



How to help youth succeed at volunteering

Audience: Teachers, parents and other adults who want to encourage youth to volunteer.

What are the keys to ensuring that youth start off right at volunteering? Ensure that each youth beginning a volunteer role has:

- A positive attitude and a correct definition of volunteering
- Clear and realistic expectations
- The right volunteer position for them
- A clear understanding of the agency's expectations

Key one: a positive attitude and definition of volunteering

Some common attitudes about volunteering expressed by youth are:

- Volunteering is just working for free
- Volunteering is not rewarding or personal
- Volunteering is done only to get school credits
- Volunteering is done only to please parents

As a role model you are a vital influence in changing these attitudes. The more you know about volunteering, agencies and what to expect as a volunteer, the better able you are to help volunteering youth.

For example: In some instances, teachers who teach the classes that have mandatory volunteer hours may have little or no experience themselves with volunteering. Therefore they may not be able to provide the students with relevant information to insure the youth will have a positive volunteer experience. In order to be better prepared to help youth:

- Ask questions, and do research on volunteering and volunteers
- Visit a local volunteer center, agency or website; volunteer yourself
- Think about why volunteering is important be prepared to sell your ideas to youth

Educate youth about volunteering, their options and what to expect, **before** to they begin volunteering. Some ideas:

- Invite local experts in to talk about volunteering
- Plan a Volunteer 101 workshop
- Plan a volunteer fair at your school and invite local organizations to have put up displays and deliver presentations
- Plan a field trip to a local agency with volunteers so they can see volunteers in action
- Contact your local volunteer center for information and ideas

Key two: realistic expectations

It has become common for schools and youth groups to have mandatory volunteer hours as part of the curriculum or program. This is often the first experience youth will have with volunteering. If either the youth or the curriculum expectations are not realistic, it can lead to a negative volunteer experience for the youth.

Sit down prior to looking for a volunteer job with your youth volunteer and talk about what their expectations are of their volunteer job. Discuss if they are realistic expectations. If not, help them to create new ones that are. Unrealistic expectations may include:

Unrealistic time commitment

Is the amount of time given or expected appropriate for the job? For example, five hours at five different organizations will not allow the youth to do meaningful work at any of the organizations. Five hours at one organization will result in the student doing jobs like stuffing envelopes or other tedious tasks. Although these tasks are important to the running of an organization, they will not encourage a youth to continue volunteering in the future. Twenty-five hours at one organization would give the youth a better opportunity to do fun and meaningful work that will inspire them to continue on.

Also, does the youth have the time in his or her schedule to be able to make a commitment to volunteering? Will it interfere with things like homework and other activities?

Unrealistic timeline

Have they been given enough time to do their volunteer work? Do they have enough time to explore their options and to change positions if the volunteer position they are in is not working out for them?

Do they realize that you can't walk into an agency and expect to volunteer that day? All agencies will have a process for volunteers. Sometimes it might be quick, but in some situations it may take even a few weeks before volunteers are ready to start. This is often because of the screening process volunteers must go through.

Unrealistic expectations.

Do both the youth and mentors have realistic expectations? It's all right for the youth to expect to get something in return for volunteering, but not all positions are the same. Are they anticipating too much in return for their contributions? Do they want a volunteer position that isn't appropriate for them?

Key three: the right volunteer position

The right volunteer job will be fun, challenging and interesting to them. Not all organizations can take youth volunteers because of the type of work they do. Youth need additional supervision and there are greater liability risks in some positions. There are some positions that are not appropriate for youth.

For youth under the age of 14, there are limited options for formal volunteering in an agency. Most agencies will not accept youth volunteers under 14 and even 16. Other options for young volunteers are to volunteer informally or by planning their own volunteer project.

Things to consider when helping a youth find the right volunteer position:

Time availability: How much time can they contribute to volunteering without it interfering with homework and other activities?

Resources: Will they need transportation to get there? Additional money?

Interests: What activities are they interested in? Why types of people do they like to interact with? What are their values?

Skills: What skills does the youth have? What are their strengths?

Benefits: What is the youth volunteer looking to gain from their volunteer experience? Additional skills? Job experience? To try something new?

All of these considerations should be taken into account when selecting a placement to ensure the best fit for the youth volunteer. Once a few organizations are selected, based on the above considerations, contact them to ensure that they:

- Accept youth volunteers
- Know how to work with youth volunteers
- Value youth volunteers the same as adult volunteers

Key four: youth know what to expect from an agency

Once you have selected an agency, talk with the youth about what to expect next: the application, screening, interviewing, training/orientation and supervision. Also talk about their rights and responsibilities as a volunteer. The more information and knowledge that they have, the more prepared they will be. If you have a presenter from an agency or volunteer centre talk with the youth, they can cover all of this for you!

References and Resources

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