

WEEK 4: VOLUNTEER THE SMART WAY

When my oldest son went off to Montessori preschool at age 3, I eagerly signed on for one of the coveted “classroom mom” volunteer gigs.

It only took me a couple of weeks to realize **what a bad fit it was.**



For one thing, I had a younger child that I had to either tote along or arrange child care for every week, which made the process a huge pain.

For another, I quickly remembered that while I love individual children, **I am not great with large groups of small children.**

By “not great” I mean that I feel awkward and nervous and twitchy around them and get irritated much more quickly than is fair. There’s a reason I’m not a preschool teacher, after all.

I came to realize that **I’d signed on for this particular gig for all the wrong reasons.** When I was totally honest with myself, I had to admit that I’d done it so that I’d be perceived by the other parents as involved and possibly become part of the “inner circle” of mom volunteers – as well as be closer to my son during a big transition in our lives.

Now, there’s nothing wrong with wanting to spend more time with your child or give your social life a boost. But ideally, volunteer work is more about the service you provide than what you get out of it. **And I wasn’t serving the classroom well.** Not only that, I wasn’t enjoying myself.

Since then, I’ve been a lot more particular about the kinds of volunteer gigs I’ll take on, and I admit that since my family size grew to five kids I haven’t done very much school-oriented volunteering at all.

Volunteer work is a wonderful thing, but it’s even better when the job you take on is a good match for your personality and skill set...and fits in around your other priorities.

But even next fall when Clara enters Kindergarten and I suddenly have a lot more free time on my hands, you can bet I won't be in her classroom very often. It's just not where I most belong – nor where I can do the most good.

Does my story resonate with you?

When little ones go off to preschool or kindergarten, many moms become heavily involved in the classroom or other school projects. And that's understandable! Schools always need helpers, and volunteering in the classroom can be a logical way to use newfound free time and still stay in touch with little ones during the day.

But before you commit yourself to a year's worth of classroom work, you might want to consider whether it's really the right fit for you.

Do you feel called to work with children – you know, *besides your own*? Will you really have as much free time on your hands as you think you will, or are there other priorities (getting your own home in order, earning an income) that need to be worked into your schedule first?

Volunteer work is a wonderful thing, but it's even better when the job you take on is a good match for your personality and skill set...and fits in around your other priorities. Luckily there are so many ways to help out in your community or child's school that you don't have to do something that's a bad match.



Your Challenge: Find Your Volunteer Style

Take out your Beyond Baby Workbook and jot down the answers to the following questions:

- When your child is in school, how would you ideally spend your time?
- How many hours would you like to volunteer?
- How many hours would you like to have free for other activities?
- Are there financial considerations to keep in mind?

What skills would I like to lend to a volunteer position?

Are you good at hands-on activities with groups of small children? Or is there an opportunity to work with older kids, or behind-the-scenes with other adults? Are you a talented writer, organizer, or fundraiser? Are you great at bringing together other parents or leading committees?

Are there opportunities I'm not thinking of?

Schools aren't the only organizations in need of volunteer help. Local after-school organizations, food banks, animal rescues, etc. might be a better fit for your interests and availability. Or maybe you'd do best one-on-one, for example, working with Big Brothers/Big Sisters.



Elementary schools tend to have the greatest parental involvement, but it usually drops off sharply at the middle school level. And yes, your tiny little kindergartener will one day be a lanky seventh-grader! Don't rule out middle, junior and high schools when considering volunteer opportunities.

Now take a look at your answers and use them to create a short list of potential roles you'd like to play, inside your child's school or in the larger community.

Next step? Reach out.

If you want to work in the community, look at organization websites for volunteer information. You can also try a website like volunteermatch.org to look for open positions.

If school is the right place for you, there are probably limitless opportunities to sign up to volunteer – by signing up on back-to-school night, attending a parent-teacher organization meeting, or just asking your child's teacher where she could use help.

Whatever you decide, keep this in mind: service is a wonderful thing, but that doesn't mean you have to leap right into filling all your available time with volunteer work.

Take a little time to ease into those “found” hours to see realistically how much you can fit and what other important activities you’ve been neglecting, but might be able to make room for now, like exercise, eating better, getting your house in shape, or focusing on your career. It all matters. Make sure to prioritize your own self-care as you create your Beyond Baby life!

Challenge Checklist

- ✓ Use workbook or journal to envision ideal volunteering
- ✓ Reach out!
- ✓ Write notes & observations in workbook