

4 tips to help your teenager build resilience through volunteerism and activism

By Phyllis L. Fagell [CNN](#) September 24, 2021

When five teenagers realized during virtual learning that their Glenbard, Illinois, classmates were struggling, they set up a text chain of support and delivered quarantine gift bags to their classmates' homes. "Every single kid called us," one of the teens told educational psychologist Michele Borba, "and after thanking us, they would start sobbing because they didn't think anyone cared, and then we would cry because we realized we could make a difference." Borba relates the story in her latest book, "Thrivers, The Surprising Reasons Why Some Kids Struggle and Others Shine," a guide to teaching children traits they need to manage adversity, including empathy.

While most parents want to raise empathetic, altruistic people, there are other compelling reasons to encourage tweens and teens to lean into volunteerism and activism -- particularly during this elongated pandemic, when so many of my students tell me they feel powerless.

"It's that whole 'Do I matter?' thing," said Dr. Ken Ginsburg, an adolescent medicine specialist, director of The Center for Parent and Teen Communication and author of "Building Resilience in Children and Teens." "When kids contribute to the world, they know they matter, and knowing they matter is one of the most protective factors. It builds their self-esteem and furthers their motivation." In addition to making a positive impact, kids who volunteer gain perspective, find purpose and get to experience the ripple effects of their actions. Doing work that makes them feel good can boost self-esteem, Ginsburg said.

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"When you help an elderly woman with her groceries or help someone learn to read, you get surrounded by 'thank you's' instead of condemnation," Ginsburg said. "Especially for teenagers who get so many negative messages, being immersed in gratitude really builds a person's self-worth." Volunteering is win-win, but some kids will need help getting started. Here are four ways parents can build an adolescent's resilience by teaching them how to help others and advocate for positive change.

1. Follow your child's passion

The key is figuring out what drives your child -- not what you think is good for them, or what the neighbor is doing, or what will look good on their resume, Borba said. That's the approach child development specialist Robyn Silverman takes with her 11- and 12-year-old children, who request that in lieu of gifts, guests attending their birthday parties bring items that will help people or causes that are important to them. "My kids were adopted and care about foster care, so one year we participated in a pajama collection effort," explained Silverman, who hosts the "How to Talk to Kids about Anything" podcast. "They also love animals, so another year they asked friends to bring leashes and dog food for an animal shelter."

Silverman recommends looking for opportunities that will personalize volunteering, such as purchasing holiday gifts or school supplies for a family that has a same-age child. But instead of doing the shopping yourself, have your child pick out the items. "We might say, 'Pick out a winter jacket or a backpack for this person who is also 12, because you have an eye for what a child this age would want,'" she explained.

Silverman also makes sure her kids see the impact of their actions. "It became a tradition that they help pack the car and be part of delivering the donations, looking volunteers in the eye and hearing how it will be helpful to others."

2. Identify the purpose behind the action

Teens can find purpose in challenging the status quo if it's inconsistent with how they think things should be, said Ryan DeLapp, a child psychologist with the Montefiore Health System in New York. He worked with one teen boy who was upset after reading a book that he felt misrepresented members of the LGBTQ+ community who have mental health concerns. To cope with that frustration, the teen posted a book review on Goodreads. "We spent a lot of time talking about the purpose of writing the review, and for this teen, the value was being heard and offering an opinion that was not represented in the reviews that were already there," DeLapp said. Mindful reflection can help an activity resonate more deeply, he noted, so he asked the boy questions such as, "What was it like to hit the post button? How do you feel now that you know your voice is out there?"

Tweens and teens might need help identifying a cause they care about, so pay attention to the types of issues they raise and the anecdotes they share, Silverman suggested. If they're frustrated about a particular policy or situation, for example, show them examples of other children who have advocated for change, and remind them that "they don't have to sit idly by," she said.

3. Address the reasons for their resistance

If a child resists volunteering, meet them where they are. "If they're an artist, would they be willing to allow such-and-such an organization to use their art to promote their cause?" Silverman said. Consider their temperament, too. If they're too shy to participate in a group activity, for instance, "have them experience gratitude in your home," Ginsburg said. "Help them understand how helpful it is to you when they help around the house. Having that experience may make them want to broaden it."

DeLapp asks the teens he works with: "If you had a magic wand and could change things in the way you'd like them to be, what would that look like?" he said. He follows that question with, "What do you feel is getting in the way of that?" The idea is to help a child identify the type of meaningful change they would like to see and any barriers getting in their way.

4. Define 'change' flexibly

Instead of defining success as achieving a desired outcome, ask your child, 'How did you make an effort to live out your values, and to what degree do you feel proud of your efforts?'"

DeLapp advised. "Otherwise, what happens when the kid puts forth the effort to advocate for a change in a school policy, but the district doesn't change it?" he said. Either way, there's a silver lining. "The act of seeing some element of change, however that's defined, can contribute to feeling greater hope, control and optimism, which contributes to greater wellness overall," DeLapp said. "I think kids feel very small these days, very powerless -- between Covid and racial strife and climate change -- but when they're given an opportunity to contribute and see another person touched by it, then the things that they're dealing with can become dwarfed," Silverman added. "It doesn't make them unimportant; it gives them context."

Beyond serving others, kids who seek to make a difference learn to ask for help when they need it, Ginsburg said. "They learn how good it feels to give; therefore, when it is their turn to receive, they can do so without shame and stigma," he explained. "And that's the ultimate act of resilience -- to turn to another human being and say, 'please lend me a hand.'"

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