



## TAKE HOME SKILL: GROWING CIVIC EMPOWERMENT

*“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.”*

–Margaret Mead

### OVERVIEW

Parents/caregivers and their teens discuss issues in their community and in the world, and think together about how they can make an impact.

### LEVELS

- Middle School
- High School
- College

### PLANNING FOR IT

#### WHEN YOU MIGHT USE THIS PRACTICE

- To nurture your teen’s [civic engagement](#)—taking collective and individual action to identify and address social issues.

#### TIME REQUIRED

- ≤ 15 minutes over multiple sessions

#### MATERIALS

- Online access to do research on a civic issue

#### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Youth will:

- Recognize and research issues in their community and in the world that they care about or are curious to learn more about
- Share facts, figures, or personal stories related to a civic issue during a family discussion

- Analyze key points of a civic issue during a family discussion

## ADDITIONAL SUPPORTS

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

## CHARACTER STRENGTHS

- Curiosity
- Courage
- Empathy
- Humility
- Purpose

## SEL COMPETENCIES

- Self-Awareness
- Self-Management
- Social Awareness

## MINDFULNESS COMPONENTS

- Open awareness

## HOW TO DO IT

### REFLECTION BEFORE THE PRACTICE

Take a moment to reflect on the issues and concerns in your community or the world that you care about. You can use the following prompts to connect your experience with your teen's experience.

- In what ways have you considered building your understanding and taking action on these issues? For example, have you researched these issues and spoken to others including your teen about what you've learned?
- Do you already or have you considered volunteering, voting, attending rallies, or taking other forms of action related to these civic issues?
- Has your teen shown interest in understanding, sharing with you, and getting involved in concerns in the community?
- What topics do they care about?
- What are some ways your teen could feel nurtured to take steps in becoming more engaged in these topics?
- How can you show your teen you respect their voice and perspective when they share their interests in civic matters?
- How can you prioritize staying connected and turning toward rather than away from each other when you and your teen have differing perspectives or don't see eye to eye?

- How can you agree to maintain [respectful communication](#) if or when you have conflicting points of view?

## INSTRUCTIONS

**Overview:** With all the hustle and bustle in our everyday lives, it can be hard to get together as a family to talk about issues in our community and in our world that we care a lot about. But when we provide space for our teens to talk about civics—our rights and responsibilities as citizens of our local communities and our world—we can help them feel more empowered. Having weekly talks about civics over dinner can be one way to help teens feel inspired about civic engagement and encouraged to take collective action to bridge differences with people in their community who seem different and pursue justice.

**Activity:** First, introduce the topic of civics and what being a citizen means to you. Talk about it from your point of view and give examples. Explain how it's important to understand that each individual contributes in different ways in their community. You can take inspiration from and adapt the following prompts using a familiar conversational style that feels natural for you.

- What is civics?
- What is a citizen from a personal perspective?
- How can I contribute to the community from my perspective as a citizen?

Continue the conversation by explaining that part of being a citizen is being able to identify and advocate for issues that may be harming people in your community. For example, you can discuss issues including lack of access to fresh food and vegetables, access to transportation, sanitation, such as having cleaned streets and parks, accessible food pantries, homelessness, clean air, access to community gardens, accessible sidewalks for people with disabilities.

Next, talk about how you can start having family members take turns choosing a civics topic that they want to discuss over dinner over the next week or more. The family member whose turn it is to choose the topic will also lead the family conversation. Family members should rotate, so that everyone gets to lead one of the conversations during the week. If family dinners are not common in your household, you might consider doing this practice as you drive your teen to school, over chores, or simply during the end of the day when you reconnect.

The conversation leader can start by doing a bit of research on the topic beforehand to prepare themselves to engage the family in a discussion. For example, they can spend about five minutes doing research online using credible sources, like [Pew Research Center](#), to learn about facts or figures related to affordable housing to share with the family. The conversation leader can also share their own personal stories or the stories of people they know who are experiencing challenges with affordable housing, for example.

The conversation leader can begin the discussion by taking two to three minutes to share key points about the topic that could include facts and figures as well as personal stories with the family members. If you like, the conversation leader can begin by taking on the role of a “myth-buster” for the topic for the first few minutes before each of the family members chime into the discussion to share their perspectives. It's especially important to encourage your teen by letting them know their opinion is very important, their voice matters, and that caring for our community is part of being a citizen. The conversation can proceed to explore how, based on your own definition of a citizen, you

can advocate for a solution or help to solve the problem. For example, using a familiar conversational style that feels natural for you, your discussion can explore the following questions:

- How are these issues affecting our community?
- How has this issue changed over time in our community?
- What factors are contributing to this issue?
- How do we see our neighbors struggling with this issue?
- What strengths are in our community that could support this issue?
- What else would be helpful to know about this issue?
- Who would be helpful to involve in this issue?
- Who outside our family (for example, teachers or friends) would we want to talk to about this issue?
- What kind of actions could we take to help or advocate on behalf of our community?

### REFLECTION AFTER THE PRACTICE

- How did your teen respond to this exercise?
- How did you try to show them respect for their opinions and voice?
- How was your experience navigating differences between you and your teen’s perspectives? What helps you to stay connected when you have differences in opinion?
- Did your teen express feeling empowered? If so, how?
- Is your teen interested in taking individual or collective action to bring about more fairness and justice on the issue they discussed? If so, how could you support them?
- What other civic topics do you think you and your teen could discuss in future conversations?

### THE RESEARCH BEHIND IT

#### EVIDENCE THAT IT WORKS

[Civic engagement](#) can nurture teen’s well-being by helping them feel a sense of greater control over their lives as they practice being hands-on in their communities. What’s more, it can help them have a more nuanced understanding of civic issues in their community and in the world. This empowerment can be especially important for teens from marginalized backgrounds.

[Researchers](#) randomly assigned teens and young adults (18% Hispanic/Latino, 18% Multiracial, 15% East Asian, 11% Black; predominantly of low socioeconomic status) to deliver a short speech on one of two different topics. They were given five minutes to prepare a two- to three-minute speech about either a civic issue (i.e., homelessness) or a neutral issue (i.e., snack foods). Compared to youth who gave a neutral speech, youth who gave a speech about homelessness had a greater sense of civic empowerment—an understanding that their active participation and involvement can make an impact on civic decision-making. What’s more, compared to youth who gave a neutral speech, youth had a lower physiological stress response preparing and delivering their civic speeches as well as during a subsequent math activity designed to induce stress, which suggests that a sense of empowerment acts as a stress buffer.

#### WHY DOES IT MATTER?

Facing civic issues can feel [overwhelming](#) at times, particularly for teens, but even for adults. Teens may be curious to learn more about issues affecting their community and the world, but they might not know where to start, and doubt their skills and ability to make a difference. At times, if they do get involved in trying to bring change to some social cause, they might be met with resistance and slow progress, which can be discouraging. For this reason, it is important to help our teens stay civically engaged and feel [empowered](#) to be active community members and global citizens building a better and just future for all. While civic engagement can be stressful, it can also [help teens feel more](#) socially connected, provide practical opportunities to be involved in their communities, and foster their sense of purpose and meaning. This practice can be one way to nurture teens' civic engagement within the family home and it is easily adaptable to meet unique family needs and interests.

## REFERENCES

Ballard, P. J., Muscatell, K. A., Hoyt, L. T., Flores, A. J., & Mendes, W. B. (2021). [An experimental laboratory examination of the psychological and physiological effects of civic empowerment: A novel methodological approach](#). *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, 50(1), 118-142.

Christens, B. D., & Peterson, N. A. (2012). The role of empowerment in youth development: A study of sociopolitical control as mediator of ecological systems' influence on developmental outcomes. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 41(5), 623-635. <https://doi.org/10.1007/S10964-011-9724-9>

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