



What Politics Can Teach Our Kids

by Christa Melnyk Hines

From yelling newsroom pundits and vigorous dinner party debates to divisive Facebook exchanges, tis' the season when there's virtually no escape from politics. Your kids may come home with questions about opinions overheard at school or elsewhere. From a parenting perspective, the democratic process -- and political shenanigans -- provides plenty of fodder for teaching kids lessons in independent thinking, respectful discourse, values and civics.

Nurture independent thinkers.

Take advantage of the political process to help your children learn to think for themselves. Ask your children open-ended questions to hear their point of views.

"Find out what they're thinking. What you want to do is stimulate their analytic, natural human curiosity," says Dr. Fran Walfish, a child and family psychotherapist and author of *The Self Aware Parent: Resolving Conflict and Building a Better Bond with Your Child*.

Watch the speeches and debates together. Ask your child who he thinks is telling the truth based on body language or who seems more respectful during a debate.

Whether you agree or not, ask her: "Why do you feel that way? How would you solve the problem?" Share your opinions with your children by prefacing your comments with "I feel" or "I think" and ask questions like: "I wonder how he'll make that happen? What do you think? How would you make it fair if you were president?"

Avoid anger. As hard as it may be, try to refrain from making judgmental comments or calling candidates with whom you disagree colorful names.

"Shouting at the TV, or at one another, presents a very negative example of responding to conflicting opinions," says Mary Jane McKittrick, author of the Boomer and Halley children's series (written for ages 4 to 8), including the Mom's Choice award-

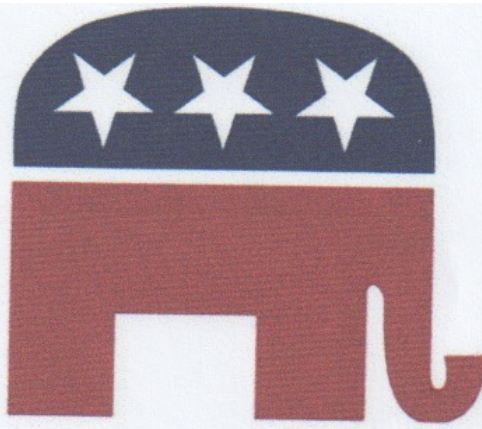
winning book *Boomer and Halley: Election Day*.

Through humor and embedded life lessons, McKittrick's books tell stories of families and communities resolving difficult challenges by working together.

Model respectful dialogue. Not all parents agree on politics, but what matters is how they discuss the issues in front of their children without raising a child's anxiety. Make ground rules with your spouse before engaging in the discussion: No interrupting, take turns listening and no put-downs, insults or blaming. And, if you come to an impasse, agree to disagree.

"I would love for parents to respect each others point of views. I would also hope that they will respect their children's point of view," Walfish says. "Be able to tolerate differences. We still love each other, and I can tolerate you having powerfully different feelings than mine."

If you find yourself getting drawn



into a heated argument around the holiday table with loved ones, keep your cool and suggest you pick up the conversation at another time.

Play nice -- in politics?! Political rhetoric may be difficult for your child to comprehend, but behavior in politics can often parallel real-life situations your child can relate to about how we should treat each other and who we can trust.

"Here we are: two political figures. They're going to say their beliefs right out front, but wouldn't it be nice if that was all they were doing," Walfish says. "Instead what they're doing is using put-downs, criticisms, (and are) willing to go forward at all costs to win."

Perhaps the vindictive nature of politics will never change, but parents can use examples of how politicians conduct themselves to teach values about what it means to win honorably, treat others with respect and be a trustworthy friend. For example, on the playground, a child might promise your child that he can have the ball next, but then passes the ball to an ally or continues to hog the ball. Even a young child understands that the other child's actions are unfair.

"A good friend is someone who treats you right all of the time. And that's what we're looking for in politics," Walfish says. "And a lot of times people will say anything to get what they want, which is to win. Our job is to try to figure out whose telling the truth, whose going to deliver on the goods."

Civics 101. Talk to your kids about the democratic process. Take your child to the voting booth and follow the results on election night together to help her see the election process in action and the connection between your vote and why it matters.

Explain that politicians are public servants and they usually enter the political process in an attempt to make a difference in the lives of citizens.

"Parents can offer examples from their lives to illustrate giving to others as a positive way to explain politics," McKittrick says. "After all, politics exist in our families, communities, schools and workplaces -- not just at the ballot box."

Freelance journalist Christa Melnyk Hines, resides with her opinionated family, which includes her husband, two rambunctious boys and a playful yellow dog.



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