# The Birmingham Children’s March

**Lesson By:** Lisa Lindstrom

**Grade Level/ Subject Areas:** 8th Grade Humanities

**Class Size:** 24

**Time/Duration of Lesson:** 90 minutes

**Guiding Questions:**

How did young people in Birmingham, Alabama in 1963 use nonviolence to take a stand against racial injustice and succeed in changing the world around them?

What was behind the decision to allow children to lead the marches of May 2 and May 3, 1963 in Birmingham, a city rife with racial tensions?

**Lesson Abstract:**

In Birmingham in 1963, the civil rights movement had lost steam in a climate of fear. A controversial decision was made by movement leaders to allow an army of school age youth to march without a permit and face jail to dramatize the cause. In this lesson, students will explore the significance of that risky decision and examine the story of those courageous young activists who accomplished what adults had been unable to.

**Lesson Content:**

Sometimes it is the young who are most able to take on the greatest risks because they have not yet taken on responsibilities that proscribe caution. Such was the case in Birmingham in 1963 during the height of the Civil Rights Movement.

Birmingham was, according to Martin Luther King, the most segregated city in America “presided over by a governor-George Wallace- whose inauguration vow had been a pledge of ‘segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever!’” (Carson, p.173) It was also considered at the time to be one of the most violent cities in the country and had been given the nickname “Bombingham”. 17 bombings of African-American churches and homes had taken place between 1957 and 1963 and were never solved. Police Commissioner Eugene “Bull” Connor, who had served 7 consecutive terms by 1963, was a member of the KKK and prided himself on knowing how to keep the “Negro” “in his place”.(Carson, p. 172) With the police unofficially affiliated with the KKK, brutality against the African-American community was rampant, and so was fear. The climate was such that even those “white citizens who privately deplored the maltreatment of Negroes…remained publicly silent”. (Carson, p. 173) After the Freedom Riders had been assaulted and almost beaten to death by raging mobs with the aid and tacit approval of City police officers and government officials in 1961, people knew what the consequences of overt action against segregation might be.

In 1963, Birmingham’s Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth, already a long time leader of the civil rights movement, invited Martin Luther King Jr. to join him in organizing Project C. C was for
confrontation. Shuttlesworth had already been jailed 8 times. His church had been bombed. His wife had been stabbed and he himself chain-whipped by a mob for attempting to enroll his children in an all white school. Nonetheless, he, along with King and many other movement leaders, was a committed practitioner of nonviolence. Inspired by Mahatma Gandhi and his use of nonviolent civic resistance to effect social change in India, civil rights activists throughout the American South had committed themselves courageously to nonviolent social revolution. Some victories had been achieved, such as the integration of buses in Montgomery. But as the movement gained momentum, so did the violence used to quell it.

When King and Shuttlesworth held mass meetings in Birmingham, they roused the passions of those who attended, but they were not able to get volunteers to commit to protests that might land them in jail. Adults were fearful because they knew they could lose their jobs, or maybe even their lives. As a result, the movement reached a kind of paralysis. Something decisive had to be done.

Fellow activist James Bevel had joined the nonviolent civil rights movement when he was a student and participated in the lunch counter sit ins in Nashville. He and many other young people had been trained before the sit ins in the philosophy and techniques of nonviolence under the guidance of Reverand Jim Lawson, who had himself studied Gandhi in India. The success the students were able to achieve through using these strategies in Nashville inspired Bevel to recruit, organize and train young people throughout the South in approaches to nonviolent direct action. He and his wife, Diane Nash, who had also been a leader in the Nashville student movement, were in Birmingham recruiting young volunteers when King arrived to help Shuttlesworth. Like Lawson before them, Bevel and Nash were able to engage student leaders from the schools they contacted and these students, in turn, spread the word. “Within two weeks, the workshops had become a contagion.” (Branch, p.752”) Each day more and more students showed up at the nonviolence training sessions and each day the new recruits got younger.

Bevel believed that the best hope for an effective action against racial injustice and violence in Birmingham rested with the youth and he suggested to King that they let an army of young people march en masse to City Hall to talk to the Mayor about segregation. Although other movement colleagues were disturbed by this idea because they knew the marchers were likely to land in jail, Bevel argued that any child old enough to go to church was old enough to march to jail. In the end, he convinced King that the movement needed something dramatic to be done and the children were not too young to choose to do it. King himself would later describe the eagerness, exuberance, creativity, and discipline of the young people as they trained, and admit, “…the introduction of Birmingham’s children into the campaign was one of the wisest moves we made.” (Carson, p. 206).

Because Shuttlesworth’s application for a permit for the march was denied a few days before the event, students had to communicate with each other through secret word of mouth networks. The event was referred to as D Day in their undercover messages. When local d.j. Shelley “The Playboy” Stewart rallied them, talking over the radio about D Day and the “big party” coming up, his young listeners heard him loud and clear.
They went to school on Thursday, May 2, knowing someone would come and get them. At about 11 a.m., a man appeared with a sign that said, “It’s time” and students poured out of their classes to head over to the 16th Street Baptist Church. They were joined along the way by groups of students from other parts of the City, some of whom had walked nearly 20 miles to be part of the demonstration.

Inside the Church, Shuttlesworth told the students, “It’s going to be a silent demonstration. No songs. No slogans. No replies to obscenities….However, when you’re arrested, sing your hearts out.” (Sapp, p. 15) Outside, the police were ready with paddy wagons. They had been instructed by Connor to refrain from violence, but to arrest all the protestors as swiftly as possible.

At 1 p.m., 50 teenagers emerged from the front door. They sang loudly as the policemen escorted them to the paddy wagons. Then another 50 emerged and another and another until the police were completely outnumbered by the young people and had to call for additional paddy wagons. Some of the officers tried to convince the youngest to leave the march, but the children said they knew what they were doing. By 4 pm, close to 1,000 protestors, some as young as 4 years old, had been arrested and sent to jail.

Jail cells built for 8 were packed with as many as 75 students. Children were meant to sleep shoulder to shoulder on the concrete floors, but they stayed up and sang to each other all through the night.

On May 3, over a 1,000 more young people arrived at the Church prepared to march. King told their frightened parents, “Don’t worry about your children. They are going to be all right. Don’t hold them back if they want to go to jail for they are doing a job for all of America and all of mankind.” (Carson, McEvoy Spero, & Mohnot, p. 84)

The police were ready again too. This time, Conner did not want arrests since there was no more room in the jails. He instead he gave his officers high-pressure water hoses to use to disperse the protestors. Of the first 60 young people out of the church, 10 stood their ground singing “Freedom” to the tune of “Amen” as hoses were turned on them. Some slid as far as 20 feet under the impact, while children continued to march out of the Church. Because there were not enough hoses for all the protesters, police officers began to round up students and send them on school buses to make-shift jails. Connor now sent in eight units of attack dogs. The crowd was too thick for those who wanted to flee to even be able to do so. Three teenagers were bit by dogs. 1,233 were arrested. The young people held to the disciplines they had practiced and the commitments they had made to not respond with violence when violence was perpetrated against them. This time the nation’s media caught it all and people from all over the world, including President Kennedy were horrified. Sympathetic demonstrations were triggered across the country.

The march lasted two more days. Reporters, activists, and celebrities flooded the city and joined the young volunteers who continued to be hosed and arrested. When Kennedy told King to stop using children, Bevel went directly to the children and told them to prepare to take to the highways to march to D.C. to question the President about segregation. By May 10, a Kennedy
advisor had helped the movement leaders and the business community of Birmingham had come to an agreement. All jailed protestors were released and pledges to end segregation and discriminatory hiring practices were made in exchange for a promise that demonstrations and protests would be halted.

Some Birmingham citizens, angry with the settlement, responded by bombing King’s brother’s home and making an attempt, which was foiled in court, to expel all students involved in the march. A major breakthrough had been made, however, which couldn’t be reversed. The courage of the young activists had brought attention to a national injustice so shameful that, once revealed, demanded remedy. The result was the passage of the Civil Rights Act in 1964.

New York State Content Standards: (Social Studies)
1.3 Students will study about the major social, political, economic, cultural and religious developments in US history and the important roles and contributions of individuals and groups.
1.4d. Students will describe historic events through the eyes and experiences of those who were there.

Materials Needed:
Paper and pencils
Video: Mighty Times: The Children’s March
Handouts: Martin Luther King’s Description of Birmingham in the 1960’s

Suggested Teaching Activities.

1. As a Do Now, have students write one sentence answering the question “What is injustice?” They should then take ten minutes to freewrite about injustices they have experienced or are experiencing in their own lives.

2. Hand out copies of Martin Luther King’s description of Birmingham in the 1960’s (King, p. 171-173). Have the students read it and then ask them what they think King means by calling Birmingham a “police state”’. Ask them what else they know about the injustices and hardships African-Americans had to live with in the American South during the 1950’s and 1960’s. If the term does not come up in their discussion, ask if anyone knows a definition for the word “segregation”.

3. Show the class the documentary Mighty Times: The Children’s March. After the film, ask the class whether or not they think Martin Luther King was irresponsible to allow young students to walk into a situation he knew might be dangerous. What do they understand about his reasoning? How old is old enough to take a stand which may involve danger? Why were the children told not to fight back physically or verbally if they were attacked, except to sing their hearts out? Do they think the marchers would have gained the sympathy and support of the nation if they had been violent?

4. Ask the class to answer the following questions in writing: 1) If you were living in Birmingham at the time of the Children’s March, would you have participated? Why?
2) If you had an elementary school age sister or brother who wanted to join the march, would you let them?

5. Students will read and listen to first person accounts of young people who participated in the Birmingham Children’s marches.

6. Student will look at photographs of the children’s crusade and write a first person narrative from the point of view of a young person in one of the photographs. The story they tell should have a beginning, middle and end. If they are stuck, have them start with “I’ll never forget the moment when….”

7. If there is time for a larger interdisciplinary project in conjunction with their art class, students could write stories based on the Children’s Crusade and use these to produce illustrated books for younger children. Once completed, these books could be presented to children at a local elementary school as a gesture of unity across age levels and a celebration of the power young people can have to change the world.

Bibliography:


Websites:
- [www.tolerance.org/teach](http://www.tolerance.org/teach)
- [www.kinginstitute.info](http://www.kinginstitute.info)
- [www.bcri.org](http://www.bcri.org)
- [www.crmvet.org](http://www.crmvet.org)
- [http://southernstudies.org/](http://southernstudies.org/)
- [http://www.encyclopediaofalabama.org](http://www.encyclopediaofalabama.org)
- [http://www.clubtnt.org/childrens_march_resources.htm](http://www.clubtnt.org/childrens_march_resources.htm)

Videos: