

Stand Up, Speak Out

How your teen's voice can change the world

Mahatma Gandhi once said, "Be the change you want to see in the world."

Understanding that concept is the first step to becoming an effective citizen. As students move toward high school graduation, educators and parents have a responsibility to educate teens to become effective citizens. That means, by the time your teen is eligible to vote, he should understand the democratic process, how to be a part of the civic debate, and most importantly, how to make his voice heard. It's never too early to start learning how to exercise civic responsibility. Here's a look at the state of civic engagement among teens and how your teen can get involved.

Teen Trends

Recent news about teens' civic participation hasn't been very encouraging. In a survey conducted by the National Constitution Center, more teens could name the Three Stooges than the three branches of government. Research conducted by the Center for Communication and Civic Engagement (CCCE) in 2004 found that only 24 percent of 15- to 25-year-olds say that they follow government and public affairs "very often."

What accounts for the trend? The CCCE found that decreased youth civic participation reflects the changing character of citizenship in the U.S., and that some younger citizens have little interest in conventional politics, voting, and mass media. A study by the organization says that teens are "no less passionate about political issues, but their emphasis on individuality prevents them from connecting personal concerns to the larger public sphere."

The CCCE's research suggests civic education can help engage teens if the approach is attuned to a teen's changing needs and realities. Peer discussions, debate, journalism, and encouraging students to vote tend to be effective classroom strategies to promote civic values. Active teaching techniques -- debates, mock trials, cooperative learning, and media analysis -- are generally the most effective for promoting civic values, according to CCCE research.

Starting Early

A 2000 Gallup Poll on public attitudes toward education asked respondents what they considered to be the most important purpose of the nation's public schools. "Preparing people to become responsible citizens" received the number one ranking. The Center for Civic Education notes that over the course of 32 years of the Gallup Poll, the public has not wavered in its conviction that the schools' central mission is educating young people for citizenship.

Preparing teens to be responsible citizens and our future leaders starts both at home and school. Here are some ways that parents can help ready their teens for tomorrow, today:

- Show an interest in civic affairs and government by initiating conversations at dinner or in response to television programs about current events.
- Encourage your teen to take part in such community service projects as neighborhood clean-ups or beautification initiatives, or with such non-profit organizations as Habitat for Humanity. Volunteering can also help your teen see the value of helping others and how small contributions can not only help other people, but also boost your teen's self-esteem.
- Being environmentally responsible is another mark of a good citizen, so encourage your teen to recycle materials and conserve natural resources, such as electricity, water and gasoline.
- Set an example by participating in the electoral process and sharing your experiences with your teen. Take your teen with you when you vote. Explain not only the process of voting, but also why voting is important. If possible, take your teen into the voting booth with you when you cast your ballot.

- Encourage your teen to read about current events in magazines or online at websites or blogs, and to watch television shows, like “The Daily Show with Jon Stewart,” through which they can get the news and enjoy a laugh.
- Volunteer at the local YMCA or another non-profit organization in your area, or for a political candidate you feel strongly about to show your teen that you’re involved. According to CIRCLE, young people who grow up in a household where someone volunteers in the community are twice as likely to volunteer regularly, to be an active member of a group, and are more likely to follow what’s happening in government and vote.

Speak Out

If people like Martin Luther King Jr., Rosa Parks and Susan B.

Anthony never spoke out, the world might be a different place. All of them were teenagers once, but they became important figures in our nation’s history because each decided to stand up for his or her beliefs.

According to one area social studies teacher, “Too often, students are uninvolved and, because of that, they become complacent and think they can’t effect change. But the truth is they can.”

Even before your teen turns 18, there are many opportunities for your teen to get involved and become an active part of government. New York State mandates that all high school students enroll in a half-year Participation in Government class. In addition to the required coursework, students have many valuable opportunities in school for civil engagement. Outside the classroom, school is an ideal place to learn about democracy and how to effect change in America. Here are a few examples of what your teen can do:

- Get involved in student council or student government early. Student government helps your teen learn leadership and team-building skills, as well as how she can use her voice to advocate for her fellow students and influence change. Typical student council activities include fundraising for school events, discussing rules and school policies, taking part in community service efforts, and planning social activities.
- Participate on the debate team or in mock trial. A competitive academic team will help hone your teen’s public speaking skills and teach him how to cultivate his thoughts and skillfully put them into words. On the debate team, your teen will learn how to analyze issues and come up with solutions. For competitive mock trials, teens learn about the legal system while getting the opportunity to meet with attorneys and appear in front of a real judge. In addition to learning skills he might not develop in the classroom, the experience will likely boost your teen’s self-esteem.
- Speak out against injustices, such as racism or bullying. Bullying is a hot-button issue today, especially now that bullies have gone online. Encourage your teen to speak out against bullying or other issues he feels passionate about. For starters, he could write an opinion piece for the local newspaper or talk to the editor of his school newspaper.
- Use social media strategically. Social media sites, such as Facebook and YouTube, are useful tools for reaching a broad audience with a particular message. Recently, an eighth-grade student received national media attention for a video she posted on YouTube about her experiences being bullied. The video showed the teen holding up signs with the names the bullies called her and how the bullies made her feel. In less than a week, the video was viewed more than 30,000 times. Although it’s important to caution teens about how easily social media can be abused, you can also teach your teen how social media can be used to spread messages that promote positive change.
- Volunteer at school. There are plenty of younger students who need help with reading or math, and with resources for schools dwindling, many school districts are laying off resource teachers and teaching assistants who once provided that extra help. Encourage your teen to talk with her guidance counselor

about opportunities to tutor younger students in your school district. Tutoring is a great way to not only help out in the school, but it also helps your teen build confidence and see the positive results of her actions first-hand and immediately.

Book & Web Guide

Teen-friendly news sites

- Rock the Vote (www.rockthevote.com). Founded about 20 years ago, the website uses music and technology to engage young people and keep them informed of political issues. Teens can follow the site on Twitter and, when they turn 18, they can register to vote through the site.
- Youth Noise (www.youthnoise.com). A website designed to inform and empower teens to get involved with national and global issues, Youth Noise also gives teens a place to blog about what's important to them and connect with other students.
- Channel One News (www.channelone.com). This television network and website is aimed at teens and provides both hard news and features.
- PBS NewsHour Extra (<http://www.pbs.org/newshour/extra>). Teens can go to this site for national, world, and science-related news. There's also a section featuring essays and editorials written by students.
- Teens for Planet Earth (www.teensforplanetearth.org). If your teen is green-minded, this site provides plenty of information and social networking opportunities.
- The New York Times Upfront (teacher.scholastic.com/upfront). This news magazine targets high school students and is packed with articles and other relevant content.
- Youth Radio (<http://www.youthradio.org>). Aimed at people ages 14-24, the site exists to educate youth and make them effective contributors in their communities.

Additional Resources:

- Teaching the citizens of tomorrow: <http://www.greatschools.org/students/academic-skills/the-state-of-civic-education-teaching-the-citizens-of-tomorrow.gs?content=162&page=all>
- The mark of a good citizen: <http://www.parenting.org/article/mark-good-citizen>
- Creating effective citizens: <http://www.socialstudies.org/positions/effectivecitizens>
- Civic responsibility: <http://learningtogive.org/papers/paper11.html>
- Actions for high school citizens: <http://www.goodcitizen.org/Citizen%20Actions/CitizenActions-HighSchool.htm>