



Parental Liability—Lesson Plan

Student Objectives

- Develop a deeper understanding of the different principles that democratic societies consider when punishing those who break their rules.
- Describe the context and reasons why some democratic countries have created penalties for parents of children who commit minor offenses.
- Examine how democracies that share common principles and face similar problems can develop very different solutions.
- Analyze the reasons for supporting and opposing the punishment of parents for minor offenses committed by their teenagers.
- Identify areas of agreement and disagreement with other students.
- Decide, individually and as a group, whether the government should punish parents for the minor offenses committed by their teenagers.
- Reflect on the value of deliberation when deciding issues in a democracy.

Question for Deliberation

Should our democracy hold parents responsible when their teenagers commit minor offenses?

Materials

- Lesson Procedures
- Handout 1—Deliberation Guide
- Handout 2—Deliberation Activities
- Handout 3—Student Reflection on Deliberation
- Reading
- Selected Resources
- Deliberation Question with Arguments
(*optional—use if students have difficulty extracting the arguments or time is limited*)



Parental Liability—Reading

1 In Breclav, Czech Republic, a judge sentenced Mrs. Danihels to 15 months in jail and her
2 husband to 10 months. Their crime? Educational neglect. Their children had missed about 2,000
3 lessons in the past school year. When their parents were sentenced to jail, the children, aged nine
4 to twelve, were sent to a center for juvenile delinquents. In Australia, a judge ordered two people
5 to pay a \$60,000 fine. But the people he penalized did not commit the vandalism—and the judge
6 knew it. Their children were the vandals.

7 Parents make many decisions about raising their children. In democracies, they expect to do
8 so without interference from government. But democracies also have laws that allow
9 governments to protect children from parents who fail to provide basic necessities and
10 supervision. They also have laws to protect society from the people who commit crimes.
11 Problems arise when these laws conflict—particularly when parents and the state must decide
12 when teenagers are responsible for themselves.

13 **Parenting and Parental Liability: An Overview**

14 Being a parent or guardian* has many rewards and responsibilities. Parents' legal obligations
15 begin when their children are born or join the family. These obligations end when children reach
16 the age of majority—the age they are legally considered adults. This age varies, but in most U.S.
17 states it is 18. In Europe, the age is usually 14.

* Guardians are people who have the legal power and obligation to take care of another person who is not capable of total independence, usually due to his or her age. For the purposes of this reading, the term “parent” will also mean “guardian,” as the two usually have the same rights and responsibilities toward children in their care.

18 Parents' most fundamental responsibility is to provide basic necessities of life—food,
19 clothing, shelter, medical care, and education—that children cannot provide for themselves.
20 Parents who fail to provide these necessities may be charged with child neglect. Parents also
21 have the responsibility to supervise their children. Under the legal theory of *parens patriae*, the
22 government serves as the ultimate parent of a child. Children who are neglected or who are not
23 properly supervised by their parents may be placed under the authority of the court. Judges
24 usually try to keep the family together by ordering these children and their parents to receive
25 counseling, to take special classes, or to receive other support. In severe cases, however, a judge
26 may place children in foster care to protect them or in a juvenile detention facility for
27 supervision.

28 Community members can also hold parents accountable for the actions of their children. Tort
29 law (also known as civil law) allows victims to sue a person who caused harm to them, to their
30 property, or to their reputation. In a lawsuit, the victim usually has to prove that a specific person
31 is responsible (liable) for the specific injuries or damage. However, even people who are not
32 directly responsible for the injury may be liable to pay. In certain circumstances, the law assumes
33 that the offense would not have happened if a parent had reasonably supervised the child.

34 Around the world, parents can be held liable for a variety of offenses committed by their
35 children. In the Russian Federation, parents can face a penalty of 500 to 1000 roubles if they
36 “fail to prevent the presence of their children in places where their presence is prohibited.” In
37 Romania, if children make false bomb threats or fake calls to emergency numbers, parents may
38 be fined. In the United States, parents can face expensive lawsuits if their children illegally
39 download copyrighted materials or if they cause an accident in the family car. Parents can be
40 charged with “failing to take sufficient measures” to prevent underage drinking in their homes.

41 And parents who live in publicly funded housing may be forced out of their homes if their
42 children engage in criminal drug activity on or near the property—even if the parents did not
43 know the children were using or selling drugs.

44 Internationally, the most common offense for which parents can be held liable is property
45 damage. Under the laws of the Russian Federation and the European Civil Code, parents are
46 liable for the property damage caused by their children aged 6 to 14, unless the parents can prove
47 they provided sufficient supervision. Between the ages of 14 and 18, the child is held fully
48 responsible. In Estonia, parents whose children aged 15-18 willfully damage property are held
49 liable whether they provided adequate supervision or not. In the United States, 33 states allow
50 parents to be sued for property damage. Some states only require parents to pay if their children
51 are of a certain age. For example, parents in Oregon will only be responsible if the offending
52 child is less than 15 years old. Some states cap the amount that can be collected from parents,
53 typically around \$2,500 per incident. In California, judges can hold parents liable for up to
54 \$25,000 per incident. Other states, like Hawaii, have no limit at all.

55 **Truancy: A Case Study in Parental Liability**

56 According to the United Nations Convention on the Child and the Universal Declaration of
57 Human Rights, children have a right to an education. In addition, education should be free up to
58 a certain age, and school attendance should be compulsory (required by law.) If children miss
59 school without a valid reason, they are considered truant. In Europe, typical compulsory
60 education laws require children between the ages of 6 and 16 to go to school. In the United
61 States, most states require children between 7 and 16 to attend school.

62 Democratic countries require education out of concern for children and to protect society.
63 Young people who do not attend school are likely to face a lifetime of difficulties. According to

64 Romanian psychologist Diana Dincă, a lack of education “diminishes a person’s chances to have
65 a job and increases the risk of extreme poverty. [The lack of]access to education... can also
66 decrease the chances of future generation’s success.” Truancy hurts communities, too. Police
67 officers know that in communities where truancy is high, so is the daytime crime rate. Adults
68 who were truants as juveniles tend to rely more heavily on welfare and have an increased
69 likelihood of going to jail, at a great cost to society. Local schools lose when students skip
70 because in places like Macedonia and Indiana, the government bases its financial support to
71 schools on daily attendance figures.

72 Democracies have developed different approaches to involve parents in reducing truancy. In
73 Lithuania, school attendance is seen as a community responsibility, and the Ministry of
74 Education requires every school to organize trainings for parents. Other democracies have
75 established escalating consequences for truants and their parents. When children exceed the legal
76 limit of unexcused absences and are “truant,” parents and school leaders are often required to
77 make a plan in order for the child to return to school. If the agreements fail to improve
78 attendance, courts may try to help parents by requiring them to take parenting or communication
79 classes. In Denver, Colorado, truant students are assigned to “catch up classes,” in which
80 teachers and other mentors help them make up the work they have missed. The goal is to help
81 them succeed in school when they start attending more. Families of truants are also assigned to
82 mediation (conflict resolution) and family group conferences.

83 When those interventions fail, some truancy laws—like those in Maryland, Virginia, and
84 Romania—go further, by fining parents of truants. Parents in Estonia who “neglect their
85 obligation to raise and educate their children” may also face penalties equal to 50 days’ salary.
86 Parents in California who “fail to compel a student to attend school” face fines of up to \$100 for

87 the first conviction, \$250 for the second conviction, and \$500 for three or more convictions. In
88 places such as South Carolina, England, Australia, and the Czech Republic, judges may sentence
89 to time in jail those parents who refuse to make their children attend school.

90 **Supporters and Opponents of Parental Liability**

91 People disagree about parental liability. There is particular disagreement about holding
92 parents liable for the actions of their teenagers. Supporters of parental liability say the laws work.
93 For example, when Pima County, Arizona, instituted a “get tough” truancy program that
94 combined rehabilitation with fines and jail time for parents, truancy dropped 64%. In Silverton,
95 Oregon, juvenile crime and truancy fell 44.5% when the town passed and enforced parental
96 responsibility legislation. Other U.S. communities have seen similar results.

97 Supporters also say that victims have an important right to restitution, to be compensated for
98 their injuries or damage to their property. However, most minors do not have any money. Suing
99 them is therefore pointless. The only way victims of vandalism and graffiti can be compensated
100 for the full costs of repairing or replacing their property is to get the money from parents.

101 Supporters add that delinquent parenting results in delinquent children. When parents fail to
102 properly support or supervise their children, serious consequences for society can, and often do,
103 result. Significant penalties for parents, like dramatic fines or jail time, deter other parents from
104 shirking their responsibilities. As the victim of the Australian property crime featured at the
105 beginning of this reading said: “At the end of the day, they are your children and they are your
106 responsibility whether you like it or...you don’t.”

107 Opponents of parental liability laws say it is unfair to hold one person responsible for the
108 actions of another. They say such laws shift responsibility away from the children, who should

109 be held accountable for their own actions. Other opponents say the laws violate the rights of
110 parents to raise and educate their children in the way they see fit.

111 Opponents say many parents lack effective parenting skills, so the biggest priority should
112 be helping parents parent well. As one psychologist and school safety expert put it, with parental
113 liability laws, “you are telling people you are going to punish them for a job they want to do but
114 don’t know how do.”

115 Opponents also think government should prevent juvenile crime and truancy by addressing
116 the reasons kids skip school or commit crimes. For example, if teachers were better trained and
117 had better materials, perhaps children would value school more. If schools were safer, children
118 who fear bullying and crime at school might attend. Some young people say they vandalize
119 property because they are bored. Opponents of parental liability would agree with the efforts of a
120 power company in Moscow that grew tired of fighting with kids who vandalized its towers and
121 decided to invite graffiti artists to make them more beautiful.

122 Supporters of parental liability acknowledge that the government in a democracy cannot take
123 the place of parents. However, democratic government is responsible for enforcing the laws and
124 protecting everyone in society. Parental liability laws can provide the right incentives for good
125 parenting and appropriate penalties for bad parenting. This solution strikes the right balance
126 between family privacy and the greater good of the community.

127 Opponents say that parental liability laws disproportionately penalize people who are poor.
128 Even when school is free, some parents cannot afford materials, appropriate clothing,
129 transportation, and other associated costs. In many economically depressed communities,
130 children miss school to work or to watch younger children while their parents work. According
131 to criminologist H. Wilson, “Lax parenting is often the result of chronic stress, situations arising

132 from frequent or prolonged spells of unemployment...and an often permanent condition of
133 poverty.” In this economy, as more parents are forced to work long hours or hold two or more
134 jobs to earn enough money to cover basic family needs, it is unjust for governments to cut
135 federal spending on welfare programs and then prosecute parents for being unavailable to
136 supervise their children.” Programs to increase parents’ job skills and earning power would
137 reduce truancy and juvenile crime more than punishing parents.

138 **Conclusion**

139 The question of whether parents should be held liable for their children’s actions is also a
140 question of the proper role of government. As University of Connecticut law and public policy
141 professor Steven Wisensale put it, “The problem we have in this country is we’re constantly
142 wrestling with the dilemma of preserving the privacy of what goes on in the family, versus what
143 is for the good of the greater community.”



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Parental Liability—Deliberation Question with Arguments

Deliberation Question

Should our democracy hold parents responsible when their teenagers commit minor offenses?

YES—Arguments to Support the Deliberation Question

1. Democratic governments protect society from crime and promote education for all young people. Parental liability laws work to reduce crime and truancy. Communities with anti-truancy programs that have combined rehabilitation with fines and jail time for parents have seen reductions in the number of truants. Drops in truancy also result in drops in juvenile crime. As with most problems in life, a mixture of incentives and penalties has the best chance of reducing negative behaviors.
2. Victims of crimes have a right to be compensated for their injuries or damage to their property. However, most minors do not have any money. If victims of vandalism and graffiti can sue parents for the full costs of repairing or replacing their property, then parents will supervise their teenagers more carefully.
3. Some children are delinquent because their parents are delinquent in their parenting. Significant penalties for parents of delinquent teenagers can help keep these parents from shirking their responsibilities. Parents are responsible for their children, and parents must be held accountable for their obligations.
4. The government in a democracy cannot take the place of parents. However, democratic government is responsible for enforcing the laws and protecting everyone in society. Parental liability laws can provide the right incentives for good parenting and appropriate penalties for bad parenting. This solution strikes the right balance between family privacy and the greater good of the community.



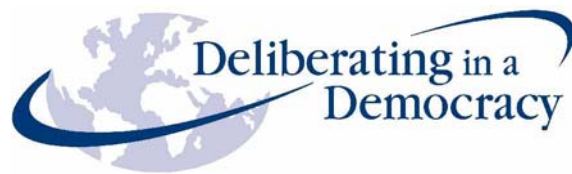
Parental Liability—Deliberation Question with Arguments

Deliberation Question

Should our democracy hold parents responsible when their teenagers commit minor offenses?

NO—Arguments to Oppose the Deliberation Question

1. Parental liability laws violate basic principles of democratic society, such as the rights of parents to raise and educate their children in the way they see fit. These laws also unfairly hold one person accountable for the actions of another responsible person. Teenagers always insist that they are more like adults than children. Like adults, they can work, drive a car, and even pay taxes. Just as they must accept a traffic ticket when they are driving, teenagers must accept responsibility for skipping school or committing acts of vandalism.
2. Many parents lack effective parenting skills, and teenagers take advantage of this situation. Punishing people because they do not know what do is like fining someone for drowning when they do not know how to swim. Instead of creating new fines and punishments, society should show these parents how to take better care of their teenagers.
3. Parental liability laws treat the symptom and not the disease. If teachers were better trained and had better materials, children would value school more and there would be fewer truants. If schools were safer, children who fear bullying and crime at school would attend. Some young people say they vandalize property because they are bored. Government can prevent more juvenile crime and truancy by addressing the reasons kids skip school or commit crimes than it can by punishing parents.
4. Parental liability laws are unfair to people who are poor. Even when school is free, some parents cannot afford materials, appropriate clothing, transportation, and other associated costs. In many economically depressed communities, children miss school to work or to watch younger children while their parents work. Lax parenting often results from prolonged unemployment and poverty. The government cannot justly prosecute parents for failing to supervise their children when those parents have to work two or three jobs to provide for their families. Programs to increase parents' job skills and earning power would reduce truancy and juvenile crime more than punishing parents.



Lesson Procedures

Step One: Introduction

Introduce the lesson and the Student Objectives on the **Lesson Plan**. Distribute and discuss **Handout 1—Deliberation Guide**. Review the Rules of Deliberation and post them in a prominent position in the classroom. Emphasize that the class will deliberate and then debrief the experience.

Step Two: Reading

Distribute a copy of the **Reading** to each student. Have students read the article carefully and underline facts and ideas they think are important and/or interesting (**ideally for homework**).

Step Three: Grouping and Reading Discussion

Divide the class into groups of four or five students. Group members should share important facts and interesting ideas with each other to develop a common understanding of the article. They can record these facts and ideas on **Handout 2—Deliberation Activities** (Review the Reading).

Step Four: Introducing the Deliberation Question

Each **Reading** addresses a Deliberation Question. Read aloud and/or post the Deliberation Question and ask students to write the Deliberation Question in the space provided on **Handout 2**. Remind students of the Rules for Deliberation on **Handout 1**.

Step Five: Learning the Reasons

Divide each group into two teams, Team A and Team B. Explain that each team is responsible for selecting the most compelling reasons for its position, which you will assign. Both teams should reread the **Reading**. Team A will find the most compelling reasons to **support** the Deliberation Question. Team B will find the most compelling reasons to **oppose** the Deliberation Question. To ensure maximum participation, ask everyone on the team to prepare to present at least one reason.

Note: Team A and Team B do not communicate while learning the reasons. If students need help identifying the arguments or time is limited, use the **Deliberation Question with Arguments** handouts. Ask students to identify the most compelling arguments and add any additional ones they may remember from the reading.

Step Six: Presenting the Most Compelling Reasons

Tell students that each team will present the most compelling reasons to **support** or **oppose** the Deliberation Question. In preparation for the next step, Reversing Positions, have each team listen carefully for the most compelling reasons.

- Team A will explain their reasons for **supporting** the Deliberation Question. If Team B does not understand something, they should ask questions but NOT argue.
- Team B will explain their reasons for **opposing** the Deliberation Question. If Team A does not understand something, they should ask questions, but NOT argue.

Note: The teams may not believe in or agree with their reasons but should be as convincing as possible when presenting them to others.

Step Seven: Reversing Positions

Explain that, to demonstrate that each side understands the opposing arguments, each team will select the other team's most compelling reasons.

- Team B will explain to Team A what Team A's **most compelling** reasons were for **supporting** the Deliberation Question.
- Team A will explain to Team B what Team B's **most compelling** reasons were for **opposing** the Deliberation Question.

Step Eight: Deliberating the Question

Explain that students will now drop their roles and deliberate the question as a group. Remind the class of the question. In deliberating, students can (1) use what they have learned about the issue and (2) offer their personal experiences as they formulate opinions regarding the issue.

After deliberating, have students find areas of agreement in their group. Then ask students, as individuals, to express to the group their personal position on the issue and write it down (see My Personal Position on **Handout 2**).

Note: Individual students do **NOT** have to agree with the group.

Step Nine: Debriefing the Deliberation

Reconvene the entire class. Distribute **Handout 3—Student Reflection on Deliberation** as a guide. Ask students to discuss the following questions:

- What were the most compelling reasons for each side?
- What were the areas of agreement?
- What questions do you still have? Where can you get more information?
- What are some reasons why deliberating this issue is important in a democracy?
- What might you or your class do to address this problem? Options include teaching others about what they have learned; writing to elected officials, NGOs, or businesses; and conducting additional research.

Consider having students prepare personal reflections on the Deliberation Question through written, visual, or audio essays. Personal opinions can be posted on the web.

Step Ten: Student Poll/Student Reflection

Ask students: “Do you agree, disagree, or are you still undecided about the Deliberation Question?” Record the responses and have a student post the results on www.deliberating.org under the partnerships and/or the polls. Have students complete **Handout 3**.



Handout 1—Deliberation Guide

What Is Deliberation?

Deliberation (meaningful discussion) is the focused exchange of ideas and the analysis of arguments with the aim of making a decision.

Why Are We Deliberating?

Citizens must be able and willing to express and exchange ideas among themselves, with community leaders, and with their representatives in government. Citizens and public officials in a democracy need skills and opportunities to engage in civil public discussion of controversial issues in order to make informed policy decisions. Deliberation requires keeping an open mind, as this skill enables citizens to reconsider a decision based on new information or changing circumstances.

What Are the Rules for Deliberation?

- Read the material carefully.
- Focus on the deliberation question.
- Listen carefully to what others are saying.
- Check for understanding.
- Analyze what others say.
- Speak and encourage others to speak.
- Refer to the reading to support your ideas.
- Use relevant background knowledge, including life experiences, in a logical way.
- Use your heart and mind to express ideas and opinions.
- Remain engaged and respectful when controversy arises.
- Focus on ideas, not personalities.



Handout 2—Deliberation Activities

Review the Reading

Determine the most important facts and/or interesting ideas and write them below.

- 1) _____
- 2) _____
- 3) _____

Deliberation Question

Learning the Reasons

Reasons to Support the Deliberation Question (Team A)	Reasons to Oppose the Deliberation Question (Team B)

My Personal Position

On a separate sheet of paper, write down reasons to support your opinion. You may suggest another course of action than the policy proposed in the question or add your own ideas to address the underlying problem.



Name: _____

Date: _____

Teacher: _____

Handout 3—Student Reflection on Deliberation

Large Group Discussion: What We Learned

What were the most compelling reasons for each side?

Side A:

Side B:

What were the areas of agreement?

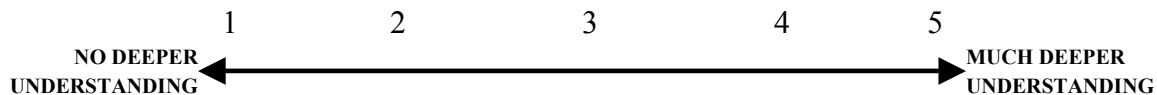
What questions do you still have? Where can you get more information?

What are some reasons why deliberating this issue is important in a democracy?

What might you and/or your class do to address this problem?

Individual Reflection: What I Learned

Which number best describes your understanding of the focus issue? [circle one]



What new insights did you gain?

What did you do well in the deliberation? What do you need to work on to improve your personal deliberation skills?

What did someone else in your group do or say that was particularly helpful? Is there anything the group should work on to improve the group deliberation?