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MANAGEMENT & CAREERS

Parents Volunteering at School Should Tailor Skills to Different Stages

Fewer parents are volunteering at their children's schools just as new research shows it yields benefits from better grades to lower rates of depression



By Sue

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Parents who bring their children to pediatrician Monica Wonnacott are sometimes surprised by one of her prescriptions: Volunteer in the classroom.

Helping teachers can lend insight into your children's academic and social skills, making it easier to aid their progress, says Dr. Wonnacott, a Riverton, Utah, mother of four who also blogs on parenting issues. "It's amazing what you can learn by spending some regular time at your child's school."

Fewer parents are volunteering at their children's schools, just as new research reveals it yields broader benefits for students than previously believed. These range from higher student grades and test scores to more positive peer relationships in middle school and lower rates of depression in high school.

As parents gather for back-to-school nights in the coming weeks, many will decide whether and how to volunteer. Children benefit most when parents tailor their volunteering to students' stage of development, research shows. Here's a rundown:

Elementary School

Children at this stage love seeing their parents in the classroom or on field

trips. Parents' volunteering reinforces 5-to-7-year-olds' natural enthusiasm for learning, and is linked to small but significant gains in academic achievement. It also predicts improved behavior, perhaps because parents' presence sets an example of respect for school rules.

By age 8, children begin to compare their performance to that of other students, making them vulnerable to a drop in self-confidence. Parents who spend time at school are better able to see how their children's skills stack up and offer targeted help, Dr. Wonnacott says.

Parent volunteers also build relationships with school staff that can help resolve problems. When Pam Costner's daughter had an elementary school math teacher who yelled a lot, "volunteering gave me insight into why my daughter was having problems," says Ms. Costner, of Rockville, Md. It also helped her talk with the teacher and principal about classroom-management issues, support her daughter at home and decide to hire a tutor.

Children are learning empathy and other social skills at this stage, and knowing their classmates can help parents spot opportunities to instill those skills, says Dr. Wonnacott. Volunteering to read with elementary-school classmates of her son Charles last year helped her understand why one of them disrupted class. After learning the child was going through family turmoil at home, she explained his plight to Charles and encouraged him to empathize and show kindness.

Many parents have trouble finding the time or energy for this kind of volunteering. Some 43% of K-12 parents volunteered at school in 2016, down from 46% in 2006, according to federal data analyzed by Kevin Walker, president of Project Appleseed, a St. Louis nonprofit advocating parental involvement.

School PTA groups are offering a rising number of small, flexible volunteer roles, including tasks they can do after school or at home. Ask your PTA for options that fit your schedule. Other parents create roles for themselves with so-called microvolunteering—offering to contribute based on a specific personal interest, such as providing healthy snacks for a class, says Donna Orem, president of the National Association of Independent Schools in Washington, D.C.

Middle School

As children begin to assert their independence between the ages of 11 and 13, parents' roles at school change. Schools are bigger and more

'School PTA groups are offering a rising number of small, flexible volunteer roles, including tasks they can do after school or at home.'

bureaucratic and parents are seldom welcome in the classroom. Children become ambivalent about parental involvement, and worry about Mom or Dad embarrassing them in front of peers.



Linda Perillo Zazzali volunteered last April as co-director and vocal coach for her 11-year-old daughter Eva's school production of 'Guys and Dolls.' PHOTO: LINDA PERILLO-ZAZZALI

Middle schoolers are beginning to set goals for themselves and deciding which ones they think they can achieve. The ideal role for parents is what researchers call academic socialization: talking with tweens about their goals, helping with planning and sharing their expectations. Such conversations correlate with higher academic achievement, a 2009 review of 50 studies found.

Still, sixth-grade parents' attendance at school events, such as open houses, parent-teacher conferences or athletic events, is linked to students' forming healthier, more positive friendships in the seventh and eighth grades, according to a study of 5,802 middle-schoolers published in May.

Researchers adjusted the results to eliminate the effect of parents' varying levels of oversight of their students' activities.

Amy Kossoff Smith of Rockville, Md., volunteered often at school when her three sons were small, but backed away when they reached middle school. (Her sons are now 16, 19 and 21.) She organized a few educational assemblies to combat drug abuse and distracted driving as her sons grew older, but always asked them first for a go-ahead. One of the biggest benefits of staying involved was building relationships with her sons' friends, says Ms. Smith, who is founder of Power Hour Editing, a college-essay coaching firm, and runs her own public-relations firm.

Parents at this stage can model values they see as important. Linda Perillo Zazzali, a Saddle River, N.J., blogger and mother of eight children ages 5 through 22, has volunteered a lot in her children's private school, from serving as lunchroom monitor to running a drama program for middle-schoolers. The message she wants to convey, she says, is not only that school is important, but that giving your time is intrinsically rewarding because it makes others happy or helps an organization you value.

High School

Parents' roles at this stage are usually limited to fundraising or administrative tasks. Students are preoccupied with building a sense of personal identity and trying out different beliefs and values. That makes academic socialization—or discussing teens' goals, values and educational plans for the future—doubly important.

Still, parents who attend school performances and parent-teacher

conferences during students' sophomore year and help with field trips and fundraisers foster lower rates of depression in their children as juniors, according to a 2014 study of 1,056 high school students.

Parental impact endures longer than many might expect. Students whose parents set high educational expectations for them as sophomores, and also attended PTA meetings and parent-teacher conferences, tended to have higher grades at high school graduation, according to a 10-year study of 15,240 students published in 2016. They also attained more years of formal education in the ensuing decade.

Making a Difference

Elementary School

Try to build a positive relationship with your child's teacher.

Observe the teacher's methods and rules and support them at home.

Get to know the school staff, rules and curriculum.

Learn other students' names so you can talk with your child about them.

Middle School

Ask your child whether and how she wants you to volunteer.

Set expectations that your child will do the best he can in school and in life.

Learn about the curriculum so you can help your child choose courses and set goals.

Set an example with your volunteer work that you'd like your child to emulate.

High School

Continue coaching your child on setting academic goals and college plans.

Emphasize the process of learning over getting high grades or test scores.

Show interest in school by participating in events or fundraisers.

Talk about the rewards of being involved as a volunteer.

Write to Sue Shellenbarger at sue.shellenbarger@wsj.com

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