

# Protesting with Children

by Chazz Lewis

Left, Right, Chicken and Rice! Left, Right, Chicken and Rice!”

I protested with my 3- to 5-year-olds in my Montessori classroom for chicken and rice for lunch, because that was their favorite meal. They helped me brainstorm ideas for the protest. We made phone calls to the principal and cook, we typed a letter together, we made signs, and even made a chant. On the morning of the protest, you could hear us marching down the halls.

“Left, Right, Chicken and Rice! Left, Right, Chicken and Rice!”

The children learned many things from this experience, but most importantly they learned that their voice matters. They learned that they have the power to make things happen when they put in the work. They learned about the process of advocacy.



Chazz Lewis's mission in life is to enjoy the process of becoming the best version of himself and help others do the same. He goes by “Mr.Chazz” and he even has a song to prove it. He is an educational specialist who

“teaches teachers to teach” in a chain

of child development centers. Lewis closely works with 9 different schools, hundreds of teachers and thousands of children. He has trained thousands of teachers in person and virtually, and has also coached 300 people in his community. He earned his master's in executive leadership at American University. Lewis envisions a world where most people wake up every day, enjoying the process of becoming the best versions of themselves. He has over 115,000 followers on Tiktok (@Tickteachtok). He is in the process of writing a book. He is a featured content creator on GetVokl, where he does an interactive podcast every Monday at 7 p.m. Eastern. Subscribe to [getvokl.com/channel/chazz](http://getvokl.com/channel/chazz). You can also find him on Instagram as “MrChazz.” Lewis is creating a service to help parents and teachers with their children at [patreon.com/Mrchazz](http://patreon.com/Mrchazz).

Too often, we judge children by how they obey, and we judge teachers by how much control they have over children. If we see a child disobeying their natural need to move and explore by sitting for long periods of time, we label them the “good” child. If we see a teacher controlling all of their students with precision, we label them a “good” teacher. If we define “good” as obedience, what does that say about our values? What if we valued cooperation and consent over obedience? Do we really want to teach young children to be blindly obedient to authority? I think not.

Here is another way to look at this. If a child obeys their nature to engage in the way that THEY learn, instead of conforming to the system of control, we may refer to them as “spirited.” Spirited children are aware of who they are and focus more on meeting their natural needs than meeting adult expectations. It is best to teach them how to meet their own needs in productive ways.

Unfortunately we tend to be unaware of their needs until they protest. When a baby cries, we become aware of their need to eat or sleep. When a child climbs/runs in the house/classroom, we become aware of their need to be active. Sometimes their needs are ignored and the words they have do not feel effective (if they even have words). In some cases the child may act out physically. This behavior is commonly seen in the form of hitting, running, crying on the floor, and so on. Unfortunately children are often shamed and punished when they protest for their

natural needs. However, their protest is a signal informing us of their natural needs. How we respond is the greatest predictor of what will happen next.

If we want to encourage activism in our youth, we must value their willingness and ability to protest. Instead of telling children, “No back talk,” we could teach children how to respond with disagreement in a thoughtful and respectful way. Too often, we shame children who are not obedient to authority, and then we expect them to speak truth to power against injustice when they get older. We need to give children many opportunities to protest for the things they care about when they are young, so they are well practiced when they are older. When those in positions of authority are not practiced listeners, and those who are disadvantaged are not practiced protesters, a negative outcome is predictable.

Just as children are trying to meet their own need for connection, Black people in America have been trying for centuries to meet the most fundamental need for humans: survival. For generations, I believe, America has been at war with Black people's two most fundamental stages in Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs: physiological needs and safety needs. America has historically used the health care system, housing programs, policing practices, media coverage and the prison system to attack the physiological and safety needs of Black people for centuries.

This has not happened without protest. In a famous 1994 interview, Tupac

Shakur said, “It’s like, you hungry, you reached your level. We asked ten years ago. We was asking with the [Black] Panthers. We was asking with the Civil Rights Movement. We was asking. Those people that asked are dead and in jail. So now what do you think we’re gonna do? Ask?”

Black people in America did continue to ask. One of the most well-known examples in recent history of a Black person asking for basic needs is when Colin Kaepernick kneeled in protest to police brutality. He was shamed, insulted and fired from his job as a result of his nonviolent plea to end police brutality. It is another example of a Black person being punished and their message being ignored as a result of asking. If this is the response to Black people with status when they ask for basic needs, what do you think the response is for those who do not have status?

Another factor that made the recent uprisings in Minnesota and nationwide predictable is the steady racial trauma that Black people experience in America. When a person is constantly seeing people who look like them being mistreated and murdered without justice, it creates trauma that is, quite literally, physically painful. As Dan Siegel wrote in “Mindsight,” “Grappling with loss, struggling with disconnection and despair, fills us with a sense of anguish and actual pain. Indeed, the parts of our brain that process physical pain overlap with the neural centers that record social ruptures and rejection.”

When a Black person repeatedly sees innocent Black men and women being killed during traffic stops, police cars, uniforms or flashing lights may start to trigger trauma. Black parents give their children “The Talk” before they hit puberty, in hopes that they will see another birthday.

If you read the last sentence and thought I was referring to the birds and the bees, then you have privilege that allows you to disregard this trauma. That does not make you a bad person. That is the nature of privilege. Because of the nature of privilege, it is equally predictable that the trauma, murder and mistreatment of Black people in America would go unnoticed in many non-Black groups or communities. When people are trying to meet a physiological or safety need and they are constantly ignored or shamed, a physical response should not surprise us.

Where does this leave us as early childhood educators? There are some practical steps we can take now, in order to empower activism and an empathetic mindset in our children.

1. Teach older children how to bring thoughtful arguments and a conclusion to a debate or conversation, without attacking their “opponent.”
2. Teach younger children how to ask for the things they want and then listen to them when they ask.
3. Teach children a variety of ways they can protest and advocate for the things they care about.
4. Teach children how to genuinely listen to each other.
5. Teach children how to compromise.

I urge you to allow your children to protest. Show them the value, importance and joy that make up advocacy for something they believe in. This does not mean that they will get their way every single time, but hear them out and come to a compromise when it is reasonable—especially if they are using the skills you taught them. Do we not want to teach our children that their voice matters? Do we not want to teach children that they have the power to

make change? Do we not want to give children the tools to make the world a better place?

What will happen if we teach children how to advocate for themselves and truly listen to each other? Disadvantaged groups will be heard. Policymakers will have constructive conversations instead of combative conversations. Social media will be filled with empathy, information and productive conversations. Bullies will be disempowered by their peers, who will speak up when they see someone being treated unfairly. Instead of bottling emotions until they explode in a way that harms others, the children of tomorrow will be able to navigate their emotions and seek help if they need it. A better tomorrow is on the other side of adults who encourage children to protest. Where can we start? Start with what they care about. It can be as simple as chicken and rice.

