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How to take kids to the voting booth

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NEW YORK (AP) - With a little advance work, taking your kids to the polls on Election Day can help unscramble the complexities of politics, government and the presidential showdown.

It can even be fun.

Myrna Blyth, who oversees the online initiative Take Your Kids 2 Vote and wrote the book "How to Raise an American," called the matter "crucial" in nurturing responsible voters of tomorrow.

"Tell them you're voting for their futures. Tell them this is what citizens do," she said. "Simply taking them with you is really exciting and mysterious, even if they just stand there."

But it doesn't take much effort to take the experience much further. Some ideas:

SET THE STAGE

To prepare young children at home, hold a mock election among stuffed animals, or vote on what game to play or TV show to watch to demonstrate the will of the majority.

For older kids, encourage scout leaders to make a polling place trip part of a civics project, or teachers to incorporate one into homework. See if your high schooler can pick up an assignment on the experience in text or video for the school newspaper or Web site.

ROCK THE VOTE

Right before the day, make a special button at home for your child declaring the year she'll be old enough to vote for real. Use fabric markers on a white T-shirt to do the same.

For older kids, you can find a sample ballot and go over it with your child, listing your preferred candidates as you explain the voting process. Let the child keep the ballot as her own on Election Day and hand it over to you as your guide when you vote.

STAKE IT OUT

Before you head out for a hands-on look at democracy in action, check local rules so you can tell your child what they can and can't do. Many areas restrict voting booth visits to kids under 15 or 16, and some don't allow them to operate equipment or touch ballots.

Also, plan to go at a time when your polling place is least likely to be crowded.

ELECTION ENTERTAINMENT

Download election-related puzzles, color pages and games online from a wide variety available and bring some along on the big day in anticipation of long lines.

Kate Kelly, a historian and author of "Election Day: An American Holiday, An American History," suggests also tracking down some historical facts about the voting process to share while waiting in line. And be prepared for questions like, "What is a vote?" Answer: It's a choice made by counting the number of people who like one person or thing more than another.

HELPING HANDS

When it's your turn, allow your child to give the precinct worker your name or hand over your registration card when you check in. Maybe your child can hold your ballot if paper is still involved.

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Let her punch out a chad, flick a lever or tap a voting screen if allowed, explaining that every vote makes a difference (reserve the Electoral College for older kids).

CEMENT THE TRADITION

Bette Alkazian, a family therapist and parent coach in Westlake Village, Calif., said it's never too early to take your kids to the polls, but make sure to do it every time an election rolls around to reinforce its importance and create a tradition worth looking forward to.

"The most important element is communicating to your kids that voting is something that allows you to impact the world in a way that reflects your values," she said.

On the Net:

- _ Take Your Kid 2 Vote: <http://www.takeyourkids2vote.org>
- _ Time for Kids: <http://www.timeforkids.com/TFK/election08/>
- _ How to make election button: <http://www.cyberbee.com/election/elem.html>
- _ Nickelodeon: <http://www.nick.com/kpp/>
- _ PBS Kids: <http://pbskids.org/democracy/vote/index.html>
- _ Official candidate sites on Youtube: <http://www.youtube.com/members?smv&ta&g8>
- _ Scholastic: <http://teacher.scholastic.com/scholasticnews/indepth/election2008.htm>
- _ Official government portal: http://www.kids.gov/6_8/6_8_government_rights.shtml

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