
Stage Your Own Scientific Debate!



by Lori Stewart

Sure, your teen can debate his way out of a paper bag. He can explain why chores are unethical, or why a later curfew is a fundamental freedom. But formal debate, the kind favored in courtrooms, governmental bodies, and high school debate competitions, isn't about standing behind your beliefs. In fact, the art of debate lies in the fact that a master debater should be able to skillfully defend any argument, no matter what he himself believes.

Not sure how your teen fits into the equation? In high school, students are often given writing assignments where they must defend a statement or argument. Same goes for the SAT essay section. But seeing both sides of an issue, and being able to talk eloquently about them, isn't just an academic essential: it's also a way to make your teen a more thoughtful and well-informed citizen. Ready to get started? Here's how to stage your own formal debate!

What You Need:

- Paper
- Pencil
- Research materials, i.e. Internet access, library books, or articles

What You Do:

Step 1

Consider a controversial topic in science together. Your teen will likely have an opinion about the topic, but encourage him to see the other side of the argument, too. A good topic that is relevant to many biology students is dissection. The National Science Teachers Association supports the rights of teachers to use dissection of animals as part of classroom instruction. However, many students and animal rights activists

adamantly disagree with this view. Consider the issues concerning dissection in the classroom:

Arguments for dissection in the classroom:

- The only real way to understand how body systems work is to see first hand through dissection labs. Textbook and “virtual” exercises cannot compare to hands-on experience.
- First-hand experience with dissections help students understand how intricate the body is and gives them an appreciation for life.
- Classroom dissection engages students’ interest in biology and life and encourages students to further study biology.
- Most students have no issues with eating meat, so as long as animals are treated humanely when they are alive, they are serving an educational purpose, just like eating meat serves a purpose.

Arguments against dissection in the classroom:

- Classroom dissection devalues the lives of animals. Students learn to view animals as “objects” rather than living creatures.
- Classroom dissection is unnecessary since there is technology available that allows students to perform “virtual” dissections.
- Most students will not go on to work in the medical field, so other classroom activities and assessments provide a solid enough understanding of how the body works.
- Animals raised and captured for classroom dissection are treated inhumanly and it is immoral to kill animals for dissection purposes.

How does your child feel about classroom dissection and why?

Step 2

Discuss other controversial scientific topics. Find a topic that interests your child from the list below or have him suggest a different topic.

- Should we produce and eat genetically modified food?
- Is performance enhancing drug use in professional sports inevitable?
- Should population growth be regulated?
- Who and how should determine who receives organ donations?
- Is euthanasia unethical?
- Should tobacco (or drugs, or alcohol) use be regulated?
- The Big Three: Abortion, Evolution, Global Warming

Step 3

Talk to you child about his strong belief on the issue. The key to remember is your child may have a different point of view on a topic, so try to discuss it openly and without judgment. Once your teen has articulated his opinion on the topic, flip the tables and ask him to prepare for a debate in which he will have to defend the *opposite* side.

Step 4

Give your teen time to research his side of the debate and write an opening statement. You should do the same, for the other side of the issue! Schedule a time when some family members or friends can watch the debate, and get ready to rumble!

Step 5

It's debate time! Both you and your teen should stand up in front of the audience. Have your teen present his opening argument first, then present your argument (making sure not to comment on anything that he has said). Next, it's your teen's turn to deliver a "rebuttal," or counter-argument, that directly addresses the point you brought up. Then it's your turn to deliver a rebuttal (you can set a time limit on these, if you wish. Assign a moderator and have her give a signal when time is up). Lastly, both you and your teen can deliver closing statements. Who argued their case most skillfully? Leave it up to a vote from the audience!

Lori Stewart is a freelancer specializing in the development of science education materials. As a high school science teacher, Lori had several students place first and second in NASA's Student Involvement Program national competition.

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