

Being There for Your Kids in All of Life's Seasons

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Sarah here. Today is Election Day here in the U.S. Regardless of your political views, party affiliation or the candidates you support, the political “season” tends to be filled with tension, conflict and uncertainty. It also tends to be a season in which strong emotions and opinions are voiced. As a parent, hopefully you have strategies for weathering the storm of the political season. Whether we think kids *should* know about politics or not, they *are* aware of the increased tension that comes with the political season. Even young kids have some level of awareness of politics- they take in what they see and hear from the people around them, from political ads and campaign posters. Rather than ignoring this truth, let’s talk about what you can do to help your family weather the political season.

Do monitor and limit your kids’ exposure to the news. If your family watches the news, listens to news radio or discusses politics, news stories or current events at mealtimes, be aware of what your child is seeing and hearing. Many news stories contain images or information that aren’t appropriate for younger viewers. And, while adults should have a broader understanding of issues, kids are consuming information without much history, context or background, which can contribute to misunderstandings, confusion and stress. Because of this, if the news and politics are important in your household, it may be useful to identify some age-appropriate news sources for your family. Various news outlets and museums have youth-oriented websites

containing stories about current events and politics. For example, Scholastic has a civics section of their website with stories that feature kid reporters.

Do teach your kids to be informed consumers of information. Even adults can struggle to tell fact from fiction, especially when it comes to information from social media. Teach your kids to identify and evaluate the sources of information. You don't believe everything you hear, right? Think about political ads- they always tell a story about a candidate or an issue. It's important to know who paid for the ad and whether a candidate approved the message contained in the ad. Just because something is in print or on TV (or on the Internet) doesn't mean it's true.

To this end, help your kids look for the fine print. Not sure what to tell them? It depends on their age, but at a basic level, even young kids understand the idea that people have ideas, preferences and beliefs, which may be reflected in what people say and do. If your kids are a little older, you can give them a little more detail.

Need a political ad funding refresher? Political Action Committees (PACs) may be established by corporations, labor unions, membership organizations or trade associations. They raise and spend money on elections, candidates or political parties. Super PACs also raise and spend money on elections, but they can't donate directly to candidates or parties.

When you and your kids see or hear a political ad, the information about who paid for the ad will be in the fine print (at the bottom of the page or the end of the message). Do your kids need to know the ins and outs of PACs and Super PACs? Nope. And neither do you. But it is helpful for your kids to understand that ads are paid for by specific groups of people with particular views who care about certain issues. This can help teach your kids about "spin" and encourage them to take information in ads with a grain of salt until they do their own research.

A helpful analogy to use is looking at things through sunglasses. The world looks a bit different when you're wearing sunglasses and the exact way you see things depends on the color of your

lenses. If you have amber-colored lenses, you won't see the world exactly like someone with grey lenses. If you really want to take the conversation to the next level, you can talk with your kids about how we all have ideas and beliefs and views that color the way we see the world. That isn't a bad thing. Our perception powerfully impacts our experience and vice versa.



Let's take this idea of being an informed consumer out of the world of advertising and into the real world. Let's say your kid comes home and tells you that a friend said a particular candidate was stupid or a liar. Rather than laughing it off, getting irate or dismissing it, use this as an opportunity to talk with your kids about information sources and credibility. Wonder with your child about why their friend said that. Does it seem likely that their friend has independent thoughts about political candidates? Or is it more likely that their friend got these ideas from someone else? If your child is young, their friend probably picked up on comments made by a relative (older sibling, parent, grandparent, etc.). You could also talk with your child about whether their friend actually backed up their opinion with any supporting information. Again, if you have a young child, that's less likely. If you have a middle or high school student, however, your child's friend may have cited a current event, a story they read or a social media post. If that's the case, you can help your child do some fact checking so they can come up with their own views about the candidate in question and about their friend's comments.

Do take your child's questions, concerns, comments and ideas about politics seriously. In previous years, I've talked with patients about mock presidential elections, politically charged class debates, student-driven protests and many informal situations that have come up. I've



helped patients work on sportsmanship and grace when their candidates won or lost. I've helped them cope with the fallout that arises when their "political views" do not align with those of their peers. I've problem solved with patients about how to manage discord and social situations that have come up post-election. I've also worked with older patients struggling with the fact that they've developed their own ideas about politics, government, social issues and the world, which differ from their parents' views.

I encourage my patients to be informed consumers of information, to be thoughtful in making decisions and to be able to articulate their views. I know that I am in a somewhat unique situation- the nature of my work requires me to put aside my own personal and political views. It's true that I don't always agree with the politics of my patients and their families. It's also true that I value the role that I have in their lives and I am committed to helping them discover their own views and take steps toward doing things that matter to them.

As a parent, I know that *you* value your role in your kids' lives and *you're* also committed to helping them become the best versions of themselves. Just remember that having kids isn't about creating carbon copies of ourselves. It's about raising independent, productive, successful members of society. So, rather than talking *at* your kids about politics or avoiding talking about politics altogether, listen, pay attention and see if politics are on your kids' radar. If your kids are having politically relevant experiences in the world, make it your business to know about it. That way you can support them and help shape the conversation into something useful for them.

Your kids may have worries about how things will go in the election or after the election. They may have disagreements with friends about candidates or the issues. Listen, validate their feelings and concerns and help them figure out how to deal with the problems that arise. You can also talk with them about the importance of grace and good sportsmanship in the democratic process.



Show your kids what it's like to have civil discourse. Create a space in which they can talk openly with you, can respectfully disagree without fear of retribution and can share their thoughts and views about issues and candidates. It's okay for you to ask them questions- just be mindful of your intention and tone, as you don't want your kids to feel criticized or attacked. It's also okay for you to share your own thoughts and feelings, but don't overdo it. You're their parent- not their peer. You are in a position of power and authority, so be thoughtful in what and how much you share with your kids. After all, everyone is entitled to their own opinion and it's important that your kids develop their own views. And remember- you're allowed to get fired up and have your own thoughts and feelings about the outcome of this or any other election. Just make sure to direct any venting to your social supports- not to your kids.

You can find Scholastic's election coverage at:

<https://classroommagazines.scholastic.com/election.html>