

TAKE A STAND



People
and the
Planet

Lessons for a Sustainable Future

INTRODUCTION

The environmental and social issues surrounding population growth are complex; from the way we use resources, to the implications of our changing climate, to the effectiveness of population policies. Sometimes, it is easier to think through an issue when you are asked to “take a stand,” or form an opinion on it. No two people think about these issues exactly alike. An individual's stance depends on their life experiences, their knowledge base, and their personal situation. Because of this, there are many perspectives on population-related issues and it is valuable for students to consider their stance while also weighing the opinions of others.

MATERIALS

- Signs: “Strongly Agree,” “Agree,” “????,” “Disagree,” “Strongly Disagree” (provided)
- Masking tape

PROCEDURE

1. Before class, tape the five signs up around the classroom. Look through the list of suggested statements, starting on page 3, and select several to use for the activity prompts.
2. Explain to students that you will be reading several statements to them, and that they should stand by the sign that most closely represents their reaction to the statement. The signs include: “Strongly Agree,” “Agree,” “????,” “Disagree,” “Strongly Disagree.” You as a facilitator can discuss with students when to go to the “????” sign. It can be used for opinions such as: “I don’t have a strong opinion” or “I agree with some parts and disagree with other parts,” “I don’t know,” or “I agree in some situations but not in others,” for example.

CONCEPT

Dialogue and debate on social and environmental issues related to population growth helps students to form and communicate personal opinions.

OBJECTIVES

Students will be able to:

- Formulate their own opinions on social and environmental issues related to population growth.
- Engage effectively in collaborative discussions with classmates on statements that deal with issues surrounding population and the environment.
- Write a position paper defending their stance on a statement using evidence to support their claims.

SUBJECTS

Social studies (geography, civics), science (Earth and environmental), English language arts

SKILLS

Debating, values identification, communicating, decision making, researching, defending a position using evidence, writing

METHOD

Students express their thoughts on issues related to population and the environment, then research a specific issue and write a position paper using evidence to defend their stance.

3. Select one of the statements from the list and read it aloud to the class. Allow time for students to think about their opinion and move to the appropriate location.
4. After each statement, have students discuss why they chose to stand where they did. You may pose additional questions to help students articulate their thoughts. Encourage students to move to a new location if their opinion changes during discussion.

Use a variety of discussion routines to hear many different voices. Some options include:

Hot Seat: Ask one student to take the “hot seat” and explain their position. Encourage other students to ask questions directly to the first student to clarify or challenge their position.

Representative: Ask students to form a group with other students near them. The group summarizes their reasoning by finding areas of consensus, and then chooses a representative to share the group’s reasoning with the whole class.

Think, write, pair, share: Ask students to individually write down a couple of reasons why they chose to stand near their sign. Have them turn to someone nearby and share their responses. Ask for several volunteers to share their pair’s reasoning with the whole group.

One word: Ask all students to come up with a one word response to why they are standing in their location. Quickly call on each student in turn to share their word.

Opposites: Ask all students to stand at a sign that does not match their reaction to the statement. They should articulate an argument for why someone might be standing at their sign, even though the student may disagree with the argument.

5. You may want to use some of the following techniques to keep the discussion on track:
 - Before discussing, create a list of norms based on student ideas about how to respectfully participate in the debate. Model and discuss these norms with students using a low stakes topic (the best season of the year, dogs vs. cats, etc.). Examples of norms could be: active listening, how to express your opinion and how to respectfully disagree. Students will then be able to use these skills when you are ready to discuss the statements.
 - To show respect for viewpoints different than their own and to practice active listening, have students paraphrase the opinions offered by others before they speak their own opinion.
 - Keep discussion focused on content, and not on personalities.
 - Focus on student ideas by keeping your own opinions confidential.
 - Use your discretion in choosing statements that you feel students have enough information to form an opinion and that fit best with your curriculum guidelines.
 - Find additional resources [here](#) for facilitating classroom conversations around topics that might be sensitive, political, or controversial.
 - Provide [sentence starters](#) to help students effectively share their opinions and communicate them with their peers.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Were any of these topics difficult to talk about? Why or why not?
2. Was there a time that your opinion changed on a statement? What caused it to change?
3. Were you ever alone at a sign? How might you feel/did you feel if you were the only person standing at a sign?
4. Was there a time when you wished you had more information before you had to choose where to stand? What information would you have liked to have?
5. What was it like to 'strongly disagree' or 'strongly agree' on an issue?
6. Was there a time that you disagreed with a close friend? How did that feel? Why do you think you had different opinions?

ALTERNATE PROCEDURES

1. If you'd like to ensure that your students are able to make educated opinions, provide them with the statement(s) you'll be discussing a day or two ahead of the activity in class. Encourage them to use this time to look into the issue(s) so they can make an informed choice and gather useful facts to support their opinions.
2. Alternatively, the statements can be used as a pre- and post-evaluation to see how students' knowledge has grown as a result of a unit of study.

STATEMENTS

1. Farmers should be urged to use sustainable agricultural practices even if it might reduce their profits.
2. To feed our growing population, we must use all agricultural means to increase farm yields, even if some of those practices damage the environment.
3. Advances in science and technology will ensure that food production and energy stores keep up with the demands of a growing population.
4. The Earth will be able to support any number of humans in the future.
5. Humans have already damaged the planet so badly that nothing we do at this point will make a significant difference.
6. We shouldn't be too concerned with climate change – Earth's climate has changed many times in the past.
7. Any new construction or other project that threatens the quality of our country's drinking water should be prohibited.

8. We must protect endangered species' habitats by not developing on them for any reason.
9. The government should make wealthier people pay more in taxes and use the money to help eliminate poverty.
10. In a real crunch, creating jobs is more important than protecting the environment.
11. The government should never be able to develop projects on Indigenous land without full agreement of Indigenous community members.
12. People in this country should be required by law to recycle and compost their trash.
13. Individual action to help the planet doesn't make a difference; only industries can make real changes.
14. Governments shouldn't ban single use plastic items, like bags and water bottles. The choice to use them should be left to the consumer.
15. To lower our use of energy and levels of air pollution, we should spend more money on improving our public transportation systems than on our highways.
16. Companies should have to prove that all parts of their products are made by people who work in humane conditions.
17. Because we live in one of the richest countries in the world, we should welcome all those from other nations who wish to live here.
18. In an effort to feed a growing population, people in developed countries should drastically reduce the amount of meat they consume.

ASSESSMENT

Students pick one statement that they are most interested in and research both sides of the issue. After researching, students take a stance and write a position paper defending their stance with evidence.

FOLLOW-UP ACTIVITIES

1. Have students create statements that relate to environmental or social issues in their own community. They should pick one statement and list possible reasons that someone would agree or disagree with the statement.
2. Choose one statement that resonated with many students and conduct a formal debate. Assign groups to be affirmative and opposition teams, allow time to research evidence-based arguments for their side, and facilitate a formal debate.
3. Have students pick one statement from the activity. Ask students to become "experts" on the content of the statement from the perspective of a different stakeholder. Students will need to conduct research on their particular perspective and then each "expert stakeholder" will explain their side of the statement. Follow-up with group discussion and reflection about the different perspectives.

Strongly
Agree

Agree

????

Disagree

**Strongly
Disagree**