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Democracy is Learned Behavior

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Do you remember how you learned civics and political participation? Was it that semester of American government in high school? Did *Schoolhouse Rock!* teach you how a bill becomes a law? Or perhaps your school held a mock election of French Fries vs. Tater Tots to explain presidential elections. You may have an unforgettable rhyme in your head to remember the Preamble, or you may have participated in Lincoln-Douglas style debates. But how much did these early lessons prepare you for participating in our democracy as an adult? When you first registered to vote and were faced with choosing a political party, had you given thought to your own political values? Even the millions of us who went on to take an undergraduate political science class will tell you it didn't give us all the necessary tools for self-governance and political participation.

We're Not Doing the Job

For decades, scholars and educators have raised the alarm that civic education in the traditional school setting has been wholly lacking. Numerous studies, commissions and reports have reached the same conclusion: We are not adequately teaching civic education and therefore generations are not prepared to take part in our participatory government. Rather, Americans are taught that government and politics are actions that *happen* to us, and that the only say we have in the matter is a vote every four years. Sure, we are schooled in our basic freedoms of speech, assembly, religion and petition, but not in a way that empowers us to put those rights and our responsibilities as citizens into action or use our individual and collective power to make positive change.

Additionally, the focus of "American government" in our classrooms is stuck on the federal level. Rarely does civic education take the local route. The results are increasing voter apathy, decreasing citizen participation and overall declining faith in government. I believe we can turn this around in the span of a generation by empowering students with civic knowledge and skills beyond the classroom and allowing them to be active participants in our democracy well before their voter enfranchisement at age 18.

Civics Must Be Practiced

Civic education cannot be only theoretical, it must be practical. A quality civic education includes understanding the values and attributes of good citizenship, acquiring the knowledge of how our political system works, and then putting the skills of democracy into practice. These components cannot be limited to traditional classroom instruction. Lessons must be reinforced by students witnessing civic engagement all around them and actively flexing their civic muscles by participating in actions even before they have the right to vote.

Democracy is learned behavior. Just like language, it is a skill that is best learned through practice and active usage. We must model the principles of a participatory democracy at home and in our communities for children to learn by example and provide space for them to learn by doing. If children see a focus on the right to vote only during presidential elections, the lesson they learn is that their vote is a tool that is used only every four years. Even if they are aware of local elections, they may believe they have little importance. Additionally, think about how the children in our lives observe us engaging in dialogue with those who hold views different from our own. Beyond the lessons of tolerance and respect, do children observe how to balance personal liberties with social responsibility to others or how to compromise personal interests to achieve shared ends? These are important skills for self-governance that we must put into direct practice when choosing a political party, evaluating public policy and selecting candidates for public office.

Everyday Democracy

Just as parents and caregivers are encouraged to sit down with their kids and discuss family finances, they must involve them in their regular civic activities. Taking your child with you to the polls is a given, but there are many other, more day-to-day opportunities to foster civic engagement beyond the classroom. Here are a few examples:

Explain your school choice. Whether it is a traditional public, charter, religious-based or private school, discuss your choice of school with your child. Evaluating choices and comparing them with your needs and aspirations as a family are important decision-making skills that are useful in self-governance and civic life. Taking the extra step of giving older children a voice in which school they will attend also helps develop their own decision-making skills. Expanding the conversation to include information on how the school is governed and how you as a parent or

caregiver participate is also a lesson in civic participation. Do you attend meetings of the parents association and participate in its activities?

Go to a public demonstration. You can find a political rally or public demonstration nearly every weekend these days. It could be a rally advocating for longer library hours or an increase in the minimum wage. Taking young people to participate in demonstrations (or even teaching them how to organize one themselves) provides a great lesson in the power of collective action, free speech and our right to petition the government. Some demonstrations we see on the news, both national and international, display the worst of humanity. More than ever before it is important to show young people that political rallies and demonstrations are not synonymous with violence, fear and bigotry but are normal and healthy acts of a democratic society.

Help your child connect the dots. Why can't the library stay open longer? Why did the price of a MetroCard increase? Why are there only a limited amount of summer youth jobs? These are all questions that tie back to public policy and decisions by elected leaders. We know how inquisitive young children are; the way they pepper you with questions can make you feel as if you are testifying before a Senate committee hearing. Teaching them to connect the dots and identify the decision makers helps them to develop important civic skills. You can also show them that they have a role in influencing the process. Take them to testify at a community board or city council hearing. Attend meetings with elected representatives and let them ask the questions.

Nurture your child's voice. The daughter of a close friend has become passionate about climate change. At 9-years-old, she has prioritized conservation as one of her primary civic values after learning about it in school. Her parents have affirmed her voice, and allow her to contribute to decisions such as reducing energy and waste in their home. They certainly didn't start installing solar panels and composting, but by giving her even a minor say in household decisions she learns her voice has value and that she can put it to use in favor of issues she cares about.

These are just some of the many ways we can model civic engagement for children. Empowering them and providing space for their participation equips them to engage in and shape our democracy well before they reach adulthood. If we limit civics education to theory alone, we essentially put their civic rights and responsibilities in a box that cannot be opened until their 18th birthday. But let them exercise their civic skills at a young age, and our children will be ready to practice democracy straight out of the gate.

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