

My experience at UBECI - Eva-Maria Oswald

The following report sums up my thoughts and experiences during my time volunteering at UBECI. I hope it will be useful to prospective volunteers.

The coordinator, Monica, greets all new volunteers with a brief introduction about UBECI, explaining important information about the projects and introducing the new volunteer to the team members and to other volunteers. Monica and her husband, Byron, are always there for the volunteers and ready to offer support and information about accommodation, doctors, visas, transport and travel etc.

I volunteered for 9 weeks in the “Working Children” project. Volunteers support the local social workers in the markets from Tuesday to Friday. These social workers are responsible for planning and coordinating activities with the children and preparing educational materials. Every day, loaded up with bags of learning materials and toys, we’d make our way to a different market where first of all we would collect all the children, aged 1 – 14 years, from their parents’ market stands and bring them to the UBECI playground. To begin the session, the children washed their hands and faces, and then played with the toys we brought or read books or told us stories about their families or about life at the market or at school. We then sang songs as a group and did some dancing or relaxation and stretching exercises. Then the group was divided into 3 age groups and the session started.

Depending on the age group, different activities followed. For the 1 – 3 year olds, we carried out activities to strengthen fine motor skills, coordination and attention, for example, painting and gluing to learn about colours and animals. For the 4 to 6 year olds, we established a ‘pre-school’ to replicate Ecuador’s kindergarten system which prepares children for school. To ensure that the market children are not at a disadvantage when they start school, UBECI teaches them to paint, draw, cut and stick, sort and count. They learn about colours, animals, letters and much more. For the school age children, the focus is on helping them with their homework and tutoring - going through their school work with them again. In addition, the outreach workers and volunteers teach them about cities, countries and different cultures. As many of these children also work with their parents at their market stalls, UBECI staff and volunteers persuade parents to allow the children to join the group and take part in the activities so that they can just be children at least for a few hours each day.

Depending on how many volunteers they have, each volunteer is responsible for around 3 to 5 children and works on the activities or school work with them. UBECI also strives to strengthen team working and interpersonal skills. Since the children are raised in a difficult social and family environment, where they are often deprived of love and care, it is extremely important to listen to them, to understand their fears, to motivate them and boost their self-esteem. A few kind words, some simple explanations of why certain things are done or not done, and a hug can all help. The children are open and affectionate - they often welcome the volunteers with big hugs as they are so happy to get some attention. They are pleased that we listen to them, joke around and play with them and support and teach them with encouraging words.

Although for children body language can communicate more than words, I would still recommend that new volunteers arrive with at least some basic knowledge of Spanish. It will make it easier to run activities for the children and get to know the local people and therefore to get more out of your time in Quito.

The time I spent with UBECI was very intense – it was a learning experience for me and it was very rewarding due to the relationships I developed with the children. Working with the market children demands energy, engagement and flexibility. The work is varied and the children often surprise you with a warm smile or a burst of laughter.

I would certainly recommend volunteering for UBECI as the UBECI team contributes significantly to the future wellbeing and happiness of the market children. Working with these children is an unforgettable experience.