

Engaging Young People in Service and Volunteering

Being part of a community isn't something that we inherit when we turn eighteen, or when we're tall enough to ride the fastest roller coaster, or after we've lost our first tooth. From the day we're born, we're part of a community of family members, neighbors, community heroes, and future friends. Even the smallest members of our community need to be given opportunities to give back and engage!

Below you will find ideas for volunteer opportunities that can be adapted to include children from age two and up, and applied to many community needs or themes.

Back to School—Host an event for the whole community to get involved in, inviting people to engage through contributing donations, organizing items, dropping off materials, and volunteering to assist with the event. This activity gives little ones an opportunity to get involved in multiple ways, and can be adapted to fit many themes: a collection for a local animal shelter, a toy drive around the holidays, etc

- **Learn:** 'All Are Welcome' by Alexandra Penfold is a book about a school where all children are welcome. Reading this book is a great opportunity to discuss the kinds of activities that children do in school (like reading stories, playing on the playground, and creating artwork) and the supplies that students need throughout the day. For use in other settings, choose a book that will help young people identify the need for the items and connect with the materials collected through the project.
- **Act:** An easy way to get little ones involved is to include them in shopping to pick out items to donate. Youth can also be involved in organizing the collected materials, including stuffing backpacks or boxes with donations. For older children (pre-K+) this can be a more independent activity, where they have a "shopping list" (which would include pictures of each item) of all the items that each bag or box will need. Younger children can participate in the same activity with a bit of extra help. With an adult's assistance, they can use that shopping list to work on matching school supplies to their photo, giving them an opportunity to practice identifying numbers and work on counting.
- **Reflect/Discuss:** During and after the activity, engage youth in conversation about the purpose of the project and how the donations will be used. Questions like, "Do you go to school? What kinds of supplies do you use at school? What do you think your friends at other schools can create with these supplies?" can help start a conversation about why helping is important and how we can help one another.
- **Needed Materials:** Donated items, a location to do the "bag stuffing", shopping lists for the children participating, and a few adult community members to assist and oversee the little ones.

Earth Day—Using recycled materials, give children the opportunity to create art projects in small groups that can be displayed in your community. During that time, give community members the chance to silently bid on the art. The proceeds collected from this silent auction can be donated to a local conservation organization. The art could also be donated to the local organization instead or to a hospital or nursing home to celebrate Earth Day.

- **Learn:** ‘The Lorax’ by Dr. Seuss is a great book to read to help little ones see through fiction why they’re creating recycled art. Some other great books about taking care of the earth are, ‘How the Crayons Saved the Earth’ by Monica Sweeney and ‘The Life of a Little Plastic Bottle’ by IglooBooks.
- **Act:** Children can participate in collecting recycled materials from their homes, giving them an opportunity to learn what is recyclable, where those materials come from, etc. Once enough materials have been collected, set aside a day or two where children can create artwork in small groups with the recycled materials.
- **Reflect/Discuss:** During and after the activity, engage youth with questions like, “What are some of the ways you keep yourself clean (ex: brushing your teeth, washing your hands, combing your hair), and what are some things you can do to keep the Earth clean? Where do you think your favorite animal lives, and how can we help that animal have a clean home? What do you recycle in your home?” to help start a conversation about how we can all play a part in keeping the Earth clean.
- **Needed Materials:** Recycled materials, art supplies, a location to host the children while they create their artwork, a few adult community members to assist

Community Heroes—A lot of little ones, especially kindergarteners and younger, don’t have a full understanding of the community they are apart of. This activity gives them a chance to understand and recognize community heroes like doctors, firefighters, mail carriers, and other community helpers that support their family and friends every day!

- **Learn:** There are many books about all community heroes, so the book you read before your activity will depend on the community hero you’re celebrating. There is a fantastic series of books by Ann Owen that depicts the job various community heroes do, the tools they use, and how they help their community! These books are great for grounding children in the “why” of the activity.
- **Act:** The children can come together to create cards, artwork, or giftbags for the community hero that they are celebrating and thanking. While the children create these cards, decorate gift bags, or fill gift bags, adult volunteers can discuss the activity and why it is important with the youth.
- **Reflect/Discuss** (these questions can be adapted for whatever community hero you are focusing on): Have you ever been to see a doctor? What makes you feel better when you feel sick? What sorts of tools do doctors use when they’re making us feel better? How can we say thank you?
- **Needed Materials:** Art supplies, paper bags, any items being gifted, a space to host the event, adult community members.

