

Tips for Effective Service-Learning Projects in Out-of-School Time Programs

Young people can find great satisfaction and wonderful learning opportunities in planning and participating in community service. Out-of-school time programs can be the perfect setting for service-learning. Regular service projects are transformed into service-learning by emphasizing the academic and social skills involved in planning and performing projects and by engaging children and youth in reflection on their work. Following are tips and project ideas to help you incorporate service-learning:

Choose Appropriate Projects: Younger children respond well to projects that have quick and tangible results and involve a lot of action (like picking up trash, doing a performance for elderly people, sorting food at a food pantry). Older children often enjoy longer-term projects that allow them to plan projects and get to know those they are serving.

Keep It Simple: Meaningful service-learning opportunities do not need to involve extensive planning, complicated transportation, or many materials. Projects can be simple, tangible and focused and can take place in walking distance from your site or right at your site.

Have Children and Youth Help Plan Projects: Involve children in brainstorming and researching project ideas. Discuss community needs and encourage youth to think about the resources and abilities they have that could meet needs they see. Younger children may need you to offer them concrete ideas and options about appropriate service projects. Older children can take more of a leadership role in brainstorming and researching ideas. Actively involve all young people in making phone calls, thinking about necessary materials, dividing up work, etc.

Develop Partnerships: Set up a partnership with a local volunteer center, community center, food bank, nursing home, homeless shelter or hospital. Invite a representative to come and talk with youth about the work of their organization and about the needs the organization tries to meet. Young people can "adopt" a group and develop meaningful relationships as they serve the same people again and again. Have youth suggest types of organizations they'd like to partner with and help them research potential partnerships. They can look at the yellow pages listings for social service organizations and ask parents and community members for ideas.

Be Persistent and Specific: Many service agencies and volunteer centers are not used to the idea of children and youth as volunteers. They may not readily have ideas about what young people can do to help. Be prepared to offer concrete suggestions of what your group can do. Be persistent. Invite representatives to come meet the children and talk about needs. Chances are, once service agencies meet the children and see the good young people can do, resistance will melt away.

Engage Young People In Reflection: Reflection is a key element during the process of planning and executing a project and after completing a project. Reflection can involve a special time set aside for group discussion and an ongoing process of capitalizing on the "learning moments" that arise. Ideas for reflection questions to be used in discussions:

- How do you think our project made a difference? What more could we have done?
- How does it make you feel to help other people?
- What did you learn that you could apply to other aspects of your life?
- What can we do to follow up on our project? What more can we do about the issue we addressed?

Celebrate Efforts: Regularly congratulate young people for their work. Make sure that organizations and individuals benefiting from your group's work express their thanks directly to the children and youth involved. Help young people see that the good feelings they get from helping others is part of their reward. On a daily basis, recognize young people who help each other, show courtesy and do things without being asked - all acts of kindness contribute the community and can be considered service-learning.

SIMPLE PROJECT IDEAS:

Following are some tried and true ideas that are easy to organize and execute in almost any community with children and youth of different ages. All suggested projects can teach children planning skills while helping them develop awareness and understanding. Along with each project suggestion are examples of specific learning that could be tied to the project.

SERVICE PROJECT	SOME LEARNING POSSIBILITIES
Rake up leaves or plant flowers for people who are elderly or disabled. Help with yard work at your site	Learn about plants, gardening and landscaping. Learn about the specific challenges of others in your community.
Perform a play, read to people, or sing a song at a nursing home or hospital and take time to get to know people there. Write letters or draw pictures to send if transportation is an issue	Practice singing, performing, conversation and/or writing skills. Learn about nursing homes or hospitals.
Develop "reading buddies." Within your program or in partnership with another program, assign older children to younger children and have them read to each other regularly.	Solidify the reading skills of both younger and older children. Older children learn responsibility, patience and teaching skills. Offer older children simple training about being a good tutor.
Hold a toy/food/clothing drive for a homeless shelter or soup kitchen.	Learn about hunger and homelessness while developing planning, organizing, counting and sorting skills.
Put together "personal hygiene kits" (toothpaste, soap, etc.) for a homeless shelter. Ask the children to bring in sample soaps, shampoos, etc	Learn about homelessness. Use math to figure out numbers of kits to be made given the number of items available.
Pick up trash in a local park or neighborhood. If there seems to be a shortage of trash receptacles, find out who is in charge and write letters.	Learn about the impact of litter. Learn to do research and practice writing skills. Learn to notice needs and do something about what you notice. Learn about responsibility.
Make cookies or pictures to give to local police officers, custodians, teachers or cafeteria workers.	Learn about the work that these people do. Learn to appreciate those who are often under-appreciated.
Help the building custodian do some cleaning that will really make the building look nicer and that he/she wouldn't have been able to get to without extra help.	Learn about all it takes to keep a building clean. Use math skills to figure out amounts of supplies needed to complete a project.
Sort food at a nearby food pantry or help prepare and serve food at a soup kitchen	Learn about hunger issues in your community. Use counting and sorting skills and/or measuring and cooking skills.

RESOURCES

This list is a sampling of resources available on the subject of service-learning. Listing materials here does not constitute official endorsement by The National Institute on Out-of-School Time.

PUBLICATIONS:

Service as a Strategy In Out-of-School Time: A How-To Manual produced by the Corporation for National Service and the National Institute on Out-of-School Time. Available on-line at www.etr-associates.org or by calling ETR Associates, Publications Department at 800-860-2684 x142.

Kid's Guide to Service Projects: Over 500 Service Ideas for Young People Who Want to Make a Difference by Barbara Lewis. Service project ideas for children and youth that range from simple one-time projects to large-scale commitments. Available through Free Spirit Publishing by calling 1-800-735-7323. Also available through School-Age Notes by calling 1-800-410-8780.

Kid's Guide to Social Action: How to Solve the Social Problems You Choose by Barbara Lewis. How-to manual offering kids the tools they need to effect change and inspirational stories of youth who have made a difference. Available through Free Spirit Publishing by calling 1-800-735-7323.

Children as Volunteers by Susan J. Ellis, Anne Weisbord and Katherine H. Noyes. Ideas for designing appropriate and effective volunteer opportunities for children under age 14. Available through www.Amazon.com.

The Service-Learning Bookshelf: A Bibliography of Fiction and Nonfiction in Inspire Student Learning and Action by Cathryn Berger Kaye. Available by calling 310-397-0070.

Making a Difference (student magazine) featuring activities, writing by young people, ideas on service. Available through Quest International by calling 800-446-2700.

The Real Heroes (Video) featuring personal testimonies from young people involved in a variety of service projects. Available through Quest International by calling 800-446-2700.

Today's Heroes (Videos and guides) featuring typical teenagers who share stories of service experiences. Available from the Points of Light Foundation by calling 1-800-272-8306.

ORGANIZATIONS/WEB SITES:

The Service-Learning Exchange: 877-LSA-EXCHange; web site: <http://www.lsaexchange.org>
Opportunities to connect with peer mentors, information on events and initiatives, help locating local resources

National Service-Learning Clearinghouse: 800-808-7378; website: <http://www.nisl.coled.umn.edu>
Publications lists, info on joining a listserv, links to other sites, general information on service-learning

ServNet: <http://www.servnet.org>
Connects youth to volunteer opportunities in their local community

The Points of Light Foundation: 202-729-8000; website: <http://www.pointsoflight.org>
Information on volunteer centers as well as youth service training opportunities and publications

Learn and Serve America: 202-606-5000; website: <http://www.nationalservice.org/learn/index.html>
Information on grants and resources available for service-learning through the Corporation for National Service