

# Growing Kid Activists 101

**19 ways parents &  
educators can introduce  
children to social justice**

**by Rebekah Gienapp**



## **Congratulations!**

If you've downloaded this guide, you've already taken the most important step in the journey to helping kids become young activists.

What step was that, you ask? Listening to the voice inside that told you "I want to help kids seek justice."

You know that children don't have wait until they're adults to take action for a better world.

I encourage you to use this guide in the way that's right for your family or your students.

Some ideas will speak to your children's passions more than others. Some will be simpler to implement than others depending on where you live, the ages of your children, and other circumstances.

**Pick just one or two ideas to start with.**

As you talk and take action with the kids in your life, you'll see momentum start to build, within them and within yourself.

Days and weeks may have gone by since you had a conversation or did an activity together. Seemingly out of nowhere, a child will remind you of something you've learned together.

So here's to building a fairer, more compassionate world with our children!

# Nineteen ways parents and educators can introduce children to social justice

## 1. Read and discuss books together.

What kind of books? Books that address social justice issues, defy stereotypes, or that open your child's world up to new perspectives and experiences.

Whenever you can find books by #ownvoices authors (authors who share a diverse background with the diverse characters they write about), focus on those first.

Here are a few of my book lists to help you get started:

[15 picture books about social justice and human rights](#)

[12 books to help children understand Islamic faith and culture](#)

[18 picture books featuring strong, feisty girls](#)

[Books that help kids understand immigration issues](#)

[Diverse books for babies and toddlers](#)

[18 children's books about poverty and hunger](#)

[Picture books about loving families in many forms](#)

[12 diverse children's books written by #ownvoices authors](#)

[Gift Guide: best picture books for every interest](#) (look at sections for little travelers and young changemakers)

## **2. Hang a world map in your home or your classroom at a height kids can easily interact with it.**

In our 5 year old's room, our map hangs right over his bed, because that's where we do our nighttime reading. As we read a book set in another country, talk about news events, or pray for particular people, we stop to find where they live on the map.

Why does this matter? Kids need context to understand their own place in the world and who other people are.

As an American, I've seen how many of us don't know even basic information about geography.

If we have no idea where a country is located, it's hard to feel a connection with the people who live there and their hopes and struggles.

## **3. Identify 1 – 2 issues that your children really care about.**

If you're a parent, what conversations spark your children's attention? Are they worried about people who are homeless? Do they get upset by discrimination? Are they always reminding you of things you can do to take care of the planet?

If you're a teacher, can you poll your students with a few choices of what they'd like to learn about?

Now that you've figured out which issue speaks the most to their hearts, use this guide to brainstorm how you can learn more about the root causes and take action.

#### **4. Help children become more empathetic.**

Empathy is not the same thing as justice. But I believe it's impossible to do the hard work of social change long term if we're not able to understand the feelings of other people.

For young children, especially preschoolers, they need to understand their own feelings first before they can be attentive to others. That's ok! It's a natural progression that will happen if the adults in their life encourage it.

On the blog, I've got a list of [10 fun activities to help kids become smart at heart](#).

#### **5. Teach children the difference between charity and justice.**

Almost all the service projects that are offered to children are acts of charity. Maybe that's because it's easier to figure out things kids can do to help meet people's immediate needs, like assemble hygiene kits or collect food.

But if we never offer kids the chance to engage in acts of justice, they'll quickly get the idea that what's needed to solve the world's toughest problems is charity. That's just not true.

Try this [“two feet of service activity”](#) to help kids understand the difference between charity and justice.

When you do engage in an act of charity as a family or a class, take time to talk about what just, long-term solutions are needed for the problem you're addressing.

## **6. Change the way you eat (at least a little bit)**

Especially if the kids in your life are concerned about world hunger or climate change, incorporate more plant-based eating into your meals.

Reducing the amount of meat and dairy you eat (even just one day a week) means fewer greenhouse gases in the air, and more farmland available to feed people rather than livestock. Look for ways to reduce your family's food waste too.

Treat trying new recipes as a fun experiment. Make sure kids understand how what they eat can help the planet and its peoples.

## **7. Talk about race openly.**

Talking about race and skin tone does not encourage racism. Quite the opposite, it gives children the tools to disagree with the subtle and overt racism that they encounter every day.

Especially if your children are white (or the majority of your students are white), look for ways to name whiteness explicitly.

For example, if you're reading a book where all the characters are white, notice that out loud. Mention that the book is different from your neighborhood/community/country, where people have so many different shades of skin.

## **8. Role play speaking up so children are prepared.**

No matter how progressive you believe your social circle or school is, at times all children will hear racist, sexist, homophobic, transphobic, or bullying comments about people with disabilities.

When you're reading books that address bullying or instances of someone saying something biased, take time afterwards to talk. Ask kids what are some things they could say when they hear conversations like this.

For the youngest children, just teaching them to say something simple like "I don't like that. That's not kind. That's not true" can be a powerful tool.

## 9. Write letters to elected officials together.

Even young children can participate in this if you're creative.

After you've identified an issue that kids feel strongly about, do a bit of internet research for justice organizations tackling that cause. Find a specific bill that's being proposed that you can write in support of (or opposition to).

You can find a template that children can use to write a short letter [here](#), [along with some instructions about how to write to Congress](#).

## 10. Proactively talk about disabilities and differences in our bodies.

Again, reading and discussing books is one of my favorite ways to open up conversations about differences.

My son and I often read [\*The Barefoot Book of Children\*](#), which includes many children who have disabilities. There are also kids with many different body types. If my son notices a difference, we stop to talk about it.

Especially when he was a preschooler, I sometimes paused to point out when a character in a book was in a wheelchair or used braces to walk. I'd comment that these helped the child get around and do the things they loved, in order to normalize the experience for him.

If your child asks you questions in public about a stranger with a disability, quietly take time to answer their questions. If the person they were speaking about heard them and the wording was inappropriate, be sure to take a moment to say something like "I'm sorry, we're still learning about the polite way to ask questions."

## **11. Give a toy or a story character a non-binary pronoun.**

What's a non-binary pronoun , you ask? Not everyone identifies with the male or female gender. One of the ways you can help kids understand this is by consistently using the pronouns like they/them for a particular toy or a character in a book.

Every once in a while, when children are talking about whether someone is a boy or girl, remind them that some people feel like they are both a boy or girl or neither a boy or girl.

## **12. Teach kids about movements for social justice, not just individual heroes and sheroes.**

When you talk with kids about important leaders for justice like Rosa Parks or César Chávez, also talk about the movements they were part of.

Do some research to learn more about how these groups acted together to win victories for justice. Ask children questions about things that these leaders needed other people to do in order to achieve what they did.

Don't forget to take time to make connections between historical movements for justice and present ones. What are some things that every day people are doing now to act for justice?



### **13. Send cards to prisoners of conscience.**

Each December, Amnesty International holds a Write for Rights campaign in honor of Human Rights Day. They highlight several cases of people who are being held in prison around the world for speaking up for human rights.

Participants are encouraged to write a letter to a decision maker, as well as send a card to the person who's imprisoned.

Even if your children are too young to write a letter to a decision maker, they can help you decorate cards to those who are prisoners of conscience and sign their names.

### **14. Attend a march or vigil together.**

If you've never participated in a march or vigil before, contact the organizing group to see what's planned and if it's kid-friendly. (Most activist events have Facebook events to publicize them, which is a great place to ask questions.)

Talk to your children about the issue and ask if they'd like to help you make a sign to carry. If it's appropriate, bring egg shakers or another instrument your child can use to make noise during chants.

### **15. Inspire children with stories of other young activists.**

While not every child is going to be a speaker at the national Women's March or help sue the federal government on behalf of the environment, it's inspiring for children to see what other young people can do.

Use [this blog post as a start to your search for inspiring young people](#).

## **16. Donate diverse books to your child's school library.**

Does your school's library have lots of books featuring children of color, LGBTQ characters, stories of immigrants, characters with disabilities or that are neurodiverse, and books that feature girls and boys in non-stereotypical roles?

Chances are there's room for improvement in the school's collection.

You can donate books yourself, or team up with others to host a diverse books drive. Make sure other parents and teachers understand what kind of books you are specifically looking for.

## **17. Take kids on a trip to the grocery store.**

Encourage children to look around at prices. They could even make a price list.

When you get back home or back to school, ask which items seemed expensive and which were cheap. Ask how could that influence the people's choices about what they eat.

Note: Especially if you're shopping somewhere that low-income people are likely to shop, be sensitive about any conversations you have in the grocery store.

## **18. Model civility, while also speaking your truth.**

In our polarized world, kids are exposed to lots of speech that quickly devolves into attacking each other.

At the same time, they also see lots of what Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. referred to as the "silence of our friends" in the face of injustice.

When children see adults speaking up in the face of injustice, while also demonstrating respect for the people who they disagree with, they can learn these habits themselves.

## 19. Start buying at least one item you regularly purchase from a source that reflects your values.

What's something your family buys on a regular basis that could be bought from a business that's owned by a person of color or from a fair trade cooperative?

Even if it costs a bit more or is somewhat less convenient, make a commitment to buying it from a source that reflects your values.

Talk to your child about why you're doing this. Discuss how price is not the only thing that matters when we're deciding who to shop with.

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### How Rebekah and The Barefoot Mommy community can help you



Hey there, I'm Rebekah Gienapp. I'm a mama, minister, justice seeker, and your guide as you raise young global citizens who want to heal our world.

I believe that as parents and educators, we have a purpose that's even bigger than helping kids become successful.

We can help kids discover their own special role in making our world a compassionate and fair place for every child on the planet.

If you need any help implementing the ideas in this activity guide, drop me a line at [rebekah@thebarefootmommy.com](mailto:rebekah@thebarefootmommy.com)

Want to connect with like-minded parents and educators? Join our [Facebook community](#)!