

How to Explain (and Celebrate!) Patriotism to your Child

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My fondest memories of my childhood are the 4th of July. Aaahhhhh. RC and Shasta cola in the cooler, Ruffles potato chips with french onion dip, songs playing on the Hi-Fi, my mom boiling ribs while my dad then grilled them with smothered homemade BBQ sauce. Dad would wear his Marine hat (he did a short stint in Korea) with a tank top, my teenage sisters would cover themselves with baby oil and lay next to the pool as the neighborhood kids and I tried in vain to find Marco Polo. My friends and I experimented with fireworks in the street after we ate dinner. My dad would light a flare and shove it deep in the grass so that we could use it to light up our sparklers, snakes and flowers before it got dark and the really good stuff started. There were at least two American flags flying, one in the front and one in the back of the house.

Children learn patriotism in so many ways, like seeing the flag whip in the breeze in front of businesses and government buildings, reciting the pledge, and singing/watching the National Anthem at baseball games or the Olympics. These are all wonderful examples but young children really want to understand WHY we celebrate the 4th of July. In the absence of an explanation, children will create whatever definition they come up with and they are pretty creative! Try asking your child what being an American means or what patriotism is. I bet you'll get some fun answers. There IS a way to explain your country's patriotism to your child now and in the future that will serve them well as they mature into their citizenship.

What is Patriotism?

It's being proud of the country you are a citizen of. You can ask your child if they are proud to be a student at school or their soccer team. Or are they proud to be a big sister or little brother? If so, this is a display of patriotism for the group they belong to, like the country they live in. Loving and appreciating your country is a very patriotic attitude.

Not only is patriotism about feeling pride in your country, it is about taking that pride a step further and putting it into action. A patriotic person sees their status as an American citizen as a great honor, but that honor comes with responsibility. Therefore, patriotic people think about how their choices will reflect on their country. Think about it in the context of a family. Patriotic people make choices that will improve their country's culture or make their country look good. When I visit other countries, for example, I am extra polite and friendly to all those I encountered to give the best example of being an American.

How Can Your Child Show or Learn More About Patriotism?

- Saluting the flag or reciting the Pledge of Allegiance (if they are too young to have done this before, you can show them)
- Attend a local parade!
- Celebrate our Melting Pot diversity! We are one of the most diverse countries in the world! Explain to your child why so many immigrants come to America (the level of freedom to do what you want, religious freedoms, safety from restrictive or dangerous government, etc.) and how having diversity is such a wonderful advantage
- Visiting a museum about American History
- Voting! You can explain why you vote and what it means, what a privilege and duty it is to vote since so many do not have that choice and why you like having a voice in how our country is run
- Tell your child why you love living in America compared to another country. If your family comes from another country but are here for work, you can explain what you like about both countries!
- Honor soldiers and veterans by thanking them for their service when you meet one
- Visit local historical places or if you REALLY want to do it right when your child is older, take them on a road trip to Washington DC
- Explain what we've done wrong in the past in our country's history and why it's important that we remember so we don't repeat it

If children understand the importance of being contributing members of their communities, then they will grow up to be active, caring citizens. These values along with having conversations about patriotism and being presented with visual examples of what makes the United States of America one of the best nations in the world are integral in making our country a stronger, safer place to live.

As I sip my adult beverage and listen to some rad 80s tunes this 4th of July, I plan to sit back and watch some fireworks with pride and thankfulness in my heart. Thank you to all who make our country the kind of place where a minority can start a business to support her family, freedom of speech and peaceful protests are legally allowed, men and women serve in the military to keep us safe, and difficult conversations on how to make our nation more cohesive and less divided are encouraged.