

# FAMILY SERVICE LEARNING AS A TOOL TO STRENGTHEN COMMUNITIES AND FAMILIES

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Family service learning can be a helpful tool to strengthen both communities and families. Much research has sought to identify the educational, political, socioeconomic, and even health factors that are adversely impacting communities and families (Adarlo, 2020; Sabo, et al., 2015). However, there are a number of accessible tools that can be immediately applied that can support and even strengthen both communities and families. One of those tools is family service learning. Family service can unite families and encourage them to come together to contribute to a larger goal. This can help strengthen familial dynamics, while enhancing personal bonds to the community. The accessibility of family service learning is also an added benefit. There is no entry level criteria to engage in family service or to start a family service group. Any person in any community can participate and offer their time, resources or whatever they can afford to financially contribute to support service projects in their community. In addition to meeting a community need, family service can also have the added benefit of offering career exposure (Mitchell & Rost-Banik, 2019), education (Eppler, et al., 2011) and supporting mental health (Wilczenski & Cook, 2009). These supports can no doubt lead to the development of long-term infrastructure by way of sustainable activities in both the nonprofit and private sector. In this summary, there will be a discussion of our application of the National Center for Families Learning (NCFL) six step model for family service learning, to the development of our own family service group, Omenala Service Learning Collaborative. In this summary we detail how we were able to apply the six-step process to our family service activities.

## WHAT IS SERVICE LEARNING?

As described by the National Youth Leadership Council (n.d.), service learning is an instructional strategy that has linked community service with academic study to enrich learning, teach civic responsibility and strength communities. It is a tool to encourage students to participate in community service, while at the same time making sure that academic learning is a part of service. Service learning also has mutual benefits for both the student and community.

## WHAT ARE EXAMPLES OF SERVICE LEARNINGS?

According to Learning to Give (n.d.), service learning activities can be direct, indirect, involve advocacy and research. Some examples are:

- **Direct:** Involves person-to-person service, where the project benefits an individual directly.
  - i.e.: reading to kids, tutoring, providing health or legal education to juveniles or foster youth or providing health screenings to seniors.
- **Indirect:** Involves projects that benefit the community.
  - i.e.: home construction with habitat for humanity, community restoration (tree planting, neighborhood beautification), food drives, raising money for a charity or nonprofit organization or web design.
- **Advocacy:** Includes educating individuals about diverse topics to bring awareness and support action on issues that impact the community.
  - i.e.: Students write, speak, lobby or act to create awareness about various issues in their community through government or grassroots action. Individuals may seek to impact laws or inform politicians and the community about important issues.
- **Research:** Involves identifying new information that leads or guides action.
  - i.e.: being involved in data collection to address a community issue or that can lead to social change.

## HOW CAN SERVICE LEARNING BE APPLIED TO FAMILIES?

Cramer & Toso (2015) published the six step model to guide family service activities as implemented through the National Center for Families Learning (NCFL) Toyota Family Learning Program. Highlighted below are the details of how we were able to apply the NCFL six step process for carrying out our family service activities.

### **NCFL Family Service Learning: Six-Step Process**

- **INVESTIGATION:** Parents and children investigate community problems that they might potentially address. Investigation involves research and a community mapping activity.

- *Our Application:* Investigation of activities for involvement were supported through a review of issues addressed in our local media, local schools and church. Also, with younger children (i.e.: infants and/or toddlers), it is helpful to pursue service activities that are indirect in nature until children become older. For example, involvement in a local drives (i.e.: back to school drives, food drives or clothing drives), community redesign (i.e.: tree planting, beach clean-ups and neighborhood beautification), card and joy campaigns for those with chronic illnesses, etc. were a good way to involve younger children or even much older family members in family service activities.
- **PLANNING AND PREPARATION:** Parents, children, community members, and teachers learn about and plan the service activities. This step includes acquiring content knowledge and addressing the administrative issues needed for a successful project.
  - *Our Application:* The leader of the family service activity did general research on organizations where the family or selected family members (if not every family member is able to participate) can engage in the service project. This was done through a general online or organizational search. The leader of a given family service project would need to discuss the needs of the organization, how the family can support the organizational activities through their service time, duration of their service activity and what the family hopes to learn about the community served (through the service activity) before the service project begins. We also created a family service calendar and decided on the types and how many service activities our family would like to engage in for the year.
- **ACTION:** Involves the implementation of the service activity. Parents, children, community members, and teachers carry out and complete the family service learning project.
  - *Our Application:* Based on what was agreed upon between the organization and family, the service activity would be implemented. Again, it was important that the details of the activity were clearly agreed upon between the organization and family, so that the needs of the organization and important learning lessons for the family are achieved.
- **REFLECTION:** Parents and children debrief and reflect on the service-learning experience. Activities include thinking about the project implementation, the meaning and connection between parents' work and the community, and what children have learned in school.
  - *Our Application:* To reflect on each service learning experience we often asked ourselves how a service learning experience impacted us directly as individuals. We also reflected on how each service experience impacted those we served and the community around us.
- **DEMONSTRATION OF RESULTS AND CELEBRATION:** Families, program staff, community participants, and others publicly share what they have achieved and learned.
  - *Our Application:* This step can aid family members with their individual and familial assessment of lessons learned and how they have been able to impact an organization and their community as a whole. Although this is optional, during this step it may be helpful for the family service club members to share their service experiences through photos and short reflections on a family generated website, blog, Facebook page or other forms of social media. This can help the family document and share (amongst themselves and others) how their service activities have provided both community, familial and personal enrichment. This can also be a great way for families to look back and bond over their shared family service experiences and reflect on how much they and their community has grown (and learned) through their service roles. Sharing experiences online may also inspire other families to service together.
- **SUSTAINABILITY:** Parents and program staff plan how to make their project or family service learning an ongoing endeavor. This may include strengthening or cementing partnerships, generating and leveraging resources, and identifying and securing funding sources that are available over time.
  - *Our Application:* There may be some service programs that families continue to participate in on a long-term basis or they may assist in devising strategies that can support the service activity's

sustainability for years to come. Families can offer great, realistic feedback to organizations on how to support or draw in other individuals to serve and meet a program need. They can also provide long-term infrastructure support for important initiatives that can make communities stronger overtime. Indeed the support of families in service can be invaluable and discussing efforts to support sustainability of the service activity important.

## CONCLUSION

As we continue with our family service activities, we see how service learning can be a practical tool that families can use to forge a sense of human connectedness. Indeed service learning is a wonderful activity that can support personal and community development in every season of life.

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