

Navigating Politics with Middle Schoolers

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A three-part reflection series on parenting middle schoolers during the pandemic on the home front, facing political realities with pre-teens, and practical considerations regarding school re-opening.

“Mama, Mr. Williams (the Principal) is totally unfair! For the Boys’ Junior Varsity and Varsity Basketball teams, he always announces their scores the next day during morning announcements and says ‘Good job,’ or ‘Great effort,’ or ‘Congrats on the win.” But when it was the Girls’ Basketball season, he didn’t say anything during announcements! Why is it like this?!” exclaimed my upset 7th grade daughter in January 2020.

As the rest of 2020 unfolded, it seemed there was no escaping politics – gender equality, COVID-19, racial injustice, the Presidential election and its aftermath – it’s all accessible as soon as kids turn on the tv, listen to the radio, or log-on to the computer for classes. Innocuous as it may have seemed, that incident regarding basketball announcements was my daughter’s introduction into politics. The notion that her team received unfair treatment – that the Principal treated the boys’ team differently from the girls’ team – made my

daughter question how the decision was made to include boys but exclude girls. Yup! That's politics! So how do we navigate politics in a way that is appropriate and responsible with our pre-teens?

Talk Openly About Issues

In our home, we do not hide news or current events from our kids. We keep conversations open to all topics so they know they can approach us and talk with us about any and all concerns, whether global (like in the news) or personal (like incidences at school). If there is a policy that needs explanation, we talk about the background of the issue, how decisions made by public officials affect the community, and why it is important to vote. We encourage fact-finding and self-reflecting questions to keep conversations open and unbiased. In the case of the basketball announcements, we asked her a wide range of questions for her consideration, including:

- Policy – Is there a policy about morning announcements? Who gets to make them?
- Self – Is it possible that the boys' team won more games than the girls' team, and that your feelings are getting in the way of being objective?
- Other – How do you know the Principal plays favorites? Is there a history and pattern of the Principal favoring boys in other contexts?

While these questions are specific to the situation she personally experienced, we hope that this mode of thinking will be applied to other global issues as she grows, matures, and is eligible to vote.

Explore Solutions Together

Even as middle schoolers, adolescents are more than capable of

being change makers in their context. They can be skillful with finding solutions to meet their challenges. Because she was not satisfied with the way things were, my daughter and I discussed the situation together. After a brief but fruitful conversation, we agreed upon the following:

- The Principal is generally fair and that the issue with the basketball announcements was an isolated case.
- It hurts to swallow your pride and accept that your season wasn't a winning one, but a little acknowledgement and encouragement from the Principal could go a long way.
- She didn't know enough about policies for morning announcements, but it seemed like representation was key for the boy's basketball mention – a member of the boy's basketball team was also a member of the student leadership team who made the announcements.

As a result of this discussion, my daughter suggested that as team captain, she needed to represent her team.

Encourage Responsible Action

So what does it look like for middle schoolers to take action and get involved in a responsible and respectful way? We took these steps:

- My daughter decided that representing the team as captain meant she had to speak up and advocate for fair treatment.
- In her letter, she stated out the observed discrepancy in the treatment of boys versus girls.
- Knowing that her objective was to be constructive, she also suggested a possible solution – working with the Coach, one of the girls' basketball team members could write a quick summary of the basketball game and submit it to the student leadership team for announcements the next day.

- She decided that she would write a letter to the principal on behalf of her teammates. She took a draft of the letter to each of the girls to get consensus on the content of the letter and asked them to sign it as well.
- When the Principal didn't reply to her letter, she followed up with an email and asked if he had time to consider her request. Her letter was well received and he agreed that her suggestion should be implemented the next season.

While my daughter might not be ready to jump into national politics just yet, her first experience with influencing decisions and outcomes for herself and on behalf of others was very empowering! Knowing that she can make a difference in her personal and local context will help her realize that she is a positive change agent.

Let's raise leaders who make a difference!

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