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Parenting Is A Dictatorship

BY JOSEPH WILSON

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With images of domestic terrorists storming the U.S. Capitol building earlier this year, there were bound to be a lot of questions from our children. How do we explain what happened in a way that makes sense to them?

Up until last month, our kids' knowledge of U.S. politics was confined to what they overheard my wife and I complain about. "He makes bad decisions," explained our 10-year-old to a baffled four-year-old during one of our exasperated dinnertime rants about Trump.

But the Capitol siege moved Trump's ineptness into new territory. Our daughters are already scared about school shootings (or, to be more accurate, about lockdown drills (<https://www.cbc.ca/parents/learning/view/the-monster-my-daughter-fears-isnt-an-active-shooter-but-the-lockdown-drill>)) and terrorism from rumours they've heard on the playground. Now they're worried about a new threat.

Sometimes you have to say no. A response this mom is all too familiar with. Read that here (<https://www.cbc.ca/parents/learning/view/kids-want-you-to-say-no>).

According to the attackers themselves, using violence was necessary to defend the institutions of democracy they felt were being threatened. Framed in this way it sounds noble. But democracy was functioning as it should in the halls of the Capitol, with the votes for a new president-elect being ratified at the time. As I see it, the attackers were deluded and misinformed (<https://www.cbc.ca/radio/asithappens/as-it-happens-friday-edition-1.5893813/capitol-hill-rioter-qanon-shaman-wants-to-testify-against-trump-says-lawyer-1.5893816>) by conspiracy theories (<https://www.cbc.ca/parents/learning/view/im-trying-to-help-my-daughter-navigate-covid-conspiracy-theories>) and an egomaniacal former resident.

One of the reasons it can be difficult to explain the logic of what's going on in the U.S. is that kids don't have a strong model for what democracy is supposed to look like. Parenting, in essence, is a dictatorship. (Or, to be more accurate, in our house it's an oligarchy ruled by an unelected junta of two people).

Parents rule by decree. Their word is final and, according to Canadian law, children are under the control of their parents until the age of 18 (or unless they are legally emancipated).

I believe this is how it should be. Young children do not have the capacity to make many of the decisions necessary for their health and well-being. They need caring, benevolent dictators in their lives to decree exactly how and when they should cross the street, and to stop them from placing their hand on a hot stove. Even the most committed free-range parent would force a toddler to relinquish their grip on a sharp steak knife or a bottle of bleach.

In the shadow of such control, whenever we can, my wife and I present our children with choices. This way we are at least giving them a glimpse of what democracy looks like. We decide collectively what movie to watch on Saturdays and what books to read at bedtime. Sometimes the choices are more difficult and they have to learn to live with the consequences. They can decide to not eat their vegetables ("we can't force food into your body," I sometimes say), but that means they forgo the right to eat dessert (which is usually just a bowl of fruit; it's not like they're giving up chocolate cake every night).

Finding it hard to navigate all of the conspiracy theories as a parent? Here's how one dad is trying to make sense of everything (<http://www.cbc.ca/parents/learning/view/im-trying-to-help-my-daughter-navigate-covid-conspiracy-theories>).

From one perspective, it's a way to prime them to take responsibility for the choices they make. But from another, it's really an illusion: we give them a very limited set of options that we have mostly decided upon ahead of time.

Since we had a third child in 2016, we are also acutely aware that we're now outnumbered. Although "one person, one vote" is admirable in principle, the kids would quickly realize their power in voting as a bloc. My wife and I decided, in what is an entirely justifiable move from the perspective of the dictators who pay the mortgage, that writing on the walls is illegal in our house. The hammer of the law comes down on whomsoever violates that law. If we were to open it up for a vote, it's conceivable that the wall-writing bloc would out-vote the clean-wall bloc and we would all be living in a graffiti-adorned hovel.

We don't live in a graffiti-adorned hovel and our children are healthy and know how to cross the street. But it wasn't democracy that did it. It's an uncomfortable truth that it was our tendency for autocratic rule by the few over the many that made them such well-adjusted kids.

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