



Introducing Young Children into the Concepts of Democracy and Citizenship

*Created by Sasha Kopp, Community Educational Consultant
for Early Childhood and Family Engagement,
The Jewish Education Project*

Introducing young children into the concepts of democracy and citizenship is a fundamental value of our American educational system. Through play, children have the opportunity to experience scenario planning, role-playing, hypothesizing and more. Exploring voting and the democratic process should use a variety of different learning modalities and hands on experiences such as creating a mock election, reading books focused on voting or elected officials, or interviewing people who have voted.

Remember that young children enjoy engaging with themes over a period of time. Introducing themes and vocabulary of voting ahead of the election gives children the opportunity to feel capable of understanding the world around them. Also, extending election play past the election itself can help them revisit the themes and continue to create alternate realities through pretend play. This helps them work through feelings or ideas that they might hear surrounding them.

We hope you use these ideas to explore these concepts. If you use some of these ideas in your schools, we would love to hear about it! Please feel free to send pictures, quotes or stories to skopp@jewishedproject.org to continue spreading the joy of teaching about the democratic process in our Jewish early childhood programs.

1. **Create a Mock Election:**

A mock election can happen at home or at school. It can be focused on what children are having for snack or what to name the new class fish. These mock elections can be teacher directed; however, the more input children have, the more invested they will be in the process. There are many things to consider when creating your own mock election:

a. **Introducing Election Vocabulary:**

- i. Election, Polls, Ballot, Ballot Box, Government, Power etc.

b. **Bring in our Jewish Values**

- i. *Tikkun Olam* (Repairing the World)
Each person can make change happen
- ii. *B'tzelem Elohim* (We are Created in the Image of G-d)
Each voice is equally important
- iii. *Mahloket* (Disagreement)
Sometimes we disagree and feel disappointment.
- iv. *Kavod* (Respect)
Being friendly is important
- v. *Shalom Bayit* (Peace in the home)
We value peace in our home and communities

c. **Creating a Poll Site in Dramatic Play:**

- i. What does a poll site need?
- ii. Contact a former poll worker in your community to learn about the physical voting space.
- iii. What about mail-in ballots? Could you create spaces in your classroom for both a poll site and a drop-off mailbox or USPS building?

d. **The Voting Process:**

- i. What is the issue?
- ii. Can you introduce mark making or circling coloring to mirror the experience of voting?
- iii. Can children create stickers to hand out after each child has voted?

e. **Counting Ballots:**

Unlike voting where we raise our hands, our ballots are secret ballots. We do not need to prevent children from sharing their vote; however, it is helpful for them to see that there is a difference between privately submitting a ballot and publicly raising a hand.

f. **The Results:**

- i. How do we each handle either winning or disappointment?
- ii. What are coping mechanisms we can use to support children who might not be pleased with the results?
- iii. What tools can we teach children to self-regulate?
- iv. How do the results impact the children moving forward?
- v. How can we help the class stay a united whole even when some may be disappointed?

2. Read books on voting, elections or elected officials.

Books give us an insight that this process extends beyond us and our time and place. They help give children a context that voting is something that has been part of being an American for a very long time. Also, having the foundation of other elections, including fictional elections, helps them realize that this election will not be their only election. An election will happen again and eventually they will be able to vote as well.

3. Interview people around you about their voting plan or their experience voting.

Voting is for everyone. Children can learn how the leaders in their community as well as the people who keep them safe or clean their school all vote. You could even ask them why they vote or what issues are important to them. There are ways to do this without endorsing a political candidate yet still exposing children to the breadth of the democratic process.