



SCHOOL VIOLENCE PREVENTION DEMONSTRATION PROGRAM

SHOPPING BAG DECISION MAKING

By Julie Schult

Activity Description

This activity provides students the opportunity to experience the legislative process by first choosing a leader to make a decision for the entire group, then living with the aftermath of the decision. With some prompting, students may consider factors that led to their decision, both on the part of the leader and the rest of the class. Practice this on members of your family or colleagues. It requires a delicate balance of salesmanship and facilitation, peppered of course with manipulation. You want to leave students understanding that it is okay that we all want something from our leaders, and to question how we make sure we get what we want as an informed citizenry within the constraints of time and our ability to communicate to our leaders.

Suggested Grade Level

Fourth grade and up

Estimated Time to Complete

One class period

Objectives

Students will

- give consensus to a leader within a controlled process;
- consider the term *common good*;
- reflect through discussion and writing on living with the decision the leader makes for the group.

Materials Needed

- Three opaque shopping bags from three different stores filled accordingly. In the first bag, place an empty, cracked CD case. In the second, place a plastic water or soda bottle filled with soapy water and coffee grounds. In the third, tape a five-dollar bill so that it cannot be felt when reaching in the bag or seen (a paper shopping bag works best for this item).

Activity Procedures

1. Display the three shopping bags after they are filled as noted above, and say, “Each of these bags contains items that benefit the common good. You may all have what is in one of them. Which one you get depends on a decision your leader makes. Who wants to be the leader of this group? The leader’s job is to decide which item the class receives.”
2. The next step varies, but the result should be the same—either elicit nominations, a volunteer, or hold a mini-election through thirty-second stump speeches, depending on how many students want

to lead. The quicker the decision is made the better. This might seem unfair to your students, but the objective here is to get a leader in as little as five minutes or less. You want to validate their ability to make a choice, but begin to manipulate how and when the choice is made. There will be time for you to explain your manipulation later.

3. Once the leader is chosen, ask, “Which bag would you like for the group?” The answer will likely be given immediately and it will likely depend on which bag is most desired, for example, a bag with a logo of a videogame store will probably be chosen over a cosmetics store, depending on the age group. This is all a part of the manipulation.
4. If the leader chooses a bag or not, ask, “Would you like to have more information about what is in the bag?” The rest of the class has likely at this point audibly demonstrated celebration or protest. Ask them if they would like their leader to obtain more information, then remind them that this decision is in the hands of the leader, and that there is no time for any more input.
5. Inform the leader that time permits for him or her to feel what is inside the bags.
6. Allow time to feel inside each bag and make the leader make a final decision. If the leader initially chose the “empty” paper bag, it is likely that she or he changed her mind upon feeling that there is nothing inside. In twenty-seven out of twenty-seven trials with this lesson, no leader, adult or student, has chosen the bag which appears to be empty.
7. Invite the leader to tell the class what was inside one of the bags not chosen—either the CD or bottle. Take the item out for all to see that with more information, the item is useless.
8. Have the leader reveal what was chosen—either the CD or the bottle, which is also useless.
9. Ask the leader why they did not choose the paper bag. A likely answer will be “because there is nothing in it.”
10. Reach inside and take out the money. Reveal to all what was really inside and begin reflection process with following prompts for discussion or writing.
 - What would you have told the leader if you had had more time?
 - Why is it important to inform our decision-makers of our wishes?
 - One could argue that our political system relies on our apathy—what does this mean? Do you agree or disagree?
 - How did the logos on the bags affect the decision?
 - What symbols are used by political parties or groups? Do these work at getting noticed?
 - What was fair or unfair about this lesson? How is it like our system of representative democracy? How is it different?
 - What would you tell someone who has the right to vote?
 - Even if you don’t have the right to vote, how can you make your leaders aware of what is needed for the common good in your community?
 - All participants in this activity have chosen a bag with something in it. What does this say about human beings?
11. Give at least a round of applause or a small prize for the leader, whose reflection will be completely different from the rest of the class.
12. Use this as a launch into further knowledge-building about the legislative process.