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Your Money

Shortcuts

Raising Children Who Care in Times That Need It

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A FEW years ago, a friend of my son's asked that, instead of getting him presents for his 11th birthday, guests donate to a certain charity. I asked my son if he would like to do something similar for his birthday.

He looked at me and said flatly, "No." He wanted the presents.

While I admired the birthday boy's initiative, I have to say I sympathized with my son. I like to give and get presents, too.

But like most parents, I also want my sons to evolve into caring citizens who are aware of and want to help others. It's not always easy to find the right way to do it — to walk the fine line between opening their eyes and guilt-tripping, between understanding the differences and needs of others and patronizing them.

But, as I started researching this, I discovered to my surprise that philanthropy — especially promoting it among children and young people — is suddenly a hot topic. There is a new show on [NBC](#), "The Philanthropist," about a dashing globetrotter who

provides relief to the needy and oppressed. In May, [AOL](#) started an initiative with the Philanthropy Project. Last month, a group of about 20 representatives of different universities and colleges gathered at Brandeis University for the first national conference on teaching philanthropy.

Why now? I would think that in these economic times, people would be hunkering down, worrying about themselves and their own needs, rather than others.

Not so, said Susan Crites Price, author of “The Giving Family: Raising Our Children to Help Others” (Council on Foundations, 2001).

“Talk about a teachable moment,” Ms. Price said. “This economy was clearly brought on by greed, and this is a time we need to step up and help people who need help.”

It also helps that [President Obama](#) has called for a “Summer of Service,” asking people to donate their money and time to help the disadvantaged.

It all sounds good. But how do you get children involved so it means something to them, so that it is not just another activity that parents push and children do grudgingly?

We, as parents, have to model such behavior, of course. But, Ms. Price said, we have to go further and create expectations that in your family, you give and serve.

First of all, figure out what your children are interested in. Sometimes parents assume that if it is something easy, or something the child likes doing anyhow, it’s not really a proper sacrifice.

Nonsense, Ms. Price said. For example, most teenagers are more adept than adults at figuring out things online. And the bonus is, they also enjoy it. So find a nonprofit that needs help, as many do, in setting up [Facebook](#) or [Twitter](#) accounts and maintaining them. It may not be as strenuous as building a house, but it can be just as useful.

Also, don’t assume there is only one way to be charitable. Ms. Price told me a story about a boy who was asked to give some of his money to charity. To avoid that, he buried it in the backyard.

“Some kids take more pleasure in giving than others,” she said. And most want to do it their own way, so that while you can guide them, you shouldn’t force them. The little boy who buried his money was happy to volunteer his time as long as he didn’t have to hand over his own funds. My son who wanted birthday presents instead of donations has worked weekly for the last two years at a local Head Start program.

Of course, philanthropy, like everything else, has gone online. AOL has forged a partnership with the Philanthropy Project, a nonprofit organization that uses the moving image to inspire philanthropy, to bring the concept of giving and volunteering to a more

mainstream audience, said Marty Moe, senior vice president of MediaGlow, AOL's publishing division.

As the Web site (www.news.aol.com/philanthropy) states: "Philanthropy is not just for the rich and famous. You can revolutionize your own life by making the act of helping out many others an easy part of your daily routine."

It offers ways to be involved and highlights continuing initiatives, like that of Zach Bonner, an 11-year-old who is walking, in stages, from Atlanta to Washington to bring attention to the nation's homeless children.

A fast-growing concept in universities and colleges is to offer classes where students have real money to distribute to worthy causes.

Andrew Hahn, for example, a professor and director of the Sillerman Center for the Advancement of Philanthropy at Brandeis University, last year taught a graduate course, Practicing Philanthropy, in which four groups of students received \$10,000 each to distribute among Boston organizations that had applied for the funds.

They had to figure out the needs in the community and how to decide among deserving applicants, Professor Hahn said.

Although the nonprofit sector includes 1.2 million organizations and represents 10 percent of the economy, Professor Hahn said, "The real agenda is not teaching students about working in the nonprofit sector, but a wider social goal." That goal, he said, is "to help them understand social conditions and social justice and imbue in them the spirit of generosity."

In 2007, Campus Compact, a coalition of college and university presidents, and Fidelity Charitable Gift Fund formed Students4Giving, which has financed 15 similar courses, primarily at the undergraduate level.

Many students have volunteered in the past, but this is different, said Maureen F. Curley, president of Campus Compact. The goal, she said, is that students reflect on what practicing philanthropy means in their lives and community.

"It's not just doing a good deed, but incorporating it into learning," she said. "The students talk about how the fact that people are hungry affects me and my community. It's not just that the poor people are over there and we're over here, but we look at the systemic roots and causes."

When real money is involved to help real people, Professor Hahn and others say, the experience takes on a whole new dimension and importance.

"There are some really heated discussions about where to give the money," said Alex Buffett Rozek, who is head of the Learning by Giving program of the Sunshine Lady

Foundation, which has financed eight such undergraduate courses and plans to increase that to 15 in the next school year.

“Our goal is not just to do it for a few years, but permanently,” Mr. Rozek said. With budget shortfalls in many states and resulting cuts for the neediest members of societies, “the value of \$1 spent for a nonprofit cause is significantly more important than it was in the past.” Through programs like his foundation promotes, Mr. Rozek said, he hopes that “the next generation of philanthropists will have a much more informed and critical eye.”

When I heard about the boy walking 1,225 miles to help the homeless, my first reaction was to wonder where I’d gone wrong. My children don’t like walking to the store. But on second thought, I realized that not every effort has to be — or necessarily should be — a grand gesture. I might suggest to my sons that we volunteer this summer at the local food pantry. It would help our community in a concrete way — and it’s only a three-mile walk.