Adolescent Volunteering

Adolescent health is often affected by social factors such as connections to the family, school, and community. One way in which adolescents can establish community connections is through volunteering. Through volunteering, adolescents can also gain valuable life experiences and feel valued and important. Research has shown positive health benefits to volunteering. Volunteering has been shown to reduce depression and increase positive emotions. Volunteering has also been linked to lower risk of high blood pressure. In a study in this month's *JAMA Pediatrics*, adolescents were split into 2 groups. Half of the adolescents were in an intervention group (a group that has a particular experience) in which they provided volunteer help to younger children on a weekly basis. The other half of the adolescents were in the control group (a group that has only their normal experience) and did not volunteer. The research study found that adolescents who experienced volunteering were more likely to have lower cholesterol levels and lower body mass index compared with those who did not volunteer. This research study clearly shows positive health effects of volunteer work.

There are many types of volunteer work available to adolescents. Some options may include:

- School-based volunteer programs in which older adolescents help younger children. These may include supervising after-school clubs, helping younger children with their homework, or helping with a school sports team.
- Hospital volunteer programs in which adolescents may help with activities such as deliveries to patient rooms, reading to patients, or helping to prepare snacks.
- Animal volunteer programs with animal shelters, humane societies, or the local zoo.
- Environmental volunteer programs to restore, clean, or preserve the outdoors.
- Nursing home volunteer programs in which adolescents may help with reading, writing letters, or playing games.
- Community organizations such as food banks, charity auctions, museums, libraries, or youth-based organizations such as the Boys & Girls Clubs of America.

WHAT CAN PARENTS DO?

Talk with your child about whether volunteering is a good option for him or her; as many as one-half of high school students participate in volunteer activities. Discuss your child's available time and interests to help identify options. Many high schools require that students complete a certain number of volunteer hours before graduating and can help in finding appropriate opportunities. Consider asking at your local library or service clubs in the community to identify local opportunities for your child to volunteer.

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