A FEW years ago, a friend of my son’s asked that, instead of getting him presents for his 11th birthday, guests donate to a certain charity. I asked my son if he would like to do something similar for his birthday.

He looked at me and said flatly, “No.” He wanted the presents.

While I admired the birthday boy’s initiative, I have to say I sympathized with my son. I like to give and get presents, too.

But like most parents, I also want my sons to evolve into caring citizens who are aware of and want to help others. It’s not always easy to find the right way to do it — to walk the fine line between opening their eyes and guilt-tripping, between understanding the differences and needs of others and patronizing them.

But, as I started researching this, I discovered to my surprise that philanthropy — especially promoting it among children and young people — is suddenly a hot topic. There is a new show on NBC, “The Philanthropist,” about a dashing globetrotter who provides relief to the needy and oppressed. In May, AOL started an initiative with the Philanthropy Project. Last month, a group of about 20 representatives of different universities and colleges gathered at Brandeis University for the first national conference on teaching philanthropy.

Why now? I would think that in these economic times, people would be hunkering down, worrying about themselves and their own needs, rather than others.


“Talk about a teachable moment,” Ms. Price said. “This economy was clearly brought on by greed, and this is a time we need to step up and help people who need help.”

It also helps that President Obama has called for a “Summer of Service,” asking people to donate their money and time to help the disadvantaged.

It all sounds good. But how do you get children involved so it means something to them, so that it is not just another activity that parents push and children do grudgingly?

We, as parents, have to model such behavior, of course. But, Ms. Price said, we have to go further and create expectations that in your family, you give and serve.

First of all, figure out what your children are interested in. Sometimes parents assume that if it is something easy, or something the child likes doing anyhow, it’s not really a proper sacrifice.
Nonsense, Ms. Price said. For example, most teenagers are more adept than adults at figuring out things online. And the bonus is, they also enjoy it. So find a nonprofit that needs help, as many do, in setting up Facebook or Twitter accounts and maintaining them. It may not be as strenuous as building a house, but it can be just as useful.

Also, don’t assume there is only one way to be charitable. Ms. Price told me a story about a boy who was asked to give some of his money to charity. To avoid that, he buried it in the backyard.

“There are some really heated discussions about where to give the money,” said Alex Buffett Rozek, who is head of the Learning by Giving program of the Sunshine Lady Foundation, which has financed eight such undergraduate courses and plans to increase that to 15 in the next school year.

When I heard about the boy walking 1,225 miles to help the homeless, my first reaction was to wonder where I’d gone wrong. My children don’t like walking to the store. But on second thought, I realized that not every effort has to be — or necessarily should be — a grand gesture. I might suggest to my sons that we volunteer this summer at the local food pantry. It would help our community in a concrete way — and it’s only a three-mile walk.