

THE SPIRIT OF CHARITY

INCULCATING A LOVE FOR VOLUNTEERISM IN YOUR CHILD COULD PAY HUGE DIVIDENDS IN TERMS OF BUILDING HIS CHARACTER, FINDS OUT NATALYA THANGAMANY

The saying 'Charity begins at home' may have become something of a cliché but some parents do actually practise it. For Adora Tan, a freelance writer and mother of a two-and-a-half-year old girl, the spirit of charity was inculcated in her while she was growing up. Her father was, and still is, an active volunteer and introduced his daughter to the world of volunteerism several years ago. Adora was part of the Girl Guides movement in school, so doing charitable work is not new to her. Currently, she and her husband are spokespersons of ECO Singapore, a non-profit environmental organisation. Adora also volunteers as a copywriter for the Girl Guides Association of Singapore.

Similarly, Joanne Lee, too, believes that actions speak louder than words. Her pre-teen son suffers from Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), making it difficult for him to follow spoken orders. However, over time, Joanne has discovered that while words may not work on her son, demonstrations help him understand and follow instructions better. Applying this principle to teaching him to become more charitable, Joanne took up volunteering and took her son along to every activity. That way, through the demonstration of examples and actions, her son was able to do things without coming away frustrated.

DEEPER UNDERSTANDING

As spokespersons for Eco Singapore, Adora and her husband are frequently found at primary and secondary schools, where they give assembly talks on caring for the environment. Not having a domestic helper to look after their daughter, they brought her along with them to the talks, rotating their time with her according to their schedule.

"When I am giving talks in the morning, he will look after her and bring her around the school," Adora explains with a chuckle. "And when he is giving talks in the afternoon, I will bring her around the school. She even has her nap times there."

Adora and her family are also active participants in tree-planting events organised by National Parks Singapore. While swinging a *changkul* the weight of a school-bag over your head and getting soil on your hands to plant a few trees may not be everyone's cup of tea, Adora and her family see the joy in it, knowing that one more tree can benefit the environment more.

The volunteering activities Joanne and her son take part in tend to be more backstage. The various stints the pair have taken part in include helping out in the kitchen to prepare food for the less fortunate and guiding the intellectually disabled in art-and-crafts or pottery sessions.

Joanne explains that the reason she and her son take part in activities that are mostly hands-on is that they help her son to focus easily and to empathise more with the people he is helping. "He gets to understand the consequences of actions, and how people feel as a

result of that consequence," she says.

To ensure her son doesn't miss out on the action, Joanne puts her son's schedule first, planning their volunteering activities around his availability. They usually have their sessions on weekends or during the school holidays. To get her son more involved in decision-making, Joanne makes sure she discusses various activities with her son before deciding which one to take part in.

RUNS IN THE FAMILY

With the spirit of charity all around her, is Adora's daughter also showing altruistic traits? "It is too early to tell as she is still young," answers Adora. "But in school, she helps the teacher to clean up and pick up the toys. She is also very compassionate; when she sees that her classmates have got running nose, she will get them tissues."

Adora also believes that bringing her daughter along to her assembly talks indirectly exposes her to environmental issues. "She is too young to fully grasp the concept of helping the environment, but she does know 'oh, that is a fish' and 'that is a cow' and she asks questions like 'Why is the cow sleeping?'" she says with a laugh.

Not every day is filled with assembly talks and tree-planting; Adora takes every chance she gets to bond with her family. Her daughter's preschool is within walking distance of their home, so Adora gets to converse with her little one while walking her to school and picking her up afterwards.

"We bring her to the zoo, parks and reservoirs," says Adora. Her daughter especially enjoys the children's wing in the Botanic Gardens. Back home, Adora's family practises what they preach. "We recycle," she says. "At the end of the day, we turn off the big switches for our big appliances, such as the TV. We try to use the fan as much as we can instead of the air-conditioner." She reveals that the family has a compost bin, where they dispose all their food scraps before re-using them as fertiliser.

As Joanne's son is older, she is able to see that performing voluntary acts of kindness for others has made a positive impact on him.

"Volunteering has taught him to be independent and contented," she says. "He has learnt about contributing to society and also how to appreciate what he has. He knows how to put himself in other people's shoes and understand their feelings." Joanne also reveals that her son has strong leadership



qualities which show up in school and possesses initiative. "He feels a sense of duty," she says. She discloses an incident where she was ill and required urgent medical attention. Her son took the initiative and bravely admitted her into hospital by himself.

Mother and son also bond over cooking and housekeeping. "He is especially interested in cooking," Joanne says with a chuckle.

However, there are also occasions where they go outdoors, visiting places such as the Singapore Science Centre and the Singapore Discovery Centre.

TOO BUSY?

So in such a fast-paced world, how can busy families give a little of their time to charity?

Some common excuses Adora and Joanne have heard is 'no time', 'not an old-folks-home kind of person' and 'don't have the opportunity'.

"Everybody is busy, everyone has family commitments, and that is one of the reasons why people can't volunteer, due to the lack of time," Adora observes. "But why not do it together as a family?"

When you volunteer together with your family, not only can you bond together but you can also help the community. Adora suggests finding something your family enjoys doing. That way, you will be able to enjoy it while contributing to society. "Do a meaningful activity together," Adora advises. "It bonds you together, as you are doing the same thing and helping the same people."

Adora also believes that showing by example will cultivate a volunteering spirit in children. "Lead by example," she says. "Children are very impressionable, so you need to show them that you do it and you believe in it. Involve them if possible and let them see for themselves."

Joanne, too, echoes Adora's advice, as she encourages parents to bond with their children by doing volunteer work together and being a role-model for their children. "Children mimic what parents do. Also, be patient with them and slow down."

However, Joanne does not believe in keeping to one 'interest' for bonding; she encourages variety. "Do not just rely on one interest alone," she says. "Try different things. Explore things you may not know. Who knows, you may find and pick up new interests."

FROM THE HEART

For Christmas last year, Adora helped to make presents for all of her daughter's friends. "I want her to learn that there is more to life than material wealth," she explains. "And I want her to understand that there is joy in giving." Adora hopes to instil more than just a volunteering spirit in her daughter. "It's only when you see others who are content with less than what you have that you can appreciate your life better."

"I find volunteering very fulfilling," smiles Adora. "When you do

something you like and somebody benefits from it, it's just such an amazing feeling that I can't describe." It's something that gives her 'a skip in her step' and a 'smile on her face'. "When you do something good and it makes you happy, just pass it on to the people you meet."

Through tree-planting, she hopes to encourage people to take better care of the environment and be more aware of the huge part they can play for our planet.

She also believes that anyone can be a volunteer, as long as they have the will for it. "There is good in everyone. They just have to find a trigger," she explained. "It could be something they may see or something they may hear about or someone they know who is a volunteer and this influences them."

She encourages others to reach out a helping hand as much as they can, even if it is not at a targeted group of people. "Even if you touch one person, it is enough. It matters to that one person."

Joanne feels that volunteering has helped her to reflect

and take a step back, especially in such a fast paced-world. "It taught me to empathise with others," she says. "Through volunteer work, I have learnt the core value of appreciating what I have because I have a tendency to compare myself with others sometimes." She hopes

her son will imbibe the same values and that they will stay with him throughout his life.



Adora and her daughter



SINGAPORE CARES

A good place to start if you want to take up volunteering is the Internet.

Singapore Cares (SG Cares) is a website set up by the National Volunteer and Philanthropy Centre (NVPC) to cater to the demand for volunteering opportunities that are flexible and do not take up a lot of time (which is perfect for those with a hectic schedule).

SG Cares provides a variety of interesting group volunteering activities, and the good news is that not just individuals can volunteer, but families as well. Families can opt to serve for a few hours, selecting from numerous activities according to causes (ranging from animals to the environment), interests and beneficiaries. This makes it easier to volunteer for a cause of interest while being exposed to the various types of volunteering. It also allows families to bond and children to learn more about being charitable.

To start, visit the website at <http://www.sgcares.org>