



HANDS-ON CARING

by Elizabeth Jennings • Art by Lena Shiffman

As I felt cold water rush into my shoes and ooze between my toes, I had to wonder what on earth I was doing in the middle of a creek on a Saturday morning. This was my catch-up time—time I usually reserved for sleeping late, having a leisurely breakfast, enjoying some precious downtime with my family.

Instead, here I was in the middle of a stream cleanup, looking out for snakes and keeping a close watch on my four-year-old son. To him, this was a big adventure and a treasure hunt rolled up in one—after all, when he'd done the stream clean up the previous year, he'd found a wagon and three balls in addition to lots of garbage.

To me, the clean up was a way to fulfill a commitment. Beyond that, though, it was one of those proverbial teaching moments we parents are always on the lookout for. I was trying to show, in a fun, hands-on kind of way, that doing things to make the world a better place is a good part of life.

Before I became a parent, I tended to make most of my contributions to the greater good through money rather than time and effort. I had a rather practical view toward altruism. In my mind, it was much more efficient to arrange automatic bank withdrawals for donations to an organization than to sponsor a youth volunteer to go halfway around the world to help in person. It was a lot easier to write a check to the food bank than to ask people to pledge money for every mile I walked in a walkathon. It made more sense to help finance world relief efforts than it did to pack a shoebox full of Christmas presents for a child I didn't know.

Efficiency. Ease. Sense. These are goals that sometimes go by the wayside when you're a parent. And, in a lot of ways, that's a good thing.

What I didn't fully realize before I began looking for ways to involve my son in service projects was how active participation can bestow a complex array of benefits on the people who give their time and effort. There's a feeling of purpose, of doing something worthwhile. There's the camaraderie with others who share your beliefs and sensibilities. There's a heightened sense of connection, not only between disparate groups of people but sometimes between people and the earth itself. There's a personal understanding of complicated problems.

I suspect few parents would argue that it's not a good idea to involve children in service projects, but lots of people have trouble making room for it in their lives. If you are interested in trying to do more, consider the following resources and ideas:

- Deborah Spaide, founder of Kids Care Clubs, has outlined one hundred service projects for children in her book *Teaching Your Kids to Care* (1995, Carol Publishing Group). Spaide writes that "charity helps kids discover their talents, hone their skills and begin to believe in themselves." Moreover, according to Spaide, acts of service not only promote moral values, character, and the sense of personal worth, they can even offer health benefits. For more information on Kids Care Clubs, whose mission is "to develop compassion and the spirit of charity in children through hands-on service projects," see their website at kidscare.org.
- When looking for ways to serve, don't ignore the obvious. Food drives at Thanksgiving or angel trees at Christmas offer an easy introduction to the concept of helping others. For ongoing activities, which make a more lasting

impression, investigate some of the many programs offered by churches, synagogues, and other faith communities. Or simply look in the local paper or on community bulletin boards. Some of the things my son and I have participated in include shopping for items to donate to a school supply drive, taking children's books to a shelter, and Christmas tree recycling projects.

- According to child psychologist Lawrence E. Shapiro, the keys to making service projects work are to choose something that is personally meaningful, to keep the commitment a priority, and to participate yourself as much as possible. Shapiro also writes in his book, *How to Raise a Child with a High EQ: A Parents' Guide to Emotional Intelligence*, that helping via organized projects will "not only teach your children to become more concerned about others, it will also teach them social skills, the importance of cooperation, and the value of perseverance and following through."
- Build on your child's interests and hobbies. Our whole family enjoys hiking, so it was natural for us to participate in trail maintenance days. My friend's daughter is an animal lover. She's trained her dog as a therapy dog and takes him to visit nursing home residents every week. If your child plays a musical instrument, you could investigate playing for a homeless shelter. If he or she is a natural in soccer, perhaps he or she could help coach preschool teams.
- In times of tragedy, actively doing something to help has the additional benefit of restoring a sense of order. Jane Brody, the widely syndicated health columnist, wrote in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks that "it is also healing to do something to help those who have suffered the most. . . This kind of disaster makes people feel impotent, and finding ways to help others can restore a sense of competence and control."
- If you consider service a privilege and not a chore, maybe your child will naturally learn to feel the same. I have to admit that when the alarm went off the morning of the stream cleanup, I didn't feel too privileged. Later, though, as I walked in the creek, I saw things I otherwise would have missed . . . things like the morning light glinting on the water and a box turtle sunning on a rock. I heard the laughter of teenagers splashing behind me and had a sudden realization: this really *is* fun.