

# A Guide to Service-Learning For Middle School Youth



  
**Camp Fire USA**<sup>TM</sup>  
Today's kids. Tomorrow's leaders.

## A Guide to Service-Learning

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The fundamental concepts behind service-learning have long been part of Camp Fire USA's approach to helping children and youth develop life skills and leadership qualities they will need to live positive, productive lives.

Service-learning helps children and adolescents see the relevance of academic and skill-based study, but it does more. It offers a concrete way for them to examine their personal values and strengthen their ethics. In addition, it provides a way to teach the fundamentals of civics and good citizenship—two elements essential in a democracy. As a young

person is developing a sense of responsibility for the welfare of everyone in his or her community, that individual is also gaining self-confidence and the sense that one person really can make a difference.

Although middle school youth are at a particularly receptive age for service-learning projects, they may have fewer opportunities for such activities. In recent years, there has been a noticeable decline in service-learning opportunities in public schools for this age group. Camp Fire USA has long included the elements of service-learning in its existing programs. However, this year service-learning is being expanded, and local councils are being encouraged to create new, high-quality service-learning projects for middle school youth "in their own backyards."

Service-learning also shows great promise for at-risk and disadvantaged youth, engaging them as few other learning approaches can. But this group also may have fewer chances than youth in other situations to participate in service-learning projects. Giving at-risk and disadvantaged youth opportunities to make personal differences in their communities allows them to gain self-confidence, new skills, and more positive outlooks toward the future.

Service-learning is a highly flexible concept. It can be applied in many different forms to target a variety of challenges in any locale. However, to be a true service-learning project and to reap the maximum benefits, the project or program must be well-designed, have specific goals, and have a clear *learning* focus that sets it apart from other community service programs.

This resource guide provides an introduction to service-learning concepts, as well as best practices, field tips, and samples of creative projects. Much of the research available comes from studies of kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup>-grade projects in public school programs. The techniques and research data, however, are applicable to any service-learning program. A list of resources is included at the end of this guide.





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## 1.0 SERVICE-LEARNING: AN OVERVIEW

Service-learning has potential benefits for nearly every age, from kindergarten to college. It is an approach to learning that gives children, adolescents, and young adults opportunities to apply academic skills and knowledge to real-world situations. In doing so, young volunteers gain understanding, see the relevance of theoretical concepts, and gain a sense of confidence in their own abilities. At the same time, they often learn one of the most essential lessons of living in a successful democracy—that every citizen must take personal responsibility for solving the challenges that face his or her community.

In addition to helping adolescents develop specific skills through practice in service-learning projects, service-learning benefits the community. It has been found to be particularly effective with at-risk and disadvantaged youth, who often find traditional learning programs to be boring or irrelevant to their lives. Service-learning projects have been shown to engage the interest of these students, produce clear gains in their academic skills, and leave them with a long-term sense of obligation and responsibility for their communities.<sup>1</sup>

When carefully designed and implemented, service-learning offers benefits for participants of all ages. If quality is lacking at any stage in the program, the outcomes—at least for the youthful participants—are neither impressive nor long-lasting.<sup>2</sup> It is important, therefore, to have a good understanding of what separates service-learning from other forms of community service.

### 1.1 What Is Service-Learning?

When most people hear the term *service-learning*, they immediately think of *community service*. While the two have similarities and both are valuable experiences, there is a distinct difference. The National Service-Learning Partnership offers a particularly good definition of service-learning:



Service-learning is a teaching method that engages young people in solving problems within their schools and communities as part of their academic studies or other type of intentional learning activity. Service-learning helps students master important curriculum content by supporting their making meaningful connections between what they are studying and its many applications. Service-learning also helps young people develop a range of service skills, from acts of kindness and caring, to community stewardship, to civic action.<sup>3</sup>

Clearly, service-learning goes a step further than community service. Community service generally connects volunteers with organizations or projects that require “manpower” to accomplish specific tasks, often for the short term. For example, youth and adults may be asked to help remove litter and debris from a local creek. The sponsoring organization, however, usually does the planning, organizing, and any follow-up. There are benefits to the community and a sense of accomplishment by volunteers. While knowledge may be gained, it is not necessarily the key focus of the activity.

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In service-learning, participants not only perform needed tasks; they also play active roles in identifying, researching, planning, and implementing solutions and then reflecting on the processes and impacts. For example, young volunteers may notice litter along a creek and decide to tackle the problem. In service-learning, they research the issue, then plan and implement a program to address the challenge. They also discuss and analyze the impact of the project and develop a strong sense of civic responsibility along the way. While doing so, they gain confidence and leadership skills.

A critical difference between community service and service-learning is that service-learning projects are usually linked to specific learning objectives and the acquisition of specific skills. In the past, some service-learning projects were less focused, causing some confusion between what constituted a community service project and a service-learning project. Some people thought that as long as a child did a community service project under the auspices of a school, it was service-learning. Today, more stringent standards are being applied to what can rightfully be termed a true service-learning project.

Beyond specific academic and cognitive skills, service-learning also gives young participants equally valuable, less tangible benefits. Young people feel a stronger sense of self-confidence; show a greater interest in civic responsibilities and citizenship issues, such as voting; and demonstrate stronger interpersonal skills and a greater appreciation of diversity. Adolescents who do service-learning also are better prepared for the workplace.<sup>4</sup> They have acquired skills in planning, analysis, teamwork, and leadership, and they have interacted with a wide variety of role models from different backgrounds and occupations.

### 1.2 Different Kinds of Service-Learning Programs

Service-learning *programs* can take many forms.<sup>5</sup> The options include:

- Community-based service.
- Co-curricular programs.
- A service clearinghouse at the school.  
(Students can find service information and options for outside volunteer opportunities.)
- Recognition for community involvement.
- Service within the school.
- Authentic application of classroom learning.
- A community service class.
- School-wide integration into the curriculum  
(most often in elementary schools).
- Community-school partnerships.



Service-learning is often associated with schools and formal education, since true service-learning is designed to link intentional-learning goals with the public service. As a result, much of the research done on service-learning has been conducted with school-based service-learning projects done in public and, to a lesser extent, private schools.

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The service-learning projects in which Camp Fire USA participates generally fall under the heading of community-based service-learning, although many are done in conjunction with local schools. Whether school-based, community-based, or some other format, the same fundamental requirements for a quality program apply. There must be a clear link between the community service project and an intentional, well-developed set of learning objectives and goals. In addition, the project should meet recognized standards/best practices in order to produce a quality program with positive outcomes.

### **Community-Based Service-Learning Offers Extra Incentives**

There are many good reasons for expanding service-learning opportunities in Camp Fire USA's programming, but one that stands out is this: Children and adolescents who participate in community-based programs say they are more likely to continue to volunteer after their initial service-learning experiences are over.<sup>6</sup> In addition, research indicates that, while all well-designed service-learning activities are beneficial, adolescents have more positive attitudes toward voluntary service-learning—such as community-based service-learning—than mandated service-learning, which often occurs in school settings.<sup>7</sup>

### **1.3 What Are the Benefits of Service-Learning?**

When a service-learning program meets certain standards for quality, the benefits can be impressive. If a service-learning program does not meet these standards of quality, the benefits are less impressive and the effects tend to decline relatively rapidly.<sup>8</sup> To learn more about best practices and essential standards for quality service-learning programs, see Section 2 of this guide.

Several years of research into kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup>-grade service-learning programs in the public schools has produced substantial data about specific outcomes (benefits) from service-learning. These outcomes/benefits can be broken into four major categories:

- Academic/Cognitive Benefits.
- Citizenship/Civic Responsibility (including Ethics).
- Social/Interpersonal Skills.
- Resiliency (which has a special impact on disadvantaged and at-risk students).

#### **Academic/Cognitive Benefits**

Research indicates that children and youth who participate in service-learning projects tend to be more cognitively engaged in school, although they may not be any more behaviorally engaged. In essence, they are better able to handle complex information and to problem solve. In addition, they have enhanced writing skills and higher scores in language arts in general as well as higher scores in social studies.<sup>9</sup>

#### **Citizenship/Civic Responsibility and Ethics**

Young people who participate in service-learning projects report greater interest in politics and community issues. They also are more likely to consider voting and even participate more in school elections. Along with a stronger sense of citizenship and civic responsibility, participants in service-learning projects may show a stronger sense of ethics, particularly if an ethics component is built into the service-learning project.<sup>10</sup>

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### **Social/Interpersonal Skills**

Service-learning has been shown to improve self-efficacy, respect for diversity, self-confidence, collaborative skills, and avoidance of at-risk behaviors. In fact, researchers in the social-emotional learning field believe that service-learning is highly effective in promoting five core social-emotional competencies (self-awareness, social awareness, self-management, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making skills) in children and adolescents.<sup>11</sup> As they begin their journeys into adulthood, most middle school youth struggle with these issues.

### **Resiliency**

Resiliency is the ability of a young person to overcome difficult life challenges without turning to behaviors such as drug use, alcohol abuse, and dropping out of school. Service-learning appears to produce youth who are more confident and hopeful about the future and less likely to engage in risky behaviors.<sup>12</sup>

In fact, service-learning appears to have special impact on at-risk and disadvantaged youth. Many students placed in alternative schools find academics boring and see little relationship between classroom studies and the “real” world. Service-learning helps bridge that gap. Participating in good quality service-learning tends to increase the engagement and motivation of disadvantaged students. Research by Brandeis University has shown that the *most* at-risk students saw some of the most positive changes once they were involved in service-learning.<sup>13</sup> They were less bored, felt they were contributing to the community, were generally more engaged in learning, and had become more accepting of diversity.

### **1.4 Service-Learning and Middle School Youth**

Service-learning has been used effectively with all age groups, all the way down to kindergarten. It may, however, be especially appropriate for middle school children. Middle school youth are facing many physical and emotional changes. They are plagued by self-doubt and often frustrated by their “in-between” status—not old enough to be taken seriously by many adults yet feeling more aware of the world and wanting to play active roles in society. In addition, they are at an age when the fear of failure or not fitting in is extreme. To support their exploration and self-development and to build confidence, middle school youth need opportunities to feel greater self-worth, to express their ideas, and to see options they might not have previously considered. Service-learning is ideally suited to meet these needs.

However, the number of school programs for middle school youth has dropped in recent years. In 1999, surveys indicated that up to 32 percent of all American public schools had some form of service-learning program operating, with participation across elementary, middle, and high school levels. By 2004, that participation had dropped to 28 percent, with the largest decline occurring at the middle school level.<sup>14</sup> Many factors may have led to this situation, including the fact that standards for defining service-learning have risen steadily since 1999. Some programs that originally had been called service-learning were technically only community service. Whatever the reason, today there appear to be fewer opportunities for middle school-aged children to participate in service-learning projects at school.

### **1.5 Service-Learning and Camp Fire USA**

Clearly, service-learning is a concept that fits well within the Camp Fire USA approach. Camp Fire focuses on developing strong, confident young people with growing leadership skills and strong personal values.



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Camp Fire USA's small group clubs give children opportunities to get involved in their communities through service projects. Each year approximately 200 Camp Fire youth members receive the Wohelo Award, which is earned by an individual who demonstrates a commitment to Camp Fire by completing four "Reflections". To earn this award, the young person must choose a topic of interest, develop projects related to it, and then advocate on behalf of the topic. Award recipients must "lead, teach, serve, and speak out" regarding their topics.

Camp Fire USA's ongoing teen programs are naturally aligned with many of the standards and benefits of service-learning. Teens in Action, National Youth Forum, Counselor in Training and Youth Advisory Cabinet programs all give youth aged 13–21 opportunities to not only serve but also play active roles in decision making. Allowing young people to make the decisions, guide the process, and make choices—and learn while doing so—has always been Camp Fire's approach. It is also recognized today as a key element in successful, high-quality service-learning projects.

Camp Fire USA's *A Gift of Giving* curriculum was created to facilitate service-learning programs for kindergarten through middle school-aged youth. *A Gift of Giving* provides youth with service-learning opportunities in their communities. Children develop leadership and teamwork skills and greater empathy for others by identifying community needs and opportunities, choosing service projects, implementing the projects, evaluating successes, and reflecting on the meanings derived from the service experiences.

*Teens in Action: Take the Challenge Program Guide* provides a framework for teen service-learning experiences. The principles of the Teens in Action program are based on youth-adult partnerships and learning through empowering experiences. Working with adult partners in a mentoring relationship, teens experience and learn about leadership, communication, planning and the political process. The *Teens in Action Prepare Today—Lead Tomorrow* curriculum leads teens through a community preparedness service-learning experience. Youth assess their communities' emergency preparedness resources and select projects that will best help youth and families become more prepared.



During the summer of 2008, several Camp Fire USA councils participated in the Summer of Service Program, funded by the Corporation for National and Community Service. This service-learning initiative was a campaign to engage more young people, particularly those from disadvantaged circumstances, in service during the summer months. This program had a special emphasis on middle school youth, particularly those who had been identified as at-risk and/or disadvantaged. Projects targeted environmental challenges, social welfare issues, and other clearly identified needs within the local communities.

To help local councils devise service-learning projects that meet the highest standards and produce the maximum benefits, Section 2 of this guide outlines best practices in service-learning and Section 3 offers special tips for working with middle school youth.

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## The Service-Learning Process Cycle

### 1. Investigation and Preparation

Form the service-learning group. Understand service-learning. Identify a "community of focus." Complete a community assessment. Select the need. Identify the project. Reflect on the process. It is vital that youth be involved in the selection and planning of the project.

### 2. Action

Create an action plan. Define the tasks. Determine a time line. Decide roles. Determine resources needed. Recruit community partners. Consider budget and public relations. Reflect on the process. Complete the service-learning project. The project should meet an actual community need and involve direct contact by the youth with the service recipients.

### 3. Formal Reflection

Reflection should be done at each stage of service-learning. This cements the learning process, linking the experience with learning activities. Youth help choose the methods. It involves everyone and uses a variety of techniques: write, read, tell, do. It includes both group and individual reflections.

### 4. Demonstration and Celebration

Conduct culminating activities tied to the service-learning project and determined by the youth. Demonstration allows youth to show what they have learned and how they have made a difference. Celebration recognizes the efforts of all participants. This may lead to future efforts.

### 5. Assessment and Evaluation

Assess what youth have learned. Assess the community impact of the project. Did youth have a meaningful role? What was the impact on the community? What did the project accomplish? What else can be done?

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### 2.0 SERVICE-LEARNING: BEST PRACTICES

Service-learning is a process that tends to be more task-driven than community service. Understanding the service-learning process is critical to designing a quality service-learning program that can produce the best outcomes for both the community and the young volunteers involved. This section looks at how service-learning works, new standards for creating a quality service-learning project, and best practices in general.

#### 2.1 Understanding the Service-Learning Process

Service-learning is a teaching method that combines meaningful service with curriculum- or program-based learning. Schools and organizations use service-learning as a tool to help youth foster civic responsibility, develop leadership skills, increase knowledge, and build stronger academic skills. The service-learning philosophy is *learning by doing through meaningful projects*. Service-learning is different from a community service or service project.

- **Service Project Example:** Picking up trash along a river bank.
- **Service-Learning Project Example:** After doing an assessment of their community, a group of youth discover that trash along a local park's river bank is a problem. The youth determine whom to contact about helping to clean up the river bank, why this area has a lot of trash, and how to keep this from happening again. The youth may talk to a park board about adding signs and a trash container near the river, or they might involve other community groups in solving the problem. The youth group may also agree to monitor the river bank for the next six months to determine if there are other things that need to be done to keep the area clean.

Service-learning can motivate youth to learn and engage in subject matter, acquire important knowledge and skills, and be able to demonstrate their knowledge and skills. There are consistent elements of successful service-learning programs, as described in this information. But the way the service-learning process is organized will depend on the participants, the leadership, the location of the activity, and the motivation of the group.

Service-learning is considered a *constructivist* approach to teaching and learning.<sup>15</sup> Constructivists believe that children should discover knowledge for themselves. They do this by directly applying academic ideas and concepts to problems or challenges, preferably those that are personally and/or socially relevant to them.

Using this concept, service-learning is seen as a process with five basic phases:<sup>16</sup>

1. Investigation and Preparation
2. Action
3. Formal Reflection
4. Demonstration and Celebration
5. Assessment and Evaluation

The diagram on the previous page illustrates the process and the steps to be taken during each phase.



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### 2.2 Reflection: The Critical Element

*Reflection* is one of the elements that sets service-learning apart from traditional community service and other volunteer/civic activities. Reflection is directly linked to cognitive development, enhanced basic skills (writing, reading, and speaking), increased civic knowledge and involvement, and a greater level of compassion and empathy.<sup>17</sup>

Reflection is the process by which adolescents make the connection between what they are *doing* and what they are *learning*. Without this “reflection” phase, service-learning projects are less likely to produce positive outcomes, and adolescents are less likely to retain positive outcomes for any length of time. In fact, they show less concern about the environment, civic issues, and other people when reflection is not a major element in the service-learning process.<sup>18</sup>

To achieve the best results, the reflection element of the service-learning project should:

- Be continuous throughout the service project (occurring before, during, and after the actual service activity).
- Be varied in nature, incorporating various learning styles (visual, auditory, kinesthetic).
- Be cognitively challenging.
- Clearly link the service-learning activities to learning objectives.
- Be designed *with input from the youth involved*, so that they feel ownership of the reflection process.
- Include discussion with peers, mentors, and *those being served*.
- Be designed to test youth assumptions about their values and encourage examination, exploration, and clarification of those values.
- Include continual feedback from adult leaders so youth can improve critical-thinking skills.

The National Youth Leadership Council offers a simple set of three questions to get children and adolescents thinking about the service-learning process:<sup>19</sup>

- **What?** What has happened? How did the youth feel about it? Collect observations.
- **So what?** What is the importance of what took place? How are the participants feeling about it? What have they learned?
- **Now what?** What should happen next? How can participants’ new understanding of the project/situation be channeled into constructive action and change for the future?

### 2.3 Best Practices in Service-Learning

Service-learning is a concept that has been used for many years, and many lessons have been learned. A key lesson appears to be that overall outcomes for young participants in service-learning projects depend on the *quality* of the programs. When service-learning is implemented well, it is a highly effective learning tool—but it is no more effective than any other learning tool if the right conditions are not present.<sup>20</sup>

There has been agreement over the years on some of the essential elements that help determine quality in service-learning projects. Recently, these standards were revised and refined, then published in a new report from the National Youth Leadership Center (NYLC), “K–12 Service-Learning Standards for Quality



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Practice,” by Shelley H. Billig, Ph.D., a well-known researcher and service-learning program evaluator.<sup>21</sup> The report is part of NYLC’s *Growing to Greatness 2008*. It incorporates information from an earlier report entitled “Unpacking What Works in Service-Learning: Promising Research-Based Practices to Improve Student Outcomes” (also by Billig), published in *Growing to Greatness 2007*. A brief outline of the eight core standards or “essential elements” follows.

### 2.4 Best Practices: Eight Core Standards for Service-Learning Projects<sup>22, 23</sup>

Eight core standards for service-learning projects were vetted through a series of “reactor panels” convened nationwide by the National Youth Leadership Council and RMC Research Corporation. For more information about the process, go to [www.nylc.org/standards](http://www.nylc.org/standards).

The eight core standards for service-learning projects are:

- Duration and Intensity
- Link to Curriculum
- Partnerships
- Meaningful Service
- Youth Voice
- Respect for Diversity
- Reflection
- Progress Monitoring



#### Duration and Intensity

Research indicates that service-learning projects need to be of substantial duration. In the classroom, this translates into an entire semester, or approximately 70 hours. One reason for the large number of hours required is that the five phases—investigation and preparation; action; formal reflection; demonstration and celebration; and assessment and evaluation—simply take *time*. Participants must have enough time to adequately address all of the phases if service-learning projects are to have its maximum impact on the young volunteers.

In addition, service projects should be of long-enough duration to actually address the community needs that they have targeted. The adolescents involved need to see the outcomes of their efforts and, in some cases, need time to reflect on and reevaluate their activities. This is an important learning stage of every project. Without enough time to see results and reflect upon them, service-learning participants cannot gain a sense of accomplishment and confidence in their abilities, nor can they connect their experiences to the learning process.

#### Link to Curriculum

As noted earlier, the link between *intentional learning* objectives and *real-world* activities is a critical one in service-learning. Without a clear connection between specific skills/knowledge to be learned and the service-project’s activities, the result is simply a community service project. That is a good thing, but it is not service-learning.

The best service-learning projects have clearly articulated learning goals, are aligned with programmatic curriculum, and help participants learn how to transfer knowledge and skills from one setting to another.

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For the best possible outcomes, young participants should be aware of what the objectives are from the beginning. Participants should play roles in defining the goals and objectives, how they will be addressed in the project, and how they will be measured appropriately.

### Partnerships

Service-learning projects are not done in vacuums. They require partnerships between educators, families, community-based organizations, businesses, and youth. The relationships between all these groups are characterized by shared vision and common goals. Healthy partnerships require frequent, ongoing, substantive communication and the willingness to share knowledge and understanding of community resources, assets, and needs.

The partners themselves must view each other as vital resources. In the end, when service-learning projects succeed, everyone benefits—the youth, the organizations, the communities, and the individuals who receive assistance.

### Meaningful Service

Young people want to feel that what they are doing is relevant, interesting, and important. When they do, they are more likely to be fully engaged in the learning process. Although children and adolescents should be directly involved in selecting projects that are personally relevant to them, they should be guided toward projects that are appropriate for their ages and developmental abilities.

Young participants feel a stronger sense of accomplishment when they can see overall results or at least results for different phases of a project. For example, it would be difficult for any group, let alone adolescents, to solve the problem of homelessness in their community. However, if they were to focus on a specific aspect of homelessness, they could design a service project around a smaller, more manageable goal that could produce measurable outcomes. Research shows that students have a greater sense that their efforts have been meaningful if they see tangible results from smaller, more manageable projects that produce measurable outcomes.

Leaders must also help their young participants gain *flexibility* from performing service projects. Few things in life go smoothly from start to finish. When tackling community issues that are often complex and longstanding, there will inevitably be complications or the need for additional research, planning, or even redesign of an activity or process. While such problems may look like failures to adolescents (and even adult leaders), participants should learn to view them as part of the overall learning process.<sup>24</sup>

### Youth Voice

Many young people are taught early in life that their voices have less value than those of adults. Some conform to that view, while others rebel. One of the most powerful attributes of service-learning is that it encourages adolescents to express their ideas in a carefully guided process that teaches them to do so within appropriate—and *constructive*—boundaries. Young participants should be involved in generating ideas for service-learning, making decisions throughout the service-learning project, and evaluating the quality and effectiveness of the project. In addition, throughout the project, they should work with adult leaders to create an environment conducive to trust and open expression of ideas.

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Camp Fire USA believes in youth voice as the foundation of the adult-youth partnership that is present in every Camp Fire program. Through the program design, youth voice becomes evident as participants have increasing decision-making power.

For some adults, giving youth a voice in decision-making is an intimidating concept. When a service-learning project does not produce the outcomes expected, it may well be because the adult leader/teacher has limited the involvement of adolescents in the planning or other critical stages of the project. At the same time, young people are often shy or wary about expressing their ideas, especially if they have had little opportunity to do so before or they have not been taken seriously. It is especially important for youth to have chances to work directly with community leaders and other stakeholders. By doing so, they learn their ideas can be taken seriously—and community leaders realize that youth can be a vital force in addressing community challenges.

Studies have shown that when youth were given opportunities to voice their own opinions, they became more articulate at doing so and began to see themselves as having power to make changes. They also showed an increased sense of belonging and improved interactions with peers and teachers.

### Respect for Diversity

Service-learning activities often put adolescents in contact with those who hold different beliefs and have very different lifestyles. The youth may meet these people in their own project groups, among community members partnering in the service-learning program, and/or among recipients of the services. These situations provide unique opportunities for learning about diversity and gaining respect for different views and lifestyles.

Clearly, the adult leaders play key roles in setting examples and discussing negative thinking, such as stereotyping—but the best service-learning projects teach respect for diversity by design. Leaders focus on developing projects around activities that not only encourage the adolescents to serve but also *to learn from those they are serving*. This helps overcome stereotyping and adolescents learn to value the diverse backgrounds of both those offering and those receiving service. Research has shown that the explicit teaching of respect for diversity produces many benefits for young people, in terms of civic behavior and as well as development of personal character.



For example, when helping the elderly do simple tasks, such as writing letters or learning about the computer, adolescents may be tempted to see themselves as the givers and the older people solely as recipients. But if the service-learning project includes taking oral histories from these older individuals, the young participants may discover that the service recipients have a wealth of knowledge and skills from which young volunteers can benefit.

### Reflection

As noted earlier, Reflection is a core element in the service-learning process. To enhance their

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understanding and the long-term benefits from the project, young volunteers need to be encouraged to think deeply about the issues involved, about their own attitudes and values and how they may be changing, and what their roles are in responding to community challenges.

Reflection activities should be challenging and use a variety of verbal, written, artistic, and nonverbal activities to demonstrate understanding and, hopefully, a change in participants' attitudes, skills, and/or knowledge. They should be encouraged to examine their own ideas and values. Powerful results occur when service-learning participants are challenged to engage in *thinking about their own thinking and reasoning processes*.

The more deeply young people are encouraged to examine their experiences, the more likely they are to value the experiences and be more involved in learning about civics and community issues.<sup>25</sup>

### Progress Monitoring

There are many ways for young participants to collect evidence of progress toward the goals of the service-learning project. They should also be interested in collecting evidence of the quality of the results. In addition, participants should be communicating the results to the larger community, sharing their understanding and knowledge gained with policy makers and community leaders.

The youth involved in the project might conduct surveys, make a count of participants, or use other measures to see what is actually taking place during the project. This gives the participants a sense of achievement and provides information necessary for any realignment or readjustment of activities and processes. Besides proving the impact of the project, this information also should be used by the leaders and the adolescents involved, to make improvements in service-learning activities. When information, data, and evaluations are used to improve the service process, the result tends to be stronger outcomes for the participants as well.

It is perfectly acceptable for participants to discover that something is not working as well as they had hoped. This provides an authentic life experience and offers an opportunity for more analysis, reflection, planning, and additional implementation to try a new approach—and measure results again. The real key is to use the information gathered to assess the progress toward specific goals, to support improvement, and to ensure sustainability of the project's impacts.<sup>26</sup>

### 2.5 Best Practices: Additional Factors

There are other factors beyond these eight essential standards that can affect the quality of the service-learning experience. In student surveys, the highest outcomes were associated with many of the previously listed items as well as with the following:<sup>27</sup>

- **Experience/practice of the adult leader/teacher.** It has been noted that not all adult leaders are experienced or comfortable with the service-learning model for teaching. Some are not comfortable with the idea of letting adolescents have strong voices and roles in the selection, design, implementation, or measurement of service projects. Those teachers/leaders with the longest experience in using service-learning as a teaching tool have significantly higher scores in some areas for quality service-learning projects.



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- **Type of service project involved.** Students who engage in direct service (to individuals, such as tutoring or visiting seniors) seem to show particular benefits, but for some reason, the results do not hold as long as the results for those students who were involved in indirect service (such as fundraising or research) during that time. Students who engage in political or civic action, such as circulating a petition or other form of advocacy, have highest scores in civic knowledge and disposition, while those who do both research and advocacy have highest scores in academics as well as civics and efficacy.
- **Intentionality.** Specific outcomes tend to be the product of specific intentions or objectives. While almost all well-designed, high-quality service-learning projects produce some significant academic and interpersonal benefits, those with specific objectives produce more beneficial outcomes. For example, service projects with specific civic-knowledge objectives produce the highest scores for civic involvement, just as those with ethics components show more outcomes related to developing a sense of values and ethics.
- **Quality elements.** The higher the quality of the service-learning program, the higher the outcomes. Thus, to produce maximum benefits, a service project must be a true *service-learning* project, developed with the eight essential elements (or standards) described previously, rather than just a community service project or other type of volunteer/charitable activity.

### 2.6 Best Practices: Avoiding a Tempting Pitfall

In recent years, there has been some discussion about the *missionary ideology*, which tends to arise in some service projects by design or accident.<sup>28</sup> This term refers to having a focus on doing something *for* or *to* the service recipients, rather than *with* them. Encouraging young people to understand the difference and helping them plan for service projects that respect service recipients and from which they gain knowledge is a part of teaching true respect for diversity.

It may be very tempting for middle school youth—as it would be for anyone—to think that they are doing something for others in a service-learning project without being changed themselves. That attitude can undermine the effectiveness of the project as well as the outcomes for the young participants. To overcome this challenge, service-learning projects should be carefully designed to help volunteers recognize that they can learn much from those they serve.<sup>29</sup>

In the previously mentioned example of middle school youth helping senior citizens, it was noted that the tendency might be for the young people involved to think they are doing something *for* the seniors that the seniors cannot do for themselves. If so, this would tend to make the young participants assume a missionary ideology toward the recipients and might lead to other negative attitudes, such as stereotyping. However, if there is a distinct sense of working *with* the seniors to address a need, and if the young people involved experience a benefit in return from the senior recipients



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(such as learning from them through an oral history project or some other project-designed element), then the youth are more likely to see that they, themselves, have also learned and changed as a result of their service. The critical element is to design a service project in which it is possible for young participants to work *with* the service recipients, rather than just doing something *to* or *for* them.

Two of the essential standards for quality, *duration* and *meaningful service*, are also related to missionary ideology in two respects.

- Service-learning projects should include adequate time spent on the project.
- Service-learning projects should have long-term impact in the community.



Most community needs are longstanding and complex. Few can be solved with just an afternoon's effort. If they do not spend adequate time on the service project, young participants may think they can solve the challenge by simple means. This does not encourage much reflection or problem solving and probably does not produce substantial change in their outlook or commitment to community issues. Unfortunately, this may be the unintended result of some community service projects, such as cleaning up litter from a creek bank for one afternoon. That solves the problem for a day, but over time, the littering may continue unless a longer-term solution is found and the source of the problem is examined and analyzed.

The amount of time spent on a service-learning project and the sense of meaningful activity that produces long-term, visible outcomes for the service recipients are directly related to positive outcomes for youth involved in service-learning.<sup>30</sup> Overall, young participants learn that the world is more complex than they thought, and they gain a deeper respect for diversity and the challenges that others face.

### 2.7 Engaging Youth Volunteers With Disabilities

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s words, "Everybody can be great because everybody can serve," are still true. Inclusion and diversity are the cornerstones of the service ethic. It is important to view youth and adults with disabilities as valuable individuals who can serve others, rather than people who only receive services.

The publication *Effective Practices Guide to Creating Inclusive and Accessible Days of Service*<sup>31</sup> is available at [www.YSA.org/programs/tipsheets](http://www.YSA.org/programs/tipsheets). It will help address the most common challenges to recruiting persons with disabilities to engage in volunteering. For example:

- **Assessing organizational readiness:** Sometimes the most difficult obstacles to surmount involve attitudes, such as prejudice and stereotyping. Evaluate the group's sensitivity to and

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knowledge about persons with disabilities.

- **Making meeting and project spaces accessible:** While it may seem difficult, small changes can make a big difference in allowing persons with disabilities to participate. Find out if meeting locations are wheelchair accessible. Is there a need for a sign language interpreter? What are other possibilities that should be considered?
- **Interacting with persons with disabilities:** The key to ensuring a successful service project experience for everyone is putting *people* first. Volunteers with disabilities are no different from those without disabilities. Like all volunteers, they want to give their time and energy to improve their communities.
- **Partnering with organizations that reach persons with disabilities:** Persons with disabilities can be found in the same places as able-bodied persons—in schools, community organizations, and workplaces. There are many organizations that exist specifically to help those with disabilities integrate into everyday life. These groups can help recruit persons with disabilities and involve them more effectively.
- **Creating promotional materials in alternative forms:** Make sure your message is accessible to persons with disabilities. Learn alternative formats to make Web sites, printed material, and spoken messages easier for people with disabilities to use.
- **Creating an inclusive event:** The primary step in creating an inclusive event is to assess and understand what skills and tasks will be involved for each activity. Most activities can be adapted to make them accessible to all volunteers.

The following Web site resources have more information on how to engage youth with disabilities:

- Best Buddies International, [www.bestbuddies.org](http://www.bestbuddies.org).
- National Organization on Disability, [www.nod.org](http://www.nod.org).
- March of Dimes, [www.modimes.org](http://www.modimes.org).
- United Cerebral Palsy, [www.ucp.org](http://www.ucp.org).
- AmeriCorps Program Directors Resource Guide to Disability Inclusion, [www.nationalserviceresources.org/filemanager/download/593/disabilguid.pdf](http://www.nationalserviceresources.org/filemanager/download/593/disabilguid.pdf).
- American Foundation for the Blind, [www.afb.org](http://www.afb.org).





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### 3.0 SERVICE-LEARNING FOR MIDDLE SCHOOL YOUTH

Middle school-aged youth are at a critical stage of development and anxious to play active roles in the world. Service-learning is particularly suited to both their academic needs and their personal/social needs. Yet, as mentioned previously, this age group may have fewer opportunities to participate due to a decline in service-learning programs in the public schools.

In recent years, Camp Fire USA has focused specifically on the needs of middle school-aged adolescents. The 2008 Summer of Service service-learning programs were designed with this age group in mind, especially those considered at risk and or disadvantaged. Research indicates that even a small amount of time per week spent in service to others (not necessarily *service-learning* activities) can produce big results for this group, closing the gap in academic achievement between higher- and lower-income students. This may be one reason that principals of low-income schools are more likely than other principals to believe that service-learning has a positive impact on a student's success in school.<sup>32</sup>

When children learn that they can accomplish things, they tend to become more interested in tackling challenges at school and in life. They recognize that they are capable—and with service-learning's strong focus on cognitive and skills development, they actually *are* more capable—of taking on the challenges life throws at them.

### 3.1 Service-Learning Objectives for Middle School Youth

Much of the Information in this section was adapted from *Service-Learning as an Integrated Experience in Middle School Education: An Introduction to Resources and Information*.<sup>33</sup>

The National Commission on Resources for Youth issued a study, *New Roles for Early Adolescents*, in which it recommended that schools develop programs which specifically enable middle school youth to:

- Test and discover new skills.
- Develop a sense of competence, an "antidote to the self doubt of this period."
- Socialize and try out different roles.
- Be exposed to a variety of role models—adults who represent different backgrounds and occupations.
- Speak and be heard, so they can make a difference.
- Test their developing morality and value structure in authentic situations.
- Have tangible or visible outcomes, either of a short-term nature or divisible into clearly defined stages.
- Share in decision making within appropriate parameters.



Normally, it would be difficult to address all of these objectives in a traditional classroom setting, but it can be done through service-learning, in ways that are engaging, interesting, fun, and effective.



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### 3.2 Special Considerations for Middle School Youth

Middle school youth are more cognitively developed than elementary school children. As a result, they not only have more opinions and ideas, they also want more respect—but they are not yet as competent or articulate as high school students. As a result, they face some unique challenges and need a little extra attention to help maximize their service-learning experiences.

When designing service-learning activities for middle school youth, it is important to remember that they are not yet as secure in their own identities as high school students. They may need extra help in preparing for service, to give them confidence, and extra support in getting community leaders to take them seriously. To give these youth optimum opportunities for meaningful service-learning experiences, consider the following approaches:

- Use *role playing* as a method for youth participants to prepare for what they might face during the service-learning experience.
- Ask community agencies or volunteer coordinators of organizations involved in the project if they have orientation sessions available.
- Be an advocate for young participants when communicating with community leaders. Encourage them to take youth seriously and explain how important it is for young participants to have voices and direct participation in the project.

### Reflection Considerations for the Middle School Youth

As noted earlier, reflection is a critical element in successful service-learning and needs to be cognitively challenging yet age-appropriate. Middle school youth are more developed in their understanding of the world than elementary school children but not yet as sophisticated in thinking as high school students. How can an adult leader target cognitively challenging reflection questions for them?

To help refine what level of reflection the middle school-aged child should be able to handle, here are some insights for parents from the Learning to Give Web site.<sup>34</sup>

By middle school, your child should be able to define and discuss the following philanthropic ideas:

- Philanthropy as the sharing of time, talent, and treasure, throughout history and from around the world.
- The “common good” and examples of it.
- The roles of the government, nonprofit, and business sectors.
- The relationship of a market economy to philanthropic giving.
- Why and where people have sacrificed for the benefit of an unknown other person or group.
- How the separation of church and state has placed all religious institutions in the independent sector.
- Organizations in the independent/nonprofit sector that speak for minority groups. (Advocacy is one of the many important roles of the nonprofit sector in a democracy—protection of minority groups from the potential tyranny of the majority.)
- A corporation that has provided a philanthropic service to the community.
- Different jobs available in the nonprofit sector.
- What is meant by the term a *civil society*?

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### 3.3. Getting Started: Preparation, Action, Reflection

Getting started in planning, implementing, and reflecting on a service-learning project for middle school youth without previous experience may seem like a daunting challenge. The projects themselves are substantial and can be complex in terms of steps and phases. But the results are well worth the effort.

Following are some basic tips specifically designed for use with middle school youth on how to prepare for the project, what types of meaningful action can be incorporated, and simple questions to get the reflection process started.



#### Identification and Preparation

Preparing for the service-learning project is a process of steps. Following are six steps to get a group of middle school youth started.

1. Identify a *learning focus* or a *community of focus*. Together as a group, answer the following questions: "Why are we doing this?" "What learning objectives do we want to learn through this project?" "Is there a specific topic area on which we want to focus, such as the environment, community preparedness, or youth programs?"
2. Identify and analyze problems in the community by doing a community assessment. Sample activities: brainstorm ideas; collect newspaper articles; interview community leaders, teachers, or parents; survey service agencies/organizations or students; take a walk or drive around the community to look for community problems.
3. Select the need and then identify a service project that links to creating a long-term solution to the problem. Look for activities in which goals and needs come together; list and post possibilities on the board; discuss pros and cons; decide on the final service project.
4. Plan the project. Break the job down into steps, time line, resources, and job assignments.
5. Identify skills needed for the project.
6. Prepare and train for service.

#### Action

There are basically only three kinds of meaningful action that can be incorporated into a service-learning project. They are:

- *Direct service*, such as tutoring, mentoring, and helping the elderly.

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- *Indirect service*, such as drives, collections, fundraisers, clean-up, construction, and environmental projects.
- *Advocacy*, such as lobbying, speaking, and performing.

Decide which kinds of action would be appropriate or most effective for the project. Service-learning projects often incorporate more than one type of action, and many use all three.

### Formal Reflection

Five simple questions can help get middle school youth thinking about what is taking place and how it is changing their views of the world:

- Is our project going the way we want it to go?
- Have my feelings about this issue changed?
- What difference has my service made?
- How did I apply my classroom learning to this service project?
- What else can we do to help with this issue?



These questions can be further refined and deepened as the project goes forward. They should be revisited throughout all phases of the project, and young participants should be encouraged to see how their answers have changed over time.

### 3.4 Tips From the Field

Following are some helpful suggestions from individuals with experience working directly with middle-school youth on service-learning projects. Some of these overlap the best practices discussed earlier but provide additional insight.

The following list was adapted from *Service-Learning as an Integrated Experience in Middle School Education: An Introduction to Resources and Information*.<sup>35</sup>

#### **Provide safe and successful experiences.**

Consider safety and supervision requirements, especially when young volunteers are with younger children or frail adults. This helps ensure that the participants have successful and positive experiences. Also, be sure to determine if the sponsoring organizations have adequately met all liability requirements.

#### **Remember the details.**

Middle school students need support in remembering details, especially in regard to equipment, time of arrival, and arrangements for transportation. Having checklists, task lists, and action plans can help this age group manage all the details.

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### **Encourage participation.**

It is important for each member of the service project group to have a role to play. Subdivide groups into a variety of tasks to ensure that everyone is actively involved and that the young participants have peer support.

### **Build on special interests.**

Most types of service-learning projects have benefits, but middle school youth will be particularly interested in those projects that show visible results. These might include environmental projects, projects with children (especially younger children or children with disabilities, and activities that involve sports), working to beautify the local community, or providing something for special needs children, (such as a playground). Many groups focus on projects with senior citizens, but these need to be carefully designed, since they require oversight and effort to ensure that children do not end up seeing the seniors as stereotypes.



### **Form inclusive groups.**

Youth in this age group are very oriented toward friends or other people from their own schools or age groups. A participant may be more comfortable working on a project with another young person or a group and feel more confident than if he or she were working alone. Consider this carefully when helping these youth plan projects.

### **Give recognition.**

Recognizing the efforts and results of the young people is important. It gives them a sense of accomplishment and self-confidence and shows that others appreciate and value their efforts. Many communities are providing opportunities for students to speak about what they have learned, but other forms of celebration—such as newspaper articles, displays on bulletin boards, newsletter articles, and slide shows—can be useful, too.

### **Clarify commitment/time constraints.**

Sometimes an adolescent comes upon an idea or project that particularly excites him or her but demands a substantial amount of time from everyone involved. These experiences are often most powerful for preadolescents, who need to test their limits, but leaders need to decide if the youth and leadership can really handle the extra work. Seek help from parents, college students, or community leaders.

### **Gain support from students, parents, and community members.**

Invite leaders, parents, and community members to attend informative planning meetings. This helps clarify roles and responsibilities, as well as expectations and time lines, of service-learning projects. Parents may be able to offer coordination of other volunteers, transportation, and help in finding sponsors. Community members can be involved in planning so that it provides the greatest impact and adequately prepares students for the tasks ahead.



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### Be flexible.

There is no way to completely control the results of these types of “experiential education.” Often things may not go as planned. The children and adolescents involved need to understand that such occurrences are not necessarily failures but rather opportunities to learn. Both the youth and their leaders should be open to questions and concerns that have not been anticipated and should be comfortable bringing in resource people who can help.

### 3.5 Sample Middle School Youth Service-Learning Projects <sup>36, 37, and 38</sup>

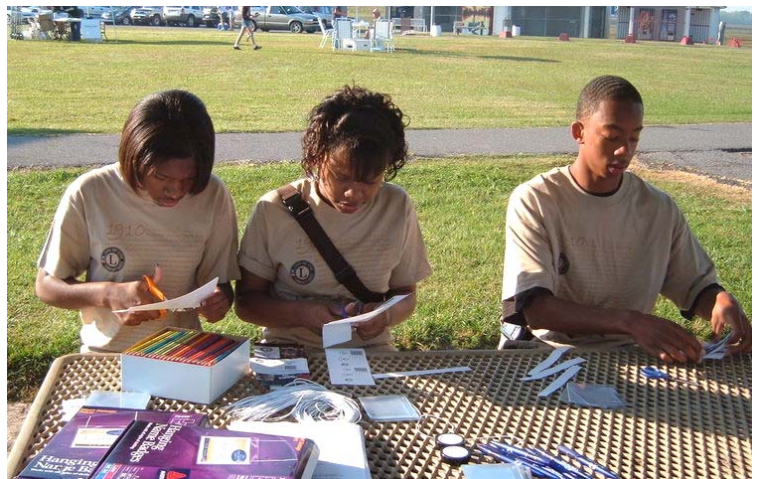
The possibilities are limitless when considering what to do for a middle school youth project. Environmental, historical, social, and political issues are all potential projects. The following samples illustrate the range of ideas as well as the very real power of young adolescents to create positive changes in their communities. If an organization is going to ask community leaders to take these young people seriously, that organization must first recognize the capabilities of middle school youth.

- Students in Salt Lake City, Utah, helped clean up a hazardous waste site, passed two new laws, and planted hundreds of trees in their commitment to improve the environment.
- While eighth-graders in San Antonio, Texas, were serving as teachers to elementary school students, their own reading levels improved and the dropout rate was reduced from 86 percent to 6 percent.
- In Portland, Maine, a middle school class collaborated with Immigration and Naturalization Services to host a swearing-in ceremony at their school for more than 30 new citizens.
- Middle school students in Pennsylvania learned about health consequences of poor nutrition and lack of exercise, then educated their neighbors at health fairs, created a cookbook of healthful recipes, and established a fresh produce stand for the school and community.
- Facing a growing threat of buckthorn (an invasive shrub), middle school students in one class did an issue analysis, a community education program, and cleanup projects. The students divided themselves into action groups to research and respond to the problem, with each group focusing on one of the tasks needed to accomplish the project—educating elementary students, conducting public surveys, contacting media outlets, and designing a brochure for a river bluff specialist. In the spring, the students helped the county parks department with a buckthorn removal project.



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- A group of seventh- and eighth-graders decided to try to stop the spread of the West Nile Virus in their community. They began by conducting Internet research and reviewing information from the Department of Health and the state's River Basin Commission. From their research, they discovered that there was no cure for the virus but that members of the community, if educated, could help prevent its spread. The students surveyed the community about their knowledge of how West Nile is spread and created a brochure, containing a "backyard checklist" for eliminating mosquitoes, which was distributed to local residents and at a nearby mall. PowerPoint presentations were used to educate community groups, schools, and participants at a statewide environmental conference. Finally, a collaboration with the local cable company resulted in a public service video documenting the students' research, actions, and recommendations.
- Middle school students designed and implemented a sensory obstacle course for a physical education class for blind students. The young participants researched and learned what it was like to be physically challenged. In doing so, they gained respect for the challenges that others faced, and went on to design games that were appropriate for both children and adults who were visually impaired.



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### 4.0 RESOURCE GUIDE

#### 4.1 MAJOR ORGANIZATIONS

Following is a list of organizations involved in service-learning and their Web sites.

##### **The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement**

This organization promotes research on the civic and political engagement of Americans aged 15 through 25. [www.civicyouth.org](http://www.civicyouth.org)

##### **Corporation for National and Community Service**

This independent federal agency was created to connect Americans, of all ages and backgrounds, with opportunities to give back to their communities and their nation. [www.nationalservice.gov](http://www.nationalservice.gov)

##### **Learn and Service America**

A program of the Corporation for National and Community Service, Learn and Serve America supports institutions and community-based organizations across the country through grants, training, and technical assistance. [www.LearnAndServe.gov](http://www.LearnAndServe.gov)

##### **Learning to Give**

This organization educates youth about the importance of philanthropy, the civic society sector, and civic engagement. [www.learningtogive.org](http://www.learningtogive.org)

##### **National Service Learning Clearinghouse**

The Clearinghouse maintains a Web site that offers timely information and relevant resources to support service-learning programs, practitioners, and researchers. The Clearinghouse operates national e-mail discussion lists to encourage discussion and exchange of service-learning ideas. It also maintains an ever-growing library collection that is available to Learn and Serve America grantees and subgrantees. [www.servicelearning.org](http://www.servicelearning.org)

##### **National Service-Learning Partnership**

Founded in 2001, this network of more than 10,000 teachers, educators, parents, policy makers, young people, and business and community leaders, dedicated to advancing service-learning as a core part of every young person's education. [www.service-learningpartnership.org](http://www.service-learningpartnership.org)

##### **National Youth Leadership Council**

An early leader in service-learning, the National Youth Leadership Council is dedicated to advocating, developing standards, and assisting other service-learning support organizations. [www.nylc.org](http://www.nylc.org)

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