

# Cover Story

BY LARA KRUPICKA

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## How kids benefit from serving their communities

Eighteen-year-old Brandon Hockersmith of Fullerton teaches kids and adults about the ocean. Tobin Holcomb of Irvine has been a junior naturalist since she was 14, helping kids experience the outdoors. What do these two kids have in common? They're among the estimated 15.5 million young people who participate in volunteer activities. Like many others, they are finding that they get back more than they give through volunteering. Here are some of the benefits:

### DISCOVER NEW INTERESTS

Volunteering gives kids a chance to try new things. In the process, they can uncover talents and interests they hadn't been aware of. Some may even go on to pursue college studies and careers inspired by their volunteer experiences.

Lori Whalen, director of education at the Environmental Nature Center in Newport Beach, has seen this in a student who developed an interest in decomposition through his work turning compost and creating graphs of the compost's temperature.

"He doesn't want to stop," Whalen says. "He finished last spring, and now it's fall and he's asking to start coming back. He doesn't have to."



### INCREASED CONFIDENCE

Youth volunteers gain valuable exposure interacting with the public that they couldn't get anywhere else. It requires them to exercise their communication and public speaking skills. In turn, this fosters confidence as students see the positive impact of their interactions.

"He loves engaging the kids and getting them to talk, rather than just standing there waiting for people to ask him questions," says Brad Hockersmith of his son Brandon's work as a docent at the Ocean Institute in Dana Point.

Whalen has found this to be true of her volunteers, as well. "They grow in speaking confidently on the phone after a month. They're fully competent. Those kinds of skills are valuable."

### A BROADER PERSPECTIVE ON LIFE

Volunteer experiences also give kids a chance to get outside of their neighborhood and have contact with people who are different from them. Whether at a museum or a food pantry, volunteering opens up children's horizons. It exposes them to more of the world—in a

controlled environment where they can feel safe.

### RESPONSIBILITY

While many volunteer opportunities are one-time events, kids can also sign up for regular shifts. Being committed to an ongoing position requires taking responsibility.

"The time management skills they get out of it is huge," says Hockersmith. He explains that volunteering "has helped Brandon realize what he has to do to spread things out so he can get everything done."

### ENJOYMENT

When children connect with a volunteer position that fits them well, the common response is, "It doesn't feel like work." When the position and the child's interests match, to them it's more like a chance to get out and play. This in turn can be a good step in helping them discover their vocation. **OCF**

**LARA KRUPICKA** is a freelance writer, wife and mom of three girls. She's had a blast watching her eldest daughter grow through her volunteer experiences, and she looks forward to someday joining her as a volunteer herself.

## Places that welcome youth volunteers

- Hospitals (think candy strippers)
- Animal shelters
- Museums
- Food pantries
- Libraries

For other opportunities, check out VolunteerMatch ([volunteermatch.org](http://volunteermatch.org)), an online searchable database of organizations looking for volunteers. It allows you to search for kid- and teen-friendly openings.

1. Look for a one-time opportunity to try out the concept of volunteering, such as at a food pantry.

2. Volunteer side by side with your child. It can be a good bonding experience, and it models the spirit of volunteerism.

3. Watch for chances to pair your child's interests with a service activity.

4. If the first experience doesn't work out, try again.

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