

Volunteerism and Youth: What Do We Know?

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In a recent commentary published in *Education Week*, Amitai Etzioni offers advice on “The Truths We Must Face to Curb Youth Violence.” Etzioni writes: “The most relevant fact for education against violence is that teaching self-restraint and responsible conduct is most successful when young people are positively involved in some other activities, rather than when they are only asked to refrain from what they are tempted to do” (Etzioni, 1999, p. 57).

Etzioni provides examples of youth with strong religious convictions and those deeply committed to sports or involved in community service, noting that their activities are illustrations of positive involvement for youth.

It is likely that we all know youth who are very involved in their church or synagogue, or youth who devote many hours to team or individual sports, but how about youth involved in community service?

What do we know about volunteerism among children and youth?

America’s Teenage Volunteers (Hamilton & Hussain, n.d.) summarizes the findings of *Volunteering and Giving among Teenagers 12 to 17 Years of Age*, the second report in a series of national studies conducted for Independent Sector by the Gallup Organization to evaluate the giving and volunteering behavior of American teenagers. The study has found several interesting trends related to volunteering and youth. For example, while most adults might not associate “volunteering” and “charitable giving” with the average American teenager, in fact, more than half of America’s teens reported volunteering in 1995, and 41% of teens contributed to charitable organizations. More importantly, teens who volunteer said the experience helped them to learn how to respect others, learn how to be helpful and kind, understand people who are different from themselves, and become more patient and understand the qualities of good citizenship.

Other aspects of volunteering that were revealed in the study address the factors that encourage the volunteering habit among youth; for example, teenagers were more likely to volunteer if their parents did. In fact, over 75% of the teens volunteered if both their parents did, but that number declined to less than 50% if the teen’s parents were not active in the community. Fathers also play a prominent role in encouraging their child’s participation. Over 88% of children whose fathers volunteered were volunteers themselves (Hamilton & Hussain, n.d.).

It appears that volunteering is cultivated in early childhood and during early teenage years. Eighty percent of teens reported volunteering if, as young children, they did some volunteer work, were active in religious organizations, or were involved in student government (Hamilton & Hussain, n.d.).

Another critical aspect of volunteering is the “asking factor” or the concept that teenagers are more likely to volunteer if they are asked to do so. Over 93% of teens who were asked to participate did volunteer, but if the teen was not asked, only 23% volunteered. One troubling finding about the “asking factor” is that African Americans and Hispanics are less likely to be asked to volunteer than Whites. Fifty-four percent of White teens were asked to volunteer, compared to 38% of African Americans and 45% of Hispanics. Yet there was little difference between ethnic groups when the teens were asked to participate—the overwhelming majority of all three groups reported they that volunteered when they were asked (94% of Whites, 90% of African Americans, 85% of Hispanics) (Hamilton & Hussain, n.d.).

How do teenagers get connected to volunteer activities? Sixty-eight percent said they did so through their church, synagogue, or temple; 28% said they did so through their school. Other volunteer organizations and service clubs were the next

most likely connection to volunteer activities for youth (Hamilton & Hussain, n.d.).

In her widely read books *The Shelter of Each Other: Rebuilding Our Families* and *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls*, clinical psychologist Mary Pipher (1994, 1996) talks about the value of volunteerism and altruism for families and for adolescents. Many adolescent girls, Pipher observes, are self-absorbed, a characteristic that Pipher describes as a developmental stage rather than a character flaw. Volunteer work, good deeds for neighbors, and political action help girls move beyond themselves into the larger world (Pipher, 1994, pp. 258, 288, 291). Pipher also indicates that volunteer work and social action can also be a cure for cynicism, depression, and narcissism. She believes these activities can make communities better and give people a sense of meaning and purpose.

Pipher describes a time from her own experience when she and her 13-year-old daughter worked at a soup kitchen. Their year-long experience working with homeless people was the best thing that happened to her daughter during an otherwise difficult school year. According to Pipher, this volunteer activity removed her daughter from a shallow mean-spirited peer culture, allowing her to spend time with people of all ages and helping her feel she could make a difference.

How can we encourage volunteering among our youth? *America's Teenage Volunteers* (Hamilton & Hussain, n.d.) offers the following suggestions:

- Ask young people to volunteer, particularly people of color.
- Encourage children to get involved in volunteering or civic participation at an early age.
- Help young people develop positive self-images that encourage helping others, promote compassion for those in need, and instill a feeling that one can enact positive change in his or her community.
- Ensure that young people have positive role models—significant individuals within or outside their family who they observe helping others.

- Increase opportunities for young people to volunteer in youth organizations, religious organizations, student governments, and schools.

For More Information

Independent Sector
1828 L St., NW
Washington, DC 20036
Telephone: 800-575-2666
Internet: <http://www.independentsector.org>

Washington, Valorad, & Andrews, J. D. (1998). *Children of 2010*. Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children.

A Web Site with a variety of volunteer organizations is <http://www.jvibe.com/jvibeaction/generallinks.shtml>

Web sites and contact information for organizations that may be helpful for connecting youth to volunteer activities include the following:

America's Promise
909 N. Washington St., Suite 400
Alexandria, VA 22314
Telephone: 800-365-0153
Internet: www.americaspromise.org

Boy Scouts of America
1325 W. Walnut Hill Lane
Irving, TX 75015-2019
Telephone: 972-580-2000
Internet: <http://www.bsa.scouting.org>

Girl Scouts of the U.S.A.
420 Fifth Ave.
New York, NY 10018-2702
Telephone: 202-852-8000
Internet: <http://www.gsusa.org>

Do Something
423 W. 55th St., 8th Floor
New York, NY 10019
Telephone: 212-523-1175
Internet: <http://www.dosomething.org>

National Youth Leadership Council
1910 W. County Rd. B
St. Paul, MN 55111
Telephone: 612-631-3672
Internet: <http://www.nylc.org>

Sources

Etzioni, Amitai. (1999). The truths we must face to curb youth violence. *Education Week*, 18(39), 72, 58.

Hamilton, Matthew, & Hussain, Afshan. (n.d.). *America's teenage volunteers: Civic participation begins early in life*. Washington, DC: Independent Sector.

Pipher, Mary. (1994). *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the selves of adolescent girls*. New York: Ballantine Books. (ERIC Document No. ED402065)

Pipher, Mary. (1996). *The shelter of each other: Rebuilding our families*. New York: Ballantine Books.

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