

Tips for Parents by Susie Kohl

Making a Difference in a Time of Abundance

“Act as if what you do makes a difference. It does.”

—William James

THIS SEASON OF SHINING LIGHTS and sumptuous food often reminds us that we want to reach out to those who might be hungry or in need of a warm bed. On a Sunday evening in November, I was privileged to attend the annual “Make a Difference” award ceremony held by the Interfaith Council of Contra Costa County. “Make a Difference” award winners serve people who often seem invisible in our affluent communities. Their dedication reveals a broader picture of our communities and the miraculous ways that working together can yield results. However, their stories also show how much more help is needed with the strains placed on families by our current economy.

Parents at our school have sometimes found satisfying ways to volunteer in programs like these with their children or have thought of creative ways their families can give to others. Several years ago, one mother baked loaves of bread with her daughter, which they gave out to homeless people on San Francisco streets. Some people donate holiday gifts to needy families. Evidently, families finding ways to contribute to their communities is a national trend.

In a Gallup poll in the year 2000, about one-third of families with children said they offered volunteer service to the community. In addition, the idea of children doing their own philanthropic work has grown exponentially. *Scholastic.com* is only one of the media venues that features “Kids Making a Difference,” highlighting the projects young people organize to help people (and animals) in their local communities and around the world.

Empowering children to put ideas for serving others into action has far-reaching potential for the future. Children who learn the fulfillment of giving at a young age will help create higher-level perspectives in coming generations. It’s important to remember that it’s the moments children experience reaching out to a family member or neighbor that create those attitudes, not the size of the project. Deborah Spaide’s book *Teaching Your Kids to Care: How to Discover and Develop the Spirit of Charity in Your Children* offers lots of practical ideas for helping children learn they can make a difference.

Of course, service has been a core value of The Meher Schools since its inception. Teachers in preschool consistently praise children for helping their classmates, treating each other kindly, and keeping their classrooms clean. In elementary school, there are daily opportunities to learn about cooperation and service. Children in our chorus have sung at nursing homes, the Special Olympics, and in programs for low-income children through our St. Francis in the Schools program in San Francisco. Drama Camp students last summer welcomed visiting students from the St. Francis program into their classes. Last year fifth graders organized bake sales and helped with a spaghetti fundraiser that served dinner to families so that all their classmates could travel to Washington, D.C. In the “Buddy program,” older students form helping relationships with younger students. Families volunteer together, helping in our Seven Circles Garden.

Beginning December 3, Amelia Granger-Whalen will sponsor a toy drive at our school for foster children in Richmond. A food drive will follow later in the month. Inspire your children by talking to them about why your family is participating and get them to actively take part.

Traditionally, the cold wind and clouds of winter have awakened people’s hearts to the need to support each other and share their resources. We are lucky to live in times of such abundance.

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