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Cultivating the Practice of Family Philanthropy

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“How can we expect our children to know and experience the joy of giving, unless we teach them that the greater pleasure in life lies in the art of giving rather than receiving?”

—J. C. Penney

Giving. Such a simple act that it is typically not given much thought. But giving is an important habit that should be learned and nurtured within the family. Giving establishes relationships and reinforces social ties.

In 2007, gifts by individuals reached \$229.03 billion in the United States. This equals 74.8% of all giving.

Religion remained the largest single recipient, receiving \$102.32 billion of the \$306.39 contributed. In any given year, approximately 70% of households make at least one charitable contribution.

Why is the lesson of giving so important?

- Society, as well as the family, is a social network made up of many relationships. A gift is an instrument for expressing a relationship. It establishes the maintenance and reinforcement of social bonds. Giving as a family to charitable organizations provides an opportunity for family members to strengthen their family bonds as they unite around a purposeful mission.
- People learn to give because they have received gifts from others. Social reciprocity—giving to others without direct return from those to whom you give—is a behavior learned in families. By practicing giving within and as a family, children learn an important skill vital for the establishment of relationships.

- Children do not develop in isolation but in the context of relationships. By giving to others, children become aware of themselves by knowing others' needs. “By helping build self-awareness and other life skills in children we can enable them to lay a firm foundation for them becoming future leaders” (Scheer and Safrit, 2001, p. 110).

Start early

Most people who love to give learned the joys of giving at an early age. Parents play a critical role in the development of the habit of generosity. Early lessons should be simple and geared toward the child's interests and development level. Here are a few steps you can take to instill giving in your children:

- **Be a role model**—Show your children the joys of giving by sharing of yourself as a volunteer and donating to charitable organizations. Let your children observe and participate in these acts of giving.
- **Make giving a year-round project**—Holiday giving is a significant ritual, but children need consistency and repetition in learning. Practice giving throughout the year.
- **Expect your children to serve and give**—Children reach toward their parents' expectations. Praise them for their philanthropic actions.
- **Give your children choices**—Let children decide what project to support with their time and money. Help your children find their own pleasure in giving. Most givers insist that they give because they like it.

Incorporate giving in your family

The family giving box—Every home with a mailing address receives many gift solicitations, particularly around the holidays. Use these as a springboard for discussions about giving. Have your children create a special box where they can save these solicitations.

Periodically, gather as a family and look through the collection. Talk about the solicitations and how your donations would be used. Ask your children about their interests. See if any of the collected solicitations might be a match with their interests.

As a family, choose an organization(s) you would like to support.

Matching dollars—As children become aware of giving opportunities, they are likely to ask about giving their own money. Consider making a matching contribution for your children's gift. For example, you might wish to match their gift dollar-for-dollar, or for every dollar they contribute you will give \$5. Also, as your children's interest in giving expands, work with them for opportunities to earn personal giving dollars.

Sponsorships—Many worthy causes and charitable organizations have participant activities that require sponsors. If your children express an interest in a swim-athon, a charity race, or other similar activity, sponsor their participation. Further, help your children develop a list of potential sponsors and assist in making the contact.

Grantmaking—Consider establishing a donor advised fund in the name of your children within the local community foundation. The children can then make recommendations for grants to be dispersed from the fund's income. To find a community foundation serving your locale, visit www.communityfoundationlocator.org or The Council on Foundations at www.cof.org.

Volunteer and visit—A good way to spark an interest in giving within your children is to provide them a first-hand opportunity to see what donated dollars do. Visit charitable organizations. Sites that are of interest to your children and family are a good place to start. Consider the zoo, YMCA/YWCA, museum, or Red Cross. Also think about volunteering. Giving of one's time and talent is not only a good way to increase an interest in giving but

can also assist in the development of a lifelong practice of service to others. After a visit or volunteer experience, take time with your children to reflect on what they saw, experienced, or felt. And, finally, praise your children for their work and insights.

Giving can become a wonderful family activity that works to strengthen the relationships within the family and provides service and resources to the community. Giving also creates within children the foundation for acceptance of future leadership roles, and plants the seeds of a lifelong habit to serve.

Whether your family is affluent or struggling to make ends meet, each has opportunities to give of their talent, time, and treasure. Taking advantage of those opportunities may be the best gift you give yourself and your family.

"You make a living by what you get. You make a life by what you give."

—Winston Churchill

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