

Volunteering benefits at-risk youth

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Youth most commonly become engaged in volunteering in order to explore their own personal strengths or because their friends were involved, according to a recent study by the Canadian Centre for Philanthropy.

Jessica Hedges-Chou, a 20 year old university student, says that she became actively involved in volunteering because so many of her friends were doing it. Once involved, she realized how satisfying it was to learn more about other people and herself.

Jessica says that one of the most important lessons she learned since becoming a volunteer is that: "Even the little things you do can make a difference."

It goes without saying that communities have a lot to gain from drawing on the abilities of their youth. In addition to communities being positively affected, research shows that by reaching out to others youth volunteers, like Jessica, are improving their own lives.

Naomi Slonim, a psychology graduate student at the University of Toronto, is currently researching civic engagement and prosocial behaviour in youth. She believes that youth have a lot to gain from volunteering.

"Youth who are involved in their communities report higher levels of self-esteem, lower rates of depression, improved personal skills, and social interactions," said Slonim.

Volunteering is an activity that can be particularly beneficial to youth who are deemed at-risk due to factors such as poverty, aggression, depression, lower self-esteem, or substance abuse. These youth appear to derive greater benefit from community involvement than youth who are less vulnerable.

According to Slonim, when youth feel that their community cares about them and that they can contribute to the community, they are more likely to identify with community goals and are less likely to violate social norms.

This has long term implications because we know that habits such as volunteering are likely to continue throughout a person's life.

Starting as a youth volunteer is therefore incredibly beneficial not only for the work done by youth but the impact this involvement will have on their social development and their future.