



Greater Good in Education
SCIENCE-BASED PRACTICES FOR KINDER, HAPPIER SCHOOLS

TAKE-HOME SKILL: TALK WITH TEENS ABOUT EQUITY AND JUSTICE

"To be human you must bear witness to justice. Justice is what love looks like in public—to be human is to love and be loved."

—Cornel West

OVERVIEW

Parents/caregivers and their teens discuss a series of questions to help them recognize inequities and become agents of change against injustice.

PLANNING FOR IT

WHEN YOU MIGHT USE THIS PRACTICE

- To help your teen nurture their sense of purpose beyond themselves and empower them to help create a thriving community with opportunities for all people to flourish.
- To empower your teen when they share an injustice that they noticed, heard about through peers/community, or faced themselves.

TIME REQUIRED

- Multiple Sessions

LEVEL

- Middle School
- High School
- College

MATERIALS

- N/A

LEARNING OBJECTIVE

Students will:

- Understand the meanings of equity and justice, and how they are distinct from equality
- Reflect on how we can sharpen our observational skills to notice the root causes and broad effects of injustice
- Explore how equity and justice relate to our identities and the identities of people in our community (e.g., from the interpersonal level to the societal level)
- Begin to be agents of change to challenge inequities and work to promote justice

ADDITIONAL SUPPORTS

- [Making Practices Culturally Responsive](#)
- [Adapting Practices for Students with Special Needs](#)
- [Making a Practice Trauma-Informed](#)

CHARACTER STRENGTHS

- Making Practices Culturally Responsive
- Adapting Practices for Students with Special Needs
- Making a Practice Trauma-Informed

SEL COMPETENCIES

- Self-awareness
- Self-management
- Social awareness
- Relationship skills
- Responsible decision-making

MINDFULNESS COMPONENTS

- Focused attention
- Non-judgment

HOW TO DO IT

REFLECTION BEFORE THE PRACTICE

- Key terms to reflect on for this practice
 - [Justice](#) is “fairness in the way people are dealt with.”
 - [Equity](#) is “the situation in which everyone is treated fairly according to their needs.”
 - [Equality](#) is “the right of different groups of people to receive the same treatment.”
- Think back to when you were a teen and how you came to understand what justice means.

- What first comes to mind for you? Do you automatically think about learning about the Supreme Court or crime and punishment? Or do you first recall memories about personal or family experiences of injustice that were based on your identity? Who taught you about justice?
- Considering what you know now about justice, how has your understanding grown? What else do you want to know about justice?
- When did you learn about equity? What issues around equity are most important to you? How did you come to learn how equity and equality are different?
- What do you want to help your teen learn about justice and equity?
- How might your teen respond to a conversation about equity and justice?
- How do the definitions of these terms provided in this practice compare to your understanding and the ways that various groups use or have used these terms recently, for example, on social media, or historically?
- How can you show genuine curiosity about your teen’s perspective and with the goal of growing together around this topic? It takes time—for both teens and parents—to learn these concepts, think critically about them, and make meaning from them to be a part of their everyday life. Humility and patience are key strengths for engaging with this practice.

INSTRUCTIONS

OVERVIEW

As parents, we want our children to be well prepared to become leaders of our communities in the future so that all people can thrive. Having honest conversations about inequity and injustice is an important part of preparing our teens to support equity and justice. Sometimes these conversations can be stressful because we want our teens to have accurate information about painful historical and current events. At the same time, these discussions can become fertile ground for our teens to think about solutions for complex issues and gain confidence that they can be creative changemakers with broad impact.

It’s important to have these conversations often because the more we talk with our teens about equity and justice, the more skills and confidence we’ll build within ourselves and in our teens. Frequent conversations about justice can help us grow our capacity to support our teens in contributing to a brighter future for all of us. You can take inspiration from and adapt the following prompts using a familiar conversational style that feels natural for you.

1. DISCUSSING THE DIFFERENCES AMONG JUSTICE, EQUITY, AND EQUALITY

- During a car ride or while you’re folding laundry together, talk with your teen about a news article you read or a movie you watched recently that highlighted an issue around equity or justice. For example, you can discuss films like [The Hate U Give](#), [He Named Me Malala](#), or [Fruits of Labor](#).
- Share with one another what you think these terms mean. How are they similar and different? What examples can you use to talk about these terms?
 - [Justice](#) is “fairness in the way people are dealt with.” Justice is both the action taken toward creating and the end result of an environment of respect where all people can flourish.
 - [Equity](#) is “the situation in which everyone is treated fairly according to their needs.” Equity is the guarantee of accessibility and opportunity for all.

- [Equality](#) is “the right of different groups of people to receive the same treatment.”
- Invite your teen to share with you how they understand the similarities and differences between equity and equality based on their own experiences or issues they’ve learned about at school or in the news.
- Discuss with your teen different ways that equity and equality can be understood. You can share with your teen the following examples:
 - “Equity refers to fairness and justice. It means providing what different groups and individuals need to correct imbalances that have resulted from previous unfair, unjust, or unequal treatment. This is different from equality, which means treating everyone the same. Inequity means a lack of justice or fairness. Equitable solutions are solutions that support different groups and individuals in accessing and receiving what they need to correct imbalances that have resulted from previous unfair, unjust, and unequal treatment.” –[FrameWorks Institute](#)
 - “I can easily give a group of kids the resources they need, say shoes. Equality is a group of kids getting the same pair of shoes. Equity is everyone gets the same pair of shoes but they also get them in the size that fits.” –[Eshé Collins](#)
- You can take some time to search online together for graphics that explain the differences between these ideas as well. For example:
 - <https://workplace.msu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/AppleGraphic-Ruth2019.png>
 - <https://www.bu.edu/diversity/files/2021/12/Equity.jpg>
 - <https://betterbikeshare.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/pasted-image-0.png>
- Model your thinking about fairness for your teen by sharing examples of the differences between equity and equality that you’ve thought about from your own experiences. For example, you can discuss with your teen how one early approach to school closures during the COVID pandemic was to offer classes virtually to all students so that they continue to learn from home. Talk with them about how this solution assumed that all students had access to essential equipment and environments like laptops, wireless connection, a quiet room, and a parent or caregiver at home (in the case for young children). Discuss with your teen how there were many children who did not have the same opportunity to access virtual learning because everyone did not start off having the same resources, which led to inequity in education. Invite your teen to share connections to equity or equality issues that they’ve encountered, observed, or heard.

2. DISCUSSING BIASES ABOUT IDENTITIES

- Think together with your teen about how different identity-based biases at different levels contribute to inequities and get in the way of stronger, more connected communities that provide opportunities for all of us to have greater well-being.
 - Identities can include groups like race, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic class, religion, ability.
 - [Bias](#) is “the action of supporting or opposing a particular person or thing in an unfair way, because of allowing personal opinions to influence your judgment.”
 - Examples of levels of identity-based bias that foster injustice can include:
 - *Interpersonal bias*, which involves the way we interact with one another in everyday situations that can lead to harm either knowingly or unknowingly. For [example](#), a group of teens knowingly use disability-based slurs repeatedly to bully another teen with autism at school.
 - *Cultural bias*, which involves communication in words or images through media and advertising that is meant to express to the general public that people from one identity are all the same in a negative way. For [example](#), movies consistently portray Muslims as

villains like perpetrators of mass violence and use tropes like subservient characters to incite fear and promote bigotry and discrimination.

- *Structural bias*, which involves multiple systems, public policies, and institutional practices that benefit people from some identities and harm people from other identities. Examples include:
 - People of color are [exposed to more air pollution](#) from many sources, which is a leading environmental cause of premature death.
 - Women who live in states with a bigger gender wage gap, less political representation by women, and less access to reproductive health services [have poorer health](#) than women who live in states with less structural sexism.
 - [Structural ageism](#) is not often acknowledged because it is seen as normal and shows up in all aspects of life. For example, older patients are less likely to be offered healthcare intervention even when they were expected to gain the same benefits as younger patients. Consumer "anti-aging" products capitalize on the fear of aging in a multi-billion dollar industry. Older workers are passed up for new job opportunities, more often fired, and less often provided opportunities for trainings in the workplace compared to younger workers.
- Structural bias is the level that has the most broad-reaching and impactful effects and can exist without interpersonal bias. You and your teen can learn more about and discuss the multiple levels of identity-based bias like [racism](#).
- Invite your teen to share connections to identity-based inequities that they've personally experienced, witnessed, or know about.

3. WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE A JUSTICE-ORIENTED CITIZEN?

- Invite your teen to share what issues around equity and justice in their communities or in society they care about.
 - Who has and who does not have power around these issues? Are you in a place of privilege or marginalization around these issues? How might you act in ways that lead to inequity for others at times? How have others acted in ways that have led to inequity for you?
 - Have you ever felt hopeless at times because the issues you care about are hard to change? How do you nurture and keep hope to help you act for change? Reflect together on the following insights about hope and justice:
 - "You have to protect your hope quotient...Sometimes when the world starts to get complicated, you lose hope that you can do the things you thought you could do. You begin to actually no longer believe that that world-changing thing you were hoping to achieve, you can achieve. While you are dealing with the complexity of the world, you are going to have to affirmatively work on protecting your hope. Your hope is vital to your capacity to change the world. I actually believe that hopelessness is the enemy of justice. Injustice prevails where hopelessness persists. –[Bryan Stevenson](#)
 - Encourage your teen to identify a person who leads with hope. This "[hero of hope](#)" can be a person that is well-known like [Bryan Stevenson](#), or someone in your teen's family, school, or community. What are some of their life experiences or ways of thinking and doing that nurture hope? In what small (or big) ways can your teen emulate these hopeful strengths in their own everyday life?

- Support your teen in learning about how to be a [justice-oriented citizen](#), which describes someone who, according to researchers [Joel Westheimer](#) and [Joseph Kahne](#):
 - Takes initiative to dive deeply beyond the surface to understand the role of structural bias—social, political, and economic policies—that is at the root cause of injustice and
 - Knows about collective action to make change for justice at broader levels—systems, institutions, and structures.
- You can ask your teen, “What is an equity or justice issue that you or your peers have struggled with? What more do you need to learn about this issue? What power do you have to spur change at the root cause? Great solutions to societal problems can come from anywhere and often those most impacted by the problems have great insight on what may need to change to actually solve them. Who has a lot of power around this issue that could initiate the changes you want to see? How can you influence and learn how to speak up to people in power about this issue?”
- For example, you can talk with your teen about the problem of hunger in your community and three different approaches to challenge this injustice. (You can also adapt this example to a topic that matters most to your teen.)
 - One action that a *personally responsible citizen* could take to address this problem is to drop off cans of food at a food drive. What are the limits of this type of action? How does this action address the root causes of the problem? How does it not?
 - A *participatory citizen* could act to take the lead in organizing a food drive in their community. How would this step get at the deepest level of hunger in the community? What parts of the problem would this step solve and not solve?
 - A *justice-oriented citizen* could [act](#) based on why people are hungry in the first place to address the [underlying reasons for food insecurity](#). They can use their own personal experiences of hunger or learn from the insights of people who have experienced hunger to better understand the problem and what is needed to solve it. Is hunger an issue that your teen and family struggle with? What would justice look like based on your lived experiences?
- Discuss with your teen the important [difference](#) between acting for justice and acting “to be the hero of the story.” Important questions to discuss with your teen are:
 - How can these actions be truly in pursuit of justice rather than swooping in to rescue people for the performance of “making a difference”?
 - How can these actions “first do no harm”?
 - If you personally are not experiencing the issue, then how are you involving the people who are experiencing the issue—a matter that concerns them—in making change for justice?
- Discuss with your teen how justice-oriented citizens are driven by the understanding that solving problems within a community and strengthening the well-being of society requires that we question and change established systems—like education, healthcare, housing, commerce, financial, energy, agriculture—that have continued to deliver unjust results.
- You can help your teen understand that structural bias is built into policies and practices. To dismantle structural bias, we can work to recognize, take out, and put in components that promote equity—opportunities for all. Important questions to ask are, “Who has the power to make the more important changes? How can you influence them?” For example, you and your teen can actively support [diverse media representation](#), write to your local TV or newspaper’s investigative journalism team to highlight a community problem, contact an elected official like a city council member or legislator to call for action, or attend a local demonstration that is a part of a larger social movement. In the same way that it was possible to originally design structural bias to promote injustice, it is possible that we can make progress by redesigning structures to foster justice for all people.

- Invite your teen to share what inequities they notice in their everyday lives or the lives of their family and close friends that they are motivated to explore and understand. These inequities, like access to high quality [early child care](#) and [clean water](#) can be issues that they face in their community that lead to feelings of frustration or anger, for example, and compel them to take a stand. What collective efforts

REFLECTION AFTER THE PRACTICE

- How did your teen respond to this exercise? Did it nurture their capacity to be on the lookout to recognize inequity and strengthen a sense of empowerment to promote equity? Did this conversation help them develop a sense of purpose beyond themselves to foster progress toward justice? When and how might you want to continue having these conversations about justice? Who else would your teen want to talk to about their reflections on justice and ways they can weave a stronger social fabric that benefits all teens?

THE RESEARCH BEHIND THE PRACTICE

EVIDENCE THAT IT WORKS

[Researchers](#) compared two different high school programs in the United States where students learned about democracy and citizenship. One program focused on participatory citizenship in an East Coast suburban/rural high school (almost all students were European Americans). The other program focused on justice-oriented citizenship in a West Coast urban high school (38% African American, 38% Asian or Pacific Islander, 5% Latino, 5% White, 10% Other; 40% lived in public housing).

The results? Both programs were successful in achieving each of their goals, but they also had different outcomes based on their priorities. After completing both programs, teens in both groups followed the news more frequently, felt greater civic efficacy, and supported greater government responsibility for those in need.

Teens in the participatory citizenship program also felt greater personal responsibility to help others and greater leadership efficacy following the program. They also had a clearer vision of what to do for their community, and had greater knowledge of the skills needed for community development. What's more, teens in the justice-oriented citizenship program also had greater understanding between structural and individual explanations for poverty, and greater interest in politics following the program.

The researchers highlighted that teens benefit from both types of program priorities—nurturing participation and cultivating the ability to analyze the underlying structural biases that lead to injustice—because focusing on promoting one does not guarantee the other will be fostered automatically in teens as well.

WHY DOES IT MATTER?

Teens need support in building skills that will help them to solve societal problems. They also need to learn how to recognize when societal structures perpetuate inequities and how to take collective action to foster justice.

Equity and justice involve [basic human rights](#) for all people, but the majority of children across the world are living with inequity and injustice. What's more, these unfair realities affect not just the development of children from marginalized identities because privileged children bear witness and are influenced by the existence of inequity

and injustice. In many cases, privilege is derived from exploiting children and communities from particular identities, which have negative ripple effects on entire societies.