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Family Matters: Teaching Children to Give

By Chloe Learey

We have entered the “giving season” when there is a heightened focus on multiple aspects of giving, from making financial donations to worthy causes, to donating our time and effort to helping others, to buying gifts for a variety of holidays celebrated this time of year. It is a wonderful opportunity to consider what lessons we are teaching our children about giving, reflect upon what we want to teach, and act on ideas for developing the giving culture we want in our families and large communities.

A good book for getting ideas on where to get started is The Giving Family: Raising Our Children to Help Others. Some of the ideas listed include: be a role model by volunteering and donating; take your children with you when you volunteer, and talk to them about your donations; make giving a year-round project, not just something to do at the holidays; start now; let children decide what projects to support with their time and money. The book focuses on specific activities for how to implement these ideas and others, as well as giving examples through individual stories of real children and families.

We are fortunate to live in a place that makes it easy to give of our time and resources. You may have heard a variety of statistics about the number of not-for-profit organizations in Vermont being especially high, particularly in Windham County, and it is true. While this can make it more challenging for non-profits to find volunteers or donors, it is a good problem to have when we are teaching our children to give. No matter your family or child’s interests it is likely you can find a place to put your energy time or money as a way to contribute to the furthering of that interest. It also gives many opportunities to try different arenas if you are not sure where to put your energy.

The balance between giving and getting is an area for teaching children about giving and generosity while minimizing the focus in our culture on ‘material stuff.’ For instance, making gifts to organizations in the name of another people is a way to give without buying more. Many families give gifts through organizations such as Heifer

International, contributing towards a goat or some chickens for a family in need. Locally we have efforts like Project Feed the Thousands which offer a very concrete way for children to learn how their giving makes a difference in the lives of others. It is important to find multiple ways for people to contribute, not just through money or buying things for others. For instance, when there is a food drive at school you can be assured that children and families who are beneficiaries of that initiative also go to school there. They might not be able to bring in a canned good or a box of cereal, and may end up experiencing a sense of shame. In the example of the food drive perhaps it is decorating the boxes or making posters. Volunteering time is another way to give without making purchases – serving food or helping clean up at a community meal, or even helping a neighbor rake leaves or shovel snow.

Helping children find the gift in giving is the most powerful teaching we can offer. Children are born with a natural sense of empathy, and offering them opportunities to give in whatever form is meaningful to them will help them develop into their best selves, which is ultimately what we want.

Chloe Learey is the executive director of Winston Prouty Center for Child and Family Development in Brattleboro. You can learn more by visiting <http://winstonprouty.org/>.