

success stories

The AppleCorps: An alternative to young teens home alone

by Margaret Leitch Copeland, Libby Brunette, and Susan Gimilaro

Ten years ago when the first group of children aged out of the Applewood Learning Center's school-age child care program, parents asked the program to find a way to serve their young teenage children so that they would not be left home alone for the summer. The teens had friendships based on many years together in the program, but were not eager to continue receiving 'child care' services. And they were not old enough to be hired by the center or other local employers and other opportunities in town for young teens were limited or non-existent.

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In the midst of a campaign to make the center more family-friendly, the director responded with a summer program for 14 and 15 year olds (which has grown to include 13 year olds) called AppleCorps. Teens volunteer in the program and parents pay a minimal fee to cover the cost of uniform shirts. It is a win-win-win-win for everyone:

- for the parents, having a safe place for their teens, not paying for care, and having one drop-off/pick-up location for the family;
- for the teens, being respected as volunteer staff, while staying in a comfortable and familiar place with their friends;
- for the center, having extra hands to help with activities and jobs; and
- for the adoring younger children, enjoying the company of 'big kids' or their older siblings.

The application and orientation process

If teens are interested in applying for a position as an AppleCorps Volunteer (ACVs), they have to complete a written application and:

- commit to volunteering for four weeks (two weeks need to be consecutive)

- participate in an orientation session to learn 'The Basics' of working with young children
- meet with the Head Teachers to learn classroom responsibilities
- agree to be assigned to a classroom without their friends so they interact with the younger children rather than with each other.

Although most ACVs had been part of the center community for much of their lives, the role of ACV brought unfamiliar responsibilities. The job description outlined some of their roles, including:

- reading to children
- participating in activities with children



- spending one-on-one time with children
- comforting upset children
- preparing snacks
- raking the playground
- organizing library spaces
- emptying the recycling bins

In order to differentiate ACVs from the staff, uniforms were offered. T-shirts and nametags allowed the ACVs to feel important and helped to identify the volunteers for families. The ACVs spent their mornings in the classrooms and their afternoons assisting with center-wide projects.

The ACVs had the typical interests of most adolescents: make-up, members of the opposite sex, music, and movies. It was important to support these age-appropriate discussions during a time outside of the classroom. The ACV office was created as a place for breaks and for organizing work. It was helpful, too, to schedule center-wide jobs in the afternoons so the ACVs could 'hang out' together.

ACVs, like all teens, had favorite activities — washing the bus — and not so favorite activities — cleaning the guinea pig cage. ACVs tended to be honest and direct in their communication; they "tell it like it is." When surveyed about their experiences, some ACVs told us:

- "If I weren't at Applewood this summer I'd be doing nothing at all."
- "My least favorite part of being an ACV was all the diseases!"
- "Why do we rake the playground and then, like five minutes later let kids play on it?"
- "What if you had a playpen for the kids to go in when they misbehave? Something they can't climb out of in the corner. That would be an effective 'time out' and would also keep [them] from biting anyone else."
- "My impressions were good, but I



would have liked to play with the kids more and do chores less."

Benefits for all

The ACVs were able to enjoy some of the more mundane aspects of running a business, including mass mailings, provided they were able to socialize during them. This not only saved the center time and resources, it provided the teens with an opportunity to feel competent and important in the business aspect of the program.

Teachers were particularly happy to have the ACVs spend one-on-one time with children. And there was no limit to the time ACVs could rock babies, read to small groups, and build block towers over and over again with a toddler who only wanted to knock them down. Parents offered their perspectives on the program:

- "My child gained responsibility, positive role models, experience with children, friendships, and feeling good about helping others."
- "Applewood provides a supervised setting for teen volunteers to gain confidence and hands-on experience working with young children while having the teacher resource available to ask questions about the children's behavior, etc."

Each summer is different

In ten summers, the number of teens interested in the ACV program has

ranged from two to seven. Occasionally, teens have been ACVs for two summers. Typically, there is one ACV for each of the center's five classrooms. While the first groups of ACVs were 14 and 15, there was soon a need to include 13 year olds. Now, most ACVs are 13 who are in what the director calls 'that transition year.'

What we learned

AppleCorps has not only become institutionalized in the program, it has become a rite of passage for the children; school-agers look forward to the time when they can become ACVs. As one ACV indicated in her application this past year, "I have wanted to join AppleCorps since I was in Kindergarten and it first started."

Since 1998, the program has become part of the center's permanent offerings to families and has helped the center grow in its thinking about the ages of its staff and volunteers. The center now offers GrandApples, a volunteer program for grandparents of enrolled children. GrandApples uses a lifespan approach that increases older adults' visibility in the lives of young children. People ask if the ACVs go on to be early childhood educators and the answer is: not yet. They have chosen college majors such as advertising, tourism and convention planning, and industrial design, but they look back fondly on their days as ACVs. As a 24-year-old former ACV said: "My experience as an ACV helped me realize how demanding and rewarding it is to

provide care for young children. I feel confident that the constant interaction with the kids has helped prepare me for when I have children of my own.”

For more information, forms, and sample letters, go to:

www.applewoodlc.org.

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“I loved being an ACV. I loved the t-shirts and the name tag. It was so official. I still have my name tag. I liked the ACV office, too. It was cool. I liked working in the infant room the best. Whenever I came to volunteer, the babies would get so excited. There was one baby who loved me. She cried a lot, but whenever I showed up she stopped. I would try to make her laugh by making funny faces. I played ball with her, read stories with her and brought her to the windows to see the birds. The teachers would say, ‘We are so glad you are here. She loves when you come and she never cries when you are here.’ I started to come before she arrived and stayed until she went home so she would never cry. I don’t like to see anyone cry. I guessed maybe she was homesick or missed her mom. I had never been around babies before. I never had any little cousins or little neighbors. I am the youngest in my family. I knew nothing about babies. Now I have two little cousins who love me. They think I am so funny. I chase them around the house, play hide and seek with them, and read to them. I learned not to be afraid of babies when I worked as an ACV in the infant room. I think I’ll make a good dad, because I like kids but I’m not changing diapers.

“Now I am a camp counselor at an overnight Boy Scout Camp. I go away for the whole summer. Sometimes kids get homesick or nervous there, too. One time this summer when I had a group of kids outside on the extreme obstacle course, a bad thunderstorm came out of nowhere. The kids were scared. I was scared. I had to rush them into a vacant barn as the thunder and lightening crashed around us. I thought: ‘What am I going to do to make them not cry?’. I told jokes, put on skits, told funny stories. Soon the storm was over and everyone was fine. I was voted Camp Counselor with the most Scout Spirit by the campers.

“I guess I learned to use humor when working with kids of any age. When I was an ACV, my friends would say, ‘Don’t you get paid?’ I would tell them it’s volunteer work. Sometimes now as a Camp Counselor, I can’t believe I do get paid. I always forget to send my paychecks home. I would do it for free, I love it so much.” — A 16 year old former ACV