

Talking With Kids About Protest (Ages 6 & Under)

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WHY IT'S IMPORTANT

Public demonstrations are a fact of modern life. As a result of the twenty-four hour news cycle and the ubiquity of social media, our naturally curious children are aware of public protests happening locally, across the country, and around the globe. However, young children can be overwhelmed by the noise and emotions that accompany even peaceful assemblies, while others may feel confused or alarmed to see adults challenging authority figures.

Whether you are planning to take your child to a demonstration or simply talking about these events at home, explaining the basic concepts of public protest will equip even very young children to understand what may otherwise feel frightening.

Your first instinct may be to jump right in and tell them that freedom of peaceful assembly is a human right and a cornerstone of participatory democracy. That people most often protest when there is a perceived injustice, particularly by a government. That holding assembly is a very important way for the otherwise voiceless to be heard.

While concepts like democracy, civic participation, and even government are too abstract for most children, even those six and under have an intuitive understanding of power and powerlessness. Children have very little control over their own lives and make few decisions regarding how their days are spent. This leads them to think quite a lot about what is fair and what is unfair. By tapping into their natural thought processes, you can help children understand why people exercise their right to demonstrate.

Since concepts of power and fairness are woven into the practice of peaceful assembly, this will be our entry point to discussing public demonstration with young children.



THE UNIVERSAL STORY OF PROTEST: UNFAIRNESS AND POWERLESSNESS

Find a quiet place. Once you have your child's attention, describe an instance in which a child is protesting what he or she perceives to be unfair behavior. This metaphor will help us draw connections to grown-up protests. You can tell any story, but it will require the following elements: a grown-up making a promise to a child (exercising power), the grown-up then breaking this promise (an unfair action), and the child protesting nonviolently, preferably mirroring your own child's typical response (for example, squealing or stomping).

Example:

Before dinner, Mommy promised Sophie that she could have a cookie for dessert. While Mommy was cleaning up after dinner, Sophie asked for her cookie. Mommy said "No" because Sophie did not finish her meal. Sophie thought that was unfair; she did not know she had to eat everything on her plate. She yelled "Not Fair!" and screamed loudly.

Ask a few questions to make sure your child understands the dynamics at play.

- » What did Mommy do that upset Sophie?
- » Why did Sophie scream?
- » Did a grown-up ever do anything that you thought was unfair?
- » What do you do when you think something is unfair?

If your child is not engaged by this example, craft a similar story based upon one of your child's recent experiences.

Lastly, you can explain that most parents understand that children have few options for communicating their feelings, and Sophie's mother was probably not surprised by her protest and may have even expected it.

GROWN-UP PROTESTS

Now use the concept of fairness to connect the way a child protests to the way grown-ups protest.

Grown-ups also feel like some rules aren't fair. For example, sometimes other grown-ups make decisions or say things that we don't think are fair.

You can attempt to describe some of these unfair rules, but try to avoid getting sidetracked by explaining them in too much detail. Now describe how grown-up protest is different, doing your best to mirror your earlier description of a child's protest.

Grown-ups protest, too, not just kids. When you're grown up, even when you yell or scream like Sophie, the person acting unfairly may not hear you. He or she could be very far away. Like if Sophie screamed after Mommy walked outside.

So grown-ups protest a little differently. They usually know many people who also feel like

the rules aren't fair. If they want to be heard, it's better that all the adults gather in a big crowd and protest together.

If you've never been to a protest before, you might even think it's scary. The same way someone might think it's scary to hear Sophie scream and yell if they aren't used to it. People will yell together and it gets really loud. Some people put their fists in the air.

They are doing it because raising their fists shows that they are united; not because they plan to hurt someone. Most everyone agrees that it is okay to protest this way.

We call this 'peaceful assembly.' 'Peaceful' means you aren't hurting anyone. And 'assembly' means lots of people are together in one place. So 'peaceful assembly' means a lot of people in one place saying 'not fair' without hurting anyone."

If you are losing your child's attention at any point, stop to emphasize what can make assemblies fun.

Want to know what's really amazing about grown-up protests? We sing songs together and play musical instruments. We carry signs that say what we're feeling. Some of the signs basically say 'Not Fair!' Sometimes people get up on a stage and make speeches.

NONVIOLENCE (USING OUR WORDS)

You may want to emphasize the importance of nonviolent behavior at a protest or nonviolence as a principle. Or you may want to discuss nonviolence in the context of a protest in the news that became violent.

Introduce the concept through the story you told. For example, if you're talking about Sophie and her Mommy:

When Mommy says 'no cookie' and then Sophie says, 'not fair,' what could Mommy and Sophie do wrong at that point?

Mommy and Sophie could try to hurt each other. Sophie could throw something at Mommy or even bite. Mommy could pick up Sophie against her will or even spank her.

RACE AND PROTEST

You may feel it's important to bring up race in the context of a protest, perhaps because race was part of a protest's message or racism played a key role in a protest becoming violent.

Small children have a broad range of experiences and varied levels of understanding about race and racism, so introducing these concepts into the dynamics of a protest may challenge them. A child's age and/or racial acculturation will affect his or her ability to see race in the context of power and fairness. Only you know your child's level of familiarity with racial issues, so moderate accordingly.

Describe some of the most memorable protest signs, songs, and speakers from your own experiences. Spend as much time as possible describing the experience of peaceful assembly, but watch their cues, so you can move on when their interest starts to wane.

Just like Mommy and Sophie, it would be wrong for the grown-ups to hurt each other. There are so many different people at a protest and they could hurt each other in different ways if they aren't just using their words.

For example, if a protester gets really angry, this person could throw something like a rock or a bottle and hurt someone or break a window. A policeman might not like what a protester is saying or doing and start pushing or shoving.

If you teach your child to "use your words" rather than screaming or physically acting out, this phrase could be a helpful connection.

You know when I tell you to use your words? It's also important for grown-ups to use their words.

Taking this into consideration, approach the topic by asking questions such as:

- » **Did you see the color of the protesters' skin?**
- » **What did the protesters say was "not fair?"**
- » **Is that thing unfair for everyone?**

Without challenging their observations, you can ask if they think the protesters were treated unfairly because of the color of their skin.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

Your child may have more questions. Some will be fun to answer. “How big can a protest get? As big as a dinosaur?” For more challenging questions, try to bring it back around to your story (e.g. Sophie and Mommy). When answering, look for the two concepts your child can best understand: power(lessness) and (un)fairness.

To deepen your child’s understanding of protest, make a habit of telling stories about protests you’ve attended or talking about successful protests like the March on Washington or the fall of the Berlin Wall.

You can also read and discuss books that approach these issues in a child-friendly way. Some books

relate real events through a child’s eyes, including *We March* by Shane Evans, *O* by Diana Cohn, and *Brave Girl: Clara and the Shirtwaist Makers’ Strike of 1909* by Michelle Markel. Other books approach the concept of protest more abstractly. Several beloved favorites by Dr. Seuss depict characters protesting unfairness or abuses of power. These titles include *Bartholomew and the Oobleck*, *Yertle the Turtle*, *Horton Hears a Who*, and, of course, *The Lorax*.

After reading together, ask your child questions about who was being treated unfairly and how they protested.

AFTER YOUR CHILD’S FIRST PROTEST

If you take your child to a protest, you may want to discuss the experience afterwards. Here are some questions to help provoke conversation:

- » What did you like most about the protest?
- » What did you like least?
- » Did you see any signs or costumes that you liked? What did you like about them?
- » Were people behaving peacefully or violently?
- » What were the people protesting about? Did they think something was unfair?
- » If you were in charge of that protest, what would you do differently?

LEARN MORE

Thank you for taking the time to talk about peaceful assembly with your child.

THE ARTICLE 20 NETWORK defends and advances the human right to freedom of peaceful assembly worldwide. Through education, advocacy, research and legal services, the Article 20 Network encourages the proliferation of public demonstrations and confronts obstacles and threats to free assembly.

Learn more about peaceful assembly and our work at a20n.org.

