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Tiny volunteers: Even very young kids can learn from giving back to society



IT consultant Dhanasekaran Rajendiran, his wife, pre-school teacher Iswarya Venugopal, and their son Sarvesh kettling for The Salvation Army at Century Square on Dec 2. ST PHOTO: ARIFFIN JAMAR



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SINGAPORE – When Mr Dhanasekaran Rajendiran invited his four-year-old son Sarvesh to volunteer for the first time, he made it sound like playtime with music.

The IT consultant asked the boy if he wanted to ring a bell.

“I wanted to tell Sarvesh that he could enjoy playing with this toy. When I told him he had to say ‘Merry Christmas’ to people who came up to him while he was ringing the bell, he started singing,” says Mr Dhanasekaran, 35.

On a Saturday evening in early December, father and son took turns ringing a hand-held bell to solicit donations for The Salvation Army charity at the entrance of Century Square mall in Tampines. The annual festive fund-raiser is known as Christmas kettling, where passers-by drop cash donations into the charity’s trademark red kettles.

Mr Dhanasekaran’s wife, pre-school teacher Iswarya Venugopal, 32, was also there to lend a hand. She observed that other children seemed drawn to Sarvesh, with one kid giving him a high-five.

Introducing volunteerism to Sarvesh through the concept of play appealed to the boy, who likes to sing and dance, says Mr Dhanasekaran, an expatriate from Tamil Nadu, India.

Sarvesh, who turns five in January, was too young to take part in his father’s previous volunteering efforts in Singapore, which included organising and playing games of cricket with foreign workers and picking litter at a beach clean-up.



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Mr Dhanasekaran, who signed himself and Sarvesh up for a few rounds of kettling in December, wants to instil a spirit of volunteerism in his only child early.

He says: “Helping others makes me happy and Sarvesh is at a mouldable age. It’s an opportunity for him to observe me and absorb what I am doing. It can’t be forced.”

Benefits of volunteering as a family

Volunteering as a family has many benefits and Christmas can be a good time to give back to the community together, say parents and family life experts.

Ms Ng Yoke Kuan, the lead of experience and engagement at Focus on the Family Singapore charity, says: “Working together for a cause can help families build stronger bonds. It can also help children learn the value of giving to others and creates a sense of purpose and belonging as they contribute to something larger than themselves.

“Volunteering can also become a cherished family tradition that creates shared memories over time.”

Pre-schoolers as young as three to five years old can begin to experience the joys of volunteering, she says, through simple activities such as getting the little ones to distribute homemade cookies to elderly neighbours.

IT consultant
Dhanasekaran
Rajendiran
with his wife
Iswarya
Venugopal
and their son,
Sarvesh
Dhanasekaran,
kettling for
The Salvation
Army at
Century
Square on Dec
2. ST PHOTO:
ARIFFIN
JAMAR

Kindergarteners can even write “thank you” cards and give them to sanitation workers who clean their family’s neighbourhood.

Mr Edward Kang, manager at Care Corner Family Support Services, Care Corner Singapore, suggests that children in lower primary can do household chores and read to younger kids as part of reading programmes.

Older children can organise games for seniors, for example.

He says: “Volunteering as a family gives parents a platform to exemplify the values they wish to transmit to their children. Children can learn organisational and communication skills, and hone their resilience and self-directed learning.”

Ms Ng adds: “If your children have spent some time with low-income families, for instance, it is likely that they would first think about donating their old clothes or books, instead of simply throwing them away.

“It also helps build children’s self-esteem as they develop a belief that they have the skills and ability to improve another person’s life.”

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Never too young to volunteer

Mr Daryl
Sung and
his wife
Melissa Goh
get their
daughters,
Joshlyn
(left) and
Zechlyn,
involved in
family
volunteering
projects
such as
baking
cookies. ST
PHOTO:
CHONG JUN
LIANG

Mr Daryl Sung, 42, wanted his daughters, aged seven and 10, to understand the spirit of Christmas when he and his wife embarked on their first festive project in 2020.

Mr Sung, who works at Fellowship of Christian Athletes, a Christian non-profit organisation, says: “The whole idea came about because we wanted to do something for Christmas. I wanted my children to see that Christmas was not just about Christmas trees and lights. It’s about the birth of Jesus and sharing the love of Christ with other people.”

In their first experience volunteering as a family, they baked 200 jars of cookies.

His daughters Joshlyn and Zechlyn helped mould the cookie dough into round shapes and pasted labels on jars, while Mr Sung and his wife, teacher Melissa Goh, did the heavy-duty work of shopping for ingredients, cleaning, baking and delivering the goodies.

At the time, Mr Sung’s children did not fully understand that the cookies were being sold to raise funds for Focus on the Family Singapore, where he is a volunteer.

Nonetheless, he wanted them to know that they could contribute to society at any age.

“Even as a young person, you are still part of a team and everyone plays a part. Besides, it was a new experience and an interesting way to bond,” he says.

It was not only the kids who learnt life lessons, but also the parents.

Mr Sung and Ms Goh, 40, found the experience of baking hundreds of cookies overwhelming. Underestimating the time and effort needed, especially as the baked goods had to be fully cooled before being packaged, they sometimes started after breakfast and ended past 3am.

He says: “It taught me tenacity as well, that things don’t always turn out as expected and you have to stick with the project till the end.”

The family raised around \$10,000 with their cookie project, which they followed with another Christmas project in 2021, making and selling about 230 beaded bands used for keychains. It raised a similar amount for Focus on the Family Singapore.

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Learning kindness and empathy

Ms Kelly Chen (third from right) and her sons, Teoh Hong Jek (right) and Hong Zen (left), read to children at AWWA charity as part of their family's volunteering efforts. ST PHOTO: CHONG JUN LIANG

It can take years for young children to imbibe the values that their parents are seeking to inculcate through volunteering as a family.

Ms Kelly Chen, a 50-year-old finance director in the veterinary sector, has been volunteering with her sons, now 15 and 17, since her elder child, Teoh Hong Jek, was around four years old.

The whole family joined in food distribution initiatives for low-income families when the boys were pre-schoolers.

Ms Chen, who spearheads the family's volunteerism, is married to a finance director at a logistics firm.

She says: "I wanted to let my children know what kindness is. That kind of knowledge, you can't learn from school."

As the boys grew older, they and their mother started volunteering at AWWA charity, initially doing varied tasks such as cleaning toys, tidying and administrative jobs.

In December, the trio helped facilitate an outing to the zoo for children with special needs whom AWWA serves, and Ms Chen also arranged a buffet Christmas lunch for 25 seniors for the third year.

Her elder son says the value of volunteerism dawned on him gradually over the years.

"Once, we knocked on a door and the grandpa took a very long time to answer. He had a urine bag and he had trouble walking. He did not have a caregiver. I was seven years old and I wished that he had a better household situation.

"My mum kick-started my volunteering journey from the age of around four. It's easier to volunteer with your family, even though I later went on my own," he says.

“I’ve become more empathetic as a result of volunteering. It made me want to help others and I also became more appreciative of my own household. I feel that I’ve made an impact on the lives of the people I have met, even if it was for a few hours.”

Ms Chen recalls another incident when Hong Jek was 13. That time, both of them were volunteering at AWWA when they saw a girl in a wheelchair with her mother. She looked to be about three years old and both mother and daughter were crying.

Ms Chen says: “It was a heartbreaking moment. I remember Jek telling me how the mum was suffering so much. I was very touched; I didn’t expect him to say that.

“I could see how he’d grown up very fast through volunteering. I told myself then that I would continue volunteering with my children.”

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