

# ComfortZone

## How to fill the long summer ahead? Safe volunteering for teens.

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With the end of the school year around the corner, any structure that remote learning might have imposed on family life will soon be out the window. What's a teen to do? Besides sleeping, Netflix bingeing, and non-stop social media.

"Kids need something productive and meaningful to do," says Brookline parent Pam Palmucci, a middle school counselor and clinical intern at Wayside Youth & Family Network in Watertown. "They want utility and purpose."

That might mean pitching in at home. It might mean online enrichment (for those with the necessary motivation and privilege). Or how about some charitable endeavors to give meaning, structure, and consequence to those long summer days? "Everyone wants to feel valued," says therapist/parenting expert Jon Mattleman, former longtime director of Needham Youth Services. "And teens are very idealistic in many ways. Volunteering is a way to feel like they are contributing."

Many community charities like food pantries have adapted to social distancing and still welcome volunteers. If there's a particular nonprofit that resonates, encourage your teen to ask how they can help. School guidance and career counselors often maintain lists of volunteer opportunities, as do teen centers. Youth Service America ([ysa.org/covid](http://ysa.org/covid)) offers a wealth of community ser-

vice ideas, and organizations like Volunteer Match ([volunteer-match.org](http://volunteer-match.org)) and Brookline Volunteers ([brooklinevolunteers.org](http://brooklinevolunteers.org)) facilitate connections to charities around Greater Boston.

Before venturing forth, make sure any volunteering outside the house meets with current public health guidelines, as well as your family's values for safety. Here are a few ideas to get started:

**Projects with passion.** Now might be the perfect time to unleash your inner activist and take a deep dive into that burning interest in gender equality or eco-awareness. Offer virtual help for a worthy nonprofit. Youth Service America can help you dive into political advocacy and voter registration. Sunrise Movement ([sunrisemovement.org](http://sunrisemovement.org)) mobilizes teen climate change activism. Or create your own social good campaign. Design a website with helpful resources. Write a tip sheet. Curate a virtual film festival. Raise money. DoingGoodTogether ([doinggoodtogether.org](http://doinggoodtogether.org)) and sgENGAGE ([npengage.com](http://npengage.com)) offer helpful ideas and guidelines.

**Caring for kids.** In most communities these days, child care of all sorts is desperately needed. If you and prospective families have properly quarantined, it may be possible to safely offer your services. And if you know a struggling single parent, even half an hour of virtual baby sit-



ting can provide major respite.

**Food for neighbors.** Are your neighbors unable to venture out? Share a pot of soup or a batch of cookies. Using proper precautions, food does not easily transmit the virus. Or offer to shop and deliver special items. Project Driveway ([projectdriveway.org](http://projectdriveway.org)) is an excel-

lent student-run nonprofit that uses volunteers with car access to shop for those at high-risk of COVID-19. Another idea? Create and maintain a Little Free Pantry ([littlefreepantry.org](http://littlefreepantry.org)) in the neighborhood.

**Make something useful.** While sewing and donating masks remains a worthy endeavor, kids can create other helpful items including sympathy and "get well" cards (which many stores are finding hard to keep in stock). Handcrafted cards can be as simple or elaborate as the maker decides, using what's already in the house. Pinterest.com has tons of ideas. Canva.com is a helpful free design tool for computer-generated cards. Shutterfly.com also has some good suggestions for meaningful quotes to include.

**Conversation and connection.** Reach out to vulnerable folks with the gift of conversation. Organizations such as FriendshipWorks ([fw4elders.org](http://fw4elders.org)) and AARP ([aarpcommunityconnections.org](http://aarpcommunityconnections.org)) organize virtual companionship to help reduce social isolation among elders. An-

other idea? The free mobile app Be My Eyes ([bemyeyes.com](http://bemyeyes.com)) uses live video calls to connect blind/low-vision individuals with volunteers willing to help with occasional challenges, from reading instructions to checking expiration dates.

**Share your skills.** Create a YouTube channel of online tutorials sharing your "how to" knowledge. If you're facile with technology, offer online lessons or volunteer to run a nonprofit's social media account. Know someone trying to learn English? Set up regular times for simple conversation that can help the person practice. UpChieve ([upchieve.org](http://upchieve.org)) can set you up to tutor students from low-income families.

**Embrace the environment.** Parks, trails, and green spaces all around Greater Boston — so vital for physical and mental wellness — could use some attention. Organize clean-up days to clear trash and natural debris. Plan projects for planting new growth where appropriate. Check with Trustees of Reservations ([volunteer.thetrustees.org](http://volunteer.thetrustees.org)), Mass Audubon ([massaudubon.org](http://massaudubon.org)), and municipal park departments for details. As with all these activities, you'll need to follow the latest public health guidelines, but you'll get the visible satisfaction of brightening the world around you — for all of us!

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