

Opening the Doors to Volunteers

by Emmalie Dropkin

Close your eyes for a moment and picture a volunteer in an early childhood program. (Okay, open them!) Who did you see? Was he in a rocking chair, reading to a group of children? Was she knitting them hats and gloves to prepare for winter? How about a bank employee coming in to educate the children's parents about creating personal budgets? While these are certainly traditional roles for volunteers, new ideas about what it means to donate time and skills are opening up new areas for volunteerism!

During the 2012-2013 program year, Head Start and Early Head Start classrooms were supported by over 1,230,000 volunteers. About 820,000 of them were parents, which suggests that as many as four in five of the million Head Start and Early Head Start students had a parent



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volunteer last year, a sizable accomplishment and a reflection of how Head Start programs welcome parents into classrooms as their children's first teachers. But what about the other 410,000 volunteers? Certainly some are community members who've visited classrooms to read with children and participate in classroom activities, but others are professionals who come to share their own skills with the program as a whole. Activities they've undertaken include:

- helping parents write résumés.
- creating websites for programs.
- building playgrounds and outdoor spaces.
- providing medical or dental education and check-ups.
- bringing portable learning opportunities like planetariums.
- sharing skills and talents for art and music.
- establishing gardens for children and teaching parents gardening skills.
- hosting book drives, coat drives, and other fundraisers.

- teaching children about community roles, like firefighting and police work.

Many of these efforts give children a broader understanding of the adults in their communities and the opportunities that are open to them as they grow up. Volunteer programs can also provide resources and services that might not otherwise be available and help build a reputation in all sectors of the community. There are benefits for the volunteers themselves, as well. They get to play an expert role, sharing both their practical skills and their artistic passions, while serving their local communities. In some cases, employers even back up their efforts with paid time off for volunteering or the ability to direct corporate donations to community organizations where they've donated their time.

Given the potential benefits to everyone involved — from children to parents to volunteers to programs — the biggest obstacle to setting up a thriving volunteer program is usually that getting started on a project requires time, energy, and oversight. Few early childhood programs have a staff member dedicated to recruiting and engaging volunteers, but that fact shouldn't be a stumbling block; once a volunteer



program is underway, it may even fund itself! Fortunately there are resources to help Head Start and child care settings make that first step. Recognizing that programs needed tools to get started, in 2011 PNC Bank's *Grow Up Great* effort formed a partnership with the National Head Start Association to create the "Opening the Doors" Community Volunteer Toolkit.

The Toolkit, which is free to download in either English or Spanish, offers advice and templates beginning with a "Needs Assessment" to determine what areas of your program volunteers might be able to support, tips for engaging staff, job descriptions, recordkeeping tools, and ultimately ways to measure the effectiveness of new volunteer efforts. Perhaps most importantly, the toolkit stimulates conversations about more than just traditional models for volunteerism; it offers suggestions about what volunteers might be able to offer with skills and experience they bring from their own careers and workplaces. Why not ask those bank employees to talk about budgeting and building credit? Why not reach out to a local garden club about helping children design a garden? The toolkit was piloted and field tested over three years with Head Start and Early Head Start programs, and is now in use across the country. (To download the Opening the Doors Toolkit, visit go.nhsa.org/opening-the-doors!)

If your center follows the school calendar, this is a great time to get started with planning and recruitment. What is it that could make your offerings stronger when children come back through your doors in the fall? Educational programming, updated facilities, enhanced parent offerings? No matter what your need, somewhere in your community is a match! The Toolkit is one way to get started on finding it.