

# How To Make a Difference as a Volunteer

By Amanda Knoles

In one of his State of the Union Addresses President Bush asked Americans to commit two years of their lives (or 4000 hours) to service in their neighborhoods, communities and the nation. Many Americans responded to the call by signing up for AmeriCorps, VISTA, The Peace Corps and Senior Corps.

The tragic events of September 11 have inspired many people to spend more time helping others. One of the most valuable lessons you can teach your children is that some of life's most meaningful tasks don't involve monetary rewards. Often the feeling of emotional fulfillment derived from volunteer work is a reward in itself.

As children see more and more images of unbalanced, selfish people on TV and in the movies, it is more important than ever to involve them in community service activities. Most newspapers list volunteer opportunities on a weekly basis and your local chamber of commerce or city hall may know of upcoming community events your family would enjoy.

A cleanup day at the beach or local park can be a fun activity for the whole family. While the children collect bottles, cans and other trash, the adults paint fences and benches or help refurbish an activity center.

Your local hospital and nearby nursing homes offer many ways to volunteer. Your teenage daughter might enjoy being a Candy Striper and taking books around to people in the hospital. Your husband could entertain nursing home residents with magic tricks, or you and your son could bring toys, books and magazines to terminally ill children.

Many local organizations have numerous opportunities available to help the needy. You might volunteer a few hours a week at a women's shelter taking calls from women who are victims of domestic violence. Thrift shops run by churches and other organizations always have a need for people to help sort through donations or assist customers. Homeless shelters frequently need volunteers to pick up leftover food donated by restaurants around town. And many communities also need volunteers for Meals on Wheels, a service to bring meals to the elderly and disabled.

Pet lovers are always needed to help out at animal shelters and to assist with Adopt-A-Pet programs. The chores vary from helping clean cages and groom animals to transporting pets to

and from local parks and pet stores where adoption events take place. Your family might even consider caring for animals as foster pets until they are adopted.

National organizations like the Red Cross, United Way, and American Heart Association always need volunteers to solicit donations and get the word out about the services they offer. The Red Cross also recruits people to help with blood donations and disaster services. Some of the federally sponsored volunteer programs offer education benefits as a reward for participation in community or national service. Learn and Serve America has three service-learning programs: community based programs for school-age children, school-based programs for K-12 students, and higher education initiatives to involve college and university students in community service. For more information on USA Freedom Corps opportunities visit [www.usafreedomcorps.com](http://www.usafreedomcorps.com) online.

Local schools can always use help. Contact the principal or your child's teacher to ask about ways you can contribute. Your creative skills could be a big help in planning the school Halloween carnival or your organizational ability might be needed to help get the library in shape.

Athletic dads can find great enjoyment coaching a Little League team or putting together a church softball league. Moms who love to bake can enlist the aid of the kids in baking cookies for a charity-sponsored bake sale.

For other ideas for community service, you might want to visit HEAVEN (Helping Educate, Activate, Volunteer and Empower Now!) at [www.hubheaven.org](http://www.hubheaven.org). The web site features representatives from national volunteer organizations and links to other volunteer resources.

Family Cares ([www.familycares.org](http://www.familycares.org)) is a national nonprofit organization operating Kids Care Clubs. They help children, families, schools and religious groups connect with important charity projects in their local communities.

Community service offers you and your family a chance to learn new skills, make new friends and do something meaningful for the town you call home. Before you protest that you simply don't have the time, add up the hours your family spends watching television or playing video games. Consider setting aside at least two hours a week as a volunteer. It can make a big difference in your life and help others tremendously.