Traditions of the Senate

Senate Decorum

For over 200 years, the United States Senate has held certain traditions and customs that Senators follow in order to work together in Congress. Learn about Senate decorum, or the rules about how Senators behave as they work. Then, use the worksheet to make some family rules.

Words to Know

Decorum: behavior that is respectful, calm, and polite.

Rule: an accepted principle or instruction that states the way things are or should be done, and tells you what you are allowed or are not allowed to do.

Etiquette: the set of rules or customs that control accepted behavior in particular social groups or social situations.

Compromise: an agreement in an argument in which the people involved reduce their demands or change their goals in order to

Thomas Jefferson’s Rule

Have you ever been told to “use polite words” or “wait your turn”? There are many different social rules in our schools, families, and communities that we follow to make sure everyone is treated fairly and with respect. Even the Senate has these rules! Some of the Senate’s rules were written by Thomas Jefferson back in 1801. He addressed issues of decorum, meaning behavior or etiquette, that the Senate still follows today.

Here’s what what Jefferson said:

“No one is to disturb another in his speech by hissing, coughing, spitting, speaking or whispering to another, nor to stand up or interrupt him, nor to pass between the Speaker and the speaking member, nor to go across the house, or walk up and down it, or take books or papers from the table, or write there."

Thomas Jefferson wrote these rules after the Senate had been around for about 12 years. Do you think Jefferson was just thinking of a polite way to work together, or was he possibly responding to issues and problems that were actually taking place?
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Step 1: Read the rules Thomas Jefferson wrote for the Senate. Hint: Replace the word “nor” with “do not” and the rules might make more sense! Think about and discuss why these rules were put in place for the adult Senators.

Step 2: Think about how you interact with other people in your household. For, example:
- Do you share technology devices or spaces in your home? What rules might help you share?
- Do you have conversations with members of your household at meal times? What rules might make for good conversation?
- What traditions could you start that give special roles to members of your household or that help decide how you spend time together?

Step 3: Brainstorm some rules and traditions. Discuss them together with your family and try to find compromises if you disagree.

Step 4: In the space below, write down your new rules. Have each person sign their name to show that they agree to the new rules. Post them in a shared place, like the front of the refrigerator, as a reminder for everyone.

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