

RAISING KIDS

How to Teach Your Kids About Civic Responsibility

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157



8



Sometimes we need a shake up to wake up. If there's one positive that has come out of this election and crazy time in American history, it's the immense uptick in people getting involved in politics and their local communities. This is major progress.

A [Washington Post](#) article just before the election in September 2016 discussed how many Americans know little about their government. The article referred to a new survey by the Annenberg Public Policy Center at the University of Pennsylvania that found how only a quarter of Americans could name all three branches of government: Executive, Legislative, and Judicial.

This trend has been taking place for many years. Since the 1950s, Americans have drifted apart and been less engaged in their communities. A [report](#) in 2001 explained how Americans sign fewer petitions, belong to fewer organizations that meet in person, do not know their neighbors, meet with friends less frequently, and socialize with family members less often than they used to.

This has only gotten worse with [technological advances](#). Spending all our time glued to televisions and communicating in brief snippets on our computers and phones does not make for much personal interaction and civic engagement.

More and more people are concerned about what is happening in Washington, D.C. As they emerge from behind their screens to organize together, local groups are sprouting up all over. People are connecting and talking about their hopes and fears.

This new energy signifies a positive change for society. Research shows that we are happier when we build relationships and open up with others in our community. How can we use this time to teach our children the importance of civic engagement?

Benefits of civic engagement

There is a clear link between social connection and happiness. When we interact with our neighbors on issues that impact our lives, we experience a greater sense of connection to those we otherwise would not have met.

Experts have found that civic involvement helps us build personal connections in addition to the typical ones we have through family, work, and leisure activities. When we participate in social action, community service, and political groups, we increase personal satisfaction because we engage with others on issues of mutual interest.

These activities also involve participating in the decision-making process, which has been found to boost our happiness as well. Happiness also comes from helping others less fortunate than ourselves because it gives us a sense of living a meaningful life.

A Harvard Kennedy School of Government survey of approximately 30,000 individuals revealed that quality of life and happiness are highest in communities where residents are more socially connected.

The survey found that levels of civic engagement – such as how much residents trusted, socialized, and joined with others – predicted the quality of community life and residents' happiness better than education or income. The survey also showed that if other individuals in a community had higher civic engagement, the whole community was happier overall.

The connection between community involvement and happiness for children and teens has been evaluated. According to youth.gov:

- Youth who volunteer are more likely to feel connected to their communities, do better in school, and are less likely to engage in risky behavior.
- Youth are more likely to volunteer if their entire family is involved and this experience results in strengthened family bonds.
- Students who performed voluntary community service were 19 percent more likely to graduate from college than those who did not.

Tufts University Professor Peter Levine studied the relationship between civic engagement and psychosocial well-being among college students. He concluded that people are happier if their daily activities tend to be helpful to, and valued by, society. They also need to feel a sense of belonging and support from their community.

Moreover, students who engaged in civic activities that impacted social change had significantly better happiness scores. They felt more connected to others, were more motivated to learn, and managed stress more effectively. He expects civic engagement programs to boost happiness.

Fun ways to teach your kids about civic engagement

Children spend time in school learning about American history and government, but you can enhance their experience from a young age by doing the following:

- Read books about American politics and government based on their age and interests. Here's a wonderful book list developed by the United States Senate.
- Watch movies and documentaries about history and government.
- Volunteer together as a family to instill community service values.
- Encourage them to join the student government or debate team at school.

- Bring them to a political event or rally.
- Learn together online using these amazing resources:

iCivics provides a platform to engage students in meaningful civic learning, including free inventive resources to ensure every student receives a high-quality civic education. As the largest provider of civics curriculum in the country, it is used in 50 states by more than 110,000 teachers.

The Office of the Clerk of the U.S. House of Representatives provides a public service website called Kids in the House. It provides educational and entertaining information about the legislative branch of the United States Government to students of all ages. Topics covered include the role of the U.S. House of Representatives, the legislative process, and House history.

Kids.gov is the official kids' portal for the U.S. government. It links kids, parents, and teachers to information and services from government agencies, schools, and educational organizations, all geared to the learning level and interest of kids. It is organized into four audiences: Kids (Grades K-5), Teens (Grades 6-8), Teachers, and Parents. Each audience tab is divided into educational subjects like Arts, Math, and History.

A Kids Guide To Running For President is a cute kid-friendly document that explains the Presidency, voting, and the inauguration.

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