

The family that volunteers together

Posted by [hjung](#) August 12, 2008 05:00AM

A friend was mentioning how she was interested in introducing her five-year-old son to the concept of volunteering. How do you do that?

Easy, I thought. I'll call [Hands On Greater Portland](#). The nonprofit connects individuals looking for volunteer opportunities with groups needing everything from someone to tutor a child to someone to clean out cat cages.

Turns out, it's not such an easy question.

"It's hard to find a way to introduce your child to volunteering," said Andy Nelson, the executive director. Kids just don't have the attention span for many volunteer projects that Hands On Portland advertises, he noted, plus it's just not that fun for kids to do things with a bunch of adults.

He knows from personal experience. He had taken his son with him to a previous volunteering activity -- a tree-planting project. But he was one of the only kids there. "He was not as into it," Nelson said. "It was kind of a grown-up thing" as opposed to something that his felt a part of.

So now, he is testing out something new: Offering family-volunteering opportunities as opposed to a volunteer opportunity that you might bring your family to.

So far, the pilot program has brought about 10 or so families to two different projects. In the first, families wrote "Love Letters" to sick children, designing cards with markers, construction paper and other art supplies.

In the second, families built a "bioswale" at Gabriel Park, which is used to filter out silt and other impurities from runoff water. In this project, families dug holes, put in plantings and mulched them to help create the bioswale.

Next up: A project cleaning cabins and restoring trails at Camp Namanu near Sandy.

Nelson could see the difference in his son's attitude from the tree-planting with the bioswale project where he and the other kids happily pitched in. "My son planted 17 plants," Nelson said.

"What's motivating for the kids is when they see others," he said. "Kids love to emulate each other."

And while it's still officially a pilot program, Nelson figures Hands On will offer a family-specific volunteering event once a month. "I think we're onto something here."

-- Helen Jung; helenjung@news.oregonian.com