

Do Children Just Take Their Parents' Political Beliefs?

It's Not That Simple

By: [TE-ERIKA PATTERSON](#) MAY 1, 2014

It is widely believed that children will imitate their parents' behaviors and attitudes—whether parents want them to or not. The 1961 [Bobo Doll experiment](#), conducted by Stanford professor Albert Bandura, demonstrated that children will interact with others in the precise manner that was modeled for them by adults.

Given this responsibility, many parents try to instruct their children and impart their views, perhaps hoping their kids become carbon copies of themselves, or become the people they wish they were themselves.

For some parents, this quest takes on a missionary zeal: They work to indoctrinate their children with a designated political viewpoint from an early age, raising them to be young ideologues. But new research suggests trying to plant those seeds during potty training might actually be the fastest way to guarantee political rebellion later on.

Jennifer and Ryan Russon of Coral Springs, Florida, are two such parents who believe they can train their children to represent how the world should be. They are raising their son Maxwell, age 8, and daughter Anna, age 6, to become staunch liberals and atheists. Their family refuses to shop at Walmart because its owners are, according to Ryan, "goose-stepping Nazis."

"Both kids already understand that the minimum wage needs to be raised," Jennifer explains. "In fact, my son had to pick a president to do a report on in his third-grade class and wrote an essay about how being able to afford food is a basic human right—that this would be his first initiative were he POTUS."

Under her parents' influence, Anna fell out of favor with her conservative kindergarten teacher when she announced that she would not eat Papa John's pizza during a class pizza party because the company's CEO was reluctant to provide healthcare benefits to his employees.

"We make sure the kids know that just because daddy may make more money than somebody else that does not mean he is a harder worker or made better choices," Jennifer explains. "Certainly this is sometimes the case, but it is not always the case. Feeling empathy and seeing the bigger picture is a big part of being liberal and I think we do a good job of impressing this on our kids."

On the other side of the spectrum is John Wilder, a marriage and relationship coach in Jacksonville, Florida. He's leaned conservative since working as a child: He noticed that earning his own way in life boosted his self-esteem. What really made the difference was when he became religious. Wilder became passionately pro-life. He formed a group called Christians for Life and led a movement that helped convince the Southern Baptist Convention to renounce its pro-choice stance.

When Wilder married and started his own family, he set out to ensure that his children were influenced by conservative ideals. He would often discuss current events and issues with them, explaining how the media had reported a slanted view of the issue, then patiently laying out the facts from his viewpoint. He says he was able to influence all three of his children with facts and logic instead of feelings.

“My son, when he was 16, thought he should be able to decide for himself whether or not he would go to church,” he recalls. “I explained to him that I agreed with him and when he moved out and was self-supporting, he could certainly make that decision for himself. Today as an adult he does not miss church.”

All three of Wilder’s children are conservative, have married conservatives, and are pro-life. He wishes more parents had followed his model.

“Children raised in a liberal home are often ruined for life,” Wilder says. “If we were to instill conservative values into our children we would stop rewarding young girls getting pregnant and going on the dole for the next 20 years and we would have a strong vibrant economy. We need to raise more conservatives in order to save the country.”

It’s understandable that parents with strong beliefs would feel it is their duty to see their children adopt those beliefs. But, however well-meaning these efforts are, they may be in vain. [A study recently published](#) in the *British Journal of Political Science*, based on data from the U.S. and U.K., found that parents who are insistent that their children adopt their political views inadvertently influence their children to abandon the belief once they become adults. The mechanism is perhaps surprising: Children who come from homes where politics is a frequent topic of discussion are more likely to talk about politics once they leave home, exposing them to new viewpoints—which they then adopt with surprising frequency.

The study, [led by researcher Elias Dinas](#), also shows that these changes are especially likely to happen during the college years. Conservative culture warriors have warned for years that universities are outposts of liberal indoctrination—and the study seems to confirm at least some of that warning.

“Extreme parental views of the world give children a clear choice for being with the parents through agreement, or against parents through disagreement,” says Carl Pickhardt, an author and child psychologist. “Thus extremely rigid views of right/wrong, trust/distrust, love/hate can be embraced by

children who want to stay connected to parents, and can be cast off by children who, for their own independence, are willing to place the parental relationship at risk.”

And that’s the rub with parenting styles like the Russos’ or Wilder’s. Just as the parents came to their views through their own experiences and then tried to teach it as established truth, the Dinas study shows how quickly that teaching can be set aside when the children have strong political awakenings of their own.

Just ask Jacqueline Church Simonds, whose relationship with her conservative parents became strained by her own increasingly liberal views when she reached her twenties. Simonds’ parents grew up in moneyed, conservative southern Missouri households, and they believed that anyone who did not agree with their beliefs were Communists intent on destroying America.

For Simonds, 55 and now a publishing consultant, there was no point in questioning the political ideology of her parents; she simply accepted it as truth.

“They were my parents,” she says. “There was always talk about how the country was going to hell and the ‘negroes’ were going to take over the streets. They feared and distrusted anyone not white or wealthy When Nixon resigned, I watched every second. My mother informed me the country had just ended.”

But when her mother directed her to vote for a senator who had publicly opposed a woman’s right to choose, Simonds refused to use her vote to appease her mother. “I couldn't vote for him if he didn't respect my rights so I told her that, and she dismissed my concerns, saying, ‘That’s something they say to get votes,’” Simonds recalls.

By 1988 Simonds was voting straight Democratic tickets, and her parents viewed her as the agitator and disturber of the peace of her family. Her parents blamed her husband, an East Coast liberal, for her political conversion but Simonds wouldn’t allow him to be the scapegoat for her change in mentality.

“That’s not what changed me,” Simonds says. “The increasing hatriotism—bigotry, anti-women, anti-poor—of the right changed me.”

It has been more than a decade since Simonds has mentioned politics around her parents. Even when news of President Obama’s first election landed her father in the cardiac ward, no one spoke a word. Because her parents held her to such an unyielding standard, she now offers herself much more wiggle room to try

out different beliefs. Being pushed in one direction made her push back and in the tussle she found a balance, she says.

So what if parents decided not to influence their children at all? Without an expressed standard to rebel or measure their identity against, would the children of parents who foster a politically indifferent home develop a passion for politics or grow to hate it?

Ben Miller's parents never shared their political views with him. "It was never talked about, not even between my mother and father," he says. At 23, Miller is now a law student at Vanderbilt and holds an intriguing stance on politics: He has none.

"I think I have point-blank asked my mother and father when I was a bit younger about who they were going to vote for or what they thought about a specific issue and never received a definitive response," Miller remembers. "You could always tell they had views, just that they never ever shared them."

He says most of his classmates regard his indifferent stance during political arguments as strange. "They usually ask, 'But who did you vote for in the 2012/2008 election?' and I have to tell them that I'm not registered to vote, which really confuses them," he says.

Miller's experience seems to corroborate another part of the Dinas's findings—that children exposed to strong political beliefs are most likely to engage with other views once they leave home.

But Miller says being non-political isn't the same as being disengaged from the world. "Not having political views does not mean I do not have strong moral, social and cultural views," he says. "Maybe it's a breakdown of semantics but I think there are a lot of things today that are made into political controversies that are nothing more than social, cultural and moral issues."

Though he volunteers at a Vanderbilt Medical School clinic that serves patients without insurance, strangely Miller claims he does not have a view on whether the healthcare system is viable.

"I would rather volunteer and do what I can on a person to person basis than get into a debate about if more or less people should be on [Medicaid]," he says. "What is important is improving my community through civic action and growing and learning as an individual through a very unbiased lens."

Although Miller has no immediate plans to start a family, he doesn't plan on diverging from his own parents' approach of not trying to shape a child's political views.

“I think we all learn early on, that no matter what people tell you, until you experience it yourself, the words of advice offered will fall short,” he says. “And that’s not a bad thing, I don't think.”