How Do I Instill a Spirit of Service in my Child?

Hope is 10 years old and lives in Gilbert, Arizona. She has always had big dreams and an even bigger heart for people. When she found out that her father was visiting an orphanage in El Salvador last summer, she asked her parents for permission to go. After Hope and her father arrived in the little village, she spend each day talking, playing and eating with the many children, younger, older and her age, who lived in the orphanage. Some of the children had been abandoned or neglected. Some children were living with medical conditions where there was treatment readily available in the states. Friendships grew as the children shared their stories, laughed and played together.

Hope and her father returned home, but she could not forget her experience or her new friends in El Salvador. She recognized how much she took for granted in terms of toys, food, clothing, having parents who loved her and took care of everything for her. She dreamed up a big plan, and excitedly asked her parents if she could have a garage sale in order to raise money for the orphanage. She told her parents that her "wildest dream" was to raise $250.

What keeps us from being more like Hope? More importantly, how can we encourage our children to think the same way as Hope – to find joy in service? It is not surprising that our children do not naturally understand the intrinsic rewards of service, even though everyone would probably agree that being generous is a good thing. We all know that it is a rewarding experience to give freely of your time, energy or financial resources to others who are in need. We would also agree that often the person who gives who receives the greatest benefit – that intangible sense of deep personal satisfaction. Since this is not an automatic message we hear on a daily basis, however, it is easy to forget. It is hard in our consumer-based culture to stay focused on ourselves rather than to experience the joy in service. Through the television, internet, radio, and daily bulk-mailings we are bombarded with the message that we should be dissatisfied with what we have, who we are, and how we look. The message is clear - we deserve more than what we have, and buying more goods, gadgets and services will bring deep satisfaction. Immediate self-gratification is over-valued. In addition, our western society values rugged individualism, entrepreneurship and independent thought. Although these values are not intrinsically wrong or negative, they may contribute to an unconscious belief that service and generosity toward others is counter-intuitive and outside the natural order of things. So it poses a challenge as parents to instill a spirit of service in our children.

Here are a few practical ideas for parents:

- Find it. Explore opportunities in your neighborhood, your family or among friends who might be in need. Identify someone (or a cause) that would be especially fun and rewarding from a child's point of view. The opportunities are plentiful, and generosity does not necessarily require money. The act of giving will raise your child's awareness to the fact that the story is not always about us. That we are all deeply interconnected with each other and have a responsibility to take care of each other as a family, as a society, and as a world. Simple service might include baking cookies for an elderly neighbor, mowing the lawn of a friend who is in poor health, writing a note of appreciation. Opportunities abound during the holiday season. Focus on fun activities as well as areas where your child already has skills and/or a passion.

- Model it. Live as a person who lives generously – openly and in front of your children. You may feel that overt gestures are showy at best and ineffective at worse, but if you viewed yourself through your child's eyes, you realize that they are watching you and internalizing your attitude. Little things that you do, or choose not to do, will speak louder than words or lectures. Does your child watch you put cash in that little red bucket outside Wal-Mart or do they hear you making a cynical comment? Do they hear you complain about how much money a

gift cost or how much you will enjoy watching the recipient open it? They will learn to value service if you value it as part of your life. Share with them how good it felt to help someone out when extra help was needed. Have you ever met a grumpy philanthropist or grouchy humanitarian worker? There is a reason why they don't exist. Generous giving and serving as a lifestyle choice is deeply rewarding - but that warm glow must be experienced first-hand. Involve your child in selecting a family gift of service this holiday season. Donate a goat, clean water or a flock of chickens together as a family, clean someone's house, make a cheerful card for someone you know or serve a meal at a local shelter. What you are teaching your kids when you do small acts of service with a positive attitude far outweighs the value of that gift. Make it obvious to your child that you give away a portion of your income (typically 10%) and help your child to find a specific person or cause that they can get excited about giving to as well.

- Start immediately. Do not wait until the perfect moment or wait until your child is old enough to appreciate the gift. A child as young as two or three can be encouraged to share, to help, to create gifts and to give them away. By the time they are old enough to understand the value of money, they can appreciate the value of giving it away. Start early, and living a life of service will become second nature to your child by the time they hit their teen years.

What about Hope's dream to raise $250 for the orphanage? Her parents agreed to support Hope's plan to sponsor a one day (only) sale, and to ask friends and neighbors to donate items and baked goods. Under her parents' watchful eye, she distributed flyers and sent out emails telling friends and neighbors about the sale. Donations began to pour in from friends, neighbors and family. So many items were donated that it was necessary to start the garage sale on Friday - a day early – making it a two day sale. As word of mouth spread, friends and neighbors continued to drop off donated items even after the sale was well underway. Hope recruited her friends to run a hot chocolate stand and to pass out cups of coffee to shoppers. Shoppers paid $5 or $10 for items that were marked 50 cents when they heard about the cause. Hope or her young friends were obviously working very hard passing out drinks and selling cookies, but also laughing, smiling, and talking animatedly to everyone at the sale. They were having a blast. Through her spirit of service and others around her, Hope raised $1440 for the orphanage - over FIVE times the desired amount!