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Helping Our Children Set Their Sights on Service

by Joseph Durrant

What would you do with \$1,000 if the conditions of that gift required that it be used in service? Answering this question was an opportunity that my parents recently gave to my five siblings and me.

Motivated by a desire to be useful in my community and equipped with sufficient means to make a difference, I set out to ponder the perfect use of the money that was mine to share. I was tempted initially to donate the money to my church's humanitarian fund, thus relinquishing my responsibility for how the money was spent and remaining confident that it would be used for good.

My brother lived in San Francisco and decided that he would hand out sandwiches from a local sandwich shop to the many homeless people occupying the city's streets. This thought intrigued me, but I loved burritos more than sandwiches. With some delicious Mexican food in hand, I set out and drove through a thoroughfare populated by the homeless.

I was so nervous on this first outing that I forgot the names of both of the good men I shared food with and talked to that day. Once I got past my own nerves, I found out that

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we both needed each other's conversation. I realized that, more than food, these good people needed me and I needed, more than a service opportunity, a chance to connect to people with different perspectives than my own.

From this very first outing, I came to realize that this project was changing me. I found that this interaction connected me to my community in an intimate and personal way.

The Value of Volunteering. When it comes to volunteering, the results are clear. Doing service where you expect nothing in return more positively affects mental

and physical health, life satisfaction, and social well-being, and service also decreases depression.¹ Another benefit of selfless service is an increasing desire to serve.

After getting to know over 20 different homeless friends, and using the money in other ways as well, I was grateful for the means I had to reach out and serve. The money did run out eventually, but the friendships continued. This desire to continue helping my friends, now without monetary means, led me to contact the local Food and Care Coalition in my city, a volunteer organization that provides shelter, food, and programs that help fulfill a variety of needs the homeless face. Every Friday morning, it is my privilege to serve breakfast and do dishes for many individuals and families who are lacking the means to care for themselves.

My grand inspiration for these service experiences came down to two parents, my mom and dad, who gave me the means and the example to go and serve. Whether or not you are in a position to do as my parents did, there are many ways to help your children learn to love service.

Helping Your Child Learn to Love to Serve. Far from being a one-size-fits-all model for helping a child love service, the following five suggestions offered by Jason Marsh, an editor-in-chief of Greater Good² can serve as jumping-off points to help parents feel comfortable with the ideas they decide to use in helping their children and adolescents serve:

Be a role model—and explain why you do what you do. Through serving and speaking about their service, parents can help adolescents want to follow their example. When my dad gave me money to give to the homeless, he accompanied the gesture with discussions that enriched my life.

Help them understand the need. Parents can help their children identify needs and opportunities like simply driving past a neighbor's yard asking, "What do you notice about Susan's yard that is different from ours?" When a child talks about the tall grass and overgrown bushes, maybe with some gentle prodding, you can then suggest, "At her age, she might need some help to keep it up. With

your skills on the lawnmower and mine with those pruning shears, you and I could make a real difference. What do you say?" At the end of your work, if Susan has not offered you both lemonade, you might think about going out for a chocolate ice cream cone, promoting additional bonding.

Help them see the impact. Childhood service was impactful for me because my parents allowed me to see the reactions of those we served. I will always remember the light-filled smiles of a poor immigrant family in our church congregation when we delivered presents one Christmas, the smile of a bed-ridden woman my dad took me to visit on several occasions, the laughter of my grandma as I spent time with her, and the many manifestations of my mother's gratitude when I helped clean and serve around my home. The list goes on, and my parents did not need to explain the impact; they gave me opportunities to see and experience the impact.

Encourage service. Find service where they can use their talents to help someone else in a way they might enjoy. My parents let me decide to give Christmas presents to struggling family in our neighborhood, respecting my urge to follow the example of a family I knew who had done something similar. Even though I planned on foregoing presents to accomplish this service, I was still blessed with Christmas gifts under our tree.

From time to time, some artificial incentives might help motivate kids. Soon enough, they will catch the spirit of it. Set up the opportunities and let your child not only choose the type of service but also decide to change an approach instead of "sticking out" a choice that feels unfulfilling.

Invite them to make it part of who they are. Once my dad handed me an envelope with a small gift and simple verse of scripture inside after I made him a plate of spaghetti. It read as follows:

Give, and it shall be given unto you; good measure, pressed down, and shaken together, and running over, shall men give into your bosom. For with the same measure ye mete withal it shall be measured to you again.

—Luke 6:38

For me, this verse beautifully highlighted the reciprocal nature of service. I knew that when I served, it would not be long before I was met with similar service from God. It was also a promise from my dad that my service would not long be unrewarded by him.

On this occasion and many others, I looked forward to serving my parents because I knew they would likewise serve me in return. As a result, I found that service in our family has seldom felt like a burden on any of us. My parents created an environment of unsolicited service.

Fostering our children's involvement with their communities helps them reap many rewards—figuring out which direction to take is the important and joyful task of every parent.

Joseph Durrant graduated from the School of Family Life and is the host of his podcast, Strive to Share.

Endnotes

- ¹ Yeung, J. W. K., Zhang, Z., & Kim, T. Y. (2018). Volunteering and health benefits in general adults: Cumulative effects and forms. *BMC Public Health*, 18, 8. <http://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-017-4561-8>
- ² Marsh, J. (2016, December 16). How to help kids learn to love giving. *Greater Good Magazine*. https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/how_to_help_kids_learn_to_love_giving

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