

Give a Little Bit

How to open your child's heart-and hands-through simple acts of service

By Amy Veits

This service that you perform is not only supplying the needs of God's people but is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God.

—2 Corinthians 9:12

On a shopping trip in December, our 8-year-old son looked over our list. "Hat, mittens, and scarf for a kindergarten girl?" he asked, reading the top item. "Why do we need those? I don't know any kindergarten girls."

"Now that the weather's turned really cold," my husband explained, "Mama noticed that a little girl in her class doesn't have a hat or scarf or mittens to wear. We're going to pick some out for her."

Our son was clearly puzzled. "Why don't her mom and dad buy mittens for her?"

"Not everyone has enough money to buy all the things they need," replied my husband. "There are parents whose jobs don't pay them enough, and some parents who can't get jobs at all."

"But how come we have to be the ones to get the mittens and things for her?"

My husband smiled. This was the question he'd been waiting for.

"We don't have to. But God wants us to do it. God asks us to take care of people who don't have enough. We try our best to help others, because we're so thankful for all the good things God has given us."

It's natural for young children to be so focused on their own needs and wants that their disregard for others can shock us. I know I've never heard my children argue over who gets to have the smallest piece of cake or who gets to be last to play on the computer.

Our human propensity for selfishness is certainly made worse by the messages of our self-centered society. CEOs of huge corporations are so focused on their own needs they hoard up millions of dollars for themselves at the expense of their employees. Advertising executives set out to convince us that we have to have it all—that it's not fair for other people to have more stuff than we do.

Yet Christ's example was consistently others-centered. In his life—and his death—Jesus taught us that the greatest expression of God's love is to serve others, especially those in need. Our challenge as parents is to help our children overcome their selfish instincts and learn to live out Christ's model of servanthood.

Set an Example

"Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you."

—John 13:14-15

For better or for worse, our children imitate us. The words we say today are the words we'll hear coming from their mouths tomorrow. The way we spend our time and resources now is the way they'll likely spend their time and resources as they grow up. To make sure your words and actions are sending the best message about serving others, keep these guidelines in mind:

Take stock of your own servanthood. What are you doing to build up the body of Christ? Do you give your time and talents freely and with joy, or are you so wrapped up in the stress of keeping track of your schedule that you grumble when presented with an opportunity to serve? If you're like me, the example you set may depend more on what kind of day you had than on your desire to follow Christ. Pray for the Holy Spirit to give you a faithful and thankful heart so you can serve more willingly.

Let your kids see you in action. If you teach Sunday school, let your children see you praying for your students, studying Scripture, and preparing your weekly lessons. If you serve on a committee, make sure your children realize why you head off to those meetings several nights each month. Explain to them the purpose of your group and just how it fits into God's plan. When we assume our children are aware of the role service plays in our own lives, we can miss out on some valuable teaching opportunities.

Remember the Good Samaritan. We can always be on the lookout for chances to serve, but when our children are with us, we should pay special attention to the many opportunities to reach out to others. Help an elderly person load her shopping bags into her car. Give your place in line to a young mother who looks worn out by her fussy children.

Last summer while on a family outing, we saw an older man riding a bike that was heavily weighed down with bags of aluminum cans. When his baggage got the best of him and his bike went down, we stopped to give him a tie-down cord from our trunk and helped him get on his way. Simple, everyday acts of love and caring make a big impression on little minds.

Get Them Involved

"Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these." —Matthew 19:14

Allow children to actively participate in service, and it will become a habit for a lifetime. With a little creative thinking on our part, even young children can jump into family service.

Start with the projects you're involved in. Since they were old enough to follow simple directions, our three children have been right in there with us on service projects. They've helped us prepare tables for the annual fundraising carnival for a local emergency assistance shelter. They've sorted and priced items for the church garage sale to benefit a church in Russia. They've chosen and bought gifts for a Christmas store that serves the needy. And in each instance, our little ones have experienced the joy of working with others to serve Christ.

Shop for your local food pantry. Make "items for the food pantry" a permanent category on your weekly grocery shopping list. Take your children shopping with you, and let them pick out nourishing non-perishable items for others who are hungry. They'll take pride in making good decisions and placing their choices into the collection container at church. As they think of the people who must rely on others' generosity for their meals, your children will learn to give thanks to the God who provides.

Don't be afraid to let your children get closely involved with the needy. A friend of mine volunteers at an inner-city mission center and started bringing her daughter with her when the little girl was only 8 months old. As her daughter grew, the two of them worked in the nursery, helping with snacks, reading, and playing with children who wondered daily where they would be sleeping that night.

My friend tells me she was warned by many people that her daughter would pick up illnesses, infestations, bad habits, and worse at the mission center. But her daughter, now nearly 6, has already gained a deep understanding of her own role as Christ's servant. "The other day," my friend says, "I heard my daughter in the back of the car, praying for whoever a passing ambulance was on its way to assist. I think volunteering with the needy helps a child develop a healthy sense that they can actually do something for others now, rather than waiting until they have grown."

Play to Their Strengths

God has arranged the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. If they were all one part, where would the body be?

—1 Corinthians 12:18-19

If we all served in only one way, the work of Christ would never get done. Through his infinite grace, God has granted us—children too!—richly varied spiritual gifts. Just as the parenting experts tell us to resist comparing one sibling to another, we must honor the unique gifts of our children.

Notice the differences. Bernadette Stankard, author of *How Each Child Learns: Using Multiple Intelligence in Faith Formation* (Twenty-Third Publications), has spent ten years tailoring religious education to fit the individual strengths of children. She bases her work on Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligence, stressing the unique gifts and talents possessed by each person.

Stankard believes that Gardner's theory, widely used in the education community, is an extension of the spiritual gifts. "For so long," Stankard says, "we have observed people who help just by listening, who can impart their wisdom during a difficult trial, who are skilled in the physical healing arts. We have seen people who can lighten the burdens of others through song, and those

who can lighten others' burdens by showing how what they are experiencing can bear fruit in the future. All the spiritual gifts are manifest in one or more of the intelligences.

"There are many ways in which kids can use their gifts, whether that be as simple as helping an aging neighbor or as complicated as writing to their congressional representative. As a parent, I will do whatever I can to facilitate that involvement. If a child is taught to believe in the gifts God has given, the possibilities are endless."

Tailor service opportunities. Our two girls have been blessed with a talent for music. Both delight in singing and playing during worship. Our son, on the other hand, has absolutely no interest in standing before the congregation to offer praise through music. As the children's choir leader, I struggled at first with his refusal to lend us his voice. I had fondly pictured all three of my little darlings warbling "This Little Light of Mine" together.

After much prayer and several fruitless arguments, I came to understand our son's position. Standing in front of 50 full pews to sing would never be his cup of tea. But put a hammer or power drill in his hand and he'll happily spend an entire afternoon with his father, repairing anything in the church building that needs it. Show him a stack of tables and chairs that need to be set up for a fundraiser, and he'll work up a sweat in minutes.

As parents, we have a difficult task set before us: To guide our children along Christ's path. Through prayer, we can look to his example to provide our own example of servanthood. We can help our children find opportunities to serve in the world around them. We can appreciate and nurture their amazing, Spirit-given gifts. Thank God for giving us these little ones who contribute to the community of Christ!

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