



## Subject Guide

### VOLUNTEERING: AN OPPORTUNITY FOR THE WHOLE FAMILY

For volunteers, organisations, managers, and trainers who would like to learn more about involving family groups as volunteers.



NVSC is a project of Volunteering Australia

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*Volunteering: an opportunity for the whole family* can be used in conjunction with the online Subject Guide – Family Volunteering on Volunteering Australia’s website. The Subject Guide lists free resources that can be accessed on the internet and is divided into four sections:

1. *Fast facts* to help you gain an understanding of issues related to family volunteering
2. *Strategies for organisations*, providing a more in-depth look into this subject so that organisations can involve volunteers more effectively.
3. *Research findings, reports and journal articles* to extend your understanding of this subject.
4. *Volunteering: an opportunity for the whole family* in PDF format, forms the final section of the online Subject Guide.

The online Subject Guide is accessible at <http://www.volunteeringaustralia.org>

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*Cover image: Suncoast Junior Motorcycle Club track manager Ted Brackman and club secretary Christine Jung pictured with Max Allen taking a break from riding at the Coolum track.*



## INTRODUCTION

People like to spend time together, and volunteering is one way that people can be together, take part in community life and achieve positive change – all at the same time – hence the increasing interest in family volunteering.

Families come in all shapes and sizes. This guide does not prescribe to any particular definition of who or what makes up a family, rather it seeks to celebrate the rich diversity of family involvement in volunteering.

The most recent Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS, 2007) survey on voluntary work included a question on parental involvement in community events and from this it would appear that there is a high correlation between a family's history of community involvement and the likelihood of children volunteering as adults. A substantial number of respondents (52%) reported that at least one of their parents had volunteered compared to 23% for those whose parents had not volunteered. It therefore might be concluded that parental example is a driver for volunteer involvement in later stages of life. On the other hand, Gill (2006) points out that the voluntary work survey also found that people between 35-44 years are the largest cohort of volunteers and can often be found volunteering in schools and sport. This would indicate that parents are involved with their children's activities and perhaps children could be perceived as driving the community involvement of the family. Gill goes on to suggest that 'if volunteer organisations can create opportunities for children to be involved, more parents would volunteer for their organisation' (2006, p. 10).

There are examples of family volunteering existing in both formal and informal volunteering. While there is not much literature on family volunteering in Australia, practical examples of family volunteering can be found in the education, sport and environment sectors. Families are often involved at school working bees, tree plantings in their local area and any number of sporting events held each weekend. For example, the Department of Sport and Recreation Queensland website states that one of the main reasons for volunteering is 'to be with family and friends'.

Commonly we would expect to find families involved at the informal level. It is not unusual to find families supporting neighbours or events in their local community. Intrinsic within informal family volunteering is the notion of reciprocity. Jennifer Wilkinson (2002) argues:

Reciprocity, then, is an explicitly social impulse, rather than an individualistic one, since it is built on feelings of optimism and confidence about the giving of fair treatment to other members of society and receiving the same from them (p. 36).

While such acts may be offered without conscious thought or expectation of reciprocity, communication between neighbours may be easier so that family members may feel more comfortable asking for or offering help when the need is perceived.

When it comes to formal volunteering, offering volunteer opportunities to family groups is an option for many not-for-profit organisations to expand and diversify their volunteer programs.

When it comes to formal volunteering, offering volunteer opportunities to family groups is an option for many not-for-profit organisations to expand and diversify their volunteer programs. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) has found, in both the Time Use Survey (2006) and Voluntary Work Survey (2007) that the amount of time people spend volunteering is diminishing. There have been three Time Use Surveys, in 1992, 1997 and 2006. This Survey gives us a snapshot about what activities people are engaged in over a two day period. Since 1997 the actual number of minutes spent volunteering (and this includes both formal and informal volunteering) has declined from 0.22 minutes per day (1997) to 0.19 minutes per day (2006). At first glance this may not seem a reason for any concern, however, this figure becomes more significant when we consider that if the 5.4 million people who volunteered in 2006 (ABS 2007), as a whole, are spending less time volunteering, then this does have ramifications to not-for-profit organisations recruitment and retention strategies. In a nutshell – if people are spending less time volunteering, not-for-profit organisations may need to increase their pool of volunteers and create a variety of involvement options.





## WHAT IS A FAMILY – SOME DEFINITIONS TO CONSIDER

Families come in all shapes and sizes and definitions vary. While there may be legal definitions, when we commonly talk about 'family' it cannot be assumed that we all mean the same thing. For instance, 'a family' might mean:

- A group of people who are all descended from a common ancestor.

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- A social group of people all living in the one establishment.

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- A blended family, that is, a cross generational group of people, some with the same parents and some with different parents.

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- A nuclear family, that is, parents and their children.

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- Extended family, a group that can include three or more generations, such as grandparents, parents, children, aunts, uncles and cousins.

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- A 'chosen family', a group of people made up of a mixture of friends or people related through blood or marriage and which may or may not live in the same premises.

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These are but a few ways people use to describe their family. And, it must be remembered that whatever the definition used, it cannot be assumed that the family group resides in only one premises or that children are a part of that family or even that the family is made up of more than two people. To cater for these unique and various family groups, organisations will perhaps need to consider a range of issues that they have not encountered when recruiting individual volunteers.

Family volunteering develops employees' leadership skills, empowerment and a sense of connection to the community through the company.

## BENEFITS AND BARRIERS

On the plus side, other countries, in particular Canada and the USA, have promoted family volunteering and through their experience have been able to identify some of the benefits and barriers of involving families as volunteer groups. From Canada, Katherine Porritt (1995) identified a number of benefits to families and not-for-profit organisations as well as companies and their employees. A sample of these benefits include:

<b>Family benefits</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Volunteering can help families learn about their own community and social issues that affect it.</li> <li>2. Volunteering creates a history of family memories.</li> <li>3. Volunteers have an opportunity to share time and talents.</li> <li>4. Volunteering helps children and teenagers to relate to other generations.</li> <li>5. Families can participate together in special events (e.g., walk- a-thons) without having to leave the kids behind.</li> <li>6. Volunteering can relieve isolation (for newcomers, new parents, etc).</li> </ol>
<b>Not-for-profit organisation benefits</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Family volunteers bring a diversity of age, talent and skills.</li> <li>2. Family connections increase the availability of volunteers for hard-to-fill and short-term positions, and can fill the gap in rush periods.</li> <li>3. Family volunteers bring a variety of perspectives to solving problems.</li> <li>4. Families provide support through existing relationships and role models.</li> <li>5. Family volunteers create valuable community relations for agencies.</li> </ol>
<b>Company and employee benefits</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Volunteering with the family increases employee commitment to the corporation.</li> <li>2. Family volunteering improves public and community relations.</li> <li>3. Family volunteering helps relieve employee stress.</li> <li>4. Family volunteering frees up time to spend with the family.</li> <li>5. Family volunteering develops employees' leadership skills, empowerment and a sense of connection to the community through the company.</li> </ol>



And, the main barriers identified by Gill (2006) are financial costs incurred by the family and lack of time. From an organisational perspective Gill mentions a number of barriers which include:

1. Greater flexibility on the part of the organisation is required.
2. Adapting screening processes to include children.
3. When volunteer needs are diverse, it is more difficult to prioritize the needs of the client.
4. Constraints on the amount of time that is available so that families can volunteer at the same time (Gill 2006, p 44).

These barriers do not preclude families or organisations from embracing family volunteering however as they have been articulated from organisations with family volunteer programs they are worth considering in the preliminary thinking and design of family volunteer programs.

### ISSUES

As with all volunteering, Volunteering Australia advocates that any volunteer program be designed and maintained in accordance with best management practices as articulated in the *National Standards for involving volunteers in not-for-profit organisations*. Volunteer Canada suggest that organisations consider a number of points in planning to involve families, an adapted sample questions:

1. Whether there are one-off or ongoing opportunities available.
2. Whether policies need to be adapted to include the needs and demands of families.
3. Whether there is adequate insurance to cover each member of the family taking part.
4. Whether there is adequate supervision and direction available.

(Hegel, 2004, p. 24)

Other issues to consider include:

1. Supervision – if children and adolescents are to be included in the family volunteer experience who will supervise and be responsible for young children?
2. Insurance – insuring both very young people and people over 80 years may be an issue. Organisations need to check if there are age limits mentioned in their policies and if so how will this affect their family volunteering program? Further if insurance is not available for very young children accompanying parents, organisations need to inform families before they become involved.
3. Generational needs – people from different generations, even when they are in the same family group, may be looking for different things to come from their volunteering experience.

One thing we all get a lot of pleasure from is watching the trees we planted in the park grow. Being able to walk to the park and seeing those trees gives a sense of achievement and pride in how we have contributed to our community.

## THE WAY FORWARD

As stated family volunteering is popular in other countries and is gradually gaining momentum in Australia. Further research and feedback from organisations and families about their experiences will further enhance this unique way of volunteering. The following interview highlights some of the practical steps organisations can take to enhance the volunteering experiences of families.

### **Interview with Sandra about volunteering with her family**

Mostly my family takes part in local events such as working bees at school, volunteering at the local footy club and tree planting at the local park. The national volunteering event we take part in is Clean Up Australia Day.

We get involved because we think it is important to provide a practical expression of our values to our children. We believe that it is important to be involved with our community and we want to encourage our children to enjoy it too.

Mostly we get involved when there is a need. We are not involved in each area of our family volunteering throughout the whole year, rather we become involved with the footy club when the season has started and when the school year has commenced. So, communication is very important.

We find that regular updates keeps our interest alive. People aren't always sure that there is a need or that groups want them involved. It was only when the footy coach told the kids to ask their parents to come along to help that we realised that we could take part. Up til that point, when we went along to the footy every week everything looked well organised and there just didn't seem to be any need. On a practical level updates that tell us what equipment to bring along is always helpful too.

Family volunteering works well when the event has been well planned, tasks have been identified so that people know what they are supposed to be doing and a leader designated so that if there are any problems there is someone to talk to and who will pass on any feedback you might have that will enhance the next opportunity.

One thing we all get a lot of pleasure from is watching the trees we planted in the park grow. Being able to walk to the park and seeing those trees gives a sense of achievement and pride in how we have contributed to our community.

Another thing that ensures our continued involvement is advance notice by the not-for-profit organisation. People need to know what events are coming up and when they will be needed so that those dates can be added to diaries. Everyone is so busy that if people can anticipate when organisations need them it really helps juggling commitments.

We have seen in the tree planting at our local park that if one family is involved it acts as an encouragement to other families for them to take part too. Also if there are families taking part who have children around the same age so that they can all play together (after all, you can't expect children to work as much as their parents) then the whole event is more enjoyable and fun for all.



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