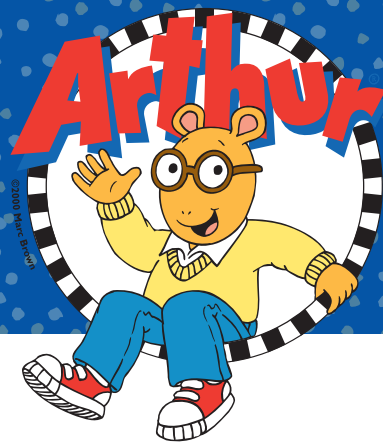


Civics for Young Learners



Why Civics?

Today, more than ever, there is an urgent need for young people (even the very young!) to learn civics. It is essential that we teach students the skills they will need to become citizens of the world: from “civil discourse” (being able to talk through problems and issues, especially with those who don’t share their point of view) to active participation in their school, community, and the world around them. As Kei Kawashima-Ginsberg, director of the Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, says,

“Strong civic education develops young people’s capacity to grapple with contentious, possibly divisive, issues . . . in an informed, rigorous, yet civil manner. Access to strong civic education, among all subjects, is imperative because doing so not only affects individual ‘success’ as citizens but also our nation’s civic health collectively.”

What we traditionally think of as “civics” (the structure of government, how a bill becomes a law, voting and elections) isn’t always taught in the early grades. Ideas about the political process aren’t commonly addressed until upper elementary and middle school. Yet educators are increasingly aware that the building blocks for civic engagement—responsibility, respect, empathy, honesty, compassion, conflict resolution, and open-mindedness—are in fact the cornerstones of children’s social and emotional development in the early grades. Adding in media literacy and a focus on cultural awareness and competency creates the perfect recipe for helping young children become caring citizens of the world.

Learning to work together and maintaining a safe and fun learning environment are key goals of students in kindergarten and first grade. In fact, these goals underscore much of what children do on a daily basis: creating and observing classroom and playground rules; understanding one’s role in a group; appreciating others; and developing cooperative, negotiation, and communication skills. Educators of young children already know that this kind of learning is every bit as important as subject knowledge.

Opportunities to teach civics, therefore, are present while teaching ELA, science, and social studies. As students grow and mature in their understanding of their roles within the family, classroom, school, and community, and as their ability to manage friendships and other relationships expands, they are learning the basics of civics.



Why ARTHUR?

The PBS KIDS series ARTHUR is not only the longest-running animated children’s series, it reaches millions of families daily, including children from ages 4 to 8 (younger and older children are also fans). Over the years, the series has portrayed a wide variety of issues and topics, from making friends to understanding differences to dealing with illness or natural disasters. Told with humor and insight, the stories explore and explain the same values that a good citizen possesses. When children watch the show, they are not only entertained, but they also learn important lessons about respecting and understanding others, problem solving, and being a good friend.

Teachers can use the ARTHUR series—especially those stories specifically geared to civics topics—to lay the foundation for teaching young learners to become active citizens of the world. Applying the concepts introduced in the show—and enacted by the characters—helps children learn how to create community rules, understand their role in their shared community, and recognize why everyone can and should contribute to solve challenges. This sense of responsibility and inclusion, as well as the experience of working together, also helps solidify a sense of belonging. As children watch the show, they relate to the characters and their everyday dilemmas and experiences. This gives children an opportunity to talk about their own problems, issues, and strategies in a supportive environment and to feel appreciated and understood.

Making a Safe Space

In every generation, children have experienced stress and anxiety. In today’s world, the speed of change, social media, and other factors have made childhood an often-perilous journey. You can provide a safe haven for students by creating a sense of community within the classroom, valuing each child’s contribution to that community, and reassuring children that the classroom is a place where they can feel comfortable talking about their fears and concerns.

Consider creating a small, comfortable physical space in your classroom where children can go to regulate their feelings or take a breather. This is not a “punitive time-out” space, but a place where children can take a moment to be alone with their thoughts. If it’s during a lesson, use a timer if needed; during noninstructional time, children may want to stay longer.

Demonstrating how to talk about even difficult issues in a calm, nonjudgmental, and caring manner can help children’s coping skills and inform their worldview. It also models for children how they, too, can listen to others, even when they don’t agree, and voice their opinions in a respectful manner.

Using Literature

In addition to the ARTHUR videos, children’s literature can provide an ideal starting point for a conversation or an action plan about civic issues. Sharing and talking about books helps build empathy, awareness, insights, and cultural competency. Books such as *All Are Welcome* by Alexandra Penfold and *The Day You Begin* by Jacqueline Woodson celebrate diversity. Maybe

Something Beautiful by F. Isabel Campoy is an inspiring tale of community activism. Both *We March* by Shane Evans and *The Youngest Marcher* by Cynthia Levinson illustrate historic incidents during the civil rights movement. Dozens of wonderful books about friendship, such as *Frog and Toad Are Friends* by James Marshall, *Jamaica and Brianna* by Juanita Havill, and *Should I Share My Ice Cream?* by Mo Willems, provide a rich source of discussions about what it means to be a friend, how to maintain friendships, and what to do when friends argue. *David Gets in Trouble* by David Shannon and *Too Many Tamales* by Gary Soto deal with lying and its consequences, while *Be Kind* by Pat Zietlow Miller and *I Walk with Vanessa* by Kerascoët offer advice about compassion and kindness. These and many other titles will enhance any discussion about civic and civil behavior. Ask your school or local librarian for additional suggestions.

Taking Action

One way in which to engage students in civil discourse and civic life is to focus on ways to make their classroom—and their school—a better place. Understanding the school structure and then, in turn, how change happens in their community and beyond, helps empower students to feel as though they can make a difference. Examples might include:

- Raising awareness about an issue, (such as the importance of wearing a bike helmet, environmental concerns, or anti-bullying measures)
- Holding events, such as a recycling drive, clean-up day, or ride-your-bike-to-school day
- Campaigning for a cause, including writing letters to local administrators, legislators, or media
- Participating in a classroom poll or mock election on an issue children care about
- Distinguishing between fact and fiction, in text and online

Becoming a Good Citizen

Crucial aspects of becoming a good citizen include knowing healthy ways to communicate, interact, and work together; being able to appreciate diversity; and understanding multiple points of view. By starting civics in the earliest grades, educators can help children meet the challenges that face them in today's complicated and often divisive world.



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