

Practicing Democracy with Children



Children come naturally to some democratic values: a love of freedom and the pursuit of happiness. Other ideals may need to be practiced: recognizing that we are all equal, seeking the common good over self-interest, understanding what “by the people” and “for the people” means. The following practices encourage children’s engagement with democracy at home and in their communities.

1

Manners Matter

Democracy cannot flourish without civility, a.k.a. good manners. Such simple behaviors as saying “please” and “thank you” signal our respect for other people. Manners are important for any gathering when people are sharing views and trying to make decisions. Brainstorm with children some things they could do that would signal that they are considerate of their family, friends, schoolmates, and even strangers. Talk together about what is not respectful in exchanges they might see in television interviews, viral videos full of name-calling, or negative comments on social media. Then make a list of “good manners” you would like to adopt. For example: making eye contact when talking, apologizing when necessary, writing thank you notes, silencing a cell phone during mealtime or other conversations, helping others with the chores, etc.

2

An Interbeing Drawing

A key principle of democracy is that individuals seek to advance the common good. Why this is important becomes clearer when children become more aware of the web of connections all around them. In *Planting Seeds: Practicing Mindfulness with Children*, Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh suggests that children make a drawing of “interbeing.” They could start by drawing a snack they enjoy. From there “draw around it all the things that make that food possible: the sun, rain, the earth, plants, farmers, animals, etc.” Include pictures or symbols to represent the companies that package and distribute the snack, the stores that carry it, and the money used to buy it.

3

Research on Your Water Supply

Democratic decision-making depends upon people being well informed about how their community works. How, for example, does our water reach us? Do the children just take having clean water for granted? (What about other public services such as electricity, sewage disposal, garbage pickup?) Do a research project with your children on your water supply. Where is it sourced? What systems does it go through before reaching your faucet? Who pays for it?

4

Car Talk

Forming opinions, listening to other points of view, and seeking consensus are all part of daily life in a democracy. You can practice these communication skills through the conversations you have in your car, whether driving to school, sports practices, or other events. Be intentional about the use of this time. Are the children learning about a particular time in history or an issue in class they would like to talk about? When appropriate, and particularly with older children, consider turning on talk radio or listening to a podcast on an issue.

In his book *How to Raise Kind Kids*, Joseph Lickona, director of the Center for the 4th and 5th Rs (Respect and Responsibility), encourages adults to use back-and-forth questions that can't be answered with a single word or a phrase. For example: What was an interesting conversation you had today? What's something you accomplished this week that you feel good about? If you could talk with anyone from history, who would it be? What would you ask them? If you were President, what are two things you'd try to change?

5

Leaving Room for the Unknown

Anyone who has participated in a public debate knows that problems can't be easily solved, and sometimes no solution is readily apparent. A great practice for such times is to leave room for the unknown. Responding to children's questions with "I don't know" demonstrates that it is okay not to have the answers. You may also solicit their ideas on an issue by responding with, "What do you think the way forward is?" This helps them build the skills of brainstorming while they learn to trust their own voices.

6

Big Things/Small Things

Good discussions and brainstorming sessions benefit from participants' learning how to keep things in perspective. In *Jewish Spiritual Parenting: Wisdom, Activities, Rituals and Prayers for Raising Children with Spiritual Balance and Emotional Wholeness*, Michelle November describes a practice she learned from her children's high school teacher: "It is useful to ask our children to first determine whether their problem is a big thing or a small thing ... The teenagers learn, for example, that a car accident is a big thing. Not passing a driver's test on the first try is really a small thing. Younger children can grow to comprehend that, while hearing that your best friend is moving out of town is a big thing, not being invited to an acquaintance's birthday party, though it hurts, is really a small thing." The next time a child reports on something that is upsetting him or her, ask, "Is this a big thing or a small thing?"

7

Volunteering

American democracy has been built upon a tradition of service by citizens to their communities. This can start at any age. Talk with children about a need they have noticed that they would like to work on. Perhaps they are concerned about litter in the park, or homeless people living on the streets, or stray animals. Then identify volunteer opportunities with nonprofit organizations and community agencies offering services in this area of concern. Have the children pick a volunteer opportunity and arrange to follow-up. Share stories from the news about children who raise money for causes they care about or in other ways take care of people and animals in their community.

8

Interviews with Your Town's Elders, Council Members, or Local Authorities

"Interviewing older people in your community is a great way to record local history and let older people know that their lives and contributions are valued," writes Penelope Franklin in *Spirit of Service: Your Daily Stimulus for Making a Difference*. She suggests writing interview questions and recording the interview to make into a book or post on a community website. As a way to "practice democracy," encourage children to talk with council members or local authorities about what they do. Sample questions could include, "What do you love about our community?" "How have you seen it change over the years?" "What led you into your profession?" The interviewer can then write up an essay on the person, featuring pictures the storyteller has provided, for an exhibit at your local history museum or library. This is a great way for your children to meet more people in your community and rally around positive stories.

9

Democracy Poster Exhibition

Throughout this Practicing Democracy Guide we have mentioned elements that contribute to a flourishing democracy: civility, advancing the common good, being well informed, good conversations, and service. Add to these the values and virtues of democracy (see back page), and you have many definitions of what democracy is all about. Organize an exhibit of children's drawings, paintings, collages, or sculptures about "What Democracy Means to Me." Invite local press and officials to visit the exhibit and talk with each artist about his/her contribution.

DEMOCRATIC VALUES, VIRTUES, AND SPIRITUAL PRACTICES

America’s democracy is founded on powerful ideas: We are all created equal. We have the right to life, freedom, and the opportunity to pursue our own happiness. At the same time, we are people in *united* states, trying to form a more perfect union and promote the welfare of all. American democracy can flourish only when citizens are united, at a deep level that transcends ideology, race, and class, with a shared spiritual and moral vision of what America should be.

Democracy is more than a form of government. It is a way of life that can be strengthened through spiritual practices — both those traditionally considered to be “inner work” and those that encourage active engagement with our neighbors and communities. The Practicing Democracy Guides give you specific ways to practice democracy at home, at work, on the Internet, and in other settings. The chart below is designed to show how the spiritual practices we’ve suggested, as well as others from your own experience, uphold democratic values and cultivate democratic virtues.

To uphold the democratic values of:				
Common good	Freedom Independence Liberty	<i>E Pluribus Unum</i> , “Out of many — one”	Equality Justice for all Rule of law	Patriotism Popular sovereignty
And to cultivate the democratic virtues of:				
Appreciation	Courage	Adaptability	Accountability	Assertiveness
Caring	Determination	Cooperation	Awareness	Consideration
Commitment	Honesty	Embracing diversity	Dignity	Cultivating wisdom
Creativity	Humility	Integrity	Fairness	Discernment
Empathy	Nobility	Mercy	Honor	Idealism
Generosity	Open-mindedness	Optimism	Initiative	Loyalty
Moderation	Purposefulness	Peacefulness	Love of learning	Responsibility, especially for civic engagement
Pursuit of excellence	Sacrifice	Searching for transcendence	Perseverance	Social conscience
Service	Self-discipline	Sincerity	Resilience	
Simplicity	Self-reliance		Respect	
Thankfulness	Trustworthiness		Steadfastness	
	Truthfulness		Strength	
We need spiritual practices of:				
Compassion	Joy	Connections	Forgiveness	Devotion
Gratitude	Openness	Love	Justice	Faith
Hope	Questing	Peace	Reverence	Listening
Hospitality	Transformation	Teachers	You	Meaning
Imagination	Yearning	Unity	Vision	Shadow
Kindness				

For more on American democratic values, virtues, and the language of democracy, visit PracticingDemocracy.net.



Additional Resources

1. For more resources related to the **Practicing Democracy Project**, visit: www.spiritualityandpractice.com/projects/practicing-democracy-project/overview
2. To download additional **Practicing Democracy Guides**, visit: www.spiritualityandpractice.com/practicing-democracy-project
3. For more on **civility**, visit: www.spiritualityandpractice.com/explorations/topics/view/24/civility
4. For more on **conversations**, visit: www.spiritualityandpractice.com/explorations/topics/view/28/conversations
5. For more on **connections**, visit: www.spiritualityandpractice.com/practices/alphabet/view/7/connections



A collaboration between Spirituality & Practice and the Fetzer Institute, The Practicing Democracy Project offers resources to strengthen and deepen the way we live out democracy. These spiritual practices help us do the work both in ourselves and in relationship with our neighbors and communities.

Some practices enhance or support the essential civic virtues and qualities of American democracy, such as respect and service. Others help us deal with problems and obstacles that depress democracy, such as anger and rigid thinking.

The Project offers spiritual practices and resources for all of us — from advocacy and civic organizations to congregations and companies.

This Practicing Democracy Guide is copyright ©2018 by Spirituality & Practice (SpiritualityandPractice.com), a multifaith website presenting resources for spiritual journeys as part of the Practicing Democracy Project. The guide was researched and written by Mary Ann Brussat, Project Director, and Kristin Ritzau, a 2018 Practicing Democracy Fellow. Democratic values, virtues, and spiritual practices chart researched and created by Habib Todd Boerger, a 2018 - 2019 Practicing Democracy Fellow.

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For more information on the Project, visit PracticingDemocracy.net.

