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Working Dad: Don't be afraid to talk politics with your kids

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Parents worry about talking to their kids about sex, drugs and drinking, but this fall the hottest topic may be politics.

Much of the nation is consumed by arguably the most exciting presidential election in decades, and that interest is creating opportunities for kids to argue with their parents about something other than curfews.

Family and politics, though, are not always a simple marriage. Children understand part but not all of the political game. Grade schoolers, for example, may be ready for snippets of campaign speeches, but not the talking and often shouting heads of cable news, the experts say.

David Domke serves as his 6-year-old son's political filter. They went to a caucus and watched a few speeches together. The University of Washington professor gives his son select articles, but also shields him from the 24-hour media frenzy.

"I want him to recognize how important this is. At the same time, I don't want him to be consumed by that because it's a big person's responsibility," said Domke, who teaches politics and communications. "I want him to see the good and value of being engaged in politics."

Unfortunately, too many young people are not engaged at all, partly because not enough families talk about it, argues William Damon, author of "The Path to Purpose: Helping Our Children Find Their Calling in Life."

"There are a whole lot of young people these days (and) it doesn't mean anything to them to be a citizen," said Damon, a professor of education at Stanford University. "We have evolved into a lightweight culture."

Still, this presidential campaign offers parents and their kids a chance to get serious about their democracy. The Finkbeiner family, for example, is a house divided, but in no danger of falling.

Mom is a Democrat, Dad is a Republican and their 12-year-old son, Connor, slapped McCain and Obama bumper stickers on his bedroom door. In their Kirkland home they keep the peace by talking a lot about politics, everything from the historic breakthroughs of women during this campaign to family-leave policies.

"If you are feeling angry about what politicians say, you have to be angry at the policies and not say that person (Democrat or Republican) is a bad person," said Kristin Rowe-Finkbeiner, Seattle-area-based leader of the parents-rights group Moms Rising. "We are more likely to fight about what movie to see."

Of course, there is a risk of giving kids too much politics.

"What we have seen before is sometimes in these experiences kids are not able to separate when what their parents desire doesn't come to be," UW's Domke said. "The child takes it far more seriously and is confused by that."

Preschoolers are simply not ready for "Hardball" or "Countdown." They are largely concrete thinkers looking for basic answers, while teenagers expect to be heard, the NYU Child Study Center reported in its paper "Talking to Kids About Politics (Elephants, Donkeys and the Media, Oh My!)." (Check out the paper at aboutourkids.org for guidance by age group.)

Sometimes those teenagers teach their parents.

This past spring Kristina Hagman found her teenage daughter watching YouTube clips of Democratic presidential nominee Barack Obama in her bedroom. So Hagman sat down on her daughter's bed and they watched his speeches together and wound up crying.

"My daughter is the one who turned me on to Obama speeches," said Hagman, 50, an artist who is active in politics.

Whatever your political persuasion, this year's presidential election is an opportunity to discuss your values with your children, says Mark Smith, associate professor of political science at the UW. But the more you open your children's eyes, the greater your responsibility to explain what they see, the father of two added.

Parents "can absolutely use it to pass on their values and beliefs, to say who they stand for and explain why," said Smith, who has two daughters.

It helps if you explain how politics shapes their lives by helping to determine the amount of money their school has, tests they take, and how they see their doctor, experts suggest.

Whether you plan to vote Republican or Democrat, you also can give democracy a boost by taking your kids to the polls on Nov. 4, or explaining your mail-in ballot.

"You show them how important it is that you took that time out of your day, and they get the stickers," said Samantha Cleaver, a former teacher who has written about kids and politics.

One of the most important steps is simply to ask your children for their opinions, and then listen to their answers, said Stanford's Damon.

Not enough families talk politics around the kitchen table, Damon says, and that erodes the spirit of public service. Fewer than 1 in 100 young people Damon surveyed had any aspiration to public service.

"Get the kid to think about the possibility," Damon said.

With three presidential debates and one vice presidential contest in the next month there will be plenty of time to get the kids thinking and talking.

"I want him to understand the importance of voting and maybe just being part of the public conversation," UW's Domke said of his son. "But I don't want him to see his future as in any way contingent upon this."

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zoom Joshua Trujillo / P-I
Kristina Hagman, far left, poses with daughter Nora Masler, 12, husband Daniel Masler and daughter Kaya Masler, 16, in their Seattle home.