

Hooked on Helping: An investment for life

Dr. Martin Mitchell, President and CEO of Starr Commonwealth, an internationally recognized private, non-profit organization that serves children and families from locations in Albion, Battle Creek and Detroit, Michigan, and Van Wert and Columbus, Ohio. Services range from foster care to residential treatment and in-home counseling programs that help young adults learn to live independently.

At Starr Commonwealth, we believe in a strength-based approach for helping children and youth develop into caring and contributing members of society.

Unlike so many programs that dwell on the deficits in children, our programs highlight and build upon their strengths. Service learning capitalizes on the natural abilities every child possesses. One of our core beliefs at Starr is that everyone has the responsibility to help and no one has the right to hurt. Every child has the ability to give and the act of giving has many beneficial properties. Giving makes you feel more whole, more human and more a contributing part of society.

From a strength-based perspective, when our students engage in service learning they reap the rewards of giving. That feeling translates back to their peer group and they apply principles of mutual respect, problem solving and connecting with adults through positive peer influence. The goal is for students to transition back into their communities and to apply those same principles at home, school, their communities and faith-based connections.

These also are the basic tenets for the No Disposable Kids® program at Starr, a training initiative designed to equip today's educators with the skills needed to create and maintain healthy learning environments for children and staff. Our experience is that as these principles are embraced they help decrease teasing, bullying, victimization and harassment in schools.

But to be beneficial, it is critical that service learning projects be meaningful. They need to be truly significant in order to maximize the impact. Young people must be able to connect the dots and see how what they're doing is valuable. It's not about cleaning up the park because no one else wants to. It's about aiding in meaningful and purposeful projects that help build self esteem, boost confidence and allow youth to enter into caring relationships with others.

For example, our students are assisting disabled children at a therapeutic equine facility in Augusta, serving the hungry at a soup kitchen in Jackson, providing help during the Special Olympics this spring in Battle Creek and volunteering at downtown Detroit's Annual Metro Youth Day in the summer. Starr youth help themselves and others by contributing to service projects at five locations in Albion, Battle Creek and Detroit, Michigan, and Columbus and Van Wert, Ohio.



One foundation of Positive Peer Culture is that students take responsibility for themselves and for helping others. We give them choices in what service learning projects they might choose. When young people decide themselves how they wish to help others, they become invested in helping, or as we say “hooked on helping.”

There are several benefits to using community service in children’s programs, the greatest of which is the ability for children to become meaningful contributors to society. They see the power they have to do good in the world.

Other benefits include the way people view children in general, especially those who deserve a second chance. Through this process members of the community have the opportunity to work with some of the most fantastic young people.

We not only incorporate service learning into the programming at Starr, but we measure how much our youngsters volunteer when they leave as well.

Our goal is to create a pathway whereby our children can transition back into an active life of community service and continue to embrace the principles of volunteerism learned at Starr Commonwealth. As productive, meaningful members of their communities, they will have given and received the greatest gift of all – the opportunity to help others.