Family Volunteering

National Volunteer Week happens during the month of April, which makes it a great time to start thinking about ways that you can give back to your community. This month you can spend quality time with your family while volunteering in your community.

Family volunteering can be done by the whole family together, by one parent and one child or teenager, or by several siblings together. It can involve both parents or one parent and an extended family member such as a grandparent or aunt/uncle. The agency receiving your volunteer service benefits by having more helpers at one time. If you volunteer on a regular schedule and occasionally a family member cannot come one week, there are others to help fill in.

What do you gain by volunteering together as a family?
First of all, you assure the goal of spending “quality time” together as a family. You also share a common bond while doing something worthwhile for others. Parents get to know their children in new ways, and vice versa. The process of demonstrating skills and learning new ones gives both age levels the chance to respect one another, work together toward the same goals, and have something to talk about all week. If you are already an active volunteer somewhere, you can continue your participation with less guilt about the time you spend away from your family. Now you’ll be with them, and the organizations you care about will receive even more volunteer help.

Choosing a Family Volunteer Project
Call a family meeting and take time to consider the whole idea. Make sure everyone, no matter how young, participates in the discussion. You might want to proceed this way:

- Make a list of all the volunteering each member of the family is doing now. Would the others like to help with any of these activities?
- What causes interest you? Allow everyone to suggest a community problem or issue. If some of the ideas intrigue the whole family, start exploring what organizations in your community are already working on these. Use the Yellow Pages, go to the library, or visit a local volunteer center.
- Also consider what types of work everyone wants to do. Make two lists: one for “Things We Know How to Do” and one for “Things We Would Like to Learn How to Do.” Make sure something is listed for each member of the family. This is a great chance to acknowledge the talents of parents and children. These lists will also be useful when you interview with an agency.

It may take several family meetings to complete these steps, but the conversations should be very interesting. You will then be ready to offer your services as a family volunteer team. Call several organizations for appointments and screen your options. See whether the agency representatives...
are comfortable talking to your children as well as the adults in the family. Does the agency have something meaningful for you to do as a group?

You may want to begin with a one-time volunteer activity. This will test the water to see how everyone likes volunteering together. Once you have committed to a volunteer project, take it seriously. Parents should show children that volunteer work is important and meaningful. Talk about the activity during the week and plan ahead for the volunteer experience. Some of the work may introduce children to new ideas and possibly to people different from themselves. This could be a good opportunity for parents to pass along their values and ethics to their children. Parents may also be challenged by the volunteer experience, and they should share this with their children.

Below are some ideas for family volunteering:

- Spending time at a senior care facility or a retirement center
- Working in a community soup kitchen
- Cleaning up a favorite park or local landmark
- Planting trees in the community
- Visiting sick children at a hospital

Some volunteer activities also provide physical activity. This time should be counted toward your daily goal of 60 minutes of physical activity. Remember to record your physical activity minutes in your April calendars.

Source:  (www.familyfun.go.com; www.charityguide.org)