

Why Lockdowns Offer the Perfect Opportunity to Teach Kids about Liberty and Government

It's always worthwhile to share the ideas of liberty with young people, but right now, during widespread government lockdowns, it is more important than ever. In some places in the US, individuals are prohibited from inviting friends or family members over to their private homes or, if they are granted that privilege, attendance is capped. In still other places, a person can be fined for not wearing a mask, for violating a travel order, or for refusing to cooperate with government contact tracers. Mandatory COVID-19 vaccination has been suggested. Businesses have been forcibly shut down, despite making creative and often costly adaptations to continue to safely serve their customers. Entire industries are being decimated by diktat.

All of this is done under the guise of a public health “emergency” and all of it is enforceable through government coercion. As economist Friedrich Hayek warned in *Law, Legislation and Liberty*: “‘Emergencies’ have always been the pretext on which the safeguards of individual liberty have been eroded – and once they are suspended it is not difficult for anyone who has assumed emergency powers to see to it that the emergency will persist.”

Now is an ideal time to teach liberty to your children, including why voluntary human action and free markets are superior to government force and intervention—even in, and perhaps especially in, emergency situations.

I respect the parents who have shielded their kids from the true reality and devastation of the government lockdowns. I too tried to make 2020 as normal as possible for my kids. But our children need to know what has happened so that they never, ever let it happen again.

— Kerry McDonald (@kerry_edu) January 2, 2021

Voluntary Human Action Over Government Force

One of the ways I explain libertarian principles to my children is to say that the government officials should have very limited power over citizens. Indeed, our rights precede government, as beautifully articulated in the Declaration of Independence. We are all “created equal” and all of us are born with “certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. That to secure these rights, Governments are

instituted...”

Just as I can’t force my neighbor to wear a mask, close his business, stay in his home, or take a vaccine, the government shouldn’t force its citizens to do these things. We can persuade our neighbors to take certain precautions or to choose certain behaviors. For example, we can share information about why wearing a mask or taking a vaccine are good ideas. We can set certain rules for those who enter our private homes or businesses, asking that they wash their hands, wear a mask, or stay socially distanced. This allows others to decide whether they want to voluntarily abide by our rules on our private property. They can choose not to visit us or shop at our store. Government officials can also try to persuade us. They can provide information and recommendations, but when they issue executive orders and “emergency” mandates under a legal threat of force, they go too far. As John Locke once wrote, “it is one thing to persuade, another to command; one thing to press with arguments, another with penalties.”

Mandates also may not work as well as voluntary action. Some data suggest that, prior to the spring lockdowns, individuals changed their behavior to help reduce viral spread before government mandates were issued.

One of the reasons many libertarians were opposed to lockdowns and government orders from the very beginning is that we believe in consent over coercion. All of us are fallible. We all lack perfect information. We all have our own self-interest at heart. It is precisely because of our humanness that power should be as distributed and decentralized as possible. This should be even *more* true in emergency situations. As Hayek wrote in *The Constitution of Liberty*: “All political theories assume, of course, that most individuals are very ignorant. Those who plead for liberty differ from the rest in that they include among the ignorant themselves as well as the wisest.”

Our leaders shouldn’t be our rulers. This has become increasingly clear through the hypocrisy of politicians and public health officials who violate their own pandemic orders while pursuing their own self-interest. We shouldn’t blame them for their actions; we should simply grant them much less power to control ours.

Free Markets and Innovation

Voluntary action without government force also unleashes human ingenuity and innovation. This is something that young people can readily understand. When people are free to collaborate, discover, and invent, they can create remarkable things that solve problems and contribute to human flourishing. Free people do this spontaneously, pursuing their own interests and talents while satisfying market demand.

In the early days of the pandemic, private labs quickly created coronavirus diagnostic tests, but the federal government prevented these labs from distributing their tests, relying only

on CDC tests that turned out to be defective. Once the federal government removed its ban on private lab tests at the end of February, the free market swiftly and efficiently responded to the huge demand for accurate diagnostic tests.

A similar government regulatory regime prevented promising vaccines from arriving sooner. The Moderna vaccine, that is now being distributed nationwide, was available last winter but the FDA prevented the company from offering “challenge trials” to volunteers that would have expedited the vaccine production process.

The miracle of the market to provide prized products, spontaneously and without central planning, is captured in the little story, “I, Pencil,” written in 1958 by FEE’s founder, Leonard E. Read. In it, Read explains that even something as simple as a pencil is an extraordinary creation, with no single person knowing how to produce it. Instead, generating the lowly pencil involves an assortment of magnificent, unplanned actions by strangers around the world, all engaged in their own type of production to satisfy their own needs and preferences, and in most cases not even knowing that they are contributing to a pencil’s birth. Writing from the perspective of the pencil, Read asserts in his essay: “If you can become aware of the miraculousness which I symbolize, you can help save the freedom mankind is so unhappily losing.” He continues:

“For, if one is aware that these know-hows will naturally, yes, automatically, arrange themselves into creative and productive patterns in response to human necessity and demand— that is, in the absence of governmental or any other coercive master-minding—then one will possess an absolutely essential ingredient for freedom: a faith in free people. Freedom is impossible without this faith.”

A new children’s book helps to bring alive the important story of “I, Pencil” by making it fun and relatable to young people. Written by economist Antonio Saravia and literature professor Clara Mengolini, *What You Can Make With Freedom* is available as a free, downloadable ebook. It emphasizes Read’s assertion that human creativity and progress flourish with freedom. Now is a perfect time to share this story with your kids.

The reality of why we need to deeply understand and actively teach the ideas of liberty and free markets to the rising generation has become very clear to me in the past year, as I’m sure it also has to you. It’s up to parents to do this, as most schools don’t and more communities steadily embrace big government policies that erode personal and economic freedom. Your kids need to hear this message from you. You can help them to choose freedom over force, and to ensure that these lockdowns never, ever happen again.