Community Service and Service Learning: What’s the Difference?

Schools, community organizations, places of worship, Girl Scouts—we all talk about getting young people involved in their communities in different ways. Everybody uses slightly different words to say this, which can get a little confusing!

Here’s how we see things in Girl Scouts (you might find that your school district uses these words in different ways, but these definitions will help you come to an agreement about what you mutually want girls to have the opportunity to do):

**WHAT IS COMMUNITY SERVICE?**

Community service makes the world better for some people “right now.” For example, collecting cans of food for the local food pantry feeds people “right now.” Gathering toys for a homeless family shelter makes kids happy “right now.” Providing clothing and toiletries to people who have suffered a disaster helps them get through a traumatic event “right now.” These acts of kindness are important ways to help some people—right now.

**WHAT IS SERVICE LEARNING?**

Service learning encourages young people to also understand the roots of problems. When they do that, they are then able to plan and lead projects that aim at addressing root causes. For example, a service-learning project on the environment could involve girls in exploring why water is polluted. That’s the important first step. Once they know that, they investigate several possible solutions, compare how well they might work, network with experts for advice, and finally put a plan in motion to address some root of the problem. In Girl Scouts, when we encourage girls to Take Action, we’re talking about service learning.

**WHAT’S THE DIFFERENCE?**

Some people think of it this way:

**Community service:** helping others...comes from our hearts.

**Service learning:** understanding and addressing the roots of a problem...comes from our hearts and our heads.

**THE WORLD NEEDS BOTH!**