

BECOMING A RESPONSIBLE CITIZEN



AGENDA

- Starter
- The Law of the Land
- Vote!
- What the Government Gives and Gets
- Conclusion
- Student Assessment

Objectives

Students will identify the need for rules and the reasons why people should abide by the law.

Students will recognize that voting is a valuable right and that they have a responsibility to be informed voters.

Students will identify reasons for paying taxes.

Starter (2 minutes)

Ask students to describe what happens when a traffic light at a busy intersection isn't working. Encourage responses that describe chaos, noise, and gridlock. Elicit from students reasons why people don't all cooperate intelligently to get through the intersection. Lead students to recognize that people have their own priorities and personal schedules.

Explain to students that when people live close together, they agree on rules to limit chaos. Point out to students that traffic lights are just one of the mechanisms that we have put in place to make our society run more effectively.

Explain that this lesson will focus on ways that we can participate in our government to make it work for us.

Part I The Law of the Land (10 minutes)

Purpose: Students discuss the need for rules and why they should abide by the law.

1. Students identify familiar laws.

Ask students to suggest a definition of "laws." Students' initial responses might describe laws as being strictly prohibitive. Allow that definition to stand for now; students will reconsider it later.

Ask students to list laws other than traffic laws. Encourage students to list laws that cover as many areas of life as possible. Write student responses on the board.

2. Students explore reasons for creating laws.

Ask students to describe what life might be like if laws didn't exist. Allow students to list alternatives that might seem positive to them (such as driving rights for 13-year-olds) as well as those laws that have negative or chaotic consequences. Write student responses in a column next to the laws listed.

When the list is complete, direct students to focus their attention on the second column. Lead students to understand that most laws are not created to prevent us from doing things, but rather to protect people and to make our lives more efficient. Using specific examples from the students' list, point out that many laws are created to protect the community and its resources.

3. Students discuss the reasons for abiding by the law.

Ask students to consider why it might be important to follow rules or abide by laws, even if they think that breaking a rule or law won't affect anybody else. Write students' responses on the board. (Student responses should include these points: even though you may not realize how breaking a specific law affects somebody else, it probably does; there can be consequences for you if you break the law.)

4. Students discuss the consequences of breaking a law.

Ask students to identify the negative consequences of breaking a law. In order to facilitate discussion, ask questions such as the following:

- How would you feel if you broke a law and someone got hurt?
- What happens to people who get caught breaking laws?
- How are family and friends affected when a person breaks a law?
- How does breaking the law affect one's education and career goals?
- Do you think that breaking a law increases the likelihood of breaking more serious laws?

Emphasize to students that there are many reasons to follow the law. One of the most serious is that, if they do break a law, they may have to deal with negative consequences for the rest of their lives.

Part II Vote! (10 minutes)

Purpose: Students identify the importance of informed voting.

1. Students consider the purpose of government.

Tell students that when a government is created, the founders agree to a set of laws that establishes how citizens will treat each other. Explain that all people who live within the territory of that government must follow the "law of the land" or face consequences.

Cross your arms and firmly tell students, "Well, I never said I wanted laws for traffic lights, so I'm not going to obey them anymore."

Ask students what they think about your position. Ask them to consider what the consequences might be for you and how your actions might affect others.

2. Students recognize that voting is a valuable right.

Ask students if you are justified in saying that you never said you wanted a law for traffic lights. Lead students to recognize that although you didn't directly ask for the law, an elected official (or someone hired/appointed by an elected official) made the law.

Protest to students, “Well, what if I didn’t vote?” Elicit from students the understanding that you gave up your right to have a voice on the issue when you decided not to vote.

Tell students that voting is a valuable right that citizens of the United States have. Ask students why they think voting is important. Lead them to recognize that the right to vote allows citizens to have a voice (a form of power) in their own government.

3. Students recognize the importance of being an informed voter.

Ask students to consider what happens if they don’t know anything about the candidates in an election. Direct students to understand that this is similar to not voting at all: out of ignorance they deny their right to choose how they will be governed.

Explain to students that it is their (and everyone’s) responsibility to be informed about the candidates and issues in an election.

4. Students learn how to become informed voters.

Ask students, “Where do you think you can get information about candidates and issues in an election?” (Student responses should include news publications, the internet, TV, libraries, candidate forums and offices, mailers, etc.)

Remind students about what they learned in the lesson on advertising. Explain that like companies, candidates will want to present themselves in the most favorable light in order to get votes. Tell them to keep what they learned about listening critically to advertisements in mind, as the same issues apply to political campaigns.

Part III What the Government Gives and Gets (20 minutes)

Purpose: Students identify government services and learn that taxes are the price we pay for these services.

1. Students identify services that the government provides.

Tell students that they are going to determine what the government does for them. Divide students into four groups. Assign each group one of the following categories: (a) transportation; (b) schools; (c) municipal services, such as libraries and recreation; (d) health and safety services, such as hospitals, police, and firehouses. Challenge students to list as many different services and institutions that the government provides in their assigned area as they can.

Allow groups about five minutes to work. Elicit from students their ideas. Write responses on the board. When this list is complete, point out the wide variety of areas in which the government provides services that we depend on and often take for granted.

2. Students explore the reasons for establishing and paying taxes.

Ask students if they know where the government gets money to pay for the services that they just listed. Explain that the government collects taxes in order to offer those services to its citizens.

Elicit from students reasons why it is important for us to pay our taxes. Ask each group to offer descriptions of what might occur if the services or institutions they discussed earlier were neglected.

Lead students to recognize the following: It is every citizen's responsibility to pay for the benefits that the government provides. Paying taxes is a law, and there are negative consequences if that law isn't followed. People who don't pay their taxes often get caught and end up in jail or have to pay the government a lot more money.

3. Students discuss different types of taxes.

Ask students to list different types of taxes. Explain to students that the government directly collects certain taxes, such as sales taxes. Other taxes— income taxes, for example—require us to file reports to the government when we pay our taxes.

4. Students learn about filing income tax returns.

Say to students, "Suppose you have been working at a job and a deduction has been made for your income tax every payday. Do you have to file a tax return at tax time?"

Explain to students that even though they have had taxes withheld from their paychecks, they still need to file a tax return. They must tell the government how much was withheld from their paychecks during the year. They must also determine how much they owe or how much the government must refund.

Ask students to suggest places where they can go to get help in preparing a tax return. Elicit suggestions such as the following:

- Parents and friends who have experience preparing taxes
- Organizations specializing in tax preparation (There are organizations that charge for the service, but other organizations do the work for free. Sometimes, free tax preparation requires that your income be below a certain level. These services are often offered at universities and colleges as well.)
- The Internal Revenue Service or state taxing authority

Remind students that they may be required to file federal and state tax returns annually, especially when they work.

Conclusion *(2 minutes)*

Close this session by asking students to summarize their rights and responsibilities as citizens. Elicit from students the following **key points** that were taught in this lesson:

- There are many reasons to abide by laws, and there are serious consequences to breaking laws.
- It is the responsibility of citizens to be informed.
- It is a citizen's right to vote.
- Taxes are the price we pay for government services.
- It is important to file tax returns and pay what is owed.

Student Assessment

1. Why do we have laws? Why are they necessary?
2. List three public services that are paid for by taxes.
3. Why is it necessary to pay taxes?

LESSON EXTENSIONS

Using Quotations

“Liberty means responsibility. That is why most men dread it.”

Explain to students that the price of liberty is “eternal vigilance.” Guarding our liberty means behaving in a responsible way. Have students discuss ways in which they take responsibility for protecting liberty.

Addressing Multiple Learning Styles

Explain to students that many organizations rely on volunteers.

Find out if your school offers credit for volunteering and which organizations in your community use student volunteers. Inform students of these opportunities.

Writing in Your Journal

Have students write about what they have learned regarding the responsibilities that come with being a citizen.

Discuss how students feel about these responsibilities.

Using Technology

Explain to students that voting effects change and that organizing voting blocs is an effective way to collect votes. Divide the class into groups. Have each group concentrate on a voting bloc (e.g., seniors, minorities, youth, etc.). Each group should conduct research (e.g., internet, library, telephone interviews, and so on) to find out what concerns these groups have and how to best motivate each group to register and vote.

Have each group create and present a campaign to motivate its bloc to the class.

Homework

Have students write a law concerning a behavior that they find annoying. The law should change that behavior but cannot infringe on individual rights.

Have students present their new “laws” to the class.

Additional Resources

Divide the class into groups. Ask each group to study one of the first 10 amendments to the U.S. Constitution (the Bill of Rights).

Have groups paraphrase and illustrate their amendment and then present their work to the class. Display their work around the room.