

Editor's Note: The following article is reprinted (with updated format editions) from The Journal of Volunteer Administration, 1996, 14(3), pp. 39-41

Involving Teens as Volunteers

Scott Kleon
Associate Professor, County Operations
The Ohio State University
Circleville, OH 43113
Tel. 740-474-7534 * E-mail: kleon.1@osu.edu

Jeff King, Ph.D.
Associate Professor, Ohio State University Leadership Center
Columbus, OH 43210-1010
Tel. 614-292-3114 * Fax 614-292-9750 * E-mail: king.20@osu.edu

Betty Wingerter
Assistant Professor, OSU Extension
The Ohio State University
Dayton, OH 45409
Tel. 937 224 9654 * Fax 937-224-5110 * E-mail: wingerter.1@osu.edu

Abstract

The Independent Sector found 61 percent of youth (ages 12 to 17) volunteered an average of 3.2 hours per week. Teens volunteered most often through religious organizations, youth development organizations, and schools/educational groups. Few of these teens become volunteers on their own initiative. Instead they are asked by others. A critical factor to successful youth programs is the response of young people to the adults who work with them. It is believed that effective youth leadership programs involve youth in significant relationships with mentors, positive role models, and other nurturing adults. In order to carry out their missions, groups and organizations must properly prepare both the adult volunteers/staff and the teens before and during the volunteer experience.

[Editor-generated] Keywords:

teens, volunteers, adult relationships, mentors, role models, youth-adult partnerships

Relax for a moment. Close your eyes. Picture a recent (or potential) experience with a teenager. Now develop a slogan that advertises what you believe about teens. Your slogan could include a jingle or perhaps you would prefer to develop a thirty experiences. Would "volunteer" be among them?

The current and potential value of teens as volunteers in our community groups and organizations should be encouraged.

Many of us have yet to recognize the potential value of teens as volunteers.

Current Status of Teen Volunteering

The Independent Sector found 61 percent of youth (ages 12 to 17) volunteered an average of 3.2 hours per week (Knauff, 1992). Teens volunteered most often through religious organizations, youth development organizations, and schools/educational groups. Specific

volunteer activities in which teens participated included: babysitting; youth group leader or aide; clean-up or janitorial work; arts volunteer; assisting the elderly, handicapped or homebound; aide or assistant to paid employees; choir member or director; Sunday school or Bible teacher.

Few teens became volunteers on their own initiative. Often they were asked by others to give their time. Teens most commonly learned about volunteer opportunities through participation in an organization or group, recruitment by a family member or friend already involved in the activity, or if they directly benefited from the activity. Knauff concluded that most active teen volunteers have all of the following characteristics: (a) a positive early childhood experience related to volunteering; (b) an altruistic value system; and, (c) a high activity level.

Adult-Teen Relations

A factor critical to successful youth program is the response of young people to the adults who work with them (Carnegie Corporation, 1992). Cox and Woyach (1992) believe effective youth leadership programs involve youth in significant relationships with mentors, where they interact with positive role models and other nurturing adults. Involving youth in volunteer roles with adults creates unique situations and opportunities for both. Organizations must be sensitive to, and understanding of, the relationship between youth and adult volunteers, and be ready to prepare their organizations for the involvement of youth volunteers.

An Ohio study of 4-H teens (youth volunteers) and adult volunteers identified barriers and challenges that can interfere in effective relationships between youth and adults (King, Kleon, and Wingerter, 1993). The study also identified qualities and behaviors that adults and teens feel enhance effective adult-teen relationships.

Teens reported that the adults who were most effective possessed the following qualities and behaviors: good

communication skills, a willingness to listen, a sense of humor, flexibility, and an ability to keep an open mind.

Teens identified the following problems and challenges working with adult volunteers: not being allowed to do enough (for example, practice skills or do meaningful tasks or work), not being listened to, and not being understood (King, Kleon, and Wingerter, 1993).

Adults felt that the qualities and behaviors teens needed to be effective in working with them included: good communication skills, self-confidence, self motivation, maturity, personability, respectfulness, and energy.

These same adults identified the problems and challenges working with teens: teen volunteers lack a sense of responsibility and commitment, are too busy, and parental support and/or involvement is absent. Adults also felt they were sometimes too busy to commit enough time to teen volunteers. (King, Kleon, and Wingerter, 1993).

The situations, the tasks to be done, and the personalities of those involved affect the ways adults and teens work together. Cox and Woyach (1992) believe that most adult-teen relationships fall someplace along the following continuum: adult control, consultations with teens, adult-teen partnerships, delegation of power to teens, teen control.

Adult control is characterized by the adult retaining all control and power. All of the planning and structuring of the programs or experiences is done by the adults.

Consultation allows the teens to be consulted in planning and implementation, but the adults retain veto power and expect agreement.

Partnership allows the teens some degree of power and responsibility, yet the adults and teens mutually agree on specific functions.

Delegation involves negotiation between the teens and adults with the teens assuming authority over certain components of the program or experience.

Teen control allows for the teens to do the planning and implementation with the adults serving in an advisory capacity.

There is no preferred relationship for adults working with teens. Adults must consider the situation, the purposes of the program, and the strengths and weaknesses of the adults and teens before deciding where the relationship should be on the continuum (Cox and Woyach, 1992).

Teen Characteristics

Teenagers possess unique characteristics which develop from day-to-day and year-to-year. The transition from childhood to adulthood occurs gradually. Research has shown that adolescence can be divided into three developmental stages; early adolescence (age 11 to 13), middle adolescence (age 14 to 16), and late adolescence (age 17 to 19). Each of these stages is marked by distinct developmental characteristics. We will limit our discussion to middle and late adolescence since we most commonly research and work with these age groups.

Middle adolescents are self-oriented and searching for independence and personal identity. They take pride in responsibility and the respect they receive from others, but their goals are based on personal needs and priorities. They wish to be recognized as unique individuals, and have difficulty understanding compromise (Karns and Myers-Walls, no date).

Karns and Myers-Walls also identify unique characteristics for late adolescents who feel they have reached full maturity and expect to be treated as adults. Rituals, uniforms, and traditions have lost much of their appeal, and plans for the future influence the activities in which they participate.

Teens as Volunteers

Mercer and Lynch (1992) state, "youth lack the experience of how to work or 'play the game' of fitting into the adult world." We must recognize that teens experience rapid physical, emotional, and

intellectual changes, and many will come to us as "unfinished" products. It is our opportunity and obligation to provide volunteer experiences that: (1) allow volunteer administrators or supervisory staff to take the time to help teens understand organizational policies and procedures, and the importance of the job to be completed; (2) match their skills, abilities, and interests; and, (3) are well planned and allow for additional responsibilities to be added.

Young people are willing and ready to share their time and talents through local community involvement. Steinbach (1992) suggested some guidelines to keep in mind when working with youth as volunteers. They include: (1) striving for ease of participation by reviewing the location of volunteer opportunity(ies), transportation required, and time of day; (2) working at the board level to give youth full status and board membership (other adults in your organizations and board members need to be prepared to treat youth as equals); and, (3) fostering teens' imagination by listening to them, and encouraging them to try (or try out) their ideas. In addition, both long- and short- term teen volunteer assignments/experiences should be encouraged and developed. Describing volunteer opportunities as job internships or training programs will help to recruit teens who are exploring future career paths.

Conclusion

Teens are potential resources available to many groups and organizations. They are willing to take leadership through volunteerism to improve the quality of life in their communities. However, we must recognize that we must allow teens to be "partners" in carrying out the mission of the group or organization. Specific efforts must be made to prepare adults for the teen volunteering experience as well as to prepare teens to volunteer in an adult volunteer environment.

References

- Carnegie Corporation (1992). Reports of the task force on youth development and community programs. *A matter of time: Risk and opportunity in the non-school hours*. New York.
- Cox, K.J., & Woyach, R.B. (1992). *Youth leadership principles*. Unpublished manuscript. The Ohio State University: Mershon Center.
- Karnes, J., & Myers-Walls, J. A. (n.d.). *Ages and stages of child and youth development*. North Central Regional Extension Publication No. 292. Lafayette, IN: Purdue University.
- King, J., Kleon, S., & Wingerter, E. (1993). *Adult-teen relations*. Unpublished manuscript, Ohio State University.
- Knauff, E.B. (1992). *America's teenagers as volunteers*. Washington, D.C.: Independent Sector.
- Mercer, M., & Lynch, R. (1992). *Youth as volunteers*. In S. Vineyard & S. McCurley (Eds.), *Managing volunteer diversity* (Downers Grove, IL: Heritage Arts), 26-34.
- Steinbach, J. (1992). Involving youth as volunteer leaders. In . Vineyard & S. McCurley (Eds.), *Managing volunteer diversity* (Downers Grove, IL: Heritage Arts), 59-62.

About the Authors

At the time of the original publication all three authors were assistant professors with the Ohio State University Extension working with volunteer programs in 4-H Youth Development. Between them they have over 35 years of experience working with adult and youth volunteers in non-formal educational settings. Betty Wingerter and Scott Kleon were Extension agents working directly with youth through local teen groups. They conduct educational programs, teen camping experiences, and community service projects. They also specialize in building positive relationships with teens. Jeff King was State Leader for Ohio 4-H, administering statewide educational programs. All three have conducted research on developing positive relationships between adults and youth.