

Involvement

Reap the Rewards of Being a PTO Volunteer

by Heidi Smith Luedtke, Ph.D.

You're busy. And the drama in some school parent-teacher organizations (PTO) rivals reality TV. But experienced educators and veteran volunteers say the rewards are worth the work. Read on to find out what's in it for you.

Insight

Relying on the school newsletter is like navigating a new part of town with a vintage map from your grandma's glove compartment. Parent volunteers learn what's really happening at school, and — more importantly — why.

Financial planner Jarvis Reeves has been involved in the PTO for eight years. These groups aren't just about cookie sales and carnivals, he says. "If you truly get involved, you will have a deeper knowledge of your role as a parent, citizen and community member."

Reeves is proud of what he learned about how schools are funded, and he recommends asking about the reasons behind school policies and practices. You might find out that fundraising events like the father-daughter dance "pay for necessities that the district either cannot afford, or is not allowed to pay for," he explains. Insider info gives you a better understanding of how your school does its job and what you can do to improve it.

Advocacy

"Being able to have a voice and make a difference" is extremely gratifying, says Vanessa Muskopf, former

fashion industry executive turned stay-at-home mom. Working in the PTO is a similar dynamic to working with professional colleagues, she says, and you don't have to be on the Board to have an impact.

Mompreneur Maureen Pollack of Stamford, encourages newcomers to start in the role of class parent. "The responsibility is not so high and you get to know the teacher on a personal level," she says. You may also see kids' behaviors and learning in the classroom or on field trips. This puts you in a position to speak up and be heard.

Involvement may inspire you to push for more outdoor play, arts and music enrichment, or to champion book drives to stock the school library. You may even become politically engaged.

When Reeves learned districts were being forced to cut back because they were trying to staff schools based on estimated budgets, he joined PTO peers on a trip to the state capitol. "We showed [decision makers] how these cuts affected children in our area and invited them to school functions so they could get a firsthand glimpse," he said. Legislators changed their votes as a result.

Personal Development

The parent organization is a perfect place to use your talents and build new skills. "Remember that you are volunteering," Pollack says. "You don't have to be perfect." And it's okay to try something new.

After one year as class mom, Pollack became vice president. "It sounds like



a huge job, but I would recommend it to even a beginner," she says. The VP is right in the middle of the action, but (mostly) outside the spotlight. Surprise yourself by stretching beyond your comfort zone.

Pollack found the most fulfillment as school auction chair. "I did it solo the first time," she says, noting that she is not a good delegator. She estimates she worked two hours a day, three or four days a week, for five months on the auction. "I got a little bit addicted to pitching local business owners — 'You donate an item; I put it in the auction and do free advertising for you.' — and I saw the symbiotic relationship between the school and the businesses," Pollack says. Raising nearly \$10,000 gave her a feeling of accomplishment that she had missed in her stay-home mom role. Even better, the experience gave Pollack the confidence to start her own business.

Community Spirit

"We live in a very fragmented world with very few direct connections to other people," says former principal and PTO volunteer Richard Horowitz, Ed.D. A school with engaged parents and administrators can become a social

hub in the community.

Engagement means more than showing up to school assemblies and PTO meetings, Horowitz says. There has to be a lot of listening on both sides. "Try to create a discussion with the administrators so you can make sure things are rolling along in the right direction. This is your chance to take ownership of the school and model community participation for your child," he says.

The best reward may come from your kids. "They will see a totally different side of you," Reeves says. "There are not enough adjectives to describe the feeling when your child is proud to see you on their campus." Muskopf echoes this experience. "My daughter is so proud to say, 'My mom runs pumpkin patch!' Her face lights up when she sees me involved in school events. There is nothing better than that!"

Friendship

The people you meet can become lifetime contacts and friends, Reeves says, noting his former PTO pals continue to refer business to him, even though they no longer volunteer together.

Muskopf says she has "met amazing

women and made great friends that [she] probably wouldn't have gotten to know because [their] kids are in different grades or on different schedules." The people who are involved really want to be involved, and that makes it fun to collaborate. Social relationships reduce stress and make your life richer.

And you don't have to be a social butterfly to benefit. Volunteering is a great way for wallflowers to blossom, says communication skills expert Christa Melnyk Hines, author of *Confidently Connected: A Mom's Guide to a Satisfying Social Life*. "Consider taking a leadership position or volunteering to coordinate the book fair," Hines advises. "Having a defined role and purpose allows relationships to grow organically, because you'll be working with the same group of people on a consistent basis." Signing up to pitch in periodically does not offer the same connection-building benefits. This year, say 'yes' to a specific job that suits your strengths. ♥

Heidi Smith Luedtke loves to see her kids at school, where they behave more politely than at home.

Steps to PTO Volunteer Success

- *Know your goals.* Do you want to make friends, build skills, or model your commitment to education? Be clear about why you're choosing to participate.
- *Decide how much time to give.* When you hit your limit, firmly and politely say 'no.'
- *Be engaged.* Real participation is rewarding; passive participation is not. Give more to get more.
- *Speak up.* Diverse ideas enrich the community and lead to better solutions.
- *Reach out.* Asking for help boosts your impact and gives others a chance to shine.
- *Be friendly and respectful.* We all see the world through different lenses.

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