



JOHNS HOPKINS  
SCHOOL of EDUCATION

Institute for Education Policy



## **Parent Resource:**

### *Civics at Home*

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## Why Civics?

One day, your children will be eligible to vote, serve in the military, and run for office. What do they need to know and be able to do, to be prepared?

One of our favorite scholars, political scientist David Campbell, talks about [four key factors](#) that make up an engaged citizen:

- Political knowledge (understanding how our political system works);
- Civic skills (the capacity to be involved, i.e., interpreting legislation and campaign platforms);
- The habit of civic engagement (community service and political volunteering); and
- Political tolerance (respect for the civil liberties of others).

Ideally, schools advance all four of these elements. But students also learn a great deal about how to be a good citizen and a member of their community at home from their parents and other family members. During this current season when children are learning at home, parents play an even more vital role in developing democratic capacities. Not only now, but even after the current COVID-19 crisis is past, how can parents support their children's preparation for citizenship?

[There are many wonderful civic resources for every age](#), but below are some home-grown suggestions that don't require a heavy investment of time or resources on your part. Ashley's own children are now young adults, but many of the ideas below come from things she tried at home (with varying success!) when they were younger. Kelly has been teaching civics to middle and high school students for years through informal channels including Model United Nations, interfaith debate, and a residential summer program for girls from around the world.

Note that our Institute takes an expansive view of the knowledge base required for engaged citizenship, to include not only how *American* governments function, but how others do; not only where each child lives, but what life is like for families around the world and at different times; not only current events, but conflicts and triumphs that occurred long ago.



## Broad Advice

### ***Incorporate your children into your civic routines.***

How do you normally get information about what's going on in the world, and who do you talk to about current events? Make your children a part of these routines, by having them watch the news with you, participate in conversations at the dinner table, or take time to volunteer together.



***Draw on your networks.*** Model what healthy disagreement and productive discussion can look like. Friends and family members may differ from you on politics. Get them to walk your older kids through their opinions, and let your kids see you wrestle with their views.

### ***Use available information.***

Online newspapers and journals, magazines you have delivered to the house, or even older books or photographs can be a gold mine. Use them to spark interest and knowledge about the world. Don't think that you have to be reading the most current or hard-hitting sources in order to generate questions about where, when, or why things *are*.



### ***Build a geographical foundation.***

Children can get to know maps online. A globe makes it even easier to see the relationship between countries and continents. You can purchase a [4-inch one](#) for \$9 or an [11-inch one](#) for \$30, on Amazon, and there are hundreds of even larger ones on Ebay.



**Don't be afraid of memorization.** Small, rote-learning tasks give children access to background information they will need later in life. Just as children learn their times tables or the names of the planets so that they can draw on this knowledge later, memorizing states and capitols and the names of countries on different continents, will stay with them for years to come.

The same is true of small (for little children) or larger (for older ones) snippets of major documents. One of our colleagues helps her kids memorize the names of the Presidents!

## By Age Group

### Young Children and Early Readers

- Connect countries or states with familiar story-book characters and films. For instance, the *Curious George* series starts with George's home in his jungle; help your children find continents and countries that have jungles. Is your kid a big fan of the *Moana* soundtrack? Talk to them about where Hawaii is and a little bit about its history or indigenous culture.
- Reinforce places they've talked about in school. Most elementary schools teach children about their home state. Teach them to find their state on the map and learn the surrounding ones. If you have friends and relatives in other states, or other countries, have the children find Gramma's home or your uncle's nation on the globe.
- When out on a walk, reading a story, or watching a television program, ask your children to identify which aspects of daily life are public (things everyone can use, such as roads, parks, or city bus), and which things are private (just for one person or family, such as a house, car, or cell phone).
- Ask your children how they would get from one place to another. By car? By airplane? By boat? Find two places on a map or countries on the globe, and ask them to figure out how they would travel between them.
- Use books, magazines, or other media you have around the house as jumping-off points for geography and current events. One of my (Ashley's) own early memories was of a *National Geographic* cover of Queen Nefertiti. My mom showed me Egypt on the globe, and I never forgot it. She also showed me where Vietnam and



Taiwan were – both very much in the news when I was small.

- Discuss different leaders in your community, and their roles in helping other people. You can also talk about what those people are doing during the COVID-19 crisis, and identify ways your own child could be a helper. Small community service projects such as donating to a food pantry, delivering groceries to an elderly neighbor, or sending a card to a healthcare worker in their life, can stick with children for a long time and establish a habit of community engagement from a young age.
- Consider making a meal once a week that uses favorite recipes from another country, prepping your children to be the experts who teach others where the country is, what language they speak, and what the names of the dishes are. There are some great books that make this easy, including



*Cooking the Globe*, *The World in My Kitchen*, or the website Taste of Home's [80 Recipes from Around the World](#), and about a million different YouTube video series to help you get started.

- You can also connect with your own family history and heritage, and to talk about holidays and traditions – both those celebrated by your own family, and those that are a part of their community. No matter what your family background or the time of year, your children could engage with a Passover seder, a Lunar New Year celebration, or variations on Fat Tuesday from around the world.

- There are wonderful children’s books about history and archaeology. When my (Ashley’s) children were in early elementary school, they loved *A City Through Time* and *A Street Through Time* ([early edition](#), [recent edition](#)) – both fantastic and beautifully-drawn windows into how cultures change. [Richard Platt’s illustrated books](#) on a number of ancient civilizations, here, are excellent. They also latched on to the *Horrible Histories* books, which present obscure (and sometimes really gross!) facts about the Romans, Egyptians, Celts, Vikings...



- Another angle is to start with disasters and their consequences. One of our team member’s fourth-grader loves the Scholastic *I Survived!* series. They reflect real experiences and also introduce kids to different places and time periods. Other fun sources are the Nathan Hale *Hazardous Tales*, which fictionalize history for a young audience, and the *Bloody Jack series*, which follows its young heroine from 18<sup>th</sup>-century London to the Caribbean to the United States.
- Think about rewarding your kids with choosing the next family film, or choosing the dinner menu, when they memorize a certain number of state capitals or age-appropriate sections of famous documents.

## Late-Elementary and Early-Middle School

- Late-elementary or early-middle school is a great time to start keeping up with current events, and to form a habit that lasts a lifetime. Have your child pick an article from a daily newspaper or news site, and ask them to tell you as much as they can about the who, what, when, where, and why. (The more interested you are, the more interested they are!) Try to have them pick something from a different country or region each day.
- Middle school children can also start to investigate major historical events that have shaped countries, regions, and the whole world. If they find a current events article from a particular place, ask them to research and find out about a major event, such as a conflict, disaster, or achievement, in that country’s history. Have them locate important places on the map, research the event, and tell the stories of particular highlights, battles, or political outcomes.
- Children in late-elementary and early-middle school can begin to memorize the names and locations of countries. Have them fill out as much of a blank continent map as they can, or play “Find that Country.” Make it a competition, or a “Stump the Parent” game.

- Ask your kids to come up with their own projects or ideas for community engage-



ment, and work together to execute them. Could they sew masks, organize a Zoom call activity with other children they know, or leave messages in sidewalk chalk for essential workers? See who they can identify in their community that might need help in some way, and talk about what opportunities to support them in developmentally appropriate ways.



- Children in early-middle school can start to memorize important speeches – such as Lincoln’s *Gettysburg Address* or Martin Luther King, Jr.’s *I Have a Dream*. This is also a great opportunity to talk about the importance of these events and help them identify historical moments that might have some personal significance. This is immensely rewarding and will stay with them forever.
- Play “Memory,” but with states and capitols. Have them make a card for each capitol and each state. Turn all of them over in a giant square. Each player turns over two cards at a time, until all of the matches have been made. The winner is the one with the most matches. Of course, this requires some work up front! You can make a separate set of flashcards with the state on one side, capitol on the other, for practice. Older kids can do the same with nations of the world, focusing on one area or continent.
- You can design a homemade puzzle of the United States or of another continent. Parents or older children with an eye for detail can create the outlines, using an Internet map for the pattern, and cut the pieces out carefully. Younger children can color them in and write the state names. See how long it takes to reconstruct the whole country!

## Middle and High School

- Middle and high school is a prime time to become engaged with international issues and political campaigns. Because it's a Presidential election year, 2020 is a great opportunity for young people to interrogate their own opinions and match their beliefs to a political party or ideology. There are myriad online tools to help them do this, such as [this NYT quiz](#) that is now out of date, but other similar tools can [help match beliefs](#) to an [appropriate party](#) or [ideological label](#). These activities can also help your children begin to develop their own political identities.



- You can also ask them to investigate a local or state election. Who is running? Which political parties? What are the key issues? Where do the candidates disagree? How might you choose whom to vote for? What other questions need to be asked? Are there opportunities (even during COVID-19) to volunteer for someone they believe in?
- Bring your children into your own deliberations. Let them see how you reason something to the ground, and on what basis you decide to support a candidate or not. Do you have a family member or good friend who disagrees with you politically? Ask them to explain their thoughts on a given issue or candidate to your family; let your kids see you respond thoughtfully to the arguments they pose.
- Pick an issue that interests your kids – whether gun control or access to health care or a diplomatic or economic dispute – and have different members of your family take up different sides of the debate. This can be done via Zoom with extended family or friends! Make sure to give them experience arguing for a side they dislike – and help them be as persuasive as possible!
- Watch expert debaters go at it! Between 1966 and 1999, for instance, William F.



Buckley, Jr., hosted *Firing Line*, which the Hoover Institute at Stanford [curates](#). Try [Vietnam](#) (1968), [A Conservative Look at Marijuana](#) (1972), or [Resolved: that Trade with China should Not Be Disrupted](#) (1997). A more recent take would be the 2015 debate between Bard (College) in Prison's team, and Harvard University's. PBS made a documentary about the remarkable debate called [College Behind Bars](#). It will take your breath away and lead to conversations about education and

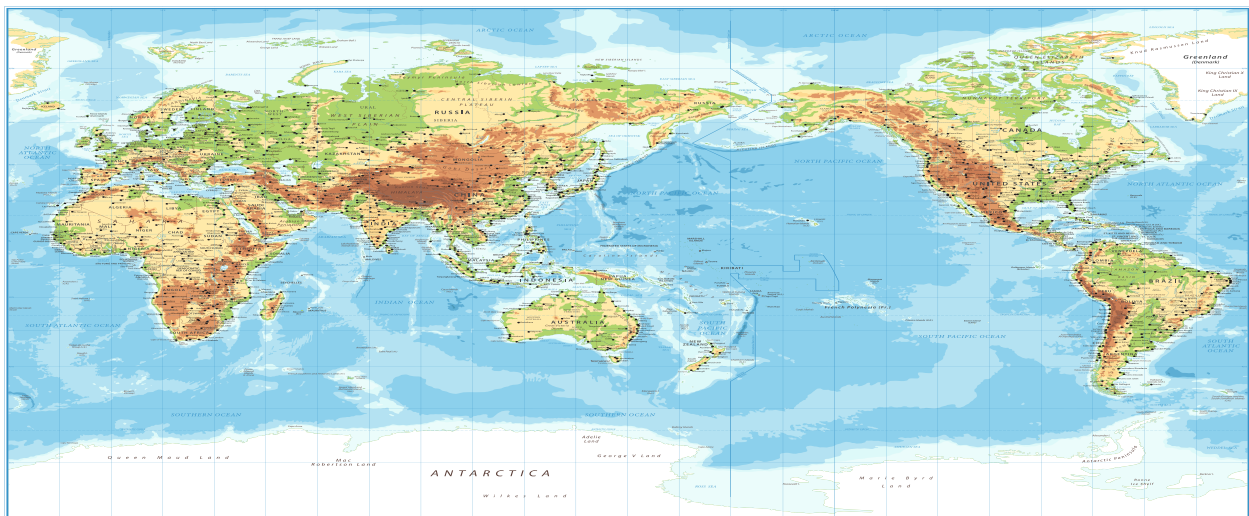


opportunity.

- Practice identifying and interrogating media bias. For example, watch the 6:00 news on MSNBC one night, and on Fox News the next. Do the same with newspapers and online sources, and ask them to compare how these different journals report the same issue. Do this a few times, and talk it through as a family each time. What's the same across sources? What's different? Use [this chart](#) as a guide, or better yet, work together to make your own and then compare the results.
- Ask them to pick a recent international event to explain to the rest of the family, and pick up the conversation where they leave off. It's a good time to circle back to the maps or globe. Where is Hong Kong? Wuhan? Australia? What kinds of governments do they have? How do the experiences going on in other places in the world, affect our lives in the United States?
- Finally, high school students have the maturity and perspective to learn in depth about life under totalitarian regimes. They could read Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, for instance, or watch *The Lives of Others*, a 2006 film about surveillance in the former East Germany, and the award-winning *Sophie Scholl* – the true story of young people who defied the Nazis.



***Enjoy the process, and enjoy living in a democracy.  
Please write us with your own suggestions!***



## Authors



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Palgrave MacMillan recently released *Pluralism and American Public Education: No One Way to School* (2017). She consults regularly on projects that examine the academic and civic outcomes of different school sectors. She is currently a Senior Fellow at the Center for the Study of Law and Religion at Emory University Law School. She holds degrees from Davidson College (Honors A.B.) and from Oxford University (M.Litt. and D.Phil. in modern history). Contact Ashley at [ashley.berner@jhu.edu](mailto:ashley.berner@jhu.edu)



Kelly Siegel-Stechler is a doctoral candidate in education at the Johns Hopkins University, where she studies civic development and political socialization in schools. She is primarily interested in the role that experiential social studies pedagogies and extracurricular activities play in shaping long-term civic outcomes in middle and high school students. Her previous projects have focused on youth voter turnout, political simulations and Model UN, and classroom discussion of controversial public issues. Kelly is a Research Fellow at the Institute for Education Policy, where she oversees the Social Studies Knowledge Map and supports their work on issues related to curriculum, accountability, and school culture. Prior to coming

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