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Volunteering May Teach You Something About Yourself

By Traci Evison
UCF Forum columnist
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The opportunity to volunteer presented itself to me last year – and it turned out to be just as much an educational lesson to me about patience and communications.

I had been wanting to volunteer someplace, and purposely chose teaching Sunday school with kids 3 to 5 years old because it was completely different than anything I had done in the past. I do not have children and had not spent a significant amount of time around them aside from family members.

Let me tell you that you can't charge straight into a classroom and control a situation by rattling off rapid-fire commands. Children are inherently fast learners, but they are wonderfully – and thankfully – still children. By that I mean they love to learn, laugh, and are open and engaged with their surroundings.

On one of my first days teaching, some of the kids had to take a bathroom break. Instead of falling in line to travel in military formation to visit the bathroom, as I naively thought would happen, the group of about eight girls and boys instead hopped, swayed and giggled their way to the bathroom despite my repeated attempts to better organize the trip.

After a few Sundays of ineffectual attempts to control this repeat excursion, I discovered what most parents likely have learned: Teaching children is not about inundating them just with a lot of instructions. When I allowed myself to be a little more lenient and understanding of them, we all had a lot more fun and I began to feel a real sense of enjoyment and accomplishment spending time with the kids.

Have you ever overwatered a plant? It wilts and the leaves turn brown, certainly not cooperating in reaching the goal of becoming a lush, flowering plant you can proudly

show off to the neighbors. In a similar way, aiming for total control of a child stifles spontaneity and motivation, and is actually counterproductive because it creates more anxiety and chaos for everyone involved.

I think this point can really apply to our daily lives, too, because it's not always about how fast you can get everything done. And that's not necessarily what volunteering your time is all about. It's OK to relax and have fun, too.

Although it was challenging at times to round up a group of children for snack time or even to sit still for two minutes in a circle to watch a video, I loved experiencing these kid's creativity and imaginations each week. I experienced more satisfaction and accomplishment than many other goals I've achieved personally.

I left each week with a smile on my face because spending time with these children reminded me how to play and be silly, something I think we often forget when we take on the responsibilities of adulthood.

If you're looking to be a helpful volunteer, too, there may be a trial and error period before you find something that aligns with your interests. But when you do, I can assure you that it will open doors to meeting interesting people, making new friends and giving you the sense of satisfaction experienced only as a result of helping others without expecting something in return.

My experience volunteering has been very positive and I feel a sense of gratitude that I had the opportunity to learn how to better communicate, but perhaps more importantly, learn some things about myself in the process.

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