

Inculcating Citizenship Values in Children

Radhika Rajanarayanan

I was a volunteer with the Children's Movement for Civic Awareness (CMCA) for four years (2010 – 2013). As urban volunteers for private schools, our work was to have weekly sessions with children of class VIII in private schools. It was a club which children voluntarily joined. Usually, about 15 to 20 children would join it. The concepts that we introduced them to were:

- **Concern:** Initially, about surroundings, wastage of water, power, littering, etc, with practical activities on how to make the change; later about the environment and child labour, etc.
- **Co-existence:** Precepts on how to avoid bias and prejudice and learn to live with diverse people.
- **Co-operation:** This included activities on how to interact with authorities, such as school or local government bodies to bring about change.
- **Confront:** How to protest and confront authorities peacefully when appeals and persistent representation to them do not work.

In addition, principles of democracy, rights and responsibilities were also imparted. All these concepts were instilled into the children through activities, practical examples, stories, films etc. Children would also run campaigns on these topics in their schools, to bring awareness of these ideas among other children.

Methodology

The first behavioural trait I noticed in most children was their reluctance to speak. My experience is that they are conditioned by family and teachers not to 'talk back' or ask questions. It took several weeks to coax them out of this reticence.

To inculcate the concepts we wanted to convey, the method that worked was to get the children to perform activities related to these concepts with their families, for example, saving water by not leaving the tap open while brushing teeth; and keeping a diary to note the changes they observed in themselves, their families, school and neighbourhood. Another method was to get them to teach other children these concepts. I found that this exercise embedded the concept better in

a child's mind. However, this method seemed to work much better with the younger children rather than the older children (classmates of CMCA club members).

Peer pressure

I believe by the time the children are 13 years of age, they have already developed habits, both good and bad, as I found during my sessions. Teenage rebelliousness also starts showing up. It was an uphill task to get them to follow the principles of good civic behaviour, for example, not riding two-wheelers without a driving licence. Peer pressure and the desire to be part of the 'in' crowd tempts them to ignore these precepts of good citizenship. Some of my colleagues had a tough time persuading, cajoling or threatening their own children to stop them from driving motorised vehicles before the legal age of 18 years.

Peer pressure works in other negative ways too. The children of the CMCA club would be jeered at by other schoolmates if they tried to have an anti-littering campaign at their Sports or Annual Day. They would tell me with downcast faces later that the other children teased them saying, 'Oh, you are from CMCA; pick up the waste wrappers yourself!'

Another strong demotivator is the harsh reaction of some parents, especially the father, to any suggestion. The children are brought up to fear the parent and hesitate to broach the topic again. But despite these ingrained habits or resistance of their parents or friends, a surprising number of the children did change over the course of a year and got people around them to change too.

Changing habits and small initiatives

Small undesirable habits, like disfiguring school desks by scratching initials on them, water wastage etc, at one point drove me to despair at the end of a whole year of drilling into them to change. One day, as I walked out dejectedly, thinking that I had failed utterly, a few CMCA club children came running behind me. 'Ma'am, there's a house next to the school where a lot of water has been flowing out of a pipe. Can we go and tell them to do something

about it?’ At first, I could not believe my ears. ‘Yes indeed, but be polite and go as a group’, I advised them and waited for them to return. In about ten minutes, I could see the flowing water trickling to a halt and the children returning, grinning triumphantly. Full of enthusiasm, they told me what had happened – the owner had switched on the water pump and gone away. There was (luckily) a watchman there, who they managed to convince to switch the pump off. Such a simple incident, yet it was enough to trigger in them the need to be more active as young citizens.

There are several other examples of small initiatives by children that made a difference.

At a wedding, Vimla saw that after the meals, people were washing their hands and leaving the taps open. She stood there and requested everyone to turn off the taps after use.

Bhawna convinced her father to wear a helmet while driving.

Shruti convinced her older sister to stop riding her scooter till she gets her driving license.

Bibi Naaz saw her friend throw a wrapper from the balcony. She picked it up, took it right back to her friend and ensured that she did not litter again.

Abdul stopped charging his phone overnight and convinced his parents to do the same. Many children, by adopting this and other power-saving methods, reduced their monthly electricity bill by as much as Rs 300!

Keerti found a child being employed as a labourer and being beaten. She called the Child Helpline number which she had memorised and was thrilled when the authorities rescued the child.

Komal stitched a cloth shopping bag for her mother. Not only is her mother very proud of her child’s craft, she also uses only that bag to go shopping. Thus, effectively, Komal stopped at least one person from using plastic carry bags.

Swati, concerned about the terrible effect of poisonous paint used on Ganesha idols on water bodies, used a clay idol during the Ganesha Festival, immersed it in a bucket of water and used the water in the garden.

Santosh took a cardboard box and went around collecting wrappers of toffees distributed during Independence Day in school.

As Anil was walking home, he saw two men walking with plastic bags full of garbage. They were about to throw the garbage on the pavement. Gathering up courage, Anil boldly stopped them from throwing the garbage, saying, ‘This is your city, don’t do this.’ They looked sheepish and walked away with the garbage. Emboldened by his success, he prevented many more people from throwing garbage on the road.

Probably the crowning achievement of the CMCA club children was the construction of speed breakers and warning boards outside their school, which sees a lot of fast-moving traffic. For this, they convinced a traffic police inspector who said, ‘You children yourselves ride two-wheelers rashly on the road’, to which they proudly replied, ‘No, Sir, we are from CMCA! We never ride two-wheelers as we don’t have licences.’ My heart was bursting with pride hearing this. Creating the speed breaker involved interacting with the municipal authority, then, the Bruhat Bengaluru Mahanagara Palike (BBMP). They learnt to write the application neatly in Kannada (getting praise from the officer for it), and made repeated visits to their office, requesting the officials till the speed breakers were constructed.

As mentioned earlier, a very important point I noticed was that when these young, active citizens started mentoring the primary school children, teaching them basics like not wasting food, not littering etc, I found that the result was much better, and quicker than in the older children. I overheard one of the younger children saying to another, ‘Hey, don’t sharpen your pencil outside the waste bin – the floor will get dirty. Didn’t you hear akka telling us where to sharpen pencils?’ The tendency among young children to idolise the teacher and seniors, therefore, to do as they say can be an advantage while inculcating values of good citizenship.

One basic concept, taken from Charles Kingsley’s *Water Babies* can be used as the focal point: ‘Do as you would be done by’. We

must make children reflect on actions by asking them how they would feel if, for example, someone else left the bathroom dirty or threw garbage outside their gate. Some basic activities for young children to mindfully do and for teachers to discuss in school could be:

- Turning off the tap while brushing teeth (and asking other family members to do it too).
- Switching off unnecessary fans or lights in the house.
- Requesting parents and older siblings not to charge their electronic devices overnight.
- Making sure that garbage is segregated and handed over to the municipal worker and not thrown on the street or in an empty plot.
- Not throwing sweets or snack wrappers on the street or floor; depositing them only in a dustbin.
- Speaking with respect to all, including household

help and municipal workers.

- Placing a small bowl of water for birds in summer.
- Reminding parents, before they leave the house, to take a bag for shopping – this could be extended to COVID-appropriate behaviour, reminding everyone to wear masks before leaving the house and washing hands on returning.
- Requesting older siblings not to ride motor vehicles without a licence and to wear a helmet while riding a two-wheeler.

Many such activities can be thought of. Additionally, encouraging young children to express themselves and talk about their experiences will make them more confident as they reach middle school. By the time these young children reach teenage, the right citizenship attitudes and habits are ingrained in them.

**Names have been changed to protect the identities of children.*



Radhika Rajnarayan is a postgraduate in Endocrinology and holds a diploma in Business Management. She is the co-founder and Director (Sales and Marketing), Radel Electronics Pvt Ltd. She is passionate about civic issues and inculcating citizenship values in young people. Radhika is a classical Indian musician. As a senior veena artist, she has performed in concerts and on radio and television. She also specialises in elder care and has a rich experience of two decades in the area. Radhika can be contacted at radhika.r2@gmail.com