

A Constitution for Our Group

Who has responsibility for my rights?



Complexity



8-13 years



Part 1: 60–90 minutes. Part 2 (optional, and at a later date): 30-45 minutes



4-30 children



Democratic Citizenship



Participation



Human Rights

Type of activity

Discussion, consensus building, rule making

Overview

Children develop a group 'constitution', listing their rights and responsibilities

Objectives

- To understand the relationship between rights and responsibilities
- To relate rights and responsibilities to children's daily life
- To develop skills of co-operation and participation
- To create an agreed set of rules and responsibilities for the group

Preparation

Optional: make copies of the simplified Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)

Materials

- Pencil and paper for each participant
- Flipchart and markers
- Optional: Copies of the simplified CRC

Instructions - Part One

1. Explore the children's experience and understanding of rules and responsibilities, starting with a few restrictions that they will already understand. Ask them to complete the following sentence:

"I don't have the right to ___ because ..."

(e.g. "I don't have the right to hit my sister because it will hurt her" or "I don't have the right to take stuff that doesn't belong to me, because that's unfair"). Make a list of these sentences.

Then ask the children to make some statements about things they *do* have a right to, using the formulation:

"I have the right to..."

(e.g. "I have the right not to be hit." / "I have the right to be treated fairly.")

2. Ask the group if they have heard of a 'constitution'. Explain briefly that it is a very important document in nearly every country. The Constitution of a country sets out the basic rights and basic rules for how society is organised. Give an example of the kind of thing that is written into a constitution – for example, that laws are made by Parliament, or that the President is the official head of the country.

3. Tell everyone that we are going to make a constitution for our group. Divide the children into small groups of four or five and give each group some paper and markers. Explain that:
 - Each small group should write down three or four basic rules for the whole group.
 - Each rule should use the phrase “Everyone has the right to...” (e.g. Everyone has the right to say what they think).
 - This can only be written down as a right if everyone in the small group agrees.
 - The goal is not necessarily to have lots of rules, but to have rules that everyone accepts.
4. Bring everyone back together and ask each group to present their rules. Record these on a chart, such as the one below.
 - First, ask for the specific rights that each group has identified and list these on the flipchart under the ‘Rights’ column. Combine any rights that are similar, asking for group approval for any revised language.
 - After listing a right, ask what specific responsibility we all have to see that everyone enjoys this right. Write this in the ‘Responsibilities’ column next to the corresponding right, using language such as, “We have a responsibility to...”, “We should...”, or “We must...”.

Example

OUR CONSTITUTION	
Rights	Responsibilities
We must be treated fairly. We can express our opinion. We have the right to play.	We must treat everyone fairly. We should always listen to other people’s opinion. We must respect safety rules.

5. After including all the rights and responsibilities listed by the small groups, ask the children to review their draft constitution.
 - Point out that it is better to have a few good rules than lots of not-so-good rules: Do all the rights make sense? Can we get rid of any of them?
 - Are there other rights and responsibilities that need to be added?
6. When the lists of rights and responsibilities are complete, ask the children whether they feel happy with the Constitution they have created.
 - Are they willing to observe the set of rules that they have drawn up?
 - Who is responsible for making sure that everyone observes this Constitution?
 - What should happen when someone doesn’t respect one of the rights?
 - Do we need to have penalties or punishments for not following rules? Why? Do you think you would disobey any of these rules if there were no penalties?
7. When you have arrived at a final version of the Constitution, make a clean copy and hang it in a prominent place. Explain that these will be our rules for working and playing together, both for children and for adults.
8. Conclude the discussion by emphasising that rules and responsibilities help us to live together so that everyone’s rights are respected. Rules protect our rights (e.g. to participate, to have an opinion, to learn, to play, etc.), rules keep us safe and healthy, and they also create responsibilities so that we respect the rights of others.

Debriefing and Evaluation

1. Discuss the activity using questions such as these:
 - Was it easy for your small group to develop a list of rights? Was it easy to identify the responsibilities?
 - Was it easy to work together as a group? Did you always agree?
 - Were any of the ideas for rights not agreed on by the whole group? Why?

2. Discuss rules, rights and responsibilities by asking questions such as these:
 - Which rules do you have in your life (e.g. at home, at school, in other settings)? Who made these rules? Whose rights do these rules protect?
 - Which duties or responsibilities do you have? Where did these come from, and how did you find out about them?
 - Do adults have rules to obey? Do they have responsibilities?
 - What did you learn about rights and responsibilities in this activity?

Part two (Optional)

1. A few days or weeks after making the Constitution, ask the children to take another look at it. Point out that laws often have to be improved, sometimes they need to be removed, and sometimes new ones need adding.
 - Do they still agree on the rights and responsibilities that they drew up earlier?
 - Are some rules harder to observe than others? Why?
 - Does anything in the Constitution need to be changed? Do we want to get rid of any rules or rights? Do we want to add any new ones?

2. Discuss enforcement of rules and responsibilities, asking questions such as these:
 - Are some rights neglected or ignored more often than others? Why?
 - Who has been taking responsibility for seeing that these rights are respected?
 - Who has been deciding what happens when someone doesn't respect one of the group's rules?
 - Does the group need to work together to establish consequences for breaking the rules?

Debriefing and Evaluation

Discuss the question of whether it matters who makes the rules for a particular group: in our case, we made the rules ourselves, as a group. Relate this process to the way laws are made in a democracy.

- Does it help to have a Constitution for our group?
- What difference does it make that you made your own rules?

Suggestions for follow-up

You could give every child a copy of the group's Constitution.

If conflicts or problems arise in the group, try to use the group's Constitution to resolve them. Problems or conflicts may also bring out further reasons for revising the Constitution.

You could devote more time to Part 2, Step 2, in order to enable the children to develop some established consequences for breaking the rules co-operatively.

Give children copies of the simplified CRC or the CRC cards. Ask them to compare their Constitution with this document of rights for all the children of the world. Are there any rights and corresponding responsibilities in the CRC that they want to add to their Constitution?

With older children, discuss why children need a special convention that defines their rights. Do children have different human rights from those of adults? Do they have different responsibilities? Help the children to understand the relationship between responsibilities and the CRC principle of evolving capacities.

The activity 'Every Vote Counts', which engages children in the process of democratic decision making, could be used either before or after this activity to look at similar themes.

Ideas for action

Ask the children to find out if their school, team, or club has a set of rules or policies and procedures that guard and protect the rights of the children, and whether those rules also state their responsibilities. Use the following questions to think about any of those sets of rules:

- Did you know that such rules existed? Who made them?
- Do you agree with the rules?
- Can they be changed? If so, how?
- What happens when people don't follow these rules?

Tips for the facilitator

Some children may not be familiar with the word or concept of a 'constitution'. You might decide not to introduce the word (Phase 1, Step 4) and simply call the document "Our rights and responsibilities". On the other hand, you may want to introduce the concept of a constitution before they write their own, by asking children to find out the answers to the following:

- Does our country have a constitution?
- What is in our Constitution?
- Who wrote it? When was it written?
- Who needs to respect it?

Many children have a negative attitude towards rules, seeing them only as restrictions on their freedom. You may need to spend some time discussing and giving examples of how we need rules to live together. Look at some of the rules which seem to them to be arbitrary – for example, the rule to brush your teeth, or to do your homework. Discuss whose rights these rules are supposed to be protecting, and compare this with rules about taking turns, respecting differences or refraining from

violence. In the second case, who are the rules protecting? Make the distinction between rules or responsibilities which are there to protect us, and those which ensure that we do not harm others.

Children will often start with negative sentences such as “We should not shout”. Try to transform such statements into positive ones, such as, “We should speak calmly to each other”.

Adaptations

To make this activity less difficult for younger children, keep the discussion focused on specific rights and responsibilities. Ask them simple questions such as:

- How do you think we can work together?
- What do we need as a group so that we get on well and enjoy working together?
- What do you need, so that you will enjoy being in this group?

Avoid going into the complications of rules, enforcement, and responsibility for enforcement.

For older children, you could go further into the abstract relationship between rights, rules, and responsibilities, using debriefing questions such as these:

- What is the relationship between rights and rules?
- What is the difference between rules and responsibilities?