



Building Your Community

Caring for the Environment

The need: The places we share, parks, streets, rivers, neighborhoods, only stay clean, safe, and beautiful if people take care of them. Caring for the environment is really just caring for the home we all live in together, and small hands-on actions add up fast.

"The best time to plant a tree was twenty years ago. The second best time is now." — Chinese proverb

"To plant a garden is to believe in tomorrow." — Audrey Hepburn

"In every walk with nature one receives far more than he seeks." — John Muir

FACILITATOR NOTES

Time. about 60–90 minutes, run in one sitting. Works in a classroom, youth group, or club. Option A needs no setup; Options B and C use real service arranged ahead of time.

Service today. Pick one option in Serve below and set it up before you begin.

Warm-up (10 minutes)

FACILITATOR NOTES

Keep this quick, short answers are great. Read the questions together.

- What's a favorite outdoor place of yours? What would it be like if no one took care of it?
- Where do you see litter or neglect in places you go often?
- Why do you think people drop trash or waste things even when they know better?
- Whose job is it to keep shared spaces nice, and is it really just theirs?

Learn (10–20 minutes)

Caring for the environment can sound huge and far away, but most of it is close to home and very doable. It means taking care of the shared spaces we all use, parks, sidewalks, schoolyards, rivers and streams, and the plants and animals that share them with us. It means not wasting what we have, and cleaning up and repairing what gets neglected. You don't have to solve big global questions to make a real difference. A cleaner park, a healthier stream, less waste, more green, these are things you can see, and things your own hands can do.

Caring for our shared spaces can mean:

- Picking up litter so a park, trail, or street stays clean and safe.
- Protecting local nature: streams, trees, gardens, and the wildlife that depends on them.
- Wasting less, reusing more, and recycling what we can.

A closer look. Behind one neighborhood runs a little creek that used to be a nice spot to walk. Over the years it filled up with litter, plastic bottles, snack wrappers, even a stray shopping cart, and people stopped going. It looked like nobody cared. Then a group of teenagers spent two Saturday mornings clearing it out, bag after bag. By the end, the water ran clear again, ducks came back, and families started walking the path. They didn't fix the whole world. They fixed one real place, and the whole neighborhood got it back.

Why these spaces need us. Shared spaces get worn down for ordinary reasons: a lot of people use them, no single person owns them, and small bits of litter and neglect add up over time. When a place looks uncared for, people use it less and treat it worse, and the wildlife that depends on it suffers. The flip side is just as true. When people pitch in to keep a place clean and healthy, everyone benefits: kids have somewhere to play, neighbors have somewhere to gather, and the plants and animals have somewhere to live. Caring for our shared surroundings is one of the most visible, satisfying kinds of service, because you can stand back and actually see the difference you made.

How youth can help. This is some of the most hands-on, see-it-immediately service there is. Youth can:

- Clean up litter in a park, trail, schoolyard, or along a street or stream.
- Help plant and tend trees, gardens, or native plants that make a place healthier.
- Cut down on waste: reduce, reuse, recycle, and help others do the same.
- Care for local wildlife and habitats: a clean stream, a birdhouse, a pollinator garden.

Keep these in mind.

- **Start local.** One real park, stream, or block you can actually improve beats worrying about the whole world.
- **Leave it better.** The simple rule of every good steward: leave a place cleaner than you found it.
- **Small habits add up.** Wasting less and picking up litter seem tiny, but multiplied across people and days, they're huge.
- **Respect the place.** Follow the rules of parks and natural areas, and don't disturb wildlife while you help.

Serve (30–60 minutes)

Today you'll put this into practice in a real service activity. Here are ways to do it:

Option A — Leave one spot better than you found it *(no cost, no prep, works in any setting)*

You don't need anything to start. Pick one spot you pass often, a corner of a park, a stretch of sidewalk, your schoolyard, and clean up the litter (with a bag you already have, and handle sharp items safely). Then make it a habit: leave every place a little better than you found it. It takes nothing but the choice to bother, and the difference is instant.

Option B — Organize a clean-up or planting *(low cost, a bit more effort)*

As a group, pick a neglected local spot, a park, trail, stream bank, or empty lot, and organize a clean-up or a planting day. Bring gloves and bags, divide the area, and work through it together. Take a before-and-after photo; seeing the difference is half the reward.

Prepare ahead. As the facilitator, you'll pick ahead of time the spot, get any permission needed, and gather gloves and bags, so the clean-up or planting can just happen.

Option C — Adopt a space or join an ongoing project *(more effort; ongoing care)*

Take lasting responsibility for a place or join a local or national environmental nonprofit: adopt a park, trail, or stream and keep it clean over time, tend a community garden, or join a conservation group's regular workdays. A place with someone looking after it stays healthy; that's stewardship.

Prepare ahead. As the facilitator, you'll connect ahead of time with a local or national environmental nonprofit or adopt-a-spot program and set up the group's ongoing role. JustServe.org can help you find one and make the connection.

Before you go (all options): Wear gloves, and never pick up anything sharp, broken, or hazardous, flag those for an adult instead. Work in a group in public, daytime settings, stay clear of roads and deep or fast water, and have your mentor check that a site is safe before you start. Wash up well afterward.

Reflect (10 minutes)

FACILITATOR NOTES

After serving, talk through a few of these together, then give everyone quiet time to write.

What did the place look like before and after? How did seeing the difference feel?

Why do you think shared spaces get neglected in the first place?

What's one small habit you could change to waste less or keep a place cleaner?

How is taking care of a shared space a way of taking care of the people who use it?

Then finish one or both sentences:

One place I want to help take care of is...

One habit I'll change to waste less or keep things cleaner is...
