

“Won’t somebody please think of the children?” How – and why – nonprofits can engage the youngest volunteers

About this article

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According to the [2010 Canada Survey of Giving, Volunteering and Participating](#), an impressive 58% of youth aged 15 to 24 are active volunteers. And while this is heartening news for many nonprofits, there might be even more volunteer potential in – surprise – the little brothers and sisters of that 58%.

For Nicola Kastner, it started with an epiphany at a corporate event one evening in February 2012. An event planner in King City, Ontario, she was listening to **Spencer West** talk about his goal to climb Mount Kilimanjaro to raise \$750,000 for [Free The Children](#)'s sustainable water programs in drought-stricken areas of Africa. West has been a double-amputee since the age of five and would be making his climb of Africa's highest peak that June on his hands. West's commitment and passion

had a powerful effect on her.

“I thought, ‘I have lived such a shallow life,’” says Kastner, whose volunteer experience to that point was limited to helping out at Brownie meetings.

It was the beginning of a profound life change for Kastner and her family, prompting her to eventually quit her job and look at the impact she could have on a global level, not just in her career. She told her two kids, Max (aged 8) and Samantha (aged 7) about West and took them to his book signing and they were moved to collect pennies for Free The Children's [We Create Change](#) campaign. Within a few short months, the two kids had collected 22 bags of pennies, became [star fundraisers](#) for We Create Change and developed an appetite for doing more good.

And that's where it all stopped.

“We wanted to keep the giving-back going,” says Kastner. But when she started looking for other volunteer opportunities for her family at other nonprofits, she found that, while kids under 16 were occasionally welcomed as [adorable fundraisers](#), most charities didn't want them as working volunteers.

Some organizations do make efforts to include younger kids in providing services but they can be hard to find and are sometimes limited to a few set dates over the year, for example:

- The **Daily Bread Food Bank** in Toronto has a [holiday public food sort](#) during the Christmas season that welcomes children aged eight to 14 when accompanied by an adult.
- The **City of Toronto** welcomes people of all ages to become [Parkland Naturalization Volunteers](#), planting native trees, shrubs and wildflowers.
- The **Winnipeg Public Library** gives kids aged 13 and up the chance to help during its [Family Literacy Fun Days](#), playing reading games and making crafts with families of young children.

And while families can sort food donations, plant shrubs or even become feral kitten socializers, those are clearly drops in a very large bucket of services that nonprofits continually struggle to provide.

“But Moom, I don’t wanna engage kid volunteers!”

"Involving kids in volunteering means a lot more work on the part of the charity, since the tasks need to be much more specific and programmed, and requires more liability," says **Owen Charters**, chief development officer at the [MS Society of Canada](#). "So the charity needs to have all the pieces in place that a children's services charity would need, like police record checks, insurance and training."

The idea of adding extra work to an organization that may already be stretched beyond capacity would certainly put a chill on the heart-warming idea of engaging children in their cause. There can also be the belief that young kids and pre-teens just aren't as useful as adult volunteers.

But could your organization benefit from actively cultivating kids? The answer, surprisingly, might be yes.

See your organization through the eyes of a child

Seeing your organization through the eyes of a child is a variant of the elevator pitch: that concise message that you give a hypothetical donor in the time it takes the elevator to reach their floor. Can any of your services be broken down into components that a child or pre-teen could not only understand, but perhaps even do effectively for you?

Obviously, some nonprofits will not have appropriate opportunities for child volunteers (disaster relief springs to mind as just one example). But analyzing your organization to see whether kids could help provide some services might not only show you new areas of volunteer engagement, it could even be a useful test of how well you're fulfilling your mission overall.

"Kids are great at any rote activity: packing something, labeling something. It's amazing how engaged they can be in simple tasks. There are so many of those jobs that adults are doing

[in a nonprofit] that kids could be doing,” says **Julie Levin**, co-founder of [Kids Cook To Care](#), a program in which kids aged six to 16, under the tutelage of a chef, prepare and cook a meal at a community centre for about 100 of the centre’s clients.

“Charities need to design programs that speak to a child’s interests but also utilize their skills.”

Another question to ask: is the link between your activities and your mission so clear that even a child could understand it and find it meaningful?

“With kids, it’s very important that they’re able to see what they’re doing in a full circle,” says Levin. “They need to see who they’re helping to understand what they’re doing.”

Don’t underestimate a child’s abilities

The [Toronto District School Board](#) is the largest in Canada and located in one of the most multicultural cities in North America. Students who are new to Canada and starting school with limited English literacy skills need additional support that can’t always be provided in a traditional classroom setting.

[Frontier College](#), a 114-year-old national literacy organization, has partnered with the TDSB’s Welcoming Committee for Newcomer Youth and Kids to train reading buddies: Grade 7 and 8 students who tutor their peers or younger kids. Interestingly, Frontier College’s own volunteer program starts at age 16 but the support and structure that a school provides enables them to expand their tutor training parameters to include younger teens and tweens.

“Many of these kids have just learned to read themselves, so they understand what’s involved. They have an immediate rapport with the other students because of their age; they know what the other kids are thinking because that’s how they think,” says **Sandra Huehn**, a community coordinator at Frontier College in Toronto. “Teaching is all about forming relationships because there’s a lot of risk-taking involved in learning and that’s a huge part of the training.”

But while kids may be able to empathize, that doesn’t mean they’re ready to be a peer tutor.

“Training is important because it gives the program a structure – otherwise it’s kids reading to kids and it doesn’t have that much impact, because the children don’t glean meaning in what they’re reading. Supervision is also very important; they need to have an adult with them. Of course they bring lots of energy, but on the other side they need a lot of supervision.”

Kids bring along their families, literally and metaphorically

While it may initially seem burdensome to set up appropriate training and supervision for kid volunteers, it’s important to remember that you’re also getting the chance to connect to their parents and caregivers as well. Each young volunteer will need to bring an adult to be their partner, which means that a nonprofit gets at least two volunteers for the price of one.

“A colleague of mine brought his two-and-a-half year old daughter to a volunteer event designed to control invasive species threatening native habitats on the Oak Ridges Moraine,” says **Erica Thompson**, who works in Creemore, Ontario as the national conservation engagement manager for [The Nature Conservancy of Canada](#). The NCC is a national land conservation organization founded in 1962 and has to date helped protect more than a million hectares (2.5 million acres) of land.

“While she was not physically strong enough to always pull the plants out of the ground, she was able to carry the pulled plants to the collection site and assist with putting the stems into garbage bags. Her dad interpreted her experience as a great one: she was able to feel the value of her contribution to a larger project; she was in a safe environment; she helped many others and she spent the entire day outside in nature.”

And while no one is advocating turning a volunteer program into a play date, Thompson’s anecdote shows that there can be more to a child’s contribution than simply being a too-cute-to-resist fundraiser.

And when a kid becomes a believer in the worth of what they’re doing, they also talk about it.

“Working with kids and exposing them to nature is so critical because they go home and tell their parents, relatives and friends about everything they learn,” says **Kailey Setter**, an Alberta-based conservation volunteer coordinator for the NCC. “They are some of our best advocates.”

But you might have to work harder and smarter

Adults are particularly useful as volunteers in that we have been conditioned for decades by teachers, bosses and automated attendants to be patient and focused for long periods of time, even when things get dull. Kids? Not so much.

“One challenge is that kids generally do not have the stamina or attention span of adults,” says Setter. “Activities have to be done in shorter spurts with breaks in between and we as staff have to be even more engaging.”

“It is a lot of training for young kids to volunteer in a short-term project and it does take staff time, and getting parental permission can be a lot of work,” admits Huehn. “That said, it’s important to see kids not just by what they’re able to give but also as learners themselves.”

To Kastner, who is still looking for a charity that will welcome her kids’ willingness to offer their time and labour – not just their impish grins and way with a penny bag – it seems like the nonprofits are losing out two times over: both with direct help providing services to their constituents and in the potential to turn child volunteers into lifelong partners.

However, the challenge of using young volunteers could even end up making your organization strengthen its commitment to every volunteer.

Huehn sees it this way: “How are they, as volunteers, growing through their experience with us? That’s a good question for adult volunteers, too, not just kids.”

5 points to ponder before engaging young volunteers

1. Cultivating a future donor is the by-product, not the point. A child who feels connected to your organization through their volunteering may well become a donor in the future but that’s not the point.

“I strongly believe that empathy and charity need to begin early,” says Levin. “The younger you start to engage children in exhibiting those qualities, they’re going to demonstrate those qualities for life.”

Do your organization’s mission and activities actively inspire the best in your volunteers, no matter how old they are?

2. Be sure a child or tween volunteer will see a tangible change as a result of their efforts on your behalf. Ensure their work has a clear before and after component – for example, a homeless person now has a knapsack of supplies because the kid packed it. Or community garden is now weed-free. Or a letter was written and mailed to their local MP to ask for action. However, giving them the chance to raise awareness by putting up posters doesn’t count in this context, nor does a bike-a-thon or other closed-loop fundraising events.

3. Get your board on board. Actively [engaging, training and supervising young volunteers](#) will be a big step. Float the idea at your next board meeting and delegate members to do initial information-gathering on issues like insurance, police checks, liability etc. (Another good litmus test is to ask your board, “Would you want your kid to volunteer here?”)

4. Learn firsthand how it’s being done. Take your kids, god-kids, nieces or nephews to an existing family-friendly volunteering event. Even if your nonprofit is not involved in that particular area, you will get insights that will help you hone your own program.

5. If you’re only cautiously optimistic about the whole idea, reach out to high schools first. In many municipalities kids need to fulfill a set number of volunteer hours to graduate high school, which means that guidance counselors are already conversant in connecting volunteers with organizations. Talk to guidance staff as part of your research: they can give you both the student’s and the nonprofit’s perspective on volunteering.

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