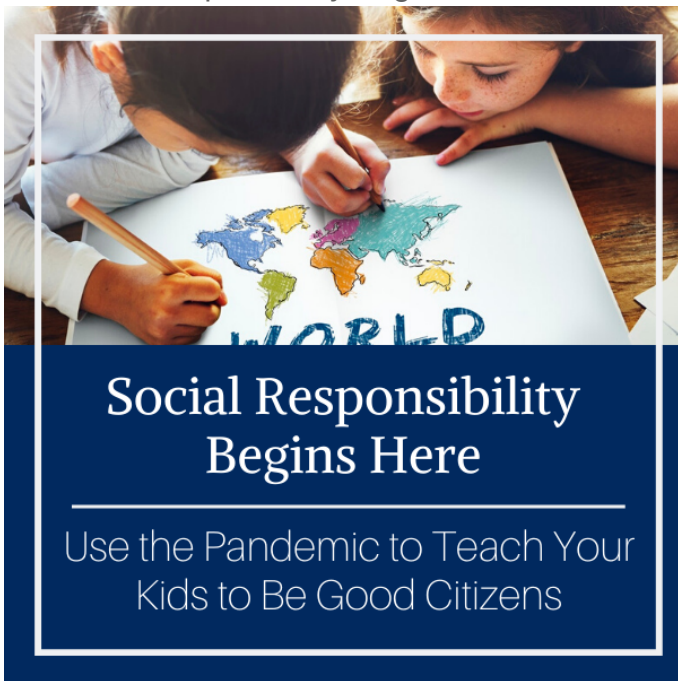


- Social Responsibility Begins Here: Use the Pandemic to Teach Your Kids to Be Good Citizens



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- [Social Responsibility](#)

By Amy K. Syvertsen, PhD, Director of Applied Quantitative Research and Senior Research Scientist

Try this perspective shift.

Instead of seeing “social distancing”
and travel bans as panic,
try seeing them as **acts of mass cooperation**
intended to protect the collective whole.

This plan is not about individuals going into hiding.

It's a global deep breath

...an agreement between humans around the planet to be still .

Be still

In hopes that the biggest wave can pass
without engulfing too many of the vulnerable amongst us.

— Dr. Lindsay Jernigan

Social distancing efforts have led us to see connection as a threat rather than a strength. Yet, the health of our communities depends on each of us taking individual actions to help others. This includes kids, as much as adults.

If you're like our family, you may be feeling a bit (OK, let's be real, a lot) overwhelmed by all of the lessons we suddenly find ourselves needing to teach our children as many schools move from in-person to online distance learning platforms. [It turns out, I'm really bad at 3rd grade math!] Yet, I'd

argue we have an unprecedented opportunity in this pandemic to teach our kids the REALLY important lessons—lessons not often found in worksheets or reading assignments—that could fundamentally and radically shape the way they think about and contribute to our communities.

I would suggest that some good will have come from this crisis if, on the other side of all of this, we've taught our kids . . .

- that our community works together to take care of one another;
- about their responsibilities for the greater good (including people and public spaces), even if they're still little;
- to notice (and show gratitude for) the people who serve our community in important and diverse ways; and
- to see and understand injustice, and that even in times of crisis not everyone is afforded the same protections and resources.

That kind of good out of this crisis, I think, will reverberate for decades as we ignite the civic engagement and social responsibility values of an entire generation.

I've come to this belief based on research the National Science Foundation funded Search Institute, UCLA, and West Virginia University to start in 2016, called the [Roots of Engaged Citizenship Project](#). We studied the important role of developmental competencies (like social-emotional skills) and contexts (like family, friends, and teachers) in shaping children and adolescents' civic values, skills, and behaviors. We learned that families reinforce important civic lessons through the frames they use to communicate current events, the ways they model behaviors, the questions they challenge their kids to ask about fairness and equity, and the opportunities they give their kids to get involved.

As we collectively navigate the COVID-19 public health crisis, here are seven ways you can teach your kids to be good citizens:

1. Make Social Responsibility Personal

Leading epidemiology and public health experts say that the only way to slow the spread of COVID-19 is for every one of us to do our part: wash our hands, keep our distance, and stay home when officials say that's what's needed. The health of our family, community, and economy depends on us setting aside personal wants and needs for the good of the whole. It might feel like we're sheltering in place to benefit ourselves, but paradoxically we're doing it for the common good.

The pandemic has created a lot of natural opportunities to reinforce these values of social responsibility and social solidarity with our kids. For example:



We can think of similar responses to the litany of questions our kids are asking about what they can and can't do when these public health restrictions are in place.

The key is to emphasize their individual responsibility to help others AND make a clear connection between their actions and how it helps. These don't need to be deep philosophical conversations to be powerful. Simply model these behaviors and reinforce the message of doing our part. Kids have a natural altruistic spirit. Feeling like they're part of the team that is solving this problem can be empowering.

2. Widen the Circle of “We”

COVID-19 reminds us how interconnected our world really is. The virus spread from [a large seafood and live animal market](#) in Wuhan, China, to nearly every corner of the globe in just three months. The [graphics depicting the spread](#) are powerful.

This public health crisis sets up an opportunity to explain (and show) our kids how connected we are to the rest of the world. What happens in China or Italy or in a neighboring state can have an immediate and direct impact on our lives; for better or for worse.

Young people with high levels of social responsibility are those who also understand how they are connected to (and, in many ways, dependent upon) others and their community. Decades of research show that people who feel connected to a group are more likely to set aside their own needs to help others (e.g., [Rutkowski et al., 1983](#); [Syvertsen et al., 2009](#)). In addition, early research conducted in late March shows that teens with higher levels of social responsibility are more likely to engage in social distancing, news monitoring, and less hoarding during the COVID-19 outbreak (see [Oosterhoff & Palmer, 2020](#); [Oosterhoff et al., 2020](#)).

In the earliest days of this pandemic, I overheard my 8-year old telling my 5-year old that “the virus came from China, but it's not *really* their fault.” It's easy when talking about how interconnected our world is to set up “us vs. them” stories that promote blame, fear, and kindle prejudice. The National Association of School Psychologists has put together an excellent [list of tips](#) for ways parents and caregivers can talk to their children about COVID-19 that counter stigma and racism. Ideas include using developmentally appropriate and accurate information to describe what is going on with COVID-19 (especially when the news makes negative statements about particular groups of people),

and discussing what it feels like to be blamed unfairly for something simply being they were associated with a group.

[Helping kids](#) learn how they are connected to others is an opportunity to cultivate a deep sense of togetherness and responsibility to the greater good.

3. Acknowledge the Service of Others

The pandemic has showcased how much our daily lives depend on the efforts of essential workers — e.g., nurses, doctors, grocery store clerks, postal workers, delivery drivers, child care workers, other healthcare workers and researchers — many who often go unrecognized. These people are serving our country by providing critical care and resources. Without them, fear, chaos, and illness would overwhelm our communities.

We depend on each other, and that has never been more real than now. While kids may not “see” this service while sheltering in place, we can tell them about the people (including those they might know) who are working hard to keep them and their community safe, potentially sending thank-you notes or emails. Many young people will have essential workers in their own extended families and households. Particularly if they’re older, how might they ease the burden of home responsibilities during these stressful times, and show appreciation and patience through the crisis? If they notice injustices in how these workers are treated, they may want to contact those in power to press for corrective action, such as appropriate health care or other benefits.

4. Make Government Less Abstract

Big problems like pandemics require big responses like government intervention. For most of us, the government plays a fairly minor and abstract role in our day-to-day lives, mostly existing below our radars. The global COVID-19 crisis has changed that. Suddenly, the government is ordering school and business closures, issuing shelter in place orders, and deciding whose jobs are essential and whose are not. The ability to harness public institutions to keep people safe and allocate emergency resources is a role that only the government can fulfill. And one to which we need to hold them accountable.

Talking to our kids about the government’s response (or, maybe, the lack thereof) promotes awareness about what the government is, how it works, what government is responsible for, and how we as citizens — both young and old— can make sure they do the right thing by speaking up (through calls, emails, our votes) when we’re concerned.

5. Don’t Shy Away From Tough Issues

The COVID-19 crisis is a real-time demonstration of the exacerbated disparities that exist in the United States and in other parts of the world. When schools close, some kids don’t get to eat. Others don’t have WiFi access or the technology needed to successfully do distance learning. When social distancing is encouraged, some people can’t make their spaces completely safe as they live in small, compact apartment buildings that rely on communal resources. When sickness sets in, some people can’t afford to go to the hospital or to stay home from work. When resources are handed out, some communities will not get equal access (if any access at all). We are now beginning to learn that the virus is disproportionately impacting African Americans and indigenous communities. And, the list goes on as these inequities are piled again and again on the same groups of people.

Are our communities really pulling together? Or, are we just pulling for other people “like us,” leaving those with fewer resources going unseen? We need to have these conversations with our kids. Noticing who might be disadvantaged by (new and old) systems and policies, and discussing our shared moral and civic responsibility to ensure we all have what we need to be well.

This can range from conversations about how stockpiling resources (like toilet paper, diapers, and food) leaves the store shelves empty for those families who can only afford to buy groceries one week at a time to more complex conversations about the US healthcare system.

The challenge is to avoid shifting the conversation from one about understanding systemic inequalities to one about having a charity mindset that might lead kids to think they can “sacrifice for those who need it” for a little while. We don’t simply want to make kids feel sorry for others. Instead, these conversations need to focus on the deeper challenge of who is left out or pushed aside and who has power and privilege in society and in our communities. Ask kids about what they think we can do to make the world a better and fairer place, then figure out ways you can work together to make their ideas a reality.

6. Connect Them to Public Spaces

With all entertainment venues (e.g., movie theaters, museums, malls) closed in states with “stay at home” or “shelter in place” orders, public green spaces and trail systems have taken on a new level of popularity (in states where they are still open). These common spaces are collectively owned by the community—kids, included! Connecting kids to public spaces in their neighborhood and community helps them see the value and importance of natural resources in their lives, and understand how their behaviors can positively (or, negatively) impact these natural spaces (see [Flanagan et al., 2019](#)).

You can promote these connections by:

- Creating awareness about natural resources (particularly in urban settings). Perhaps your family decides to explore a new trail or walking path each week.
- Asking your child what they enjoy about these spaces.
- Talking about the shared ownership and responsibilities of public spaces.
- Drawing attention to behaviors you see that are having a positive or negative impact on the space.
- Asking your child what they can do to protect these spaces.

7. Do Good

For many of us, the pandemic has created an unprecedented opportunity to spend more time with our children. Time that we’re filling with e-learning, screens, play, long bicycle rides, and attempts to get them to finally clean their bedrooms. This time can also be used to do good for others.

Here are a few ideas:

- **Grab a trash picker upper tool and head to a local park.** All three of my kiddos (8, 5, and 2) take pride in doing this (while keeping the trash at a distance and washing their hands well). They

like the adventure of walking through the trees to see what they can find (and who can find the most garbage or most interesting object). It also creates lots of opportunities to talk about our responsibility for taking care of the environment, and the dangers that littering can cause for animals.

- **Volunteer to help neighbors.** People everywhere are organizing via social media platforms and group texts to help neighbors locate essential supplies (“Who has toilet paper in stock right now?”) and make grocery store runs (“Heading to the store. What can I get for you?”). Not only is it powerful for kids to witness this kind of mutual helping being modelled, but they can help too! For example, they could help an elderly or sick neighbor with spring yard work or other chores to help minimize their exposure. Doing Good Together has a growing list of ways families can serve their communities during the pandemic. Brainstorm ideas with your kids and make a point to talk about how their actions positively impact both kids and adults in your community.
- **Reach out.** The toll of this pandemic on the mental well-being of society is serious, and many will need professional and/or medical intervention. [If [you](#) or [your child](#) are struggling with the stress, please ask for help.] The disconnection that comes with social distancing can be disorienting. While we need to maintain physical distance to stop the spread of COVID-19, we need social connection more than ever.
- **Spread joy and kindness.** Kids and families are finding small ways to spread joy and kindness in the midst of this crisis, including public art displays with words of encouragement. [Sidewalk chalk](#), [painted rocks](#), and artwork ([rainbows](#), [hearts](#)) in windows are reminding people that we’re in this together. Others are creating fun (and safe) ways for their neighbors to connect like [dance parties](#) and [scavenger hunts](#) that promote social distancing. Some are sending notes and artwork to nursing homes where physical visits are not possible, and “[hugs](#)” to socially isolated grandparents. Not all gestures need to be grand, of course. Joy and connection can also come from something as simple as looking someone in the eye and saying “hello” or a wave as you pass each other.

Perhaps all of these ideas just look like another list—not much different from the assigned worksheets that are being teleported into our homes by teachers. (And some teachers may be assigning these kinds of things!) What’s different, I would say, is that these actions, while giving back to others, are also renewing and rewarding. Rather than just taking away energy, they can renew it.

Rather than feeling helpless in a time of crisis, they help you feel hopeful. Rather than feeling isolated, you will feel inspired. Rather than feeling overwhelmed, perhaps you’ll feel more optimistic that your children—our children—will shape a world that is better than the one they are inheriting.

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