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# The Family That Gives Together

Filed Under [Family Volunteering](#)

By *Marygrace Taylor*

Want to teach your kids the value of compassion, community, and responsibility? Try volunteering as a family.

### Why Volunteer?

Volunteering is a win-win-win situation: It teaches big life lessons to kids, brings family members closer together, and addresses needs in the community. What's more, taking a few hours to help others—during the holidays or at any time throughout the year—will make you and your kids feel great.

Volunteering can be an important learning experience for kids, since “kids develop a sense of understanding people with different physical appearances, backgrounds, and beliefs,” says Heather Jack, president of The Volunteer Family, an organization that connects family volunteers with opportunities in their area. Kids learn about social and environmental issues too: After volunteering at a local recycling drive, your kid just might start brainstorming the ways how she can lower her own carbon footprint.

Volunteering also strengthens family bonds. “Almost all families say [volunteering] has brought them together and made them more of a team,” says Jenny Friedman, founder of Doing Good Together, an organization that promotes giving back as a family. In addition to simply providing an opportunity to spend time together, the experience often sparks conversations between parents and children regarding social issues and family values—topics that might otherwise not be talked about.

Most importantly, volunteering is an investment in the community—and when young families are the ones giving back, this investment is a long-term one. “This is the way to grow community activists and philanthropists,” explains Friedman. She points out that kids who grow up volunteering are more likely to continue doing so throughout adulthood.

### Choosing a Way to Give Back

Think your little ones are too young to spend some time helping others? Not so, say Jack and Friedman—even an infant can accompany her parents on a

trip to a nursing home or assisted living facility to spend time with the elderly. There are jobs for young children with short attention spans, too, like helping mom or dad deliver hot food for a local Meals on Wheels program (a shift only takes about an hour). “Meals on Wheels is great for kids because they are interacting with people, but don’t have to put in a lot of effort since your child can simply hand the meal to a person,” Friedman says.

Kitchen table projects like making care packages for people in the military or assembling sack lunches for the hungry are another option for families with young kids, since they involve doing a task right at home. “Often volunteering can be uncomfortable for people in the beginning, and even scary for kids,” says Friedman, explaining that at-home or indirect service works especially well for beginners or shy kids. At [MakeAChildSmile.org](http://MakeAChildSmile.org), families can find the names and contact information for a sick child who has been hospitalized and create cheerful cards or care packages to send in the mail.

Unsure of how to go about choosing a volunteer opportunity? Your child will probably be more enthusiastic if she can help you choose the activity, says Friedman. Further, it’s best when parents align the activity with the interests and talents specific to their child, Jack explains. If your kid is great at playing the tuba, she might enjoy performing in a talent show at the local VFW hall. Does she love animals? Find out if a nearby zoo could use some help, or organize a blanket drive for shelter animals. To find a list of volunteer opportunities near you, visit [thevolunteerfamily.org](http://thevolunteerfamily.org).

#### Before You Go

If your child is a first-time volunteer, she might be anxious or uncomfortable about interacting with people she perceives as different. These feelings are common, says Friedman, and it’s important for parents to be sensitive. Encourage your kid to share her concerns with you, and try to set up her expectations by explaining what your family will see and do while volunteering. If you’re not quite sure what to say, try reading a book together that talks about giving back, or consider some of the discussion points listed at [doinggoodtogether.org/talkandlearn](http://doinggoodtogether.org/talkandlearn). Finally, remember to convey a sense of enthusiasm for the project—your child will quickly pick up on it. If your family plans to spend an afternoon at a local nursing home, for instance, let her know how much you’re looking forward to exchanging stories with the elderly to learn what life was like when they were growing up.

#### After You’re Home Again

You can ensure your family gets the most out of its volunteer experience by taking time afterwards to reflect. By finding out what your kid thought about the volunteer activity (and sharing your thoughts with her!), you can use the discussion as a starting point to talk about different social issues, says Jack. Start by asking how your child felt when she helped others, why she thinks her volunteer work was important, and what she did and didn’t like about the experience.

Most importantly, remember that volunteering should teach your little one to feel compassion and empathy for the people she’s helping, not pity or superiority. “We don’t want for kids to see the world as made up of a group of givers and a group of receivers,” explains Friedman. “Everyone needs help sometimes, and all of us have something important to offer. Volunteering emphasizes the similarity among all of us.” Make sure that your own attitude reflects this idea, and try reminding your kids of a time when someone gave your family a hand. Maybe your neighbor brought over a tray of lasagna when Grandpa Jerry was in the hospital, or Aunt Sally drove your daughter to ballet when your car had a flat tire, for instance.

“While we want our kids to be grateful for what they have, we want to encourage that gratitude in a way that doesn’t make them feel more superior or more compassionate simply because we have [something] to give,” says Friedman. “Instead, we do for others because the world is simply a better place when we help each other out.”

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## For Your Family

### An Attitude of Gratitude

The holidays haven’t quite yet arrived, but the time is always right to start thinking about gratitude. “Feeling grateful every day is an attitude and a way of experiencing life,” says Carleton Kendrick, Ed.M, a family therapist and author of *Take Out Your Nose Ring, Honey, We’re Going to Grandma’s* (Unlimited Publishing). While fostering gratitude in your family will certainly remind your child to say thanks for her holiday gifts, there’s more to it: Working as a family to express appreciation for each other and the world around you is a skill—and one that should be practiced daily.

The best way to foster feelings of gratitude in your kid? Be a good role model. “Teaching your children by example how to make their gratitude known is at the core of teaching them how to appreciate and celebrate the abundance in their lives,” explains Kendrick. Others, too, emphasize that when it comes to encouraging gratitude, it’s important for parents to practice what they preach: “On the whole, too many of us spend too much time worrying and focusing on the things we *don’t* have and what *isn’t* going perfectly. That negative viewpoint tends to result in more negativity coming our way. It becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, and one we can pass onto our kids unknowingly,” says Corinne Gregory, founder of Social Smarts, a program that teaches social skills to young people.

Kendrick points out that gratitude can take many forms, so there are countless little opportunities that you, your child, or your partner can take to foster deep feelings of appreciation. The dinner table is a good place to start: At a family meal, share one thing you appreciated that day—then encourage everyone else to do the same. Other ideas? When you pass by a family member at home, give her a hug. Or, “give a homemade gift, a thank you card, a phone call, or a spontaneous favor. Remembering those who have made us feel special and valued encourages us to become more aware and appreciative of human kindness,” Kendrick says.

The benefits of acknowledging appreciation abound. Gregory points out that once children adopt a more gracious (and in turn, positive) attitude, they’re met with better reactions and opportunities in almost all situations. “Kids that are grateful for what they have and for what others do find that people are more likely to want to help them or want to do things for them than kids who have a sense of entitlement,” she says.

“Lessons [of gratitude] are learned throughout a lifetime, [they’re] not merely discussions we have at Thanksgiving dinner,” says Kendrick. So start practicing appreciation now—by the time the holidays *do* roll around, your kids will be old pros at expressing thanks (and the habits will stick with them past December!).

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## Just for You

### (De-)Stressing Tradition

If turning out four different side dishes on Thanksgiving (or cleaning the house from top to bottom for 16 guests, or spending way too long trying to replicate those cute turkey-shaped place cards for the dinner table that your grandmother always used to make) is making you feel decidedly *ungrateful* for the holiday season, take pause. While the urge to create a memorable holiday for your family is completely normal, memorable shouldn't have to mean overwhelming or draining for you.

"Moms put a lot of pressure on themselves to have things a certain way for the holidays by upholding traditions and making things fun for the kids. In the end, though, those desires cause more stress [on the family] which is counterproductive for everyone," says Laureen Miles Brunelli, a mom and writer of the [About.com guide for work-at-home moms](#). "This is your holiday, too. Doing things that make you more relaxed will make the whole family relaxed." How exactly to accomplish this? Brunelli has a few suggestions:

- **Rethink tradition.** "We think of traditions as something very static, but they're actually dynamic. They change over time, especially as your family grows and changes," Brunelli says. Dreading the 6-hour plane ride to Aunt Sue's house now that you have a newborn? Maybe this is the year to enjoy a small meal at home with friends or family that live nearby, and exchange photos or videos with your aunt. Or maybe you're working longer hours this year and don't have time to make a from-scratch crust for all five of your pies—that's okay. Thanksgiving dinner will be just as nice with store-bought piecrusts (and maybe even better, since you'll feel that much less overworked).
- **Enlist help.** For some reason, moms have always been at the helm of the ship called Holiday Madness—but that doesn't mean they can't delegate to their crew. "As kids grow, they become more able to do things. Find simple recipes and put them more in charge of cooking, or of decorating. If it looks like a kid did it, so what?" says Brunelli, who also points out that, "your spouse needs to be on board and helping, too."
- **Take a break.** Unthinkable? It might feel that way, but setting aside time to relax is essential for moms—especially during the busy holiday season. "It seems like it's taking from a very small pool of time you have to do things, but in the long run it will help you focus on the things that are going to make it a happy holiday," Brunelli says. Try planning lunch with a friend, or taking a night off from cooking or shopping to enjoy a warm bath and cozying up in bed with a good book.

Most importantly, remember that setting aside or modifying a tradition for a year doesn't mean it's gone forever, or that the holiday will be any less special. Instead, think of it as enjoying a more relaxing holiday that allowed you to focus on the things that really make the season meaningful—reflection, gratitude, and time spent with the people you love. "The kids are going to remember holiday times as happy if the parents are happy," says Brunelli. A happy holiday? Sounds like the best tradition of all.

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