

Ep #31: Raising Civic-Minded Little Humans With Kelly Siegel-Stechler



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Devon Clement

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I know the election is on everyone's mind right now, and today we're going to talk about how you can start your kids on being involved and engaged citizens early. Don't worry, it's easier than you think. Stay tuned.

Welcome to *Parenthood Prep*, the only show that helps sleep-deprived parents and overwhelmed parents-to-be successfully navigate those all-important early years with their baby, toddler, and child. If you are ready to provide the best care for your newborn, manage those toddler tantrums, and grow with your child, you're in the right place. Now here's your host, baby and parenting expert, Devon Clement.

Hello, and welcome back to the *Parenthood Prep* podcast. I'm so excited, because today we have another interview for you. A cool thing about being a podcaster is that I get to force people I love to have conversations with me and record them.

So we are recording this the week before election day, and this year is a pretty big, pretty important election. This is going to come out the day before; if you're listening to it any time after. I hope that Kamala Harris is the president, and if she's not, I'm not really sure what any of us are going to do.

I thought it would be a good time to talk about teaching your kids to be good citizens, to have civic responsibility. What does that mean? Is it something that we don't learn until high school, when we take a civics class? Is it something that we don't learn until we're old enough to vote?

I think it's not something that you're necessarily thinking about when your kids are small, and it's actually something that is not that difficult to incorporate.

Devon Clement: Our guest today is Kelly Siegel-Steckler. Why don't you introduce yourself, Kelly?

Kelly Siegel-Steckler: Sure. Thanks, Devon. I'm Kelly Siegel-Steckler. I am a researcher at the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, or CIRCLE, at Tufts University. I am an education researcher with expertise in civic development and political socialization. So all of my work really centers around how the educational experiences, and the experiences young

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people, have early in life impact their political and civic engagement throughout their entire lives.

Devon: I think that's just so important. Obviously, when you're up to your elbows in dirty diapers you're not necessarily thinking about civic engagement. But I think there's some things you could do, even from preschool age, or maybe even younger.

So tell us a little bit about what you think parents can be doing. Obviously, we're not trying to give them more chores, more tasks, but I think it's something that can really become a presence in their everyday life.

Kelly: Yeah, for sure. And I think your point of when does this happen, is this something we start thinking about in adolescence? Is it something when you suddenly turn 18 and all of a sudden you have to decide how to be a political person in the world?

The reality is that the experiences we have from an early age sort of shape how we interact with our communities and the people around us, how we think about being part of the world. And those things start really, really young. And even if you're not thinking about it, you're already doing it.

I think most of us have a sense at this point that the behaviors we model at home, the way we interact with our children, the way they see us interact with one another has an impact on how they grow up. And that's very true for their civic engagement as well.

So I think there's a few very basic things that you can think about when you have toddlers, I would say, is probably a good time to start that is going to really serve them well in the long term. The first thing is thinking about your child's agency. How do they develop a sense of efficacy and belief that they can influence the world around them?

I'm not saying that you need to give your kid a choice about every single thing that happens in their life, but do they feel like their presence in a situation matters? Do they think that they have an opportunity to make some choices? To feel like they are allowed to have opinions and ideas and follow those through?

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And do they feel like they have a role in their family where there are certain things that are their responsibility, that they have agency for? Do they see how those behaviors or responsibilities impact other people? I think that's really important.

Devon: I think that's so huge. And that's something that I am constantly beating the drum about, that your child is a full member of the family. They're not above you and you are not above them. It's like the more you allow them to have that agency... It's such a weird little dichotomy or paradox, because sometimes parents give their kids too many choices and then they get overwhelmed.

Well, my pet peeve, which I talk about all the time, they give them choices that are not actually choices. So if you're giving them real choices about activities they want to do, or clothes they want to wear, or what they want to eat, or having a vote in what the whole family does. "Oh, I'm sorry that you don't want to do this thing, but all the rest of us do. We would like you to come with us, and next time we'll do the thing that you want to do."

Kelly: Right. So I think that's a really good second thing to be thinking about, is this concept of collective decision making in your family and at home. There are lots of different ways that communities make decisions. Sometimes it's voting. Sometimes you have an executive who's in charge who gets to make the decision themselves. They may or may not take input. Sometimes we take turns, right? Sometimes we build consensus.

So just having a little bit of awareness about how you make collective decisions in your family, being explicit about those things, and following through with them. So if you do have a vote and it doesn't turn out the way that you, parent, wanted it to, and you said you were going to have a vote, you should really follow through with doing the thing that the vote turned out.

Again, don't create choices that aren't real choices. But having some attention to how decisions are made collectively in your family, moving between them and then talking about them. Do we like how we made this decision? Was it good for everybody? Who was disappointed? Who was happy with it?

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That can really build awareness of thinking about how communities function and who's getting what they need based on different kinds of decision making.

Devon: As you're saying this, I'm thinking about my own childhood where my younger sister who I love, she is my dearest friend, but she was a tyrant and she just got to decide what we did all the time. And we all deferred to her because the consequences were not worth it.

And I think in a lot of ways that was effective at the moment, but I don't think it served her well. I think she had to spend some time learning how to live in a world where she didn't just get what she wanted all the time, where other people's opinions mattered. And me and my mother and my father are all so easy going that we were just like, "Okay, yes. Fine. Whatever. Just shut up. Stop screaming. God."

So I think obviously the temptation is to defer to the loudest voice or the squeakiest wheel. And I get that sometimes you have to do that, but having those different ways to work together to decide things is, I think, super, super important. So I love that.

You're not necessarily saying to your kids, "We're going to vote on what movie we watch tonight," just like we're going to vote for the president. It's just starting a process of 'I get to have involvement in these decisions. I get to have some say over what we as a society are going to do.'

Kelly: Yeah. And I think it doesn't have to be explicit all the time. It doesn't have to be very obvious, "We vote on Wednesdays, and that's when we learn about civic engagement."

Devon: You have a polling station in your house. There's a curtain that goes around.

Kelly: To your point about your sister, part of that is helping students come to terms with the idea that humans are individuals. We all have different experiences and opinions. And not everybody sees the world exactly the way you see it, has the exact same experiences that you do, or will come to agree with you eventually about certain things.

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Part of functioning in a pluralistic society is being able to simultaneously be aware of and build some comfort with multiple perspectives and points of view. I think this is actually something we've seen a real deficit with post-pandemic. Where typically this is something students learn to grapple with in preschool and kindergarten really early on.

But even now, I'm seeing a lot of third and fourth graders who just have a hard time with this idea that other people are 'separate from me and they can do things I can't control.'

Devon: I mean, I know some adults that aren't great at understanding that.

Kelly: But I think that's a really big social/emotional development thing that we can be thinking about and working on at home, right? If you have a disagreement with your partner, how do you talk to your kid about that? How do they come to understand that different people can think different things and that's okay? How do you help them resolve conflict in your family and sit with being disappointed?

Are you always trying to make everything better? Are you always trying to find something we can all agree on? Or is there opportunity for your child to sit with, make sense of, grapple with difference? Because that's really meaningful. Like you said, it's hard for adults. It's hard for a lot of folks. And it's not going away anytime soon.

Devon: Yeah, I think that's so important. And that's also a running thread that we talk about all the time, that it's okay for kids to be unhappy, to feel uncomfortable. It's not trauma for them to not get what they want all the time. It's okay if they're upset that the other kids want to play a different game.

Something I say is... When I was a nanny, I took care of a little boy who was various ages while I was working with him, say four to seven, on and off. And if we played a board game or something, I didn't let him win. I would act like another kid. Sometimes you win and sometimes you lose. I mean, I didn't wipe the floor with him every time, which I could have.

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But his grandparents were kind of always deferring to him and always letting him win and stuff like that. And I'm like, that's not teaching him anything. He needs to learn that sometimes the other person that you're playing with is going to win. And that's fun.

Or if we were doing an activity. We used to build these tracks for Hot Wheels cars. We would take turns; he would build the track that he wanted and I would help him and support him with that. And then I'd be like, "Okay, now I'm going to build my track." And he'd be like, "Well, what do you mean?" I'm like, "Now it's my turn to decide what the track looks like. We're going to do this." It kept me from going insane.

It gave him a little bit of turn taking that he just wasn't getting with these other adults in his life who were letting him do whatever he wanted. Actually, it was so funny. One time we were playing a game Uno or something, and I won. And he said, in genuine disbelief, "But I thought that boys rule and girls drool." I was like, "No, sir, you have that the other way around. It is girls who rule and boys who drool. Thank you. Also, boys go to Jupiter to get more stupid."

Kelly: Yeah, I think that's so great. And I think it doesn't have to look good all the time when you're doing this work. I think sometimes parents feel the pressure to turn everything into a teachable moment. Where we have this really great conversation about how the child is feeling, we get to the teachable points, and we tie a neat little bow on it. It's all wrapped up, it's done, and we're good forever.

Devon: It's a nice, tight 22 minutes with commercial breaks, like a sitcom.

Kelly: Correct. And I think that that's not really how young children's civic development, or any development, really works. It's an ongoing process. Every single experience that's negative doesn't have to have a silver lining. Sometimes things are just bad and resilience to that is really meaningful.

The last thing I would say that parents can do is a bit of a cop out, but it's true. If you are a civically engaged human, that has serious long-term consequences for your children. Seeing you care about the world...

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Devon: Positive, positive consequences. Sometimes when we say that, it sounds like it's a bad thing. But consequences can be both good and bad.

Kelly: Correct. I had a conversation with my mother when I first started my PhD studying civic education and she was asking, "What does civic engagement mean? I don't really understand it." We had dinner with each other and she was like, "I don't think that really describes me. I'm not good at those things." And I was like, "Mom, my whole childhood you were on every committee at church."

She's on the board of their local pond. She's on the board of the golf club. She talks to her neighbors about things. She's so civically engaged, but she never had the language or opportunity to reflect on and think about those things. She just kind of did them because that's what her parents did. And that's what I saw her doing.

But actually, if you can take some time to reflect on and think about those things, and you can name them for your children, that's really meaningful to say. "I participate in this group with other moms because it matters to me that we get to know people in our community and feel connected to them. I go to PTA meetings because I care a lot about what happens to you at school, and I want to have some influence on that."

Just saying those things out loud and modelling that for your children is really, really meaningful. One of the things I think is really fun sometimes, when you're in a civic education space, is people will ask, "What's your earliest political memory?" And you would be shocked how young people are.

My earliest political memory... I was born in 1988... I remember going into the voting booth with my mom in 1992 and she said, "I'm voting for president. These are the two people that are running. There's George Bush, who's already the president. And there's Bill Clinton, who might be the president." I was four years old, and she was explaining this to me. I had a chance to say, "I think you should do this."

That's cool. And I remember that now as a grownup. I think a lot of people have experiences like that, that seem innocuous or meaningless to their parents at the time, but have really long-ranging effects and really stick with you.

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Devon: Yeah. I mean, you're reminding me... I remember going to vote with my parents, certainly. I don't remember which elections, but that is definitely something I recall. Also, we lived in a development. It was a townhouse community so there was leadership. There was not an HOA. There was a board.

All the townhouses kind of had to look the same, so a lot of the decisions about the outsides. They'd trim the bushes. They did the landscaping. And there were always annual elections for who was going to be on it. And my neighbor on my street was on it for a while. We got a newsletter, and there was always information in the newsletter about what was going on in the development. It was like a little country.

My mom actually got a note taped to the door when we first moved in because she put sheets in the windows because she hadn't gotten curtains yet. She got a note like, "you can't do that." But yeah, little things like that, that are not maybe as big or as wide ranging as the government. It's just like, what's the PTA? What's the local community things that we can get involved in?

A kid I was in first grade with, his dad was the mayor of our town. I don't know, it's just interesting. And I think there's the other aspect, which is how early kids are really learning about some of the issues, the bigger political issues.

I remember hearing about abortion when I was in third or fourth grade. Somebody had said something about it, and they told me what it was. And the way they described it, I was like, "That sounds horrible." So I went home and I said to my mom, "What is this? It sounds horrible."

And she was like, "No, it's actually not. Actually, in a lot of situations it's important. And if it's not legal, people are going to do it anyway, and then they're not going to have safe results." And that was it. I was like, "Okay, I guess I'm pro-choice now," at like eight or nine years old.

If I had come home and we had a different conversation, I might have had a different perspective. Now I am very vocally pro-abortion. But it all started from that conversation that I had with her at that point. Even through high school, being in a youth group and going to this thing at Great Adventure where this

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woman talked about how she had an abortion and she regretted it. I was just like, I don't care. Because I already knew what I believed.

Kelly: Yeah, I think sometimes people have this reaction, that this has to be a big conversation, right? This has to be everything all at once. It's going to be forever. But I think it's actually more of what I'm talking about, rather than this one experience that is going to change everything for your kid.

It's like, no, we just want to create an environment where they can have these conversations. Where they're ongoing, even if they're not participating. Maybe they see you talking to your partner, your friends, your family members about things that are important to you, and they think that that's normal. Because it is, right?

These things affect us in our lives. We deal with them every day. It's normal to talk to one another about our ideas, our hopes and dreams, and worries, our opinions about things. And trying to create an environment where your child sees that modelled for them and is socialized into that participation is going to do a lot for them.

It doesn't have to be setting up the perfect conversation about abortion, right? Or the perfect conversation about race. That's not possible. It's never going to happen.

Devon: Yeah, it's not going to happen in a short span of time. There's going to be a conversation about it. And I think another thing that's great for adults to model to kids just generally, is that sometimes our perspectives change. Sometimes we were wrong about something. Sometimes we believed one thing and then we learned more information and now we believe a different thing.

Kelly: Yeah, and that's normal. That's human experience. And it's okay. It's also okay for your kids to see you admit that you were wrong. And for you to not be okay with differences of opinions sometimes. Just like you want them to feel agency to make sense of conflicting opinions and not getting your way. You can also have agency. You can also make sense of conflicting opinions. And we're all just muddling through together most of the time.

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Devon: That's how I feel, often. Yeah, so just to kind of review what we talked about. We want to teach kids that they have agency over their own lives. It doesn't mean they get to be the dictator of the family, or they get to decide every single thing. But that they do get to make choices that will have an impact, even if it's something very, very small. Like, "Which of these two weather appropriate outfits do you want to wear?"

And the second one was collective decision making.

Kelly: Yep. We want to practice lots of different methods for making decisions as a group. Be explicit about how we're going to make decisions, and then follow through on the way that we make them.

Devon: And then sitting with the discomfort, if the decision that you want is not the one that got chosen.

Kelly: Absolutely. Learning to respect and understand other people's points of views.

Devon: And I think not only being allowed to have the feelings, but being allowed to express the feelings. "Okay, I know you're upset and you're crying and screaming, and that's fine. That's how we all feel sometimes." God, I want to cry and scream so often, and do, and then you get that out.

Kelly: Last one's modelling. Being the adult you want your child to be one day, to the best of your own ability. Rather than placing your future hopes and dreams that they will be the adult you wanted to be. Just be that adult yourself.

Devon: Oh, I love that. Oh my God, it's so true, too. I think a lot of people have kids because they want a do-over of their own childhood. We're all just human beings. We're all just out here and nobody's perfect. We're all just out here doing the best. If we are doing the best we can. If you're not doing the best you can, then screw you. But if you're really trying and doing what's possible for you, then being kind to others, I think that's all we can really ask for. It starts so much earlier than we think.

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Well, Kelly, thank you so much for taking the time to talk to me. I know you're super busy right now with all the election stuff going on, so I'm glad I could steal you away.

Kelly: Yes. And if you are listening to this the day before election day, and you haven't voted early yet or submitted a ballot by mail or a drop box, please go vote. Your voice matters. You are a part of this democracy. We need you. Make a plan and go vote. Preferably for someone who's not a fascist.

Devon: Ideally.

Kelly: Ideally.

Devon: Everyone in New York City... I vote in New Jersey because that's where my business is based and where I own a home and all that. So in New York City there are all these props that everyone's so excited to vote for, yes and no. Everybody's up... I'm like, "Oh, the only prop I got to vote for is whether we're taking Woodrow Wilson's name off the high school." Which yes, apparently, he was very racist. So goodbye, Woodrow Wilson.

Kelly: Yeah, it turns out most people in American history, most former presidents, old white men were kind of racist. I just don't think we need to continue to celebrate that. I'm going so hard on this Woodrow Wilson thing. You guys all codify abortion into the state law, please do. I love it. But I'm going to really... Woodrow Wilson.

Devon: But even in small towns things are important.

Kelly: It is important. It's symbolic and it matters. And so I'm glad that you got out the vote, Devon. I'm really glad to hear that.

Devon: Thank you. I hope my ballot box didn't get caught on fire. I voted by mail.

Kelly: We'll knock on wood for you. All right.

Devon: Anyway, everyone go vote. Kelly, thank you so much. As always, you can find us on Instagram @happyfamilyafter. There will be a post up today

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about this episode. If you have any comments or questions, we'd love to see them there. Kelly will be tagged in that as well, if you want to check her out.

Kelly, I hope we get to talk to you again.

Kelly: Thank you so much for having me. And yeah, have a great week.

Alright, listen up, folks. We love to joke around but it's time to get real. And that real talk, it's all about giving your babies the roasting they deserve. Yep, you heard it right. We're calling for an epic Baby Roast.

We want you to drop a voice note on our website and call out your little ones for their adorable crimes. Did your baby spit up on your brand-new dress the second you put it on? Maybe they decided to scream through your sister's wedding vows? We want to hear all the juicy details.

Head over to HappyFamilyAfter.com, or hit the link in the show notes. Every page on the site has a button on the side for you to record straight from your phone. Your story might just make it onto an episode of the *Parenthood Prep* podcast. We can't wait to hear.

Thanks for listening to this week's episode of *Parenthood Prep*. If you want to learn more about the services Devon offers, as well as access her free monthly newborn care webinars, head on over to www.HappyFamilyAfter.com.