

# From Transactional to Transformational:

## Creating Authentic Service Learning Experiences for Kids

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### Transactional vs. Transformational

Service Learning needs to support kids' growth beyond a "collection of hours", "what do I get", and "does this count" mentality and develop a "what is needed and how can I help?" leadership mindset.

Service Learning demands an intellectual understanding of the systemic issues of injustice and barriers to access and power that result in inequity. Paired with charitable giving and understanding this knowledge, this "learning", makes the service work capable of CHANGING the volunteers that participate in it. This makes them agents of change in society.

### Goals of Service Learning

- Foster a curiosity about others and skills to question and investigate the reasons for barriers to access (What has happened in the past?)
- Equip young people with the practical skills and experience needed to lead activities that support their communities (What can we do right now?)
- Develop the spiritual and emotional strength found in morally and civically responsible young people (How will we act moving forward?)

### Three Fundamental Parts of a Service Learning Experience

1. Preparation and Education - Ask "why" is this work needed.
2. Work of Direct Service - Do the work and allow the students to lead.
3. Reflection and Prayer - Consider how all the people involved were changed and what happens now.

**"Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms." 1 Peter 4:10**

## Step 1- Preparation and Education Questions and Prompts

### Elementary School Prompts/Activities (Grades K–5)

1. What does it mean to help someone?
2. How do you feel when you help others?
3. Who are people or animals in our community that might need help?
4. Have you ever done something kind for someone else? What did you do?
5. Why do you think it's important to care about others?
6. What are some ways kids can make a difference?
7. What do you already know about this group or organization?
8. What questions do you have about the people or animals they help?
9. How would you like to help if you could do anything?
10. If you could tell a friend why helping is important, what would you say?

**Read a Picture Book Related to the Issue** - (e.g., homelessness, hunger, caring for animals)

- Follow with a discussion or drawing activity: *"How can we help?"*

**Create a "Helping Hands" Mural**

- Each student traces a hand and writes or draws a way they can help others. **Watch a Short**

**Video or Virtual Tour of the Organization**

- Use visuals to introduce the space and the people involved.

**Role-Play Scenarios**

- Practice kindness, inclusion, or asking how to help someone in need.

**Make Welcome or Thank You Cards**

- For people being served, volunteers, or staff at the organization.

**Pray Together for the People They Will Serve**

- Connect to faith and compassion with simple intentions.

### Middle School Prompts/Activities (Grades 6-8)

1. What does "service" mean to you? How is it different from just helping out?
2. Why do you think people start organizations to serve others?
3. Who are the people this organization serves, and what might their needs be?
4. What are some challenges people in our community face?
5. How do you think this service project will affect you?
6. What talents or skills do you have that could help someone?
7. Why is it important to learn about the people we are serving before we serve?
8. What do you hope to learn or experience from this service project?
9. How could this service make a lasting impact?
10. What questions do you have about this organization or the issue it addresses?

**Visit the Organization's Website**

- Have students take notes: What is their mission? Who do they help? How?

**Make a K-W-L Chart**

(*Know – Want to Know – Learned*) about the issue or population served.

**Explore News Articles or Stories**

- Choose age-appropriate current events or personal stories related to the issue.

**Interview a Staff Member (Live or Virtual)**

- Prepare student-led questions to understand real-world needs and impact.

**Map the Issue**

- Where does this problem exist in the world or in your own community?

**Discuss a Scripture Passage or Catholic Social Teaching Principle**

- Tie in faith-based responsibility to serve (e.g., *Matthew 25:35-40*).

**Create a "My Gifts" Inventory**

- Help students identify personal strengths and how they can use them in service.

**High School Prompts/Activities (Grades 9-12)**

1. How does service relate to justice, equity, or compassion?
2. What is the mission of this organization, and why is it important?
3. Who are the stakeholders in this issue? How are their voices represented?
4. What biases or assumptions do you bring to this project?
5. How can we ensure our service is respectful, ethical, and meaningful?
6. In what ways do you hope to grow as a result of this experience?
7. How does this organization address the root causes of the issue it serves?
8. How might your participation in this project lead to long-term change—in you or in the community?
9. What are the potential impacts (positive and negative) of our service?
10. How will you reflect on and share what you've learned from this experience?

**Conduct Background Research on the Justice Issue**

- Assign small groups to explore topics like housing insecurity, refugee support, poverty

**Explore the Organization's Website and Annual Report**

- Identify their mission, values, programs, and how they measure impact.

**Journal Prompt: "What do I assume about this issue or group?"**

- Encourage self-awareness and humility before engaging in service.

**Analyze a Relevant Case Study or Supreme Court Case**

- Tie in civics, ethics, or policy angles if relevant to the issue.

**Prepare Questions for a Guest Speaker or Site Visit**

- Focus on understanding long-term solutions, challenges, and ways to contribute.

**Catholic Social Teaching Reflection**

- Break into small groups and apply one CST principle (like solidarity or dignity of work) to the upcoming project.

## Step 2 - Work of Direct Service

1. **Food Drive + Hunger Education**
  - Collect and sort non-perishable items while learning about food insecurity.
2. **Community Clean-Up Project**
  - Clean parks, schoolyards, or neighborhoods while learning about environmental stewardship.
3. **Visit and Build Relationships with Seniors**
  - Write letters, create art, or perform music for nursing home residents.
4. **Literacy Support**
  - Collect gently used books and donate them, or read to younger children.
5. **Partner with a Local Animal Shelter**
  - Make pet toys, collect supplies, or educate others on humane treatment of animals.
6. **Care Kits for People in Need**
  - Assemble hygiene or comfort kits for shelters or hospitals.
7. **Environmental Awareness Campaign**
  - Create posters, presentations, or social media content around recycling, water conservation, etc.
8. **Support Refugees or Immigrant Communities**
  - Collect clothing, write welcome cards, or raise awareness about global displacement.
9. **Garden for Good**
  - Plant a school or community garden and donate produce to local food banks.
10. **Service for People with Disabilities**
  - Create inclusive games, sensory kits, or volunteer at special events.
11. **Peace and Kindness Campaign**
  - Promote anti-bullying, inclusion, and positive school culture through student-led initiatives.
12. **Faith in Action Projects**
  - Organize a prayer service, Stations of the Cross, or reflection tied to acts of mercy.
13. **Disaster Relief Support**
  - Collect supplies or raise funds and awareness for those affected by natural disasters.
14. **Fair Trade Awareness Project**
  - Learn about ethical consumerism and host a Fair Trade sale or event.
15. **Adopt-a-Shelter or Nonprofit**
  - Build a long-term relationship with a local organization through ongoing support.
16. **Pen Pal or Art Exchange with a Different Community**
  - Build empathy and connection through storytelling and shared projects.
17. **Student-Led Advocacy Campaign**
  - Identify a justice issue and raise awareness through posters, videos, or presentations.
18. **Volunteer with a Special Olympics or Unified Sports Event**
  - Support inclusion through active participation and friendship.
19. **Create a "Blessing Bag" Ministry at School**
  - Stock bags with snacks, socks, hygiene items, and distribute through a local partner.
20. **School Supply or Backpack Drive**
  - Help kids in underserved communities start the year prepared and confident.

## Step 3 - Reflection and Prayer

### Elementary School Reflection (Grades K–5)

1. What is something new you learned from helping others?
2. How did helping make you feel inside?
3. Did you see someone smile or feel happy because of what you did?
4. What was your favorite part of the service project?
5. Was there anything that surprised you?
6. Would you like to help again? Why?
7. What is something small you could do every day to help others?
8. Who could you tell about your project to inspire them to help?
9. What is something you can pray for after this experience?
10. How can your class or school keep helping in the future?

#### Draw and Tell

➤ Students draw a picture of their favorite part of the project and then share it with the class or in small groups using sentence starters like: *"I helped by..."* or *"I felt proud when..."*

#### Thank You Card or Prayer Offering

➤ Have students create a card or prayer for the people they served, the organization, or the volunteers they worked with.

#### Feelings Chart or Class Mural

➤ As a class, build a mural or chart of words and images describing how the service project made them feel (e.g., proud, happy, helpful, curious).

### Middle School Reflection (Grades 6-8)

1. What did you learn about yourself from this service experience?
2. How did your view of the people or issue change?
3. What part of the experience was most meaningful to you?
4. Did you face any challenges or uncomfortable moments? How did you grow from them?
5. How did this experience change how you think about fairness or justice?
6. What gifts or strengths did you discover in yourself through serving?
7. What can you do now to keep helping with this issue?
8. How could you involve others in your school or community to keep making a difference?
9. What long-term change would you like to see, and how could you be part of that?
10. If you could design your own service project next time, what would it be?

#### Reflection Journals or Exit Tickets

➤ Prompt students with questions like: *What did I learn about myself? What was challenging? What do I want to learn more about?*

### Gallery Walk of Reflections

➤ Students write a few sentences or quotes on posters or sticky notes about their experience. They walk around reading others' insights and add comments or questions.

### "I Used to Think... Now I Think..." Statements

➤ Guide students to reflect on how their thinking has changed through sentence starters like: *"I used to think hunger was just about not having food. Now I think..."*

## High School Reflection (Grades 9-12)

1. How has this experience shaped your understanding of social justice?
2. What did you notice about power, privilege, or access during your project?
3. In what ways were your assumptions challenged?
4. How has this experience impacted your values, beliefs, or future goals?
5. What role does faith or conscience play in your desire to serve?
6. How can you move from a one-time project to long-term advocacy or action?
7. What responsibility do you feel to continue working for justice after this experience?
8. How will you share your learning or story with others to create more awareness?
9. What organizations, careers, or paths interest you now that you've done this service?
10. How will you stay informed and stay engaged in the issue you served?

### Dialogue Circles or Socratic Seminar

➤ Facilitate a student-led discussion around questions like: *What is justice in this situation? How did our service contribute to a larger cause?*

### Create a Media Reflection

➤ Have students make a short video, photo essay, podcast clip, or blog post summarizing their experience and its impact on them and the community.

### Advocacy Planning or Next Steps Journal

➤ Ask students to reflect: *What can I do now to stay involved? How will I raise awareness or advocate for this issue?* Guide them to brainstorm next steps or actions they can take.

## Prayer Before Service

Dear God,

Thank You for this chance to serve. Open my eyes to see others with kindness. Open my heart to love without limits. Help me be Your hands today—gentle, helpful, and full of care. May everything I do bring joy to others and honor to You. Amen.

## Prayer After Service

Loving God,

Thank You for the people we met and helped today. Thank You for teaching us through service. Help us remember that small acts of love can make a big difference. Keep our hearts open to serve again—with joy, humility, and faith. Amen.