

Raising Philanthropic Children

By: Julie Williams Lytle, VP/Director of Philanthropic Services
Pegine E. Grayson, VP/Philanthropic Services

Introduction

In April, WTC's Director of Philanthropic Services, Julie Lytle, delivered a keynote address at the national *Advisors in Philanthropy* conference in Chicago. In the article below, we share some of the salient points from Julie's presentation, entitled *Raising Philanthropic Children and Why Advisors Should Care*.

The Benefits of Giving

As parents, we want so much for our children: we want them to develop good values, a strong work ethic, and a healthy respect for the value of money. We hope they'll grow up to become productive members of society and find a healthy balance between their work and social lives. We hope they'll discover what they love to do and be able to make a living doing it. In short, we want them to be happy. Increasingly, parents are discovering—and science is proving—that teaching their children about philanthropy can help to lay the groundwork for achieving many of these aspirations.

We've all heard the adage "giving is receiving," but new scientific research confirms that this is literally true. Studies involving sufferers of chronic pain demonstrate that *providing support to their peers*, far more than simply *receiving peer support*, results in a significant improvement in quality of life and reduction in pain.¹ Another study of people living with multiple sclerosis had similar results, with the support providers living longer and more symptom-free lives. In fact, scientists have recently uncovered a physiological basis for what they call the "helper's high." By monitoring the brain activity of test subjects asked to think about how they would give away an imaginary sum of money to charity, researchers discovered that thinking philanthropically lights up the same sections of the brain as those responsible for pleasure through eating good food and sexual activity!² (See generally Stephen Post's new book, *The Hidden Gifts of Helping*.)

Why Teach Kids to be Philanthropic?

Exposing children early on to philanthropy—whether through donating money to a particular organization, raising money for a good cause, or volunteering time—is an excellent way to develop empathic thinking. They get to see first-hand how a lack of the opportunities that they have been able to take for granted impacts people in less fortunate circumstances than their own. This in turn fosters a generosity of spirit, a sense of gratitude for what they have and a feeling of connectedness to their local community.

Studies have shown that altruism in teens helps to inoculate them against the particular hazards of this age group: adolescents who are philanthropic are less likely to become pregnant or to abuse drugs or alcohol.³ They also perform better in school and have higher self-esteem. Finally, altruistic teens tend to grow up to be happier and healthier—physically and emotionally—than their non-philanthropic counterparts.⁴

Families of wealth face a unique set of additional challenges. Sixty-five percent of high net worth families report feeling concerned that inheriting wealth will cause their children more harm than good.⁵ Seventy percent of intergenerational wealth transfers fail by the end of the second generation, meaning that the wealth is essentially gone, for two primary reasons: poor family communication and inadequate preparation of their children to inherit and manage wealth.⁶

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And the children of privilege often have a “love-hate” relationship with the family wealth, characterized by feelings of guilt (since they didn’t earn the money) and fears of inadequacy (that they won’t be able to achieve their parents’ level of success). Philanthropy can address all of these concerns. It provides wonderful opportunities for family communication and interaction, serves as a vehicle for children to learn about money management and empowers children to believe that they can make a difference in their communities or the world at large.

Six Simple Steps to Raising Philanthropic Children

Following are some simple ideas for incorporating philanthropy into your everyday child-rearing practices.

1. Start Early

Children begin to pick up their families’ values very early in life. At the tender age of 4 or 5, children can participate in gift selection for family members, and can begin to learn to choose gifts that others would like, rather than what they like. Infuse story time with some books that highlight generosity or provide examples of people helping one another and of how good it makes everyone feel. Craft time can be turned into an opportunity to make cards or presents for friends, family, teachers and neighbors. As children get older, they can help pick out food or toys to donate to local shelters. When young children participate in these kinds of activities as a matter of course, giving to others becomes reflexive; it’s just what people do for each other.

2. Set an Example

We’ve all heard the saying “Actions speak louder than words,” and it certainly is true in this context. You can talk all you want about being charitable, but it won’t have an impact unless your children see you putting your time and money where your mouth is. One family we know volunteers together every Thanksgiving at a homeless shelter, serving meals to needy families. Another one encourages each family member to direct on their birthday a gift to a charity or to someone in need, to reinforce the idea that giving is receiving. If you serve on a nonprofit Board, bring your kids along to your organization’s fundraising events or programs that might interest them. Every time you donate clothing or household goods to a charity rather than just throwing them away, you set an important example for your children to emulate. Before long, they’ll be asking for your help in culling unwanted items from their own closets to donate.

3. Be Intentional and Overt

Resist the temptation to give covertly. Yes, life is busy and often harried; it may be easier to simply buy and drop off your toy drive donation on your lunch hour or while the children are at soccer practice than to find the time in busy schedules to bring your children along. It may be more efficient to whip up that casserole for your sick neighbor than to elicit your child’s “help” in preparing and delivering it. But in leaving your children out of the equation, you miss a valuable opportunity to let them see you setting the example and, more importantly, to experience what it feels like to do something thoughtful and selfless for someone less fortunate. The short- and long-term rewards of giving WITH your children will far outweigh the hassle!

4. Leverage Tools at Your Disposal

Fortunately, today’s parents don’t have to reinvent the wheel; there are plenty of resources available to support your efforts to develop philanthropic values. Use allowance as a tool by requiring a certain portion to be set aside for sharing with others. If you have a family foundation, invite younger kids to tag along on site visits or volunteer with you at organizations you support. Older kids can serve as junior members on the Board or participate in the foundation’s annual retreat. If your family does its charitable giving through a donor advised fund, or simply by consensus at a family meeting, you can allocate a small amount of money for your middle or high school-aged kids to direct to the charity of their choice, based on research they can do on line. One terrific website that is designed to develop young philanthropists is www.youthgive.org.



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Encourage older kids to get involved with service opportunities, locally or abroad. One teenager we work with returned from a 2-week service trip to the highlands of Fiji, where she lived without electricity and bathed in eel-infested water while tutoring children and helping a med student tend to villagers' basic medical needs. Upon her return, she marveled that the village children, who lived in abject poverty, nevertheless were so grateful for the little they did have, and that her simple contributions seemed to make such a difference in their lives. It was a life transformative experience for her.

5. Be Consistent

Children typically love ritual and tradition. Whatever philanthropic practices you decide to adopt, make them regular practices: e.g., bagging groceries at a local food bank before every Thanksgiving; walking in the Avon Breast Cancer Walk every year; "adopting" a family each Christmas through a social service agency; or have a monthly family meeting about where to direct donations. Once these are in place, you'll be surprised to see that if you forget or try to drop one, your kids will protest!

6. Emphasize the Joy in Giving

Perhaps most importantly, have fun! Let your children see the joy it brings you to be of service to others. Help them find a cause or an organization they can get excited about supporting. Teaching your children the joy of giving is handing them the key to a healthier, happier life.

¹ Paul Arnstein, et al., "From Chronic Pain Patient to Peer: Benefits and Risks of Volunteering," *Pain Management Nurses*, 3, no. 3 (2002): 94-103.

² Jorge Moll, et al., "Human Fronto-Mesolimbic Networks Guide Decisions about Charitable Donation," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 103, no. 42 (2006): 15623-15628.

³ Joseph Allen et al., "Preventing Teen Pregnancy and Academic Failure: Experimental Evaluation of a Developmentally Based Approach," *Child Development* 68, (1997): 729-742.

⁴ Michelle Dillon & Paul Wink, *In the Course of a Lifetime: Tracing Religious Belief, Practice and Change* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2007).

^{5&6} Roy Williams and Vic Preisser, *Preparing Heirs: Five Steps to a Successful Transition of Family Wealth and Values* (2003).

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WHITTIER TRUST COMPANY
1600 Huntington Drive
South Pasadena, CA 91030
(626) 441-5111 Fax (626) 799-1814
www.whittiertrust.com

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