

Age Appropriateness in Youth Service

Grades K-5



The service of young people is an important resource in solving community problems. But like any volunteer, youth volunteers need to be matched with appropriate opportunities. Developing age-appropriate service activities will ensure fulfilling experiences for volunteers and agencies. Depending on the age of youth, concrete developmental features must be present to retain his or her interest and energy in service.

This resource packet includes a brief overview of the developmental themes for youth in grades K-5 and sample projects appropriate for this age group.

What are the benefits of children doing volunteer work?

Every parent knows that teaching their kids to help others is the right thing to do, but did you know that getting children actively involved in volunteering can better prepare them for life?

Volunteering...

- ***Promotes personal growth:*** It feels good to do good—volunteering gives kids a personal sense of purpose and boosts self-confidence. An ordinarily shy child may learn a new talent and, in turn, teach others, raising his or her self-esteem.
- ***Reduces “at-risk” behavior:*** Studies show that students who volunteer are more likely to stay in school, stay off drugs and stay out of trouble. It gives kids “connections” to other people and promotes maturity.
- ***Teaches social responsibility:*** Kids develop empathy for others and they learn that one person really can make a difference.
- ***Strengthens families:*** Children who interact with people from other cultures and circumstances better understand the world around them and gain a deeper appreciation of their own families. In addition, parents who participate in their children’s volunteering experiences encourage open communications, leading to meaningful discussions at the dinner table.
- ***Furthers career development:*** Volunteering in an area of interest is a good preparation for future careers. It gives students a more realistic view of workplace and enhances their leadership skills.

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There are many benefits to volunteering. Most important, volunteering teaches children that, although there are problems in the world, anyone can be part of the solution—a solution that benefits everyone.

*An excerpt from an article in *Family Ties* entitled “The Benefits of Children Doing Volunteer Work” written by Mary Jeanne Menna.

Developmental Themes for Youth in Grades K-5

Everyone develops at a slightly different rate and in a slightly different way. However, general patterns can be seen within different age groups of youth. Consider these major developmental themes when designing appropriate service opportunities for youth in grades K-5.

Primary (5-7 years)

Physical:

- Developing small muscle skills
- Developing hand-eye coordination
- Increasing ability to play games
- Increasing skill with tools
- Possessing high energy levels
- Needing to be active
- Gaining control over body/self regulation

Social:

- Beginnings of empathy
- Having two or three best friends
- Playing with small groups of children
- Beginning of conformity with peers
- Beginning of interactive conversation
- Needing to express newly acquired power and control, try out new roles
- Having trouble taking another’s point of view

Cognitive:

- Beginning to differentiate between fantasy and reality
- Increasing attention span
- Becoming adept at ordering objects by size and quantity
- Developing logical operations and ability to solve problems
- Building stronger memory for concrete sequences (numbers)
- Developing better judgments and decisions

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- Increasing ability to remember sequences and names of objects
- Using perceptions to reason

Self:

- Achieving independence in physical self care
- Being goal-directed in exploration
- Learning to forgo immediate reward for delayed gratification

Values:

- Developing sense of duty and accomplishment
- Developing moral values
- Developing consciousness
- Developing awareness of consequences for behaviors and action
- Beginning to accept rules, but not understanding principles behind them
- Seeing things as either bad or good

Elementary (8-10 years)

Physical:

- Placing greater importance on physical skills
- Increasing small muscle coordination
- Possessing high energy level
- Begin active and energetic
- Experiencing growth spurts
- Being able to care for self

Social:

- Increasing influence by peer group
- Growing interest in hobbies
- Competing with peers
- Growing concern with peer-imposed rules
- Engaging in energetic physical game play
- Having same-sex friends
- Seeking “best” friend

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Cognitive:

- Holding prolonged interest
- Beginning to see similarities
- Beginning to apply logical thought to practical situations
- Beginning to understand relationships of cause and effect
- Understanding concept of money and time
- Beginning to understand symbolism and abstract concepts
- Being able to organize information
- Substituting words and ideas for concrete objects.

Self:

- Achieving personal independence
- Being aware of importance of belonging
- Becoming increasingly self-sufficient
- Beginning to compare themselves with others

Values:

- Testing and questioning attitudes, values and belief systems
- Learning to forego immediate reward for delayed gratification
- Moving away from egocentrism
- Beginning autonomous thought and mutual respect
- Identifying closely with parents and other family members
- Seeking adult role models to influence behavior
- Understanding the reason for rules and behaving accordingly
- Beginning to set standards for self and accepting responsibility for own behavior
- Developing concern for others

*Adapted from *A Practical Guide for Developing Agency/School Partnerships for Service-Learning*, Points of Light Foundation, *The Power and Potential of Youth in Services to Communities*, Minnesota Office on Volunteer Services, and *Learning By Giving*, National Youth Leadership Council.

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Matching Service Experience to the Developmental Level of the Participant

Diane Hedin's research suggests that "for optimal moral growth, students should be engaged at their own level of reasoning in experiences which will challenge them to exercise their skills in more sophisticated ways. They must not be overwhelmed with demands beyond their current level."

As young people grow from childhood through adolescence to adulthood, there are appropriate service opportunities for them at every age. Just as young people have opportunities to participate in age-appropriate athletics from Little League to varsity sports, they also can have increasingly complex service experiences as they grow up.

Project idea starters and examples of service projects

Kindergarten and First Grade Students

- Make holiday greetings cards and artwork for senior citizens who live in a nearby nursing home
- Participate in Arbor Day events, developing a basic understanding of the need for such a day and what community is all about
- Help clean up a road or park
- Collect stuffed animals to donate to children in a homeless shelter
- Make bird houses for a nursing home or shelter

Second Graders

- Visit a nursing home as a group, making presentations that could include singing, story telling or games
- Begin a "Stay in School" campaign, make posters explaining why school is good for you
- Adopt a zoo animal
- Hold a food drive for the homeless
- Organize a liter patrol during lunch and recess

Third and Fourth Graders

- Adopt an elder: write letters, share projects, visit, assist with utility bills through fundraisers
- Sponsor aluminum can drive to raise money to plant trees in a park

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- Adopt a ____ project: a portion of a river, stream, highway, beach, or park trail
- Raise money for a local zoo and awareness of endangered animals
- Collect clothes, toys and shoes for needy countries
- Start a community garden

Fifth Graders

- Assist younger students in making cards for seniors, explaining who the cards are going to and helping personalize them
- Plant gardens with low-income families
- Organize read-a-thons, where students read to younger children or get sponsored to read books, and use the money raised to buy books for a library or for underprivileged kids
- Hold a health fair to raise awareness about diet, disease and exercise
- Research the problem of air pollution, and start a “Carpool” campaign
- Lead workshops on bike safety

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What is and is not age appropriate service for K-5 students?

Age appropriate...

- Participating in an environmentally conscious project, like a beach clean up
- Making placemats for a soup kitchen or homeless shelter
- Read-a-thon projects, where students read to younger kids
- Initiating a liter patrol at school during lunch or recess
- Collecting used books for a shelter for homeless children
- Performing plays and skits depicting community problems and their solutions
- Visiting senior citizen who live in a nearby home

Not age appropriate...

- Testing water samples from a local lake or river and documenting the findings for the community
- Volunteering in a soup kitchen or homeless shelter
- Organizing a phonics fair to help improve reading skills
- Starting a recycling program for the entire school
- Writing letters to corporations asking for donations for a shelter for homeless children
- Holding a youth summit to address problems in the community and possible solutions
- Collecting and writing a personal or community oral histories by interviewing senior citizens

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