

TALK WITH TEENS ABOUT CIVIC ISSUES

Difficulty: **MODERATE** | Frequency: **VARIABLE** | Duration: **10 MINS**



WHY YOU SHOULD TRY IT

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 or 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 these reasons, it is important to help our teens stay civically engaged and feel **empowered** to be active community members and global citizens building a better 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 home and can be adapted to meet your family's unique needs and interests.

TIME REQUIRED

This practice can take as little as 10 minutes a week.

HOW TO DO IT

As teens get older, they often become increasingly aware of civic issues—topics affecting our immediate communities and the world, like access to good health care and education or economic opportunities.

One way for you to provide space for your teens to talk about civic issues is through weekly civic conversations. You might have these talks over dinner, while driving to school, or during household chores or an evening walk. You can also simply set a time at the end of the day to reconnect and talk.

Follow these steps to structure your conversations:

1. **Decide who will share and lead the discussion.** Assign one member of the family to choose a civic topic that they care about in advance to present to the family. Ideally, the chosen family member will share about the topic at the beginning and then lead the family in a short discussion.
2. **Learn about the topic before sharing.** The leader should spend a little time learning about the issue beforehand to ensure that they can engage the family in a conversation. The research does not need to be extensive, particularly if time is a concern.

3. **Take turns sharing and leading conversations.** Family members should rotate so that everyone gets to present and discuss a civic issue. You can have these conversations weekly, or however often makes sense for your family.

EVIDENCE IT THAT WORKS

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.

One study randomly assigned racially diverse teens and young adults (predominantly of low socioeconomic status) to deliver a two- to three-minute speech about a civic issue (homelessness) or a neutral issue (snack foods). They were given five minutes to prepare.

Young people assigned to give the civic speech reported a greater sense of civic empowerment—an understanding that their active participation and involvement can make an impact on civic decision making—after the speech. What’s more, compared to the 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 TO TRY IT

[Civic engagement](#) can nurture teens’ well-being by helping them feel a sense of greater control over their lives as they practice being hands-on in their communities, and conversations about civic issues are a first step.

Taking the time to lead a discussion about a civic issue can help teens organize their ideas better so that they can begin to develop a sense of efficacy around an issue they care about. The opportunity to prepare for the conversation allows them to gain a more nuanced understanding of civic issues in their community and in the world and consider the kinds of actions that they believe could be taken.

This process of reflecting and speaking on a civic topic can help them feel more confident about taking action in the near future—and empowerment can be especially important for teens from marginalized backgrounds.

SOURCES

[Parissa J. Ballard, Ph.D.](#), Wake Forest School of Medicine

This practice is part of [Greater Good in Action](#), a clearinghouse of the best research-tested methods for increasing happiness, resilience, kindness, and connection, created by the [Greater Good Science Center](#) at UC Berkeley and [HopeLab](#).

