

Children are Undiscovered Community Assets by Amy Neugebauer of The Giving Square

The Giving Square partners with schools and organizations to develop children's philanthropic skills, identities, and tools. Our flagship program, the Kids for Kids Fund, engages 3rd-5th graders in an experiential philanthropic journey focused on empathy, humility, and impact.

"People always tell us young people will save the world, but there is simply not enough time to wait," warns Greta Thunberg. There is strong sentiment that children are the future. We write songs about it, print bumper stickers, and use the phrase in speeches. We say the words, but we do not act as if we believe it to be true. If we did, we would consider children to be the ultimate community owners.

Within the framing of this issue of the E-Journal of Public Affairs, we are exploring the concept of "community ownership," of people taking collective responsibility for making life better for others. This paper explores why kids should be treated as community owners, how adults get in the way, and how we can all nurture children to be agents of change...now, just as Greta calls us to do.

Children are Ideal Community Owners

We know that children can be community owners because we have seen it. Through our Kids for Kids Fund program, we have engaged hundreds of 3-5th graders in an experiential curriculum designed around deepening their civic and philanthropic dispositions, skills and behaviors. Our program helps kids develop empathetic and expanded understanding of needs in their community. We explore where life is not fair and help them see their responsibility to make it more fair for others. Finally, we give them the responsibility to give away \$1,000 to a local, child-serving organization in their community (think of this as a "KAF", a kid-advised fund).

During our program, children have opened up about their experiences of being an immigrant, battling cancer, having siblings with special needs, witnessing parents battling depression, losing family members, and in dealing with racism. Throughout our program, children talk about hard stuff because they have seen it and experienced it. And they want to do something about it.

Our program reframes how kids can help. Specially, we validate their capacity to work together to make important decisions about how to allocate resources in their communities through the KAF deliberation process. We also emphasize all the different ways that kids can take responsibility for helping others in our families, neighborhoods and communities. We encourage them to think about the myriad ways they can be philanthropic every day. These are the community ownership efforts we validate:

- "I taught my brother how to read."
- "I sit with my mom when she is sad."

- “I helped the old lady pick up the tomatoes she dropped at the store.”

While the bigger child-led fundraising or canned food drives get attention, it is also the everyday acts of community ownership that add up to big things.

Because of the Kids for Kids Fund program, 94% of participants report wanting to help others more and 88.24% see themselves as philanthropists. Without our program, less than 50% of children polled reported feeling important in their communities compared to 100% after our program.

The Kids for Kids Fund works for a few reasons. It is evidence-based (built on research related to service, empathy, giving, character development, and child development). We constantly test and evolve our curriculum and practices in order to adapt to rapidly changing social challenges in our communities, as well as to maximize impact. Finally, our program meets kids where they are – both in their social concerns and philanthropic capacities. It works because children are capable and interested in being community owners. We unleash power, we do not generate it.

Adults Get in the Way

In order to engage kids more broadly as community owners, adults need to break our own thinking and practices about how best to engage kids in giving. Here are a few of the patterns we need to break:

1. **Treating kids as future contributors.** Foundations traditionally give kids responsibility once they are “of age.” Families give kids token roles in preparation for the future. Without considering kids to be important for who they are, children do not feel connected to acts of service.
2. **Using extrinsic motivation to drive their engagement.** When my son was very young, he came home one day motivated to make a \$50 donation to a giving campaign at his school for a national non-profit. When I asked why he had made this decision, he shared that with a \$50 donation he would get the t-shirt. Children are often engaged as fundraisers and incentivized through prizes. Just because they go through the act of raising money does not mean that they are more likely to see themselves as community owners.
3. **Avoiding talking to kids about difficult things.** Whether it be homelessness or racism, we avoid talking about important social issues because we want to protect our children from community and societal challenges. Kids are receiving information about what is happening around us. If we don’t help them process what they are experiencing, they will create their own meaning.
4. **Letting the desire to market our children become the driver of giving and service.** Wanting to market our kids and help them get into college sets us up to brand children

as superheroes for superficial acts of service. Wanting to nurture the humanity of our kids leads to very different activities and conversations.

How To Engage Children as Agents of Community Change

Rather than focusing on single acts of service, such as lemonade stands and canned food drives, we should focus on building a philanthropic disposition in children that will set them on a lifetime of giving. We should treat kids as the community owners that they are. Here is how we can do it:

1. **Engage kids in the art and science of philanthropy, not just kindness and “doing good.”** First, start with the true definition of philanthropy: giving of ourselves for the good of humanity. Make it clear that everyone can be a philanthropist, no matter age or income. Explain that there are many ways to be philanthropic: doing research, speaking up for a friend or an issue, being a good listener, sharing our resources, helping someone do something, teaching something new. The possibilities are endless.
2. **Have the hard conversations.** Have real conversations about hard things: structural racism, homelessness, the pandemic. By seeing and exploring the challenges, they will be better equipped to figure out how to be helpful. If we fear the conversations, we should start with our own education and exploration.
3. **Spend time with first-person narratives.** Explore issues through personal narratives in books, movies, photos. Find ways to develop an empathetic connection to the needs and experience of others by hearing their stories. This helps kids understand both why and how we might help.
4. **Expand kids’ understanding of issues through data and research.** Kids will respond to facts about various challenges: hunger, homelessness, disabilities, and so on. Don’t jump into solving the problems until we have done the research. This step is critical in ensuring that we fully understand the problem (causes vs. symptoms) and are actually helping.
5. **Introduce potential role models.** Learn more about philanthropic kids such as Greta Thunberg (using her voice and brain for the good of the earth), Mikaila Ulmer (using her writing and resources for the good of bees), Milo Cress (who used his voice to challenge a restaurant about their use of straws, thus triggering a national movement), or Belen Woodard (who launched “More Than Peach” to ensure that children have crayons in a variety of skin-tones). Adults can be role models too. In pre-surveys of participants in our programs, most kids report that their parents are their role models. While we know this changes over time (alas!), we should recognize that this is true for a time and that we should act accordingly.

6. **Help kids define issues that are important to them.** One potential starting point is kids' own lived experiences: their own talents, interests, and obstacles that may link to larger social issues. We have seen many children withdraw once parents (or grandparents) push their own agenda about what kids should care about. Let kids explore their ideas. Don't tell them what they should care about.

Adults need the help of children. We need their authentic voices, fresh ideas, and positive thinking NOW. We need children to have a sense of responsibility to their communities NOW. We need them to feel like they matter NOW. Imagine how different the world would be.

If you would like to learn more about our methodologies and programs, please reach out to info@thegivingsquare.org.