

Organize a “Read-a-Thon” for Military Children

Organizing a “read-a-thon” can be a fun project that you can easily organize with your friends, family members or colleagues. “Read-a-thons” are a fun way to put the spotlight on reading and raise funds for organizations that support the military community. They’re a great way to bring children together and have them interact with each other, improve their social skills, listening, writing, oral and artistic abilities, reinforce their love for reading, as well as show care and support to their parents. By getting parents engaged you will help families bonds and build stronger communities.

In addition to all great benefits “read-a-thons” bring, you will be able to raise money for causes you are passionate about: buying school supplies, groceries or other items for military families that are in need or homeless veterans. The possibilities are endless.

How does it work: Students receive funding or pledges for each book that they read or listen to.

Type of service: family/guest volunteering, group volunteering, ongoing project, done-in-one day project

Difficulty level: moderate

Time commitment:

This varies depending on the time you set your “read-a-thon” for. If it is a one-day event, your time commitment (depending on your role and responsibilities) may range from as few as eight hours a year to up to 10-15 hours a month to organize and lead a regular “read-a-thon” which usually takes four to eight weeks to complete.

Target age: all ages

Resources:

- Open space for reading
- Books
- Paper/pen
- Water
- Snacks

Note: Many youth-based organizations require that adult volunteers have a criminal background check prior to serving with their agency. Volunteers must attest confirm, represent, and warrant that they have never been convicted of or charged with a violent crime, child abuse or neglect, child pornography, child abduction, kidnapping, rape or any sexual offense, nor have they ever been ordered by a court to receive psychiatric or psychological treatment in connection therewith. Before choosing to organize a project working with children or for youth-based agencies, please make sure that volunteers in your group meet the aforementioned requirements and are prepared to have a full background check and perhaps fingerprinting before they are eligible to volunteer.

Project instructions:

Step 1: Assess Interest

Talk to your friends and colleagues and assess their interest in getting engaged in starting a “read-a-thon.” Reach out to colleagues who are parents. They are often already active in their community or schools and are more likely to engage in your project and become true advocates and ambassadors for it.

Having a committed and enthusiastic leadership group for your project will guarantee that your project will have a good beginning. Discuss prospective roles and responsibilities. Volunteer positions within the project may include participating on a planning committee or PR committee, talking to potential project sites, helping with managing the money and identifying beneficiary partner organization.

If you see limited support for your “read-a-thon,” consider pitching the idea of organizing a children’s book club instead. If one book club did exist, find out why it ended. If one already exists, find ways to lend your

support. Talk to family and friends, school teachers, librarians and community leaders to get their feedback and build the foundation for your future project. You can even combine a “read-a-thon” with a book drive for military children.

Step 2: Identify Partners

Contact your local schools that serve military children and let them know about your idea. Arrange a meeting with the school principal, teachers or another school contact and go over a plan for implementing a “read-a-thon.” If the principal is welcoming to your ideas, find out the requirements for starting one. Many schools are open to such type of activities so the process shouldn’t be too hard. If you cannot hold your “read-a-thon” at your local school, try contacting a community center, an organization which serves military children or discuss with your colleagues how you can hold your “read-a-thon” engaging children of employees.

Step 3: Recruit Volunteers

Contact your friends, family members or co-workers and ask who would be interested in joining or helping with making the “read-a-thon” reality. Talk to your friends and family and tell them the benefits of such a project and secure their buy-in.

Maximize your volunteers’ skills and interests and put them to work. Identify people to can fill the following roles:

- Identify partners
- Help organize the “read-a-thon” kick-off event
- Help vetting the potential beneficiaries
- Help identify and select a fiscal agent for donations (if appropriate)
- Help get in touch regularly with teachers, parents and inquire about the status of children’s pledges
- Lead reflection and recognition efforts with the volunteers

Remember that the personal “ask” is always the most effective. Explain to your friends and colleagues the benefits of this project and who the “read-a-thon” will benefit (targeted number of veterans, military children, etc.) This will solidify your “pitch” and will motivate more people to participate and help.

Step 4: Establish Goals and Timeframe

It is time to set goals for your “read-a-thon.” Plan to hold the “read-a-thon” around vacations and holidays. In this way, children will have time to read.

Establishing realistic goals will help you create a plan and successfully implement your project. These goals can also help you create an overall message you would like participants to learn. How will the “read-a-thon” benefit the community? How many children would you like to engage? Decide how long the event will last and set a goal for how much you will raise. It is important to create a plan in order to establish consistency.

Step 5: Develop Your Plan

As you continue to organize your “read-a-thon,” ask yourself the following questions in order to create a coherent plan:

- When will the “read-a-thon” start and end?
- Is there a minimum number of books each child will have to read?
- What is the minimum number of minutes/hours children have to read for (e.g., 20 hours of reading)?
- What are the roles within your team?
- When and where the kick-off event take place?
- What resources are needed?

Set the rules for donations (for example, for every hour of reading each child can solicit a \$5 donation). You can even consider creating suggested book lists. Just make sure they are age-appropriate and reflect all potential age groups. You can also consider collecting a small fee for registration for the “read-a-thon.” This will help you cover some basic expenses.

Step 6: Promote

Communicate about your project to others in the community. Talk to people at your place of worship, schools, coffee shops, grocery stores etc. Reach out to your community and talk about the benefits of a “read-a-thon”.

Step 7: Project Kick-off

Start the “read-a-thon” with a fun and engaging event. Reach out to your local partner and hold a meeting with parents and children. Talk about the “read-a-thon” and explain its purpose. Distribute tracking sheets and gather children’s reading pledges. Make sure you explain the rules of the “read-a-thon,” provide a tip sheet to children for approaching potential donors, communicate parents about their roles and inform children what will happen after the project finalizes. Will there be a celebration event? This is a great event /project to engage friends and families, as well as potential donors.

Explain the participants what will happen to the funds they collect. Who will be the beneficiaries? This is a great time to talk about veterans, military families and the challenges they face, as well as ways to help.

It is very important to make the kick-off event fun. Create game stations and provide refreshments. Assign volunteers to help moderate activities and engage children. Hold contests (e.g., speed reading contests, trivia). A fun project beginning will get children motivated and interested. Get parents involved.

Do not forget about safety. Make sure children come accompanied by adults and prepare liability waivers in advance. Make sure you have volunteers collect all the information you need about participants.

Step 8: During the Project

Throughout the project, parents and teachers play a crucial role. Periodically, they check on the progress of their children and students and make sure it meets their pledge goals. You can set up a regular time for volunteers to get in touch with parents and teachers and collect information about participants.

At the end of the project, readers collect donations promised by sponsors and turn them into the teacher or designated representative.

Your role is to designate the winner(s). Consider organizing a small ceremony to award prizes to readers who accumulated the greatest number of reading hours. For example, when the child reads for 500, 1,000, 1,500 or 2,000 minutes they earn prizes. The winners can participate in the drop-off of donations to the benefiting party (organizations, veterans, military children, etc.) Seeing the impact of their efforts will make them feel proud of their accomplishments. Make sure you take pictures and make them part of your communication strategy throughout the project.

Step 9: After the Project

Make sure you are accountable for all donations received throughout the project. By this point you should have identified the benefiting party. Make sure you deliver the donation and accompany it with a message from participants.

Step 10: Reflect and Recognize Volunteers

Take a few minutes to reflect on your “read-a-thon” and the impact it had on your community. Contemplate ways to continue what works and fix what does not work. Here are some suggested activities:

- Tell your co-workers, family and friends about something you learned and how you will continue to help others.
- Lead a group discussion with your volunteers and discuss questions such as:
 - Why did you volunteer?
 - What did you learn about the needs of military children in your community?
 - What is the one thing that you will remember most about this service activity?
 - How can you continue to make a difference in our community?
- Communicate about your project. Take pictures and make sure your colleagues and your community know about your hard work and successes.
- Last but not least, don’t forget to thank your volunteers, partners and club members. They deserve it.

Give yourself a pat on the back for all of your hard work. And remember to thank everyone who helped you. It will make them feel great. While the “read-a-thon” is still fresh in your mind, think about what worked well and what didn’t. That way you can build on your success, if you decide to do this again.

Everyone likes to be recognized for his or her hard work and achievements, especially volunteers. Show your volunteers how much you appreciate them and they are more likely to fully participate and return in following years. The following are some suggestions on how you can recognize your volunteers.

- Verbally recognize your volunteers’ efforts, but also send a personalized note thanking them.
- Plan to recognize your volunteers at your next special event.
- Provide your team with a camera to take during giving circle meetings. Post the pictures in a visible, public area and online.
- Give each volunteer a small token of your appreciation (for example company T-shirt).
- Ask people who were particularly enthusiastic or helpful to join next year’s planning committee.

Additional Resources

- Kidsreads www.kidsreads.com/clubs
- HandsOn Network www.handsonnetwork.org
- www.readathon.org