

# FAMILY VOLUNTEERING INFORMATION SHEET



## Keeping it in the Family!

### An Information Sheet for Volunteer Involving Organisations on Family Volunteering

This information sheet has been developed as a useful guide for volunteer involving organisations who are interested in increasing the diversity of their volunteer pool, and in particular have an interest in exploring how they could involve families in voluntary activities. Family volunteering describes the situation when family members volunteer together. There are all sorts of permutations in terms of what is possible; for example, family volunteering could be a parent and child, grandparents, adult partners or brothers and sisters.

There is increasing interest from families, particularly parents with children/young people, who wish to find meaningful, educational, purposeful activities for them to do as a family. Volunteering can provide the perfect conduit for this aim. One-off or group volunteering opportunities are often suitable for families as they can be tailored for different age groups, require flexible commitment and tend to be projects that are short term in nature. Families remain an untapped resource with respect to volunteering; there is a lot of scope for organisations to consider promoting volunteering directly to families. Research has shown that targeted campaigns, such as those focused directly on families, can be much more effective than general marketing approaches. Due to the variety of work being done by volunteer involving organisations, there is potential to involve families in a wide range of ways. Some of the most common reasons given for not volunteering at all or not volunteering in a particular area is 'I didn't know about it', 'I wouldn't know how to find out about it', 'I don't have the right skills or 'I don't have the time'.

Therefore, marketing and communication is key to the development of any new volunteering models, especially where the intention is to involve a greater range of people. School holiday periods and weekends are ideal times to try to attract families.

**Below is a list of some common activities associated with family volunteering:**

- *Conservation/environmental:* beach & public park cleans; giving time in community gardens & nature reserves; small animal box building (helping improve the habitats for small animals such as birds, bats, red squirrel, hedgehogs).
- *Advisory Groups:* if families are a key target market for your organisation, consider involving them as advisors on ways to improve user experience.
- *Community outreach:* helping at a shelter or soup kitchen; painting & making repairs at a community centre; visiting a nursing home, walking animals for housebound or vulnerable neighbours and helping to pack Christmas hampers.
- *Arts:* getting involved in community theatre; sorting resources, shelving & issuing books at a local library.
- *Fundraising:* bag packing at supermarkets to raise funds for an organisation.

### **Northern Ireland Case Studies**

**The National Trust is a great local example of an organisation successfully offering family volunteering opportunities.**

Although some of their activities are not transferable to all organisations, they do demonstrate great creativity in terms of how families can get involved. In addition to conservation and gardening work, they involve families in leading on cookery demonstrations, hosting activities, dressing in character attire, bulb planting etc.

**The RSPB's Big Wild Sleepout is an annual event aimed at bringing families closer to nature, so no better way for families to get involved than by volunteering at the event.** Family groups have been volunteering at the event over the last five years, lending their experience and knowledge of what families want and need to have a great experience at the event. A family now sit on an event management committee, with parents and children taking on responsibility for different activities, reflecting their individual skills. This is a great example of family volunteering benefiting the charity, the family and the public.

**Family volunteering holds many benefits for both families and volunteer involving organisations. That's what makes this form of volunteering so worthwhile for both parties.**

### **Benefits for Organisations**

When families volunteer together, the most obvious benefit for organisations is that volunteers increase in number and in demographic diversity. The more diverse a volunteer pool is, the greater the range of skills and knowledge that will be available to organisations.



One of the most common barriers to volunteering for people of all ages is a lack of time because of work and family commitments (It's All About Time, 2007; Irvine and Schubotz, 2010). Family commitments can include carer responsibility and a desire to spend spare time with loved ones. Fortunately, family volunteering allows people to fulfil their family responsibilities whilst also getting involved in voluntary activities in the community.

By involving families in their activities, organisations can strengthen their ties to the communities they work in; raise the profile of their work to a varied range of people and increase the interest in other areas of the organisation's work, i.e. increase membership and participation in activities. Other benefits for organisations include:

- Helps to get work done fast.
- Engaging families in a one-off event may lead to longer term commitment. For example, child volunteers are likely to continue volunteering as teens and adults, if they have a positive experience.
- Increases the skill base of volunteers as organisations will attract new types of volunteers because of the family connection.
- Attracts media attention, particularly if a novel way of volunteering is being used.
- Helps develop intergenerational relationships within and across families.
- May not require Access NI checks if the activities are offered under the condition that the parents / guardians of the children and young people are responsible for the children / adults at risk while volunteering. However, it is still advisable to apply good risk management and child protection practices.

## Benefits for Families

Volunteering helps organisations to get work done that supports their beneficiaries, i.e. people, environment, animals, wildlife, etc. However, if done well, it can also be a win for volunteers. There are many benefits from volunteering together as a family. Organisations should consider some of these things when promoting/marketing their opportunities. Volunteering together can strengthen the bonds between family members by providing them with positive shared experiences. Children can develop new skills and learn respect for people of different backgrounds and beliefs in a safe environment. Family volunteering can also be a very appealing offer to families as it can be a relatively cost-free family activity that brings added value.

- Develops family pride, sense of purpose and feeling of being part of the community.
- Teaches positive values, such as civic responsibility, empathy and respect.
- Creates positive role models for children and young people.
- Improves family members' understanding of and respect for each other.
- Improves family members' understanding of and respect for people in the community who are different to them, their local environment, heritage, etc.
- Fosters a shared sense of accomplishment and satisfaction from giving back to the community.
- Offers an informal type of work experience for young people that they can use in job and college/university applications.
- Develops people's critical thinking and problem-solving skills.
- Spending fun time together.



**Family Case Study:** "Volunteering with **Special Olympics** has been a fulfilling and rewarding experience for our family. My two daughters and I volunteer as swimming coaches in our local Special Olympics club. Joining the club has really helped the girls grow and develop as individuals through their interaction with athletes and other volunteers in the club. Volunteering as a family has strengthened the bond between us all as we now spend time sharing ideas and reflecting on training sessions that we have delivered together. We all get immense joy from watching the athletes develop and perform at their best; knowing that we have impacted their lives in some small way!"

## What you need to do:

- Get support from your senior management and Board of Trustees. Developing family volunteering opportunities takes time and 'buy in' from people across the organisation.
- Where possible, provide opportunities where people can see the visible outcome/end result from their work. This can provide greater encouragement for families to come back and help out in the future.
- Make sure to give family members options about what roles they can get involved in next.
- Ensure volunteering activities are suitable for a wide range of ages and skills sets.
- Consider adapting existing volunteering activities to suit families/groups.
- Hold activities at locations that are easily accessible and include weekends, if offering opportunities during school term time.
- Involving families in a single event can lead to longer-term commitment, but this is more likely to happen if families have had fun.
- Be prepared to adjust the activity design if needed. Start small by piloting some ideas- build in time to collect feedback from staff and volunteers which will help to review how things are done.
- If an organisation wants to engage family volunteers for specific events or as occasional volunteers, different families can be paired together around a variety of tasks. This can be a fun exchange for children or young people, providing them with the opportunity to work with other people of a similar age.
- Organisations should ensure that families have all the information and materials they need to carry out the role. It is advisable to have an informal chat / briefing with families before the activity to make sure they are suitable and understand the role.
- A role description may be required if families are carrying out a more complex activity that has a number of tasks, but other roles such as helping out at a beach clean may not require a role description, as a briefing session at the site may be sufficient.
- Risk assessment needs to reflect the different age groups taking part and check with your insurer that the family volunteering is covered.
- Prepare staff who will be managing/working alongside families as volunteers. Identify the skills needed to work with different age groups and the dynamics that come with group work.

## Useful Publication

[Occasional volunteering information sheet](#)

### Disclaimer

Reasonable precautions have been taken to ensure information in this publication is accurate. However, it is not intended to be legally comprehensive; it is designed to provide guidance in good faith without accepting liability. If relevant, we therefore recommend you take appropriate professional advice before taking any action on the matters covered herein. Charity Registration No. NIC101309. Company Limited by Guarantee No. NII602399. Registered in Northern Ireland.