20 Ideas for Teaching Citizenship to Children

By Leah Davies, M.Ed.

Citizenship means being a member of and supporting one's community and country. A United States citizen has certain freedoms which are declared in the U.S. Bill of Rights. In addition to these privileges, a citizen has an obligation to be informed, law abiding, and uphold basic democratic principles such as tolerance and civic responsibility. Voting, conserving natural resources, and taking care of oneself are all part of citizenship. In addition, citizens often participate in local community projects dedicated to the common good.

In response to concerns about children's ethical development, many states have adopted character education programs of which citizenship is a part. Most educators agree that helping children understand their rights and obligations as a U.S. citizen needs to be reinforced in all grades.

Educators are obligated to teach students the history of our democracy on a level children can comprehend. Helping students explore citizenship and connecting it to their lives are the keys to true understanding. When children are exposed to storytelling, drama, and other activities in which they are actively involved, their retention is increased. If they learn that people from other countries are not necessarily free to voice dissenting opinions, practice their religion, or even have as many children as they would like, the students will begin to appreciate their freedoms.

Hearing accounts of people who fought for and founded the U.S.A. will increase their awareness. Children need to be taught that citizens of the United States are not free by accident, but because individuals made great sacrifices to protect their rights. Learning the history of our symbols such as our flag, Liberty Bell, and Statue of Liberty will contribute to their insight. Since our flag embodies our values and the unity of our country, respect for it needs to be maintained. Reasons behind certain holiday celebrations such as Fourth of July, President's Day, and Veteran's Day need to be addressed, as well.

Many schools have adopted rituals that inspire citizenship. Immigrants report that saying the Pledge of Allegiance and singing patriotic songs are meaningful traditions that help them feel part of America. In addition to classroom lessons, some schools invite children to read school-wide messages that encourage citizenship and stimulate discussion. Patriotic programs can be presented by the students once a year. If children learn to love and appreciate their country through thoughtful activities, they will be more likely to become responsible, active citizens in their community, nation and the world.

What are some activities that foster citizenship in children?

1. Hold a discussion on what citizenship means -- including rights and responsibilities of citizens.

2. Define a good citizen and have the students share personal stories about when they exhibited citizenship. For example:
   - I was friendly to a new child from a different country.
   - I helped clean up the park.
   - My mom and I passed out voter pamphlets.
   - I collected used toys and clothes for needy children.
   - I walked away from a fight.
   - I said "no" when a friend asked me to steal money from another child.
   - I wear my bike helmet and follow other bike safety rules.
   - I wait for the signal to cross the street and I stay in the cross walk.

3. Ask students to describe what would happen if there were no rules or laws at home, in school, in traffic or against stealing, attacking, etc.

4. Involve them in making classroom rules. Discuss why rules are important and have them define the consequences if they are broken.

5. Ask the students to interview a veteran, immigrant, or person who lived through the Great Depression. Together make a list of questions they could ask such as:
   - How do you feel about the United States of America?
Tell me about your life?
What was a difficult time for you?
What does being a U.S. citizen mean to you?

Have the children write about or draw what they discovered, report their findings and post the results on a bulletin board.

6. Have the children write a poem, story, play or song about citizenship. Have them perform their creation for others.

7. Ask the students to search for local citizens who generously contribute to the good of the community. Thank or honor them in some way.

8. Have them read, analyze and debate newspaper articles on various topics concerning civic life.

9. Have the children create a video on "American Life" or another related topic.

10. Invite speakers to share their knowledge of United States history or portray historical characters.

11. Read or have the students read stories about extraordinary Americans and then act out the stories.


13. With an adult's assistance have the students take photographs in their community for a book entitled "Our Freedoms," "Our Citizens" or another related topic.

14. Attend city council meetings, school board meetings or court sessions. Visit historical museums, monuments, and/or national parks.

15. Teach the children patriotic songs to sing at a parent program, school or community event.

16. After researching the significance of American symbols and/or the Pledge of Allegiance, have the children make a bulletin board explaining what they learned.

17. Have the students create a presentation to teach younger students about the American Flag, its history, symbolism, care and proper display.

18. Discuss taxes and why our local, state and national governments need income for police, firemen, prisons, roads, etc.

19. Support a school-wide student council composed of representatives from each classroom.

20. Encourage students to participate in community service projects such as recycling, picking up litter, and volunteering for other worthwhile projects.

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