Acts of Kindness as a Community Service Option
In Youth Programming

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Abstract

An Acts of Kindness Program – “Ten Days to Change Your World” -- was developed and piloted as an independent community service option for Teen Court youth in Marinette and Oconto counties in northeastern Wisconsin. The program, including the evaluation, was designed using a positive youth development framework characterized by the presence of the Four Essential Elements (Belonging, Independence, Generosity, and Mastery). Preliminary results indicate that youth participants in the program appreciated freedom of choice and experienced positive feelings about giving to others and to the community.
Acts of Kindness as a Community Service Option in Youth Programming

Across the nation, youth contribute their time and talents to improve their communities through volunteer service. While adults volunteer more often than youth, teens alone contributed over 1.3 billion hours of volunteer time nationwide in 2005 (Grimm, Jr. et al, Dietz, Spring, Arey, & Foster-Bey, 2005). Youth volunteer for individuals and groups of people with service ranging from stocking shelves at food pantries to organizing blood drives.

The value of community service does not stop with the recipients. Community service provides volunteers themselves the opportunity to connect with their community and experience the benefits of providing service to others. Volunteers potentially benefit in a myriad of ways through their participation in community service including positive effects on physical health, mental health, occupational achievement, and social behaviors (Wilson & Musick, 1999). However, the act of participating in community service does not guarantee the positive benefits of volunteerism. In a review of research on volunteerism, Wilson & Musick (1999) postulated that to be of benefit to the volunteer, the service should be freely chosen and enjoyable. Participating in community service for the purpose of reaping the rewards of community service is not enough to guarantee positive benefits to the volunteer; indeed it may negate the positive benefits gained from intrinsic reward.

For many youth, finding a service experience that is enjoyable and freely chosen may be difficult, particularly in those rural areas where community service options are limited. In addition, positive youth development research points to the benefit of involving youth in
experiences that provide the Essential Elements of Youth Development (Independence, Mastery, Belonging, and Generosity) (Kress, 2009). The question then becomes how to involve youth in quality community service experiences that engage them with their community and increase their sense of belonging, while providing opportunities for self-determination and mastery. In this paper, we will explore the potential value of a non-traditional community service – Acts of Kindness—as an independent community service option for youth that allows them to make choices within their service experience.

An Act of Kindness involves doing something unexpected that benefits another person or group of people. Acts of Kindness, like the more traditional form of community service, may also have unintended effects on the volunteers themselves. Jones (1998) required that students complete a series of Random Acts of Kindness along with a reflective journal as part of a college sociology class on deviance. Jones concluded that the assignment led students to consider the value of kindness, and that it also had lasting effects on the students and increased their skill in community building.

In addition, researchers found that six weeks of kind acts (five per week) resulted in an increase in reported happiness by participants as compared to the control group (Lyubomirsky, Sheldon & Schkade, 2005). A subsequent study showed that positive effects could be gained by individuals in as few as 10 days (Buchanan & Bardi, 2010). Adult participants in the controlled study reported that 10 days of doing either novel or kind acts reported an increase in life satisfaction. The increase in life satisfaction was significant when compared to the control group. Buchanan and Bardi concluded that daily acts of kindness can result in an increase in life satisfaction in as few as 10 days.
Objective

An Acts of Kindness Project was originally suggested by a deliberating Oconto County Teen Court panel. It was later developed as a community service option for youth and piloted with Teen Court youth (both youth offenders and panel members) in Marinette and Oconto counties in northeastern Wisconsin. The program—“Ten Days to Change Your World”—was developed and evaluated using a positive youth development framework characterized by the presence of four Essential Elements: Independence, Belonging, Mastery, and Generosity (Kress, 2009). The following objective was established for the pilot:

Youth will report an increase in the Essential Elements of Positive Youth Development (Belonging, Mastery, Independence, and Generosity) following participation in the Ten Days to Change Your World project.

Positive indicators for the Essential Elements as experienced by participants, were defined as follows, (based on Kress’ work unless otherwise indicated):

**Belonging**

- A perceived increase in connection with the community

**Mastery**

- An increased sense of mastery through the incorporation of the life skills of decision making, concern for others, and community service (Life skills from Hendricks, 1998)
- An increased recognition of one’s own abilities
Independence

- An increased recognition of the impact an individual can have on themselves and others
- An increased recognition of the importance of youth to their community
- An increased recognition of the likelihood for future contributions to their own community and to other communities

Generosity

- An increased appreciation of giving to others

Methods

Two panels of Teen Court youth (Oconto and Marinette Counties) and select individual youth offenders participated in this program. Human Subjects approval was obtained from the office of the Secretary of the Faculty, University of Wisconsin-Extension.

Each group of youth participants, and the individual participants, received a brief overview of the project which included the following:

- Definition of Acts of Kindness
- Examples of appropriate Acts of Kindness
- Instructions to complete one Act of Kindness each day for 10 days
- Overview of record-keeping in reflective log book (Appendix A)
- Safety guidelines
Evaluation

A post then pre-retrospective evaluation, based on the Essential Elements, was distributed to participants at the completion of the project (Appendix B). Log books were collected and coded by response.

Preliminary Results and Discussion

We piloted “Ten Days to Change Your World” with a limited audience consisting of Teen Court panel members and youth offenders to Teen Court (where the panel deemed it appropriate). While our sample size for the pilot program was small (n=20), preliminary results indicate that all participants who completed the quantitative evaluation (n=13) showed an increase in at least one of the indicators, with most of the participants showing an increase in a majority of the indicators.

Comments gathered from the Reflective Log Booklets and evaluations include the following:

- “I expressed my feelings like I never have before.”
- “It just felt nice to help someone in need.”
- “I felt good making someone else feel good.”
- “It feels good to have others appreciate you.”
- “I felt accomplished.”
- “I can see how this project would help people. It could improve their self-esteem. They can do more for people.”
- “It made me feel like I was giving something back to the community.”
- “I know I will continue to do good things for others.”
- “Responses from people made me feel good.”
- “Liked picking my own Acts of Kindness; having a choice on what I wanted to do.”
- “Some acts were planned and some just happened.”
- “The project got me to notice how many acts of kindness I do every day.”
- “I think this project would help offenders see opportunities to help others.”
• “I’ve never really been thanked by anyone before (this).”

Participants were asked to use one word to describe their experience in the project. Select responses are as follows:

• “Compassionate”
• “Reborn”
• “Kind-hearted”
• “Thoughtful”
• “Great”

Implications

The use of the Random Acts of Kindness project, Ten Days to Change Your World, presents an option for youth where community service is freely chosen and executed under conditions that youth themselves choose. This type of service is especially valuable in Teen Court situations where it is difficult to place an offender in a community service site due to the nature of his or her violation, yet it is imperative that the youth be afforded the opportunity to connect directly with the community.

Ten Days to Change Your World may also be valuable in situations where it can provide youth the opportunity to freely choose their service. There is application for this project in other 4-H venues including Community Clubs and 4-H camp; it is especially applicable for youth in rural communities who experience limited community service options. The Ten Days to Change Your World project can be done anywhere -- from home, within schools, or even within juvenile facilities -- with limited financial resources and lack of transportation.

Ten Days to Change Your World also affords youth the opportunity to creatively engage with the community, based on their own talents and interests. The Acts of Kindness can be
planned or completely random, depending on the interests of the youth involved, and the circumstances.

As a benefit, youth involved in the project practice their written communication skills as they completed their booklets, and were led through a reflective process designed to increase their empathy and awareness of others, and increase their understanding of their connection to their community.

The community benefits were not measured in this pilot project, yet it is to be expected that members of the community gained in some measure by the work of the youth in this project. As one youth reported: “I feel like (people) got to see a good side of me.”
References Cited


   [www.national4-hheadquarters.gov/library/elements.ppt](http://www.national4-hheadquarters.gov/library/elements.ppt)


*62(4): 141-168.*
Appendix A

**Ten Days to Change Your World**

*Reflective Log Book (sample pages)*

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**My Story...**

“What wisdom can you find that is better than kindness?”

—Jean-Jacques Rousseau

My favorite activity:

One word to describe my experience:

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**10 Days to change your world**

*Here’s my Story… Day 1*

**What I did**

*Fill in the blanks...*

**What happened**

*Fill in the blanks...

**My thoughts, reflections...**

*Fill in the blanks...*

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**Make a Difference!**

Make a difference—one day at a time—YOU can change the world!

Share your lunch.

Help carry the load.

Sit with someone who looks lonely.

Pick up litter.

“Hey, that’s enough saying only positive things, let’s actually do something!”

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**10 Days to Change Your World**

IMAGINE TAKING A CHANCE

MAKE A DIFFERENCE

---
Ten Days to Change Your World

**NOW, after doing Random Acts of Kindness**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Think about the statement below and answer: first the **NOW column**, and then the **BEFORE column**.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

**BEFORE doing Random Acts of Kindness**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

- I care about people in my community.
- People in my community care about me.
- I feel connected with my community.
- I often think about ways in which I can help others.
- On most days, I find a way to help others.
- Helping others makes me feel good.
- By helping others, I am affecting my community.
1. Are you male or female? _______  Grade _________ Age _________

2. Have you ever done any community service before this project? (please circle one)  Yes  No

3. How many Acts of Kindness did you do, since you started this project? (please circle one)
   0  1-3  4-7  8-9  10  10 or more

4. Will you continue to do Acts of Kindness? (please circle one)  Yes  Not sure  No

5. Did you enjoy this project? (please circle one)  Yes  Not sure  No

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NOW, after doing Random Acts of Kindness</th>
<th>Think about the statement below and then answer, first the NOW column, and then the BEFORE column.</th>
<th>BEFORE doing Random Acts of Kindness</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>Neutral</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The things I do for others make a difference in their lives.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The things I do for others make a difference in my life.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I think about what others might need in their lives.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I show kindness to others who think or act differently than I do.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am an important part of my community.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I see myself contributing to a community, both now and when I am an adult.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>