

Power and Authority

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Grade level: 6-8

Objectives: Students will be able to:

- Explain the difference between power and authority
- Identify the sources of authority
- Compare situations where power and where authority are involved
- Identify how a bully makes others do what he/she wants and how to stop a bully

Definitions

What is power? What is authority? How do they differ?

Power is the ability to control or direct someone or something. Someone has power when they tell people to do something and they do it. (E.g., a bully, a mob boss, a dictator--they have no authority)

Authority is the power combined with the right to exercise it. Authority comes from jobs or positions, rules and laws, moral principles, and consent. (E.g., a parent, a teacher, an elected representative or executive)

Activity: Identify which is involved in the following situations: power or authority

1. A jury decides that Maggie Smith is guilty of robbery and the judge sentences her to prison. Is this power or authority.
AUTHORITY: The jury has the authority to determine the facts of a case and the judge has the authority to sentence a person for committing a crime.
2. Bob Washington, who is bigger than most of his friends, cuts in front of the line at the movie theatre.
POWER: Bob Washington may have the power to intimidate others but he does NOT have the authority to cut in line.
3. Chris Matthew's parents go out and leave him in charge, and he tells his younger brother not to touch his computer.
AUTHORITY: Chris Matthew's parents gave him the authority by putting him in charge.
4. A referee ejects two players from a game because they started fighting.
AUTHORITY: The referee has authority to do this (otherwise we might have too many fights at games!)
5. Richard Lee tells his son that he is grounded because he broke his curfew.

AUTHORITY: Parents have the authority and the responsibility to protect the safety and health of their children.

6. A thief robs you at gunpoint.

POWER: Obviously the thief has no RIGHT to rob anybody.

7. The city council refuses to give permission to a group of students who want to use the park for a protest rally.

AUTHORITY: The city council has the authority to do this. (It might not be the right decision but they have the authority to make a decision for the safety of the community).

What about bullies?

Bullies make people do what they want. Is this based on power or authority?

Bullies have no right or authority. They only use power to get what they want. Sometimes people use power without the right or authority to exercise it.

Consider: How does a Bully make others do what he/she wants?

- Power (Force)
- Fear
- Peer pressure (together these equal “intimidation”)
- Consent (Submission)

Consider: What can you do to stop a bully?

- Speak up
- Tell someone in authority
- Fight back
- Get others to support *you*

Understanding the sources and purposes of authority can help your students appreciate that a bully has NO authority! Civics is not just about government but about how we interact with each other in a civil society.

Brainstorm: Why do we need Authority?

Imagine that you wake up one morning and find that there is no longer any authority. All rules, laws, police, courts, teachers, principals and governments have disappeared.

- What problems might arise?
- How would you protect your rights?
- Would you even have any rights?

Critical thinking: Where does the right to exercise authority come from?

Roles—jobs or positions, like your position as a teacher includes authority to keep your classroom safe and quiet enough so that learning can take place or an usher at a movie whose job is to keep people in line

Custom—for example, the usher’s job is reinforced by the custom of first come, first served.

Rules and Laws—the authority for a job or position is often based on laws. Laws give police the authority to arrest you if you commit a crime and a judge the authority to sentence you to prison.

Moral principles—are also a source of authority—whatever religion or none that we might each believe, we all should be following ideas of right and wrong. Moral principles, such as those listed in the “Ten Commandments, (E.g., Thou shall not kill. Thou shall not steal.) or the Golden Rule (Treat others as you would like them to treat you.) are common to most cultures and religions. There is an overlap with custom and laws.

Consent—we agree or consent to give authority to the president of our local organization by voting. AS we’ve noted, consent is the basis for a democratic government.

Abuse of Authority

Even when someone has the authority to tell people what to do, sometimes that authority is abused.

Read the Dr. Seuss book *Yertle the Turtle*, or use this summary:

Yertle the Turtle is King of the pond on the Island of Sala-ma-Sond. He wants to see higher. So he has several turtles climb on each other’s backs so that he can climb on top. Mack, the plain little turtle at the bottom, complains of pains in his back and shoulders. Yertle tells him to be quiet (“I’m King and you’re only a turtle named Mack”) and adds yet more and more turtles, until... Mack burps and all the turtles, including King Yertle, fall down. Yertle is now King of the Mud, and the turtles are FREE “as turtles and, maybe, all creatures should be.”

Questions for discussion:

- Did King Yertle have the authority to act the way he did?
- What was the source of King Yertle’s authority?
- What were the problems on the island of Sala-ma-Sond?
- What can we conclude about King Yertle’s use of his authority?
- How could the turtles protest King Yertle’s abuse of authority?
- How could the problems have been corrected?

What can we learn from Yertle the Turtle?

- Why is it important for limits to be placed on the powers of those in positions of authority?
- Give examples of instances where limits are placed on people in positions of authority?
- Think about our system of government: how are the power of those in positions of authority limited.

- Draft a constitution for Sala-ma-Sond.
- Hold an impeachment trial or court hearing.
- Interview authority figures to identify the source of each person’s authority and the limits placed on their authority. Might King Yertle have been a better ruler if he had been elected? Why?

The American Revolution and abuse of authority.

Now let’s look at a real story—the story of the American Revolution and the creation of the U.S. Constitution.

The Founders basically claimed that Britain was not protecting the natural rights of the colonists, and that the British government was abusing its authority by trying to impose taxes without their consent. The list of 27 complaints against King George III in the Declaration of Independence were offered as proof of the right to rebellion because the British were not protecting the rights of the colonists. The conclusion “...these United Colonies are, and of Right ought to be Free and Independent States” declares independence. So the Declaration of Independence served several purposes: to declare independence, to rally troops and to win foreign allies.

The Federal Convention in 1787 was an effort to organize a method for self-government that would prevent abuse of authority. To prevent an abuse of authority the Founders diffused authority by establishing:

- A system of Federalism with defined powers and limits for the national government and some powers reserved to the states
- Three branches of government, each with separate powers defining the limits of their authority

Critical thinking activity: Abuse of authority today

Have students identify instances of abuse of authority today and brainstorm how such instances might be stopped.