

madison area

fall/winter 2008-09

Parent's Guide

FREE!

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Bringing Books
and Boys Together
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**Your Guide to Everything
Kid-Related in Madison!**

Birthday Parties • Museums • Swimming Lessons • Photography • And Tons More!

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Giving Hearts, Confident Kids— Youth Volunteers

By: Mary Ellen Schutz

Not every child is a Kamilah Simone Bryant. Kamilah, at age five, saw pictures of children in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, worried about where those kids would play, and proceeded to raise \$1,000. She spent a year making paper fans and selling them at \$1 each. Her donation to KaBOOM! helped fund the initiative to build 100 playgrounds in the areas affected by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

Every child, early in life, does experience that urge to help. It seems to balance the MINE phase. Ask any parent of a three- or four-year-old. Those little ones love being needed; they love the sense of accomplishment.

So, how can parents nurture that urge to help and raise their children with a mindset that encourages them to be of service to others?

START EARLY

Many volunteer organizations allow young children accompanied by their parents. Special Olympics Wisconsin, for example, welcomes volunteer cheerleaders (ages 0 through adult) and more actively involved volunteers age 13 and up. Kids in strollers can hand water to walkers in a Relay for Life. Just ask. But be mindful of your child's abilities and stamina, and be prepared to supervise their efforts.

"My family was just always involved with something," said Lacy Delsman, volunteer math tutor at Madison's Georgia O'Keefe Middle School. "They encouraged me as I grew, through Girl Scouts, through church, at the local hospital. It just seemed natural to continue when I went to college. Now that I've graduated, I'll look for a way to help in my new community."

LEAD BY EXAMPLE

Again and again, parents of young volunteers say: Kids learn by watching what we do. When parents choose to give their time and energy, it sets the stage. Volunteering can take as much (or as little) time as your schedule allows. Be a chaperone for a field trip. Box up outgrown but lightly worn shoes and send them to Soles 4 Souls. Drop off snowsuits during the Koats for Kids drive. Simple giving acts, like adding an extra item or two needed by a crisis center to your grocery cart, can make a tremendous difference in your child's outlook on life and their belief that they can make a difference.

"I'd take my daughters to Target or the grocery store with a list for the food pantry. We'd shop and deliver the items together," says Alaina, mother of two. Her four-year-old daughter's donation birthday party netted a truckload of baby supplies for their local crisis center. And, yes, the "let's help babies" party idea came from the four-year-old.

VOLUNTEER SIDE-BY-SIDE

"I like helping, getting dirty, and testing my strength," says 9½-year-old Moira (Mo) Stettner who works side-by-side with mom, Kelli on Black River clean-ups. She also delivers Meals-On-Wheels with her grandmother. "It's a great way to get and stay connected," says Kelli.

Support their ideas—Kids see ways to help that never occur to adults. When six-year-old Sami FitzGerald learned about the children at St. Jude's Research Hospital, it sparked her desire to help in her own unique way.

GIVING HEARTS continued on page 11.

Sami, author of *Fish Sticks, Books, and Blue Jeans!* a gratitude workbook for young children, initiated the Colors Decorate the World Project. Supported by her mom, she asked friends and family to donate coloring books and crayons. Her endeavor led to box upon box of art supplies arriving at St. Jude's from all over the country—and more are needed. Sami, now age seven, says it all started with “thankful and grateful,” a couple of words she hears regularly from her parents.

LET THEM STRETCH THEIR WINGS

As your children become more independent, give them opportunities to try volunteering on their own. “Often the school and staff have a wonderful list of opportunities that either occur on campus or in the community. This can be a wonderful way for kids to enter into a successful volunteering experience, paving the way to a full-fledged opportunity to plan and implement their own experiences later,” says Joe Bruzzese, M.A., parent coach for middle school families.

BUILD SELF-CONFIDENCE

Youth volunteers become real believers in The Power of One; they learn that they can make a difference. “Research shows that youth who volunteer are involved in fewer risky behaviors, do better in school, and have an all around stronger base and foundation,” says Barbara Wiers, Girl Scouts of Blackhawk Council. Kelly Klopping, Special Olympics Wisconsin, adds, “Volunteering opens up their world view. At Special Olympics, young people become comfortable with disabilities and learn that many of the disabled lead normal lives.” “Volunteering provides an opportunity to become ‘The Expert,’” says Karen M. Wendt, Monona Public Library. “You can see their confidence building. They love sharing their experience.”

FIND OPPORTUNITIES

Volunteer opportunities abound. For very young children, choose opportunities that make sense for them. Start at home, then broaden the experiences. When they bring groceries to the food pantry or care for an orphaned pup, kids see the impact on lives at a level they understand. Can't think of anything? Eighteen-year-old author and volunteer Sondra Clark provides step-by-step instructions for kid-friendly service projects in *77 Creative Ways Kids Can Serve*. Just look around; you'll find there's a need that can be met by just about every age and interest.

YOU DON'T HAVE TO KNOW IT ALL!

There are some terrific print and web resources for parents. Please check out our website at www.madisonareaparentsguide.com for links to volunteer opportunities, answers, and activities.

Mary Ellen Schutz is a freelance writer and editor, who raised two service-minded kids of her own in Madison, Wisconsin. Over the years, she and her children volunteered with Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, 4-H, Angel's Wish, Red Cross, Boys and Girls Club, and other groups. You can visit her on the web at www.GentleEditing.net