



Helping hands



Recruiting volunteers to complement your team will allow you to introduce a diverse range of talents and experiences into your setting, says **Tim Kahn...**

Volunteers really came into the limelight when the Big Society was high on the political agenda, but there has never been a shortage of volunteers. In the current climate, however, many people have an additional reason to volunteer: not only do they now have more time but it also looks good on their CV.

This article aims to help you think about the myriad of issues that your organisation needs to address in order to use volunteers successfully.

Volunteering standards

There is a set of volunteering standards for which organisations can get accreditation; these are known as the Investing in Volunteers (iV) standards. The areas that these standards cover include:

- treating volunteers with fairness;
- protecting volunteers from physical and emotional harm;
- giving volunteers appropriate resources, support, opportunities and recognition;
- ensuring that volunteers reflect the diversity of the local community.

The first of these Investing in Volunteers standards talks of a “commitment to the involvement of volunteers, and recognition throughout the organisation that volunteering is a two-way process, which benefits both volunteers and the organisation.” (See below for more details.)

Let’s start by looking in greater detail at the benefits of volunteering, particularly in early years settings.

The benefits

The setting can benefit because volunteers often have a range of talents and experiences which mean they have rapport with other parents and children from their local communities in a way that staff members may not. Volunteers may also give you feedback about the local community that you might

otherwise never get, can help you raise your profile locally and play a part in identifying and encouraging further volunteers. In this age of cutbacks and savings, it would be a serious omission not to point out that volunteers are free – though, of course, they need regular, ongoing support (which is not free)!

The benefits for volunteers include increased self-esteem, knowing that their views and experience are valued and that they can contribute to the service. They also gain work experience, which can lead to training, qualifications and employment opportunities.

Recruitment

Volunteers will not just turn up on your doorstep. You will need a

strategy to recruit them, which will focus on the needs of, and benefits to, both your setting and the volunteers; and it may include using local publicity (both local press and radio). Parents or others who have previously used the setting are



likely to form the core of your pool of volunteers. Students on placements and young people on work experience are another source.

Invite potential volunteers in for an informal chat. Such an 'interview' is a two-way process for both parties to find out more about each other and for volunteers to find out what their role entails. A role description, outlining key tasks, can be useful.

If you give application forms to potential volunteers, ensure that they are written in easy-to-read language and only ask for necessary information – long and/or complex forms can present a barrier to many – so that you do not put off anybody who may be an excellent addition to your service.

Ensure that appropriate CRB checks are carried out before any volunteer starts. (CRB checks are currently free of charge for volunteers.) Ask for references for volunteers, especially in cases where you do not already know them. Explain to volunteers why you are carrying out checks and need references; otherwise they may feel unnecessarily scrutinised.

There may be a local volunteer centre where they vet and keep a list of potential volunteers – build an ongoing relationship with them, they can be a real gold mine.

Planning

Make sure that volunteers have a good experience when working in your setting. It may be tempting to give them tasks that are routine and mundane – tasks paid staff are reluctant to do – but remember that volunteers who feel fulfilled by their work in your setting are likely to volunteer for a longer period and give back more.

Part of helping volunteers feel fulfilled is to give them an induction appropriate to their level of involvement. Ensure your service has a written set of policies and procedures that addresses 'volunteers', particularly specifying who supports them and describing the complaints procedure.

If you think you could make more use of volunteers in your service, then National Volunteers' Week (1st – 7th June) may be a logical focus for a campaign to try to attract them.

The volunteer experience

SHEENA LEVY "I've not been in paid employment since having my children nine years ago. My two older children are in school while my two-year-old is still at home with me. After volunteering in my local children's centre, initially on the parents' forum, I decided to take an introductory course in childcare. After that, and with all my experiences with young children, I decided that rather than trying to return to work in insurance, I would qualify and look for a job in childcare. My course required me to have a placement, which I found in the pre-school that my two eldest children attended and, some months later, I applied for and successfully got a part-time job working with a child with additional needs. I'm now looking forward to taking further qualifications and developing my career in childcare."

THE SETTING Helen Jones, Pre-school Learning Alliance County Manager for Hertfordshire, has a wide overview of early years services in her area. "In my experience, most volunteers are parents with children who use a setting. In children's centres, they tend to fall into two categories: professional parents who may have skills to share, and vulnerable parents who may need support. Both learn things they then use with their children at home. A minority of people aren't able to successfully volunteer, either because of the 'baggage' they carry or because they do not get the necessary CRB clearance. In most cases they amicably agree they cannot work in the setting. Community pre-schools have management committees filled by volunteers; they are often parents who have taken a committee role but want to help out in the pre-school with the children too."

"Most volunteers are only involved for a few years while their children are young and do not choose to stay in the field. So, Sheena's story is not representative in this respect, though the fact that she initially got involved through a local parent forum is more typical.

"Remember, however, that volunteers aren't a simple answer to all your problems. You will only get back what you put in."

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find out more

Find out more about the Investing in Volunteers Standards and the work of iiv, at iiv.investinginvolunteers.org.uk
Get involved with National Volunteers' Week, at Volunteering England's website, volunteering.org.uk