

## POLITICS IS PERSONAL

BY DR. KAREN HILL SCOTT

There's no subject more emotional for parents than their child's well-being. I've heard parents say they'd run in front of a hurtling train to save their children's lives. Most of us feel we'd go to the ends of the earth to provide the best we can for our children. Some of us might even do that to get our children into a top preschool program.

Yet, parents of young children have lower rates of voting than older age groups. They have a low frequency of engagement in advocacy for public policies and programs that would support the development of the children they love so very much.

Let's look at the November 2002 Congressional election statistics as an example. These are the kinds of statistics our elected officials and their campaign managers have in their heads or at their fingertips at all times. These statistics determine what's important and what's not, for major political platforms.

Every elected official knows that of all adults from 25-44 year olds, only 36 percent are likely to vote. Contrast that with 56 percent of adult voters, aged 45-64, and 66 percent of 65-74 year olds who vote. The actual number of older Americans who vote is 47 million compared with 28 million for the younger adult category. Add to that the pitiful 20 percent voting rate among the 27 million 18-24 year old voters, and it becomes clear why parents are literally squeezed out as a priority issue group. The 18-24 year olds don't perceive any benefit from voting at all, let alone any future benefit they might gain when they become parents.

There is a cruel irony in this phenomenon of low voting patterns. Parents aren't going to the polls to vote during the years they could use public policy the most. Paid parental leave,



expanded child care and preschool services, good schools with small class sizes and adequate textbooks, and adequate health care for all families, either languish in policy purgatory or are feebly funded.

We have a circular problem here, and it's not doing young families a bit of good.

To get traction around any children's issue, parents have to demand it and put it in the public consciousness. Parents have to perceive that their private struggles to earn a living, raise their children, and contribute to society are as essential to the American way of life as having great interstate highways and municipally funded sports stadiums.

If the issues facing families - all families - are not advanced by parents themselves, they certainly can't be carried on the goodwill of voters whose memories of the hard parenting years have faded; or worse yet, of those who feel that if they endured, you can too!

Parents are the most credible advocates for developing and preserving essential services that promote good child development. For example, special education programs throughout the United States would never have happened if a highly placed federal official had not had a child with special needs. That leadership and example put power in the hands of parents of the disabled, who fought to get laws passed and funds appropriated to help them help their children.

So, what can you do, as the most powerful advocate of all, for your children?

Here are a few very simple ways to get started:

- Vote in every election, including your local elections. This is where you can weigh in on school construction and other education issues directly. You and a few hundred of your friends could actually swing the vote, since local elections often have low turnout. I call this "stealth voting" for kids.
- Take your children with you to the polls. Let them take pictures and have a good time. They'll ask a lot of questions that you'll be forced to answer. Think of how proud they'll be when you tell them that you are voting so they can have a good life! Lots of polling places have stickers, so everyone can leave with a reward.
- Get your friends and family to register to vote and send them your take on the issues to inspire more interest in politics of childhood in your own support system.
- Sign up to receive newsletters and action alerts from groups that are working on behalf of children and families. No matter what your political views are, there are many different kinds of family support policies that have been offered on both sides of the aisle. These groups will keep up with the latest state and national issues



affecting parents.

- You can also put yourself on the mailing list of local children's advocacy organizations. They can give you issues to work on in your community.

The late former Speaker of the House of Representatives, Tip O'Neill, once said that "all politics is local," meaning people vote for the national candidates who best represent their personal interests. Tip O'Neill recognized that people vote with their heart, not with their heads. They act based on an emotional trigger about what will work for them on more than just knowledge alone.

As a parent, I know your issues are often not on the ballot, and the candidates may not always connect with your personal needs as a parent. But, if you're among those willing to jump in front of a train to save your child, maybe you'd consider writing a letter or making a phone call to improve the quality of every child's life experience, and maybe improve even your own.

Give advocacy a chance. If you do, families and children may finally take priority over pork-barrel projects in budget discussions; your elected officials will take notice; and the public agenda will have to change. After all, when it comes to our children, politics is personal.

Resources:

[www.parentsaction.org](http://www.parentsaction.org)

[www.nationalpartnership.org](http://www.nationalpartnership.org)

