

Why Parents Are Taking Children to Vote This Year

Can you instill good values and habits by having your children watch you pull the lever? A resonant moment



Children at a voting booth in Concord, N.H. Photo: Matthew Cavanaugh/Getty Images



By
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Stewart Goodbody is going to take her 5-year-old daughter, Alice, with her to vote. They plan to go early, before kindergarten, and walk to the polls in a housing complex near their Brooklyn Heights, N.Y., apartment. Ms. Goodbody will choose the candidates, and Alice will press the button, casting her mother's selection.

"I am making the choices, but she is communicating it to the government," says Ms. Goodbody, adding that she thinks that is a powerful message for any child. She's hoping the Nov. 8 outing inaugurates a lifelong practice.



Stewart Goodbody is taking her 5-year-old, Alice, to the polls. Photo: Stewart Goodbody

Many parents see taking their children to the polls as a way to instill positive lessons about responsibility and honor, values that resonate even more deeply in an uncivil election season. Some take along small sons and daughters in part because they can't leave them at home—schools in many districts and a handful of states are closed on Election Day—but the parents use the task to show their children how to practice citizenship.

Few lessons are more important to Joe Cimperman, whose mother immigrated from Slovenia. “She thought this was the greatest country on earth and couldn't believe that some people don't vote,” says Mr. Cimperman, who accompanied her as a boy. He and his wife, Nora Romanoff, have taken Maeve, 8, and Samuel, 4, to the community church down the street to vote in every election. “We want them to understand and appreciate this is their responsibility,” says Mr. Cimperman, who was a Cleveland City Council member for 18 years and is now president of Global Cleveland, a nonprofit organization.



Rabbi Steven Carr Reuben Photo: Jeff Lipsky

The physical acts involved in voting—getting into a car, or subway, walking several blocks to the polling place, waiting in line with others, marking your ballots and pulling the lever—are memorable and underscore the day's significance, says Rabbi Steven Carr Reuben, who wrote “Children of Character.” He adds, “This is a supreme opportunity to demonstrate what being a part of a democracy means.”

The 67-year-old learned that from his parents. As a child of about 9 or 10, he walked the precincts with his mother, who was active in local politics in Los Angeles, handing out leaflets and petitioning at various polling places. “That sense of responsibility and civic involvement stuck with me forever,” he says. He took his own daughter, now 36, to vote with him.

All states allow minors in the voting booth with their parents or guardians, but definitions of minors vary. In Connecticut, only those 15 and under are allowed. Pennsylvania allows one minor in the booth and Maryland, two, as long as they aren't disruptive.

Voting With Children

How to help them get the most out of the process.

- Talk with your child beforehand. Explain that voting is an important responsibility and privilege. Read books and websites, such as pbskids.org, or hold family elections for favorite meals and movies.
- Check state election rules. Some states limit the number of children allowed. Contact an elections office to see when your polling place is least crowded.
- Involve your child in the voting process as much as possible. Don't count on cellphones as entertainment, as many states prohibit their use in the polling area.
- Follow up afterward. If your candidate loses, explain why it is important to keep voting.

Lines can be long, so coaching them on how to behave in that grown-up space can help. Delaware has a three-minute time limit in the booth, before a poll worker comes in to see if you need help. Use of cellphones is banned in many states.

Ms. Goodbody has looked up YouTube videos on elections so Alice can see what voting booths and ballots look like. They are prepared for long lines. But if the harsh tone of the election season carries over Nov. 8 to the polling station and conversations between adults there turn ugly, she has a plan.

She will explain to her daughter that people disagree and sometimes get angry but have a right to express their opinions. "I would also suggest speaking in advance to your child about leaving" if you have to, says Ms. Goodbody, who adds that in that case, she would come back and vote without her daughter.

Ms. Goodbody, who is director of communications for the Girl Scouts of the U.S.A., believes that part of instilling leadership, especially in girls, is making sure they understand that their voice matters. A 2014 Girl Scouts poll showed that 53% of 1,088 girls, ages 11 to 17, including non-Girl Scouts, accompanied a parent to vote.



Alexia Lewis Photo: Jennifer Boxley/Boys & Girls Clubs of America

Alexia Lewis is voting for the first time in November and working at her campus polling station. She credits her late great-grandmother, Mattie Washington, who had an eighth-grade education and drove a bus, with inspiring her to do so.

Ms. Lewis, who turned 18 in July, was essentially raised by Ms. Washington and accompanied her twice-annual pilgrimages to the local polling stations in their small town of Mizpah, N.J. Her great-grandmother would take her behind the curtain, let her press the buttons, and then have her sit beside Ms. Washington as she registered voters.

Over the years, Ms. Lewis says, she learned that everyone, regardless of race, class, education, or income, is equal when it comes to voting, and that everyone has a chance, and a responsibility, to make an impact. Those civic lessons shaped the young woman's ambitions. Ms. Lewis, a Youth of the Year for the Boys & Girls Clubs of America, aspires to be Chief Justice. "If not for her taking and showing me and letting me see what a huge deal it is, I would probably be one of those people who felt my vote didn't make a difference," says Ms. Lewis, who is a freshman at Hampton University majoring in political science.



Deborah Gilboa shows her children how she fills out her absentee ballot. Photo: Noam Gilboa

Deborah Gilboa, a Pittsburgh family physician, who writes and speaks on parenting and youth development, took her four sons as infants. "I wanted it to be a familiar place—the smells, the sounds, the people," says Dr. Gilboa, who accompanied her father to the polls as a child. "Familiarity, I think, is one of the ways to make them more likely voters."

Voting, she says, reinforces what she calls the three Rs: Respect for people with different opinions and the process choosing them; responsibility as a citizen; and resilience if your candidate loses. If a child whines and wants to go home, there is another lesson, she says: It may not be fun but it is worth doing.

Involving a child in voting also gives parents a nonthreatening opening for talking about values. "Most of the time when we are talking about values, we're complaining about their behavior or something their friend has done," she says. An election, she says, creates an opportunity to talk about whatever is important to you—leadership, equality, dignity, justice, patriotism.

Once the election is over, parents can talk with their children in polite tones about who won. If your candidate lost, explain that the newly elected official still represents everyone and that it is important to vote, whether you win or lose.

"I hope one of the silver linings of this contentious political landscape is that more people choose to involve their kids in the actual ballot process," says Dr. Gilboa. She took her boys when she voted in the primary but will be traveling on Nov. 8. She applied for an absentee ballot and will have them watch her when she fills it out.