

Helping children understand elections

During election season, it's hard to avoid the barrage of information about and advertising related to candidates and current issues. From signs and billboards to commercials, debates, radio spots and Internet banners, the election is all around us and our families. Children are very aware of approaching elections.

In many schools, elections are used as subject matter for social studies classes so that children can become aware of what our democratic system of government looks like in action. While children can't cast ballots to decide who their leaders will be, many schools hold "mock elections" to help students understand what this process is like. Mock elections might even include students campaigning for candidates of their choice.

Understanding elections

Children, especially when they are young, feel most secure when the adults around them seem to agree with each other on important matters. They feel a sense of uneasiness when they know that people who care about them are in conflict with one another, especially when each point of view is put forth passionately. Children may wonder, "Who's right about this?" or, "What am I supposed to believe?"

But voices articulating disagreement and even conflict are a very real part of campaigns, and current issues naturally find their way into everyday conversation. Children overhear parents talking with friends or one another, see an adult's reaction to a commercial, or see a teacher's bumper sticker in the parking lot.

Election Discussion Tips

- Tell children that we are called to bring our faith and principles into the public square. Our Catholic faith is at the core of our views about right and wrong and the good of humankind. We must do our part to make our community and world a better place by working for the common good.

- Let children know that as Catholics, we do not have allegiance to a particular person or party, but to a set of principles that relate to the truths we profess and believe. These principles act as guides when we are evaluating a candidate or party platform in light of our faith.

- Help children grasp that everyone sees life and the world a little differently. Because each of us is a unique individual, we all have our own perspectives, and sometimes what we feel strongly about isn't as important to someone else. This doesn't mean that all views are equal, or that the only truth is one's personal truth. As Catholics, we do not, and cannot, believe that truth is relative. We do accept, however, that there are many people who disagree with our Catholic perspective. Even though we disagree, we still must be respectful.

- Be charitable and respectful in the example you set for children. Adults calling someone names or otherwise expressing hostility because of differing political views can be confusing for children.

- Reassure children that they are safe and secure, and that our nation is in God's hands. Modern campaign advertising can be so sensationalistic that children might believe electing a certain candidate would spell certain doom for our country. Regardless of who is elected, we are called to do our part and trust in God.

Because we live in a democratic nation, we have the privilege, and civic duty, of participating in elections and making our

views known. Children need to see that conflicting viewpoints are a natural, and often necessary, part of the democratic process. But how can children make sense of what they are seeing and realize that when adults express differing points of view, they are not (or at least shouldn't be) fighting one another? How can children understand that these expressions are evidence of a society made up of different views voicing their opinions so that everyone is represented and the will of the people is respected? (See sidebar for tips)

Key Catholic themes

In the document "Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship," the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops discusses seven key themes that Catholics should take into consideration when participating in the political sphere. The Church does not endorse a particular party or candidate. Rather, it encourages that we grow in our understanding of these issues so we can make decisions about candidates and parties with an informed conscience.

Children can learn about these issues when they are presented in a developmentally appropriate way. Here are some talking points parents, teachers, catechists and caregivers can use when explaining these themes to children.

THE RIGHT TO LIFE AND THE DIGNITY OF THE HUMAN PERSON: Before we were even born, God knew us. God made us, and he knows who he made us to be. Every life is valuable to God, and every person has a right to life from conception to natural death.

Talk about it: What can we do when we see someone being mistreated or left out? How do we respond to those who are different from us? If we see someone else being mean, what should we do?

THE CALL TO FAMILY, COMMUNITY AND PARTICIPATION: God gives us families to help us learn how to love one another and so we can learn who God is. Our parish community also helps us to

learn about God.

Talk about it: How can we work together in our families, parish communities, school or neighborhood to take care of one another and become the people God made us to be? How do we participate in the communities that surround us?

RIGHTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES: Because God made every person, everyone has rights and responsibilities. Jesus said we should love our neighbor as we love ourselves. Following this command means making sure everyone's rights are protected.

Talk about it: The Church teaches that everyone has a right to basic human needs: food, shelter, clothing, rest and medical attention. What can we do to protect the rights of people around the world and our friends and neighbors?

OPTION FOR THE POOR AND VULNERABLE: We should have special love and care for those who are poor. We should treat people in need the same way we would treat Jesus himself.

Talk about it: Who are the poor and vulnerable people that we know? What can we do to make sure they know we love and care for them?

DIGNITY OF WORK AND THE RIGHTS OF WORKERS: The different jobs people have are important. They help people earn money to buy food and other things they need. Jobs also allow people to work together with God and his creation. Work is part of God's plan for people. Workers should be treated fairly.

Talk about it: What jobs are we called to do in our family, in our home and in our community?

SOLIDARITY: Even though each of us is different, we are all part of one human family. God calls everyone to be his children. We should treat everyone with love, kindness and fairness. Jesus also calls us to be peacemakers. Treating others fairly will help us to live in peace with one another.

Talk about it: How can we be peacemakers in our family, at school, in our parish and during other activities?

CARING FOR GOD'S CREATION: God gave the plants, animals and all of creation for the good of all people. We are called to work to take care of the plants and animals and the places where they live, so everyone can enjoy them now and in the future.

Talk about it: What are some ways we can take care of God's creation each day?

As Catholics and citizens, we have a right and a responsibility to uphold Christian values in the society in which we live. In doing so, we work together with God as he builds his kingdom. Let us set a godly example for our children – one of careful reflection and civil dialogue – so they too can live as the light of the world.

This story was adapted from the pamphlet "Talking to Kids About Elections and Current Events" and originally posted on www.osvnews.com.