

Family volunteering puts life in perspective

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Food stamp use is at a record high. Two recent reports show how hunger no longer knows a bias - touching children to seniors, the middle class to the homeless. How to help your kids understand the problem of hunger and lend a hand:

"Our two boys are in Cub Scouts and we have several things we do in Scouting that get them involved in volunteering," says Robert Coughlin of Davidson. "We do a food drive every February called 'Scouting for Food.' The boys have really bought into this. It is a huge success each year."

To be part of the solution, bring your kids into the fold of volunteer work early on. Decide whether you want to start with a one-time project with a local group or a bigger commitment. But don't just show up on a random morning before Christmas ready to pack lunches, hunger relief advocates say.

One mother in Louisville, Ky., asked her two daughters last Christmas to set up an appointment to assist with serving lunch at a local homeless shelter. The girls also helped pack gifts of candy, fruit and gloves.

"The bickering last year was at an all-time low," she recalls. "The girls realized that we are so blessed."

Charlotte Reznick, author of "The Power of Your Child's Imagination: How to Transform Stress and Anxiety into Joy and Success" (Perigee, \$14.95), agrees that the tradition of helping others can put personal problems into perspective. If kids are moping around or stressing out, take them to the local soup kitchen to serve meals, she suggests. They'll benefit from a feeling of more control and a sense of being appreciated, she says.

Other ideas from parents:

Let your children help drop flyers at doors in your neighborhood to promote local food drives.

At your child's birthday party, instead of gifts, ask guests to bring nonperishable food to be taken to a soup kitchen or other mission. Be sure your child is old enough to understand.