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Election 2008

Talking to your kids about politics

Christine Bernier Lienke

What You Can Do to Help Children Understand the 2008 Election

Dr. Ronnee Schreiber, a professor of political science at San Diego State University and mother of two, offers the following advice when talking political issues with your children:

needed to learn more about the upcoming election and its players. In November, San Diego parents will be heading to the polls, some with kids in tow, but how much do your children know about the process? Now that the 2008

presidential election is upon us, our children's arsenal of questions will include potentially complicated questions about the upcoming election. Here's what you can do to educate your children about today's political landscape and the voting process:

Educate your kids about politics. It's never too early!

Schreiber suggests speaking in age appropriate language, but warns against

"dumbing things down." This election offers the perfect opportunity

My husband and I have differing, and quite strong, opinions as to which candidate should be elected president this November. Recently we joked that we never disagree, but our daughter corrected us.

"The only time you argue is when you disagree with Dad about him voting for cocaine!" Stunned, we quickly realized she meant McCain.

This alarming statement made me realize two important things: My daughter needed to stop watching the television show "Cops" with my husband and, maybe most importantly, she

These Websites offer a wealth of information for children, parents and teachers including information on political platforms, the voting process and the candidates.

KidsVotingUSA
www.kidsvotingusa.org

Take Your Kids 2 Vote
www.takeyourkids2vote.org

Time for Kids
www.timeforkids.com/TFK/kids

Democratic Party
www.democrats.org

Independent American Party
www.usiap.org

Republican National Committee
www.rnc.org

to talk with your child about gender politics, race relations and the role the media plays in an election.

Use kid-friendly resources to illuminate the issues. Movies such as "Kit Kittredge: An American Girl," set during the Great Depression, help them better understand social issues and how government plays a part in our lives. Websites like KidsVotingUSA.org and TakeYourKids2Vote.org are packed with information, ideas and games geared to educating children about the political process.

Consider sharing your ideals with your kids. Let kids know how you feel about political issues. At some point they may challenge you on your views, but Schreiber recommends allowing open dialogue, no matter what their views.

Three biographical children's books were released this fall featuring each of the presidential candidates, Barack Obama and John McCain, as well as former presidential candidate, Hillary Rodham Clinton. All are history makers in their own right: Clinton, who came incredibly close to being the first female presidential nominee, Obama the first African-American presidential nominee and McCain, who would be the oldest person ever inaugurated as president if he were elected.

Barack Obama:
Son of Promise, Child of Hope,
Nikki Grimes (2008, Simon &
Schuster Children's Publishing)
Ages 5-10

Hillary Rodham Clinton:
Dreams Taking Flight,
Kathleen Krull (2008, Simon &
Schuster Children's Publishing)
Ages 5-10

My Dad, John McCain,
Meghan McCain (2008, Aladdin)
Ages 5-10

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Educate yourself about the candidates.

To share your views with your children in an educated fashion, you should first become familiar with the candidates and their platforms. It's important to know each candidate's platform, even those for whom you don't intend to vote.

Keep up with the news and start a

discussion at dinner. Listen to talk radio, browse kid-friendly current events Websites or read a brief newspaper or magazine article to your child about a concept they can grasp pertaining to the election, then discuss it as a family over dinner.

Watch the presidential debates together

on television. Not all children will have the patience to sit through an entire debate, nor will they want to discuss the outcome in great detail. Encouraging them to watch the beginning of the debate allows them to put a face to a name and an opportunity to hear the candidates, even if it is for only a short time.

Don't forget about campaign

advertising. Schreiber recommends developing a healthy level of cynicism and sharing that with kids regarding campaign ads that might portray candidates in a negative light.

Take your kids to the polls.

Elementary-aged children, in particular, enjoy any outing and will wear your "I Voted" sticker as a badge of honor. Simply allowing them to witness the election process will give them a comfort level when they're old enough to vote.

College-age students.

If your child is headed to the polls for the first time, sit down and talk about specifics of the election and the importance of their vote. If possible, go to the polls together and no matter how they choose to vote, celebrate the fact that they did an honorable thing by voting.

"If you familiarize children and use the language with them early on about the political process, it's less daunting to them," Schreiber says. "Kids really understand that government structures

and institutions are important in our lives."

How Your Child's School Can Promote Election Education

Kids Voting USA's (KVUSA) mission is to assist elementary-aged children in becoming educated, engaged voters. While vacationing together in the late 1980s, the founders of KVUSA were in Costa Rica, a country where voter turnout reaches upwards of 90 percent. They soon learned this high voter turnout was attributed to the fact that most Costa Rican adults bring their children to the polls, and subsequently, they brought this idea back to the States.

KVUSA's educational programming is designed to work in conjunction with social studies curriculum for grades K-12. Headquartered in Washington, D.C., KVUSA has 50 affiliate locations in 27 states having helped to educate thousands of children on the voting process. In many of its affiliate locations, KVUSA works in conjunction with election officials to offer a ballot for children at the polls.

"The fundamental premise was to take the kids to the polls with you to give them something to do," said John Barse, CEO of Kids Voting USA. "The underlying premise being that voting is a habit."

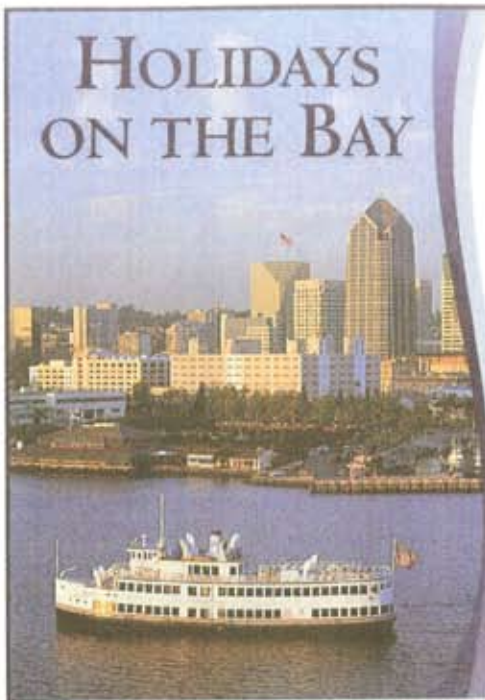
In areas where KVUSA programs were actively used in schools, voter turnout increased among 18-year-olds who were exposed to the program as children. Interestingly, voter turnout among adults also increased in those areas.

In the end, educating your child about politics can only strengthen their constitution to vote and foster their independent political views.

In my home, two things are for certain, my husband will never vote for cocaine, and my daughter now knows much more about each history-making candidate, including McCain. ♦

Christine Bernier Lienke is a freelance writer and a mother of two vibrant, inquisitive and politically-engaged children. She is fielding their frequent questions about the presidential election.

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