

# Charity begins at home

Volunteer in your community and share with your family the satisfaction and fun of helping others. **BY DEBBE GEIGER**

Volunteering comes naturally to Anne and Tom Barney of Durango, Colorado. As a major part of Anne's upbringing, it's an interest that she lovingly shares with their three children—Emily, 10; Sarah, 8; and Will, 6.

Giving to others is a common experience in the Barney household. For example, the kids keep a "giving" jar on the kitchen counter, filling it with part

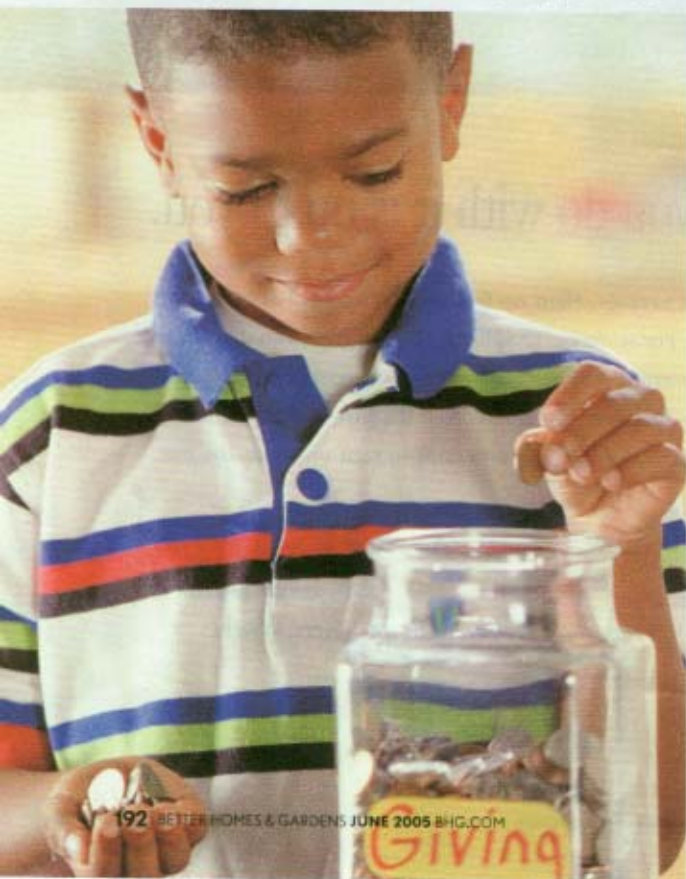
of their allowance and the money they make through selling homemade soap and other special projects. "We allow them to save a third, spend a third, and share a third," Anne says. When the jar is full the family votes on how to spend it. So far, they've used the fund for a variety of good deeds, such as donating flowers to a local nursing home. When the kids adopted a dog, they donated their funds to the nonprofit animal shelter, the same one where they found their beagle puppy.

As one of seven children raised by parents who set the standard for charitable acts through their church, Anne knows that volunteering brings a family together. "Through Girl Scout food drives, and visiting nursing homes, I realized that volunteering and being charitable is not a hat you put on and take off. It's something you do when the opportunity arises."

"Volunteering encapsulates the values of kindness, respect, empathy, friendliness, and tolerance," says Robert K. Goodwin, president and chief executive officer of the nonprofit volunteer network based in Washington, D.C., the Points of Light Foundation ([www.pointsoflight.org](http://www.pointsoflight.org)). He agrees that children become better citizens, improve their ability to form friendships, and develop greater communication and leadership skills as they mature.

#### DEFINE "BUSY"

For the Barneys, volunteering has become something to do that brings the family together in fun ways. But Anne acknowledges it takes a bit of planning to fit it all in—after-school activities, homework, jobs, weekend



PHOTOGRAPH GETTY IMAGES

playdates—so starting off with a calendar is one way to keep your family on track.

Be realistic about the number of commitments you and your family can make. A passel of frazzled volunteers is not the objective. Projects requiring one or two mornings or afternoons a month are a good fit for most busy families.

Jenny Friedman, author of *The Busy Family's Guide to Volunteering*, believes a full schedule is one of the best reasons to get involved because volunteer projects bring families together. "We're all so busy driving car pools, working, going to school. Here is an opportunity to be with our kids in an important and meaningful way." Friedman is executive director of Doing Good Together ([www.doinggoodtogether.org](http://www.doinggoodtogether.org)), a nonprofit organization encouraging parents to educate children about social issues and community service.

### CONSIDER THE CHOICES

Family volunteering means involving your kids in the decision-making process from the start. "The more say

they have the more engaged they'll be when they decide to do it," says Friedman.

■ **SHARE YOUR IDEAS.** Before discussing a volunteer project with your family, research projects to consider. Call a soup kitchen, nursing home, or animal shelter and speak to someone who can give you specific information about the facility, its needs, and how your family can help. Present your list of ideas to your children. Let them add their ideas and soon you'll have a variety of appealing options to consider. Vote on which ones are the most interesting and fit within your schedule.

■ **MAKE CONNECTIONS.** Deborah Spaide, author of *Teaching Your Kids to Care: How to Discover and Develop the Spirit of Charity in Your Children*, suggests focusing on meeting human needs first. "We're trying to teach our kids how important it is to be contributing members of society; to give back and help others," she explains. For older kids, raising money and cleaning a park are good possibilities, but such activities won't necessarily develop compassion in young children, she says. "They can't understand that \$2 will be donated to a soup

kitchen to buy bread for homeless people. It doesn't fulfill them in the same way that picking a bouquet of flowers and giving it to a neighbor who just came home from the hospital will." For example, taking clothes or toys to a shelter makes a greater impression when children can meet some of the kids who live there. The human connection is indelible.

### CREATE YOUR OWN OPPORTUNITIES

"Some children are outgoing and enjoy interacting with others," Friedman says. Other kids may be shy around adults but terrific with younger children. This is one reason some families enjoy creating volunteer projects of their own. Work with your strengths, discuss how much time each volunteer project will require, and have a ball coming up with fun ideas. Consider these volunteer ideas and projects.

■ **OFFER YOUR SERVICES.** Can you water and mow a lawn? Replace lightbulbs? If your kids prefer physical labor, supply a wish list of simple home repairs and gardening improvements to families or neighbors in need.

■ **TURN TO THE ARTS.** Can you sing? Tell stories? Write scripts? Think of ways to entertain children in hospices or hospitals. On a small scale, create a puppet theater and script a few fairy tales to perform; start a '50s doo-wop singing group and make the rounds of nursing homes and other care facilities in your community; learn how to make animal-shape balloons and call yourselves the "Balloon Brigade" to the delight of children's wards.

■ **SPONSOR A FAMILY.** At [www.boxproject.org](http://www.boxproject.org) you can choose a family with children similar in age to yours and send them a care package filled with necessities once a month. For a personal touch, add a goody bag of your own with comic books or coloring books and crayons, or a hand-written letter. Explains Friedman, "You can actually get to know this family and form as close a relationship as you want."

For the Barneys, volunteering is as routine as baseball practice or a weekend round of golf. It's a way to create a home environment where helping others is a way of life, and doing it as a family is a lot more fun. It's a model every family can borrow from. ☺