



Name That Branch: Civics Education Gets a Makeover

Sandy Parker explains the lessons that might be missing from your child's classroom, and what you can do about it.

Would you be able to name the branches of government? Can your children or grandchildren?

Believe it or not, national surveys show that 22% of Americans think the three branches of government are Republican, Democrat and Independent (the correct answers are executive, legislative and judicial), and over one-third cannot identify even one of them.

With statistics like that, you might not be surprised to learn that civics education classes probably aren't what you remember as a child. In Florida, children receive one semester of civics in middle school, teaching civics, democracy and government. That's all that's required.

If our young people are to grow up to be knowledgeable and engaged participants in our democracy, we as parents and grandparents need to reinforce the importance of civics, and make it a daily part of their lives.

- **Make government up-close-and-personal.** Does your child enjoy the Sun-Fun Lagoon at the North Collier Regional Park? It's paid for with tax dollars. Will her local library branch be closing soon? That will be a decision for county commissioners. Does your grandchild complain about the dress code in his school? It was chosen by the school board. Point out that decisions made by elected officials affect us every day.

- **Visit local government buildings.** Take your child with you to pay a tax bill at the Tax Collector's Office and explain why we pay taxes. Take her into the voting booth on Election Day and tell her who you're voting for and why. Or ask to visit a local fire station to show how tax dollars are utilized.

- **Use issues of the day as teaching opportunities.** The upcoming retirement of a Supreme Court Justice is a chance to discuss the judicial branch of government. What does the Supreme Court do? Why is there debate over Court nominees? Talk about the issues at stake and how might future Court decisions affect your child's life?

- **Set a good example.** The best way to show your child that you value good citizenship is to be a role model yourself. If possible, serve on a local advisory committee or volunteer in the community.

We need to help our kids grow up to be active citizens and informed voters. It's up to us to teach them that democracy is not a spectator sport.

Sandy Parker is president of the League of Women Voters of Collier County. She has been pursuing her passion to inspire people to become engaged in civic life since retiring from a corporate finance career and moving to Naples in 2003.

Visit these websites for more ways to share civics with our kids:

- **White House 101** — Facts and fun for all ages. www.whitehouse.gov/about/white_house_101

- **Our Courts** — Former Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor welcomes teachers and students to the site for civics games, civics-in-action projects and more. www.ourcourts.org

- **Democracy Kids** — Presents information on Congress and state legislatures through interactive games and activities to entertain students as they learn. www.democracykids.org

- **Online Sunshine for Kids** — Kids of all ages learn about Florida's Legislature. Activities utilize up-to-date technology to inspire learning. www.leg.state.fl.us/kids

