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WHY ARE WE HERE?

Grades: 4 through 10

Time: 15-30 minutes

Materials: Computer/data projector & internet connection OR a copy of the DVDs “Why Are We Here?” and “The Power of One” (see below);

Relevant Subjects: Social Studies, Language Arts, and Science

Preparation: Have students’ chairs arranged in a U formation with you at the open end of the U.

1. Ask students to take a couple of minutes to think about how they would respond to the following question: “Why are WE here on Earth?” (Assure them that there is no right or wrong answer and that all answers/perspectives will be accepted and honored. Depending on the age of the students, ground rules might need to be in place prior to this discussion).
2. Invite students to share their thoughts, using the WHIP method (students start at one end of the “U” and go quickly to the other end, understanding that they can “pass” if they don’t choose to share). Avoid sharing your own views on this question so that you don’t influence the students’ thinking.
3. Show the 90 second PSA “Why Are We Here?” (<http://www.oneearth.org>) and then ask students to respond to the viewpoints presented in the PSA. Ask them to respond to the narrator’s question: **“Could life on this planet survive without us?”**
4. After having students share their thoughts about the PSA and its viewpoints, ask students to think about what kinds of problems we face today on this planet (this is especially important if you find that some students think that the plants and animals on Earth could not survive without the human species). Ask students to each name one problem, again using the WHIP method. (Examples might include crime, war, poverty, global warming, species extinction, slavery, etc., although some students might mention “natural disasters,” such as tsunamis, earthquakes, etc.)

5. Ask students “Who has caused the majority of problems which exist today on Earth?” (Humans.) “Who did the narrator in the film say has the power to protect the entire planet and all species, including ourselves?” (Us/humans.)
6. Lead a brief discussion about how, although some of these problems seem overwhelming, we all have the power to do something positive. Show “The Power of One” (<http://www.oneearth.org>). Be ready to discuss the issues presented in the film: school desegregation, the fall of the Berlin wall, Tiananmen Square, Gandhi, Mother Teresa, etc.
7. Ask students to take a moment to reflect and think about one person they know in their own lives who has made a difference, and then invite students to share their thoughts.
8. Ask students to choose one of the problems of the world named earlier and to think of something they can do in their own lives to help solve that problem. (You may wish to do this in small groups. Depending on the age of your students, you may want to help them brainstorm.)

Activity by Valerie Belt (HECP Graduate)