

Family Volunteering: A Natural for Environmental Stewardship Organizations

Best Practices Booklet

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Evergreen**

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The logo for Canada, featuring the word "Canada" in a serif font with a small maple leaf icon above the letter "a".

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Who are Family Volunteers?

Families come in all shapes, sizes, and configurations. In this booklet, the term family refers to any group of two or more people who consider themselves to be family. This could include spouses, parents, children, siblings, nieces and nephews, aunts and uncles, members of a common household, and other people who consider themselves to be family. Family volunteers give time to the same organization or initiative, but they may or may not volunteer at the same time or do the same activities.

1. Introduction

Stewardship organizations in Canada engage in a broad range of activities, from restoring natural habitats and greening school grounds to managing invasive plant species. Volunteers are the lifeblood of these activities, and stewardship organizations – like other nonprofit organizations – are always looking for ways to increase the number of committed and enthusiastic volunteers.

Families represent a vast pool of potential volunteers for Canada's nonprofit sector, and family volunteering offers rich benefits to both organizations and families (Volunteer Canada, 2003). In 2004-2005, Evergreen, a national nonprofit environmental organization with a mandate to bring nature to our cities, undertook a national research project, *Best Practices for Family Volunteerism in Community Stewardship Initiatives*, with funding support from the Knowledge Development Centre of Imagine Canada. We wanted to learn about the status and potential of family volunteering in environmental stewardship organizations and how these organizations can best support family volunteers in their activities.

Our research project included a national survey of stewardship organizations, a telephone survey of family volunteers, and in-depth conversations with volunteer coordinators across the country. One of the key findings of our research was that family volunteering is common in Canada's stewardship

organizations, but that it is usually done on an *ad hoc* basis and is not a widely recognized trend, despite its apparent potential. A second finding was that stewardship organizations lack the tools and strategies to initiate and strengthen family volunteering programs.

This booklet provides practical, low-cost ways for stewardship organizations to develop a family volunteering program. It is based primarily on our results from the *Best Practices for Family*

Volunteerism in Community Stewardship Initiatives study and includes many insights, helpful statistics, quotations, and case studies from the project's surveys and interviews. It offers tips and strategies for designing family-friendly volunteering opportunities, recruiting family volunteers, and recognizing them appropriately so that they will become enthusiastic and dedicated volunteers.



Katie Loftus

2. Why Focus on Families?

Family volunteering is a 'natural' for stewardship organizations. Stewardship activities offer families a chance to 'get their hands dirty' and spend time together outdoors while contributing to their local community and environment and nurturing a sense of responsibility for the natural world.

The benefits are even greater for stewardship organizations. First, family volunteering can boost the impact of these organizations and their programs. In our survey of 346 Canadian stewardship organizations, 18% had family volunteer programs. More than one quarter (27%) of these organizations that targeted families as volunteers said that engaging families had helped them meet their goals of improving the local environment.

Second, family volunteers can become dedicated to the cause of stewardship. Thirteen percent of those organizations, that had family volunteer programs, said that family volunteers are valuable assets because they are loyal and committed and lend continuity to a project. Finally, involving young people as volunteers can also pay off in the long term because people who experience volunteering as part of their upbringing are more likely to become volunteers later in life (Hall, McKeown & Roberts, 2001).

The benefits of family volunteerism also extend into the broader community. More than one quarter (26%) of the organizations that have family volunteer programs noted that family engagement helps to raise the profile of environmental initiatives and issues among all ages. Nearly one quarter (24%) of organizations with family volunteer programs also reported that engaging families had produced community benefits, including an increased sense of community pride and cohesiveness.

Case Study

Task Force to Bring Back the Don: Family Volunteerism and Environmental Education

Like many Canadian environmental stewardship groups, Toronto's Task Force to Bring Back the Don works with families on an ad hoc basis. *"We get a lot of families out for stewardship events, mostly on weekends. It's often one parent with kids"* says Aynsley Morris, vice-chair of the Task Force. While acknowledging the challenges of engaging families, such as the need to have a variety of tasks for all ages, she thinks that stewardship groups have a lot to offer to families. *"There's real sense of accomplishment at the end of the day"* Morris says. *"You come out, you plant a tree, and you've made a difference. And it's got the long-term effect, too. It's an opportunity to engage a family for the long term, since they can see the tree grow over time."*

Morris also recognizes that family volunteering can be a valuable environmental education tool for organizations. *"You can see parents trying to pass information on to the kids as they're working. It's a good way for us to get the message across and to reach children. Parents often encourage their children to go on a little tour of the site afterwards as well, so we have that opportunity to teach about the whole project, rather than just putting a tree in the ground and going away."*



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“Our volunteers are in communities all along the river. Those individuals are our representatives in the area, and folks in the community will call them first if they notice a problem. That means we have people in each community who have some nominal responsibility for the local environment. If it’s a family, then the circle of influence – the people who care about this work – is even broader.”

- Andy Sharpe, Science Coordinator for the Clean Annapolis River Project, Nova Scotia



Peter Thomson

3. Getting Started With Family Volunteering

Involving families in your stewardship activities doesn't need to be costly or time-consuming. In many cases, you'll be able to incorporate these suggestions into your current volunteer program. Here's how to get started.

If you're just getting started on a volunteer management program, you may want to check out Evergreen's *Hands for Nature: A Volunteer Management Handbook*. It is specifically designed to help greening groups work effectively with volunteers to create and sustain stewardship projects. *Hands for Nature* is available from Evergreen at www.evergreen.ca.

Consult with Existing Family Volunteers

Before you can decide on your family volunteerism goals, you'll need to know where you stand with respect to family involvement. Most stewardship organizations engage at least some family volunteers. Spouses sometimes volunteer together on a board or committee, and outdoor events often attract parent-child teams or other family groups. Do any of your current volunteers volunteer with family members? If you're not sure, find out. Add a space to your volunteer intake form or tracking system to find out whether the volunteer is there with a family member. If you haven't got a tracking system in place, develop a simple volunteer sign-in sheet. You may be surprised how many families already volunteer with your organization! This is also a great opportunity to find out more about your family volunteers. You might want to ask:

- How did you and your family hear about this volunteer opportunity?
- What made you decide to volunteer together with a family member?
- What benefits have you derived from volunteering with a family member?
- What challenges have you faced in volunteering as a family?
- What kinds of volunteer activities would be most appealing for you to do with your family members?
- What kind of recognition would you and your family appreciate most? (Offer a choice of several recognition methods).

Once you understand your current ad hoc family engagement better, you'll be able to develop this resource more effectively through, for example, strengthened job design and more targeted recruitment or recognition efforts.

Make a Commitment to Family Volunteering

Now that you have a sense of how many family volunteers are already involved with your organization, and what their needs are, you can formulate a plan for your new and improved family volunteer initiative. Make family involvement a specific goal of your volunteer program, and make sure that everyone in your organization – including board members, staff, and other volunteers – understands the importance and benefits of engaging families. You'll need to set concrete goals, which may detail the number of family volunteers you'd like to recruit in the coming year, the number of families attending your annual spring planting event, or the number of family-friendly events you'll hold. Develop a set of objectives to meet your goals. For example, you might decide to establish a "family-friendly" labelling system

for your events schedule, recruit a team of child-care volunteers for outdoor events, or hold your first annual Family Fun volunteer event. Next, make prioritized task lists, indicating who is responsible for each task, and when it should be completed.

Family Volunteering Plan

Goal: Increase number of family volunteers at May 10th planting event from 20 to 40

Objective 1: Develop targeted recruitment strategy to attract more family volunteers

Tasks:

- Meet with 3-5 of our current family volunteers to better understand needs / motivations (Joan and Larry: by December).
- Draft new family-focused recruitment message(s) for flyers and Web postings (Larry: by February).
- Expand distribution of recruitment material to include the community centre, local church and mosque, daycare centres, and elementary school bulletin (Larry: by April 1st).

Recognize the Challenges

Engaging families is not without its challenges, and not every volunteer activity is suitable for family groups. Being able to anticipate the challenges of engaging families will help you set realistic goals and achieve them. Here are some common challenges that you may encounter and that are discussed in this booklet:

Accommodating families' busy schedules. Busy and unpredictable family schedules can make it difficult for organizations to meet all of the needs of family volunteers, while work, school, sports, and lessons can make it hard for families to find time to volunteer together. Activities that are not time-dependent or that can be achieved within a flexible timeframe are most likely to be attractive to families. For example, an all-day tree-planting event could allow families to drop in whenever they have time. Alternatively, a family could take on the job of distributing flyers throughout a neighbourhood over the course of several days or a week. Generally speaking, weekends and weekdays after work are the most convenient times for families to volunteer.

Meeting children's needs. If you're not accustomed to having children at meetings or stewardship events, the challenge of providing for their needs can seem daunting. Most stewardship activities are quite appropriate for children however, and, as this booklet will show, a little advance planning and creativity can help you ensure that volunteers of all ages will have a good time.

Safety and liability concerns. Before you explicitly welcome family volunteers to an event, check with your insurance provider to ensure that your coverage applies to volunteers of all ages. Assess the possible risk of any volunteer opportunity, manage the risk by identifying and warning participants of any hazards, and focus on developing your lower-risk activities into family-friendly events. If you're still worried about risk to children, consider asking parents to sign a waiver form.

4. Designing a Family-Friendly Volunteer Program

Active and committed volunteers are crucial to any project. Experienced volunteers are especially valuable because they know the ropes, they can encourage and help train new volunteers, and they're great ambassadors for your cause in the community. Families can be among your most dedicated volunteers and can help to raise your organization's profile in the community. If families have fun and an enriching experience, they're more likely to come back and take on more responsibility in the future. Here are some suggestions to ensure that your volunteer opportunities are truly 'family-friendly.'

Plan for Family Participation

Not all of your organization's activities are necessarily well suited for family involvement. You will need to take a look at the full range of your volunteer opportunities, decide which ones are best for families, and give them a family-friendly seal of approval in your outreach and publicity material. But which activities should those be?

In our survey, we found that 93% of family volunteers ranked fieldwork in their top three choices of stewardship activities. Of these 93% of volunteers, almost three quarters (74%) placed such work outdoors as their number one choice. Of the 93% of volunteers that ranked outdoor activities in their top three choices,

59% ranked tree or wildflower planting as their first choice of activity; 15% placed gardening first; and 13% chose field research as their most preferred work outdoors. This isn't surprising, given that our survey found that access to nature and getting outside was one of the main reasons that families get involved in stewardship projects to begin with. Outdoor activities are by no means the only kind of activities that can be family-friendly, but they do reflect families' general preferences.

The following questions, which are based on the results of our surveys and interviews, can help you decide whether a certain activity is appropriate for families. Answer each with 'yes' or 'no.'

- Is the activity outside and/or does it give volunteers an opportunity to spend time in a natural setting?
- Could the activity take place in an environment where the behaviour of children (e.g., running, making noise, playing, exploring, etc.) is acceptable?
- Is it active, fun, and hands-on?
- Will volunteers see tangible results of their efforts without a large time commitment (e.g., a new tree is planted, a garden plot is weeded, a bat house is built, etc.)?
- Does the activity lend itself to a flexible time frame?

What are Families' Needs?

Every family is unique, with a special set of needs, skills, goals, and motivations. The suggestions offered here are generally applicable to families who volunteer, but are by no means universal. Whenever possible, try to assess each family's needs individually. For example, you may want to include a space on your volunteer contact or intake form to record families' goals and needs.

While many families may be looking for a fun outdoor experience, you might come across some family teams that would like to work together on a research project, Web site development, site design or program planning. The possibilities are endless!

- Will the activity have a local impact on a specific neighbourhood or community?
- Does the activity include a range of manageable tasks for volunteers with varying levels of skills and abilities?
- Does the activity allow for socializing and interacting with other families?
- Could the activity include an educational or skills-development component?
- Do its goals include community outreach or environmental education?
- Is it a group or co-operative activity? Alternatively, is it a task that could have rotating responsibility (e.g., watering a community garden every other day)?

If you answered 'yes' to most or all of these questions, then the activity you have in mind can probably be labelled family-friendly.

Meet Children's Needs

Not every family includes small children, but meeting children's needs is a common challenge faced by organizations that involve family volunteers. In most cases, younger members of a family can pitch in and help with stewardship tasks, and parents are usually good at ensuring that their children are kept occupied. But being a family-friendly organization means going the extra mile to make sure that kids are not just accommodated but are genuinely appreciated. It's important for all event leaders to set a tone of acceptance right from the beginning, so that everyone understands that children are important and welcome rather than a nuisance or distraction. It also means understanding that parents may have to take a break in their activities to attend to their children's needs and acknowledging that children may not get as much done as adults.



Joshua Berson

Our surveys and interviews yielded rich information about how to accommodate children’s needs. Here are a few low-cost ideas based on suggestions from volunteers and from volunteer coordinators who shared their tried-and-true strategies for ensuring that activities are truly child-friendly:

- Before the event, identify child-friendly tasks that are relevant to the day’s work and assign several of your reliable teenaged or adult volunteers responsibility for coordinating those activities. These volunteers may decide that the children’s activities will be the same as the adults’ activities but will be carried out at a child’s pace, or they may come up with special tasks that the children would enjoy.
- Provide food and refreshments. This is always important when you involve hard-working volunteers, but it’s particularly crucial for children, who are especially susceptible to sun exposure and exhaustion.
- Design a short discovery walk, scavenger hunt, or game that will teach kids about the environment while they take a break from their activities.

What Kinds of Tasks Can Children Do?

Short, easy tasks with tangible results are best for children. Here’s a short list of activities that kids can do:

- Water plants
- Dig holes
- Pick up litter
- Help plant a tree
- Paint murals, banners, and signs
- Pull weeds
- Sell lemonade or cookies
- Build and decorate a birdhouse
- Post flyers
- Spread mulch
- Serve refreshments
- Harvest vegetables

Be Flexible With Scheduling

Organizations often find it difficult to accommodate families’ busy and unpredictable schedules, and families often struggle to find time to volunteer together. Forty-seven percent (47%) of the volunteers we surveyed suggested that flexible scheduling, with an emphasis on weekend events, was a key way for organizations to encourage more family participation, and 18% of organizations with family volunteer programs cited scheduling issues as a significant challenge to family participation.

As a general rule, the more flexible you can be, the better for family involvement. Families are more likely to be available on weekends or weekdays after work, and they typically need ample notice of an upcoming event. In addition, it’s a challenge for families – especially those with young children – to work with rigid start-times or long time commitments in terms of the number of consecutive hours families are expected to engage in a particular volunteer activity. Busy families are much more likely to come to a drop-in Saturday morning planting event than an all-day trail-maintenance hike that starts at 9:00 ‘on the dot.’ A few volunteers we surveyed suggested

Event Scheduling: How long is Too Long?

There is no hard and fast rule for how long a family-friendly event should be. Most volunteers who mentioned scheduling issues in the *Best Practices in Family Volunteerism* survey put the emphasis on flexibility, so that variable family schedules can be accommodated. One respondent suggested a four-hour maximum, while another said that if young children are involved, “*make sure families can put in their volunteer time, and be home by lunch.*”

that the ideal stewardship activity for families is one that allows them to create their own schedule. For example, members of one family could be appointed as “Garden Guardians” and could be responsible for spending a few hours in the community garden each week, doing general maintenance, weeding and watering. This allows the family to take on more responsibility while meeting their need for a flexible schedule.

Getting the Message Across: Where to Recruit Families

Most families get involved in stewardship work because they hear about it through word-of-mouth or because the organization asks them directly.

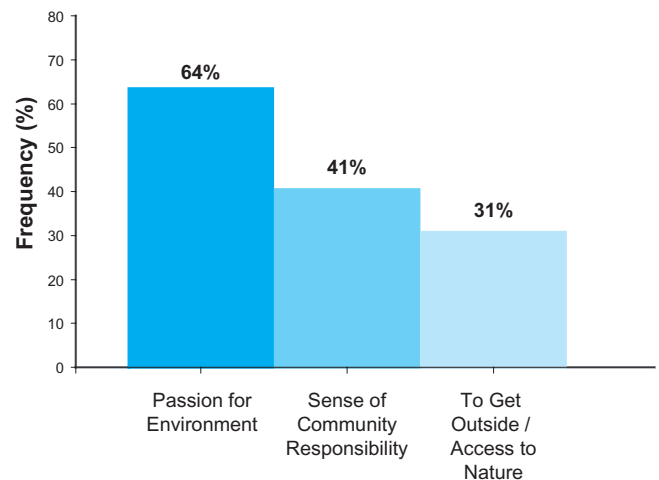
Your most powerful means of recruitment is networking and face-to-face contact! In addition, think about where you might gain the most access to families: faith organizations, community centres, day-care centres and schools, local sports facilities, parks, and shopping centres are all good places to post your recruitment material.

5. Recruiting Family Volunteers

The cardinal rule of recruitment is: know your target audience. If you understand their motivations and needs, you’ll have an easier time getting them involved.

According to our survey of family volunteers, more than 6 in 10 family volunteers (64%) were motivated by a passion for the environment (see Figure 1). Four in ten (41%) were motivated by a sense of responsibility or connection to the local community, and nearly one third (31%) volunteered so that they could get outside and spend time in a natural setting.

Figure 1: Top three motivators for family volunteers to do stewardship work*



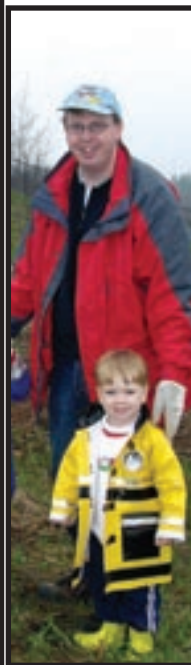
***Note:** Percentages add up to greater than 100 due to multiple responses.



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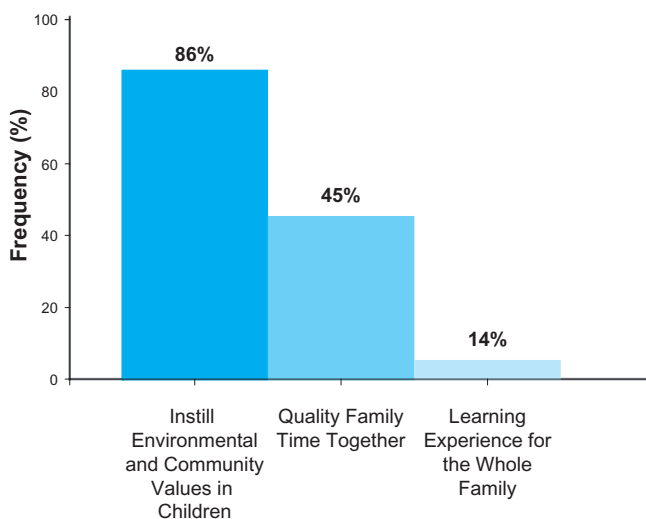
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Our survey also offered insight into why families decide to volunteer together. The number one reason – mentioned by 86% of respondents – was to instill a sense of environmental responsibility and community involvement in the younger generation. Volunteers also mentioned the importance of spending quality family time in a healthy setting, away from the distractions of video games, television, and competing demands for the family’s time, as well as the opportunity for the whole family to learn something new in hands-on way (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Top three motivators for volunteers to give time with family members*



***Note:** Percentages add up to greater than 100 due to multiple responses.

You should appeal to these motivations when you design your recruitment message. For example, a message such as, “*Want to help green your neighbourhood? Join the Friends of Shady Grove’s Family Fun Tree Planting Event and make a difference in your community!*” stresses both a sense of environmental responsibility and an opportunity for quality family time. It may have even more impact if it is posted in the park itself, where people already go to jog, play sports, or walk the dog.

Family Stewardship Volunteering: The ‘Wow’ Factor

“The natural environment is such a spiritual place, and it offers an opportunity for intimacy and connectedness that doesn’t happen in a mall or a warehouse. There are unique discoveries and magic moments that happen for families in nature. Kids get excited about something, and they drag their parents out. The parents end up doing things and seeing things they otherwise wouldn’t. They reconnect with nature, and we see them experiencing that ‘wow’ factor. Volunteering together is a wonderful opportunity for parents and kids to connect with each other in the most natural setting.”

- Tara Treanor, Garden Coordinator, Two Rivers Community Garden, Guelph Ontario

Keep in mind that families often volunteer together because it’s more convenient for parents to bring their children along, especially if they know that there will be child-friendly activities for them, than it is to have to find child-care. Fourteen percent (14%) of respondents to our survey cited this as a key reason for volunteering as a family. Be sure your recruitment material makes it clear that family-friendly means children will be accommodated, whether by providing child-care (in the case of board meetings or planning sessions) or by incorporating children’s activities into the event.



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6. Recognizing Family Volunteers

Any volunteer who doesn't feel appreciated will quickly move on to other pursuits. The key challenge in recognizing family volunteers is to respond to the interests and needs of volunteers of various ages and with varied interests. Stewardship volunteers who give time with their children report that kids are often thrilled with mementos such as pins, hats, or badges, but that they themselves don't want to collect more

A Sincere “Thanks” Goes a Long Way!

Family volunteers interviewed in the Best Practices for Family Volunteerism in Community Stewardship Initiatives study repeatedly emphasized the importance of treating volunteers with respect and showing appreciation with heartfelt encouragement and thanks during the event itself. Fancy recognition gifts or social events can't replace this simple “thank you.”

stuff. The general principles of volunteer recognition – recognize often, sincerely, and in a variety of ways – hold true for family volunteers. If you have already designed your volunteer opportunities to provide a fun, rewarding experience for families, your family volunteers probably feel appreciated and welcomed. Here are few more recognition ideas, many of which were suggested by family volunteers themselves.

For more information on youth volunteerism in Canada, including strategies for recruitment, orientation, training, and recognition, check out *Volunteer Canada's Volunteer Connections: New Strategies for Involving Youth*. It's available online at www.volunteer.ca.

For Children

Children love to have something to show for their effort – especially something that can be brought home, shown to friends and teachers, or put up on the fridge or wall to demonstrate their achievement. They appreciate badges, certificates, photographs and thank-you cards from the organization. They also respond well to public recognition. For example, one volunteer who responded to our survey suggested that kids love it when their names are mentioned in a community newspaper or newsletter, along with photos of the event.

For Youth

Young adults volunteer for a broad range of reasons, including gaining job experience, plugging into a social or professional network, and learning new skills. Offering training opportunities – and documentation of that training to be included in a résumé – is a great way to recognize teens' efforts. Young people may also be interested in taking on added responsibility. Tap into the energy, creativity, and enthusiasm of a capable youth volunteer by suggesting that he or she lead a nature walk, train new volunteers, or even start a new project.



Katie Loftus

For Whole Families

In our survey of volunteers, we found that families who are interested in stewardship volunteering are motivated by an interest in making a difference to their environment, spending quality time together and with community members, and learning as a family. Keep these motivations in mind as you design your recognition strategy. Some ideas for the whole family – suggested by family volunteers themselves – include:

- A family membership or pass to a local conservation area or community centre.
- Social events such as potluck dinners, inter-family baseball games, and guided nature hikes. Remember that, for families, time is at a premium. Many family volunteers note that social and educational opportunities are great, as long as they're incorporated into the volunteer event itself. If they're scheduled separately, the whole family is unlikely to be able to make it!

- Awards for exemplary family participation, especially if local media cover them. One volunteer suggests: *“Recognize dedicated families at an event, or profile them in newsletters, Web sites, etc., to promote the value of their participation. This goes farther than a trinket or memento.”*

What Do Families Say About Recognition?

“Don’t try to do anything that takes extra time, such as social events that we have to schedule in. I’d rather have refreshments or social elements on the day of the event, so we feel appreciated while we’re doing it.”

“It’s nice to be recognized by having snacks, or a social element during the event. It’s harder to get to events or educational opportunities that are separate from volunteer time – it’s just one more thing to schedule!”

Taken from our results of the *Best Practices in Family Volunteerism* survey of family volunteers, 2005.



Peter Thomson

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