the students went shopping. “The kids got their own small carts and looked for items from all five food groups,” says Ryan. After the children gathered and paid for the food, they returned to school and handed their bags over to Northwest Harvest. That initial shopping trip was such a hit — both with kids and parents — that it is now an annual tradition. “The kids really understand that they are doing this for families who don’t have enough money to get their own food,” says Ryan.

The Country Dawn Preschool, on the border between Everett and Lake Stevens, has a year-round food drive, and participates each year in the Muscular Dystrophy Association’s Hop-a-thon. Kids have sponsors who pledge money for each hop the child completes in one minute. Teachers incorporate information about muscular dystrophy into their curriculum so that the kids get a sense of what the Hop-a-thon is for. “I think it’s important for them to see that there are differences out there, and that there are families in need,” says Bliven. The kids respond with enthusiasm — each year the school raises close to \$2,000 for the organization.

For Katie Kehoe, a teacher at the Puyallup South Cooperative Preschool, the secret to engaging 3-5-year-olds in community service is helping them relate to the people they are serving. “We tell the kids, ‘you know how you sometimes feel hungry? You



WILL AUSTIN

children are very capable of empathizing with, and responding to, the needs of others. “Helping others comes naturally to kids,” she says. “Our job is to help them stay connected to their inherent generosity.” Van Dernoot Lipsky’s school does this in a multitude of creative ways — from handing out flowers to voters on Election Day, to writing heartfelt messages to Gulf Coast children displaced by Hurricane Katrina. “Even when we take field trips we are mindful about how we interact with others in the community, for example how we talk to the bus driver,” she says.

Although school programs are a great place to start, parents of preschoolers can also find additional ways to cultivate generosity at home. One idea is to periodically give your child a box and ask them to fill it with toys or books

Using money normally earmarked for school field trips, the students went shopping.

they no longer want, explaining that they will be given to children who can’t easily get their own. Bringing your child with you to drop the box at a community service organization or library can help your child feel connected to those on the receiving end of their generosity.

can ask your mom or dad for something to eat, but some kids’ parents can’t always get them food,” says Kehoe.

You can also bring your child to a community clean up, or have them help you prepare and bring food to people in need.

Kehoe finds that when the needs of others are presented in a way that kids can understand and connect with, they respond wholeheartedly. “Every November we do a big food drive — we literally make a mountain of food,” she says. Other popular service activities at the school include donating coins to the school’s scholarship fund and bringing coats and blankets for families in need.

For van Dernoot Lipsky, it’s all about trying to be the best person she can be, and modeling the values she wants her own children to have. (More on her work with her two preschool-aged children on page 37.) “We don’t realize how incredibly influential we are as parents,” she says. “If we are generous ourselves, it helps our children remember that they are as well.” ☐

Laura van Dernoot Lipsky, founder and director of Prescolar Alice Francis, a Spanish language preschool in Seattle, agrees that preschool-aged

Lisette Austin contributes regularly to local publications. She lives in Seattle with her husband and 5-year-old son.