Give a Little, Get a Lot:
How volunteering also helps the volunteer

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Don't tell Jane Handel that one person can't make a difference. The 18-year-old from Needham, Mass., has changed the lives of many. In 2004, she created A Book From Mom, a program that provides new books for parents serving prison sentences to share with their children. The program, which earned Handel a Gloria Barron Prize for Young Heroes, grew out of an eighth-grade community service project in which she and some friends donated old books from their school to the needier schools.

"It felt so fulfilling when we had completed the project that I wanted to continue giving back to the community," Handel explains. She learned about the scant resources at the state's only women's prison and realized that her idea could help inmates. To date, her program has placed more than 9,200 new children's books in five prison and pre-release facilities.

Handel got just as much from the project as she gave. Volunteering provides many mental, emotional, and physical health benefits, in addition to such rewards as school credit, recognition from others, and points of pride on college and job applications. It can bolster self-esteem, develop personality strengths and skills, and foster a sense of responsibility and gratitude, notes Nancy Fenn, director of volunteer services at Carson City Hospital, in Carson City, Mich.

"I always feel wonderful about volunteering," says Handel. She adds that the experience has let her see the generosity of a community. "It's wonderful to see kids buying books to donate because they pick them with such care, hoping to share one of their favorites with a beneficiary of my project."

Giving Lights Up Your Mind

Handel and her book donors see the link between altruism (an unselfish desire to help others) and personal well-being. "It's good to be good. Science increasingly says so," notes Stephen Post, coauthor of *Why Good Things Happen to Good People*. "Volunteering—at a level not experienced as overwhelming—has positive impacts on happiness, mood, self-esteem, social skills and connections, and mental health."

New research reveals that community service improves everything from personal satisfaction to spiritual growth. "It's nice to give time to others. It makes me feel like I'm helping people," says Emily Rudd, 15, of her volunteer work at Carson City Hospital, where she helps at the front desk and in the gift shop.

People who give during their high school years have better physical and mental health throughout their lives, according to a 50-year study. Volunteer activities are so linked to lower teen pregnancy rates and better school performance, as well as decreases in depression, antisocial behaviors, and substance abuse, Post adds. "The impact is strongest when teens are inspired to volunteer on their own, but even when they're

required to do so by school-based programs, there's a considerable positive impact," he notes. "Individuals who start volunteering early are likely to continue volunteering for the rest of their lives and enjoy longer, happier, and more fulfilled lives."

Science backs Post up: A study in Ontario, Canada, reveals that volunteering reduces the impact of stress on the body, lowers blood pressure, and bolsters the immune system. Although scientists cannot draw definite conclusions, research suggests there might even be an evolutionary link. Working together toward a common good seems to activate reward-related areas of the brain such as the temporal cortex, caudate nucleus, nucleus accumbens, and frontal cortex. Other studies report that altruism triggers pleasure centers in the brain and is linked to social ties and trust. The result: a feel-good boost that motivates people to do even more good to feel even better.

Teens Step Up

Alexandria Kolodko, 15 of River Vale, N.J., and Nicole Hansell, 16, of Suffern, N.Y., know all about "helper's high." They make and sell clothing and give profits to the Make-A-Wish Foundation, a group that grants wishes to children with life-threatening illnesses. "This project has become more than community service," Alexandria says. "It's part of our lives, and we really enjoy doing it." The teens, who have raised nearly $18,000, say the best part of volunteering is knowing they're bringing hope and joy.

"I love knowing I'm putting a huge smile on a child's face," Nicole says. "Granting them a wish … keeps their hope alive. Who wouldn't get a high from making such a difference in a child's life!"

"When we get started young, the experience of helping others provides meaning, a sense of self-worth, and a social role," Post says. Giving back also may help people who have lost a loved one to an illness or accident, he adds: "Altruism is a terrific coping mechanism."

Help Others, Help Yourself

"Volunteering boosts my self-esteem and keeps me busy doing something worthwhile," says Darius Weems, 17, of Athens, Ga. He suffers from Duchenne muscular dystrophy (DMD), a degenerative muscle disease that claimed the life of his older brother at 19. "Life is too short. You need to get out and try to make the world better," Darius notes.

With a group of friends, he created a documentary film to raise awareness of DMD and funds toward a cure. Darius now travels to speak about the award-winning film, DMD, and disability rights: "My volunteer project has helped raise awareness of DMD, which most people don't know it the number one genetic killer of children," he says. Darius finds the volunteer spirit is contagious: "Often when I've been out talking about my project, people have asked if they could help too."

Catch the spirit of giving. Join the teens in this article and volunteer. You'll get as much as you give!