

Closing the Parent Gap

By Barbara Dafoe Whitehead

The 2004 election revealed a striking gap in the political leanings of people who are married with children: They favored the Republican, President George W. Bush, over the Democrat, Sen. John Kerry, by nearly 20 percentage points—59 percent to 40 percent. This married parent gap must now take its place in the popular political lexicon alongside previously established voter gaps such as the gender gap (in which women generally lean Democratic and men lean Republican) and the race gap (in which minorities lean heavily Democratic and whites lean heavily Republican).

It was not always like this. Democrats were successful in competing for married parents in the very recent past. Bill Clinton only narrowly lost them in 1992, and then narrowly won them in 1996. Bush opened up a 15-point married parent gap over Al Gore in the 2000 election (winning the group 56 percent to 41 percent). But Clinton's success shows that Democrats should be able to compete for married parents again in the future—or even win them.

Many Democrats have come to realize in the aftermath of their defeat last November that they must strike out beyond their traditional base of support if they want to start winning national elections again. Sen. Hillary Clinton (D-N.Y.), for example, has begun to appeal to pro-life voters. And newly elected Democratic Party chairman Howard Dean has pledged to reach out to evangelical Christians.

But Democrats will not do better with married parents until they recognize one simple truth: Parents have a beef with popular culture. As they see it, the culture is getting ever more

violent, materialistic, and misogynistic, and they are losing their ability to protect their kids from morally corrosive images and messages. To be credible, Democrats must acknowledge the legitimacy of parents' beef and make it unmistakably clear that they are on parents' side.

The Parental Perspective

At the moment, Democrats are savoring their success with a largely different segment of electorate—young people, ages 18 to 29. These voters turned out in record numbers in 2004, accounting for 17 percent of the total vote, and they favored Kerry by 9 points (54 percent to 45 percent). On its face, this is a promising sign for the future.

At the same time, however, it is also worth thinking about where many of these voters will be standing come 2008. Some are already married. More will be married four years from now. And many of the married couples will have children. At that point, will the Democrats still

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***“One person with a belief is a social power equal to
ninety-nine who have only interests.”***

—John Stuart Mill

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look as good to them, let alone to those who are already married with children?

Parenthood is a life-transforming experience. It changes behavior in predictable ways. When people become parents, they become more closely connected to family and community, more religiously observant, and more likely to turn out to vote. They begin to think about where to find affordable housing in safe neighborhoods with good schools. They worry about protecting their kids from the lure of crime and drugs and the menace of gang violence and sexual predators on the Internet.

Their outlook on the popular culture can also change. Before parenthood, young adults are the chief consumers of the edgy, envelope-pushing popular culture. A 25-year-old who is not yet a parent is likely to feel at home in—or at least on nodding acquaintance with—the world of hip-hop, the club scene, R-rated movies, and adult-themed cable television shows. But a 35-year-old parent sees things in a different light. He or she looks at the popular culture not

through the eyes of an unencumbered adult, but through the eyes of a grown-up who is responsible for shaping the ideals, values, and aspirations of a child. From this vantage point, the culture—especially the elements that sensationalize crime, violence, drugs, and sex—looks more toxic. This does not mean that parents want to renounce the adult pleasures of the popular culture or deny them to other grownups. It does not mean that they favor censorship. Adult fare is fine as long as it is aimed at adults. But it does mean that parents now see a big difference between what is okay for adults and what is okay for kids. And they want to protect kids from what is not okay.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, I was part of a team that conducted focus groups with parents around the country. One of the first questions we asked was: “As parents, what do you see as your main responsibilities?” Almost every time, the participants identified two responsibilities. One was economic. As they liked to say, “We have to put a roof over our kids’

heads and food on the table." The other—and every bit as important as the first—was cultural. They would say: "We have to teach our kids right from wrong."

Later on, we would ask them: "In your efforts to teach your kids right from wrong, what are the forces that make it harder for you?" Of all the questions, this was the one that raised the emotional temperature in the room and brought people forward in their chairs. Their answer came almost by acclamation: "It's the culture." What they meant was that their kids are cast adrift in a media environment that is touting competitive materialism, coarse language, misogyny, violence, and celebrities behaving badly. All of this interferes with their best efforts to teach right from wrong.

That was the response from parents more than a dozen years ago. Today's parents are up against a culture industry that has become even more aggressive and resourceful in its marketing of extreme violence and casual sex to kids. So there is more than enough reason for this generation of parents to be concerned about the coarsening of the culture.

Consider, for example, the perspective of one such concerned parent who was recently interviewed on National Public Radio. This mother and children's book author grew up during the 1970s in a Midwestern Catholic household of nine children. Her parents were very strict. She was not allowed to watch television because her father "wanted us to use our imaginations." So, she read voraciously, losing herself in the imaginary worlds of C.S. Lewis' Narnia, Saint-Exupery's Sahara, and Lewis Carroll's Wonderland. Later on, as a young single adult, this woman rebelled against her strict upbringing. She became a popular icon for her defiance of moral convention and her protean pop-culture persona.

Then, in her 30s, she crossed over into parenthood. She became the married mother of two children. Her outlook on the popular culture changed. She began to see the wisdom of her father's strict rules and the advantages of a sheltered childhood. Today, she is trying

to give her own children, ages 2 and 8, the same kind of protection. So, she allows no television. She screens all videos before she will let her children view them. She rejects the sexually exhibitionist values of the popular culture. She wants to instill a strong moral sense in her children. "I try to stress what is important in life," she told an interviewer, "not just the surface. I encourage my daughter to work on the inside, not the outside. The way she treats people is more important than how she looks."

In case you are wondering, this famous author/mother is not Dr. Laura. It is Madonna.

Mama Does Preach

Is this just the latest persona invented by the endlessly self-reinventing Madonna? Maybe. But Madonna's story has an authentic ring. It dramatizes how the transition to parenthood produces a new outlook on the culture. Call it "lifestage conservatism." It is not based on conservative political ideology. Madonna, who supported Wesley Clark in 2004, is hardly a conservative ideologue. Nor, for that matter, are most married parents. In the November 2004 vote, the majority of married parents were self-identified moderates (45 percent) and liberals (16 percent). Rather, lifestage conservatism is rooted in the responsibility of parents to teach right from wrong. This sense of responsibility might explain the response of married parents with children to the now-famous question on the 2004 exit polls: Asked to name the "one" issue that mattered most in their presidential voting decision, 27 percent of married parents chose "moral values." This option was chosen by only 20 percent of the rest of the electorate.

The parental perspective is what inspires mothers in an upscale suburb of Boston—Sen. Kerry's backyard—to boycott Abercrombie & Fitch for its catalog ads featuring half-nude teenagers simulating group sex. It is what inspires parents to cry foul over *Monday Night Football's* steamy pre-game promotional ad for *Desperate Housewives*. (In many parts of the country, *Monday Night Football* begins before

children's bedtime hours.) And it is what makes parents seethe over corporate marketers whose sole purpose is to shock and offend in order to generate buzz and box office, without regard for how their tactics affect kids or their unsuspecting parents.

The Madonna interview highlights another key feature of the parental perspective. Like her, today's parents tend to compare the state of the popular culture today with the state of the popular culture when they were children—and not the state of the popular culture when they were young single adults. Madonna grew up in the 1970s. This is her baseline for judging what her kids are exposed to today. Consequently, the 1970s now seem like an age of Edenic innocence for kids. Back then, the big primetime television shows were *All In the Family*, *Happy Days*, *Laverne & Shirley*, and the *Mary Tyler Moore Show*. *The Brady Bunch* was going strong. *Grease*, *Star Trek*, and *The Muppet Movie* were hits at the box office. Debbie Boone's *You Light Up My Life* was at the top of the Billboard chart. A transgressive television moment meant showing Mike and Carol Brady in a double bed.

Today, of course, this has changed. Eminem, not Debbie Boone, tops the Billboard chart. Britney Spears, not Marcia Brady, sets the fashion standard for nine-year-old girls. T-shirts emblazoned with the brand name FCUK have replaced homemade tie-dyes. The hot kids' games are not Clue or Candyland. They are video games like last year's best-selling, award-winning video game *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*, which features gang violence and prostitute killing, or the Internet video game that invites players to step into the shoes of Lee Harvey Oswald and fire at President John F. Kennedy as his motorcade rolls by. This game was tastefully released on the 41st anniversary of his assassination.

At the same time, technological innovations have made it harder for parents to monitor what their kids are watching, buying, and playing. Back in the 1970s, there were only three major home entertainment

technologies—radio, television, and record players. All three were still big boxes. All three occupied fixed space in the home where parents could see and hear what was going on. All three came with plugs to pull and off buttons to push. But the new entertainment technologies include a dizzying and ever-multiplying array of devices that defy close parental oversight. They are small, portable, and personal. It is true that there are also technologies that theoretically allow parents to control and monitor their children's media consumption habits, such as V-chips in TVs and Internet monitoring software for computers. But as a practical matter, those technologies amount to small plugs in a crumbling dam. For one thing, kids are often more techno-savvy than their parents. For another, the sheer volume of media noise and consumer culture come-ons is enough to overwhelm the small patches parents may install on a TV or a computer. Personal technologies like handheld music players and cell phones—not to mention all of the TVs and computers at friends' houses—offer too many ways for marketers to reach over the heads of parents and appeal directly to kids. Even three-year-olds can tell you what is cool.

The pervasive reach of these new technologies undercuts the idea that parents have all the power they need to monitor the media experience of their children. Yes, there is much that parents can and should do to regulate children's hours of TV viewing or video game playing. But the technology moves around with the kids. So, it is not just a matter of monitoring what kids do at home. They are plugged in at school and at the mall and in the street. The media atmosphere is like smog: thick, pervasive, and opaque. To suggest that parents bear sole responsibility for what their kids are "breathing" is like telling people who are worried about global warming to buy a higher SPF sunscreen.

What has also changed is that more parents are working today. They are less available to supervise their kids' activities during the hours when kids are not in school. Indeed,

parents are the most time-starved group in society. This has provided an unprecedented opportunity for marketers to exploit the erosion of parental time and supervision with products and electronics designed to help kids feed themselves, entertain themselves, and explore every enticing nook and cranny of cyberspace. Many of these products are helpful, but some are not.

Research consistently finds an increase in aggression and a decline in pro-social behavior among kids who are exposed to media violence. One study found that after violent video game playing, students were slower to help a person whimpering in the hallway outside and slower to offer help to peers. And a heavy diet of such images and messages numbs kids to the social and moral consequences of violence. As for the idea that make-believe violence helps kids work out their aggressions, the research suggests the opposite: Simulating violence does not reduce violent impulses; it breeds them. And the more violent the games, the bigger the effect. The few available studies on graphic sexuality suggest similar desensitizing effects.

Up Against the Big Guys

Today's parents feel that they are losing the battle for the hearts and minds of their children. Their adversaries are not just corner store purveyors of candy, comic books, and *Playboy*. They face powerful forces in their efforts to raise kids of good character and competence. Parents are up against the fast food industry, the video game industry, the teen fashion industry, and the entertainment industry. These multibillion dollar enterprises spend huge amounts of time, money, and research thinking up ways to deliberately bypass parents and other gatekeepers. Their technologies pervade youth culture. Their consumerist messages tell kids that what you buy, who you idolize, and how you look matter more than who you are, how you treat others, or how hard you work. And these corporate powers hire armies of highly paid lobbyists, lawyers, and industry organizations to defend

their bottom-line interests. Yet, the same corporate powers deny any responsibility for the larger public interest. When called to account for gratuitously violent or sexually suggestive marketing tactics, industry lobbyists blandly state that they cannot be held responsible for shaping kids' character and conduct. After all, they say, that is the job of their parents.

Against these corporate Goliaths, parents feel powerless. Their individual voices are weak. Their time is limited. Their energies are focused on the daily work of taking care of kids and doing their jobs. They do not have the resources to fight commercial sleaze on their own. And some liberal groups that once supported parents and kids now seem more oriented to the ACLU than the PTA.

A Progressive Cultural Populism: Sending an "On Your Side" Message to Parents

Democrats have long been on the losing end of Republican appeals to a conservative cultural populism. Too often lately, the party does not counter these appeals but merely tries to change the subject, from cultural values to bread-and-butter issues. Clearly, it is crucial to contest the Republicans on the bread-and-butter issues. But why should Democrats fail to mount a defense, let alone an offense, on the cultural front?

In competing for at least one segment of the electorate—married parents with young children—Democrats can go on the offense with a progressive cultural populism. They can do so by taking the side of parents against the cultural forces that make it more difficult to "teach kids right from wrong." This does not mean censorship, of course. And it does not mean legislation or even regulation in every case. But it does mean that the party should use the bully pulpit regularly and aggressively to identify with parents' concerns and to attack the irresponsible marketers of violence and sleaze to young kids.

The essential first step is to recognize the worth and dignity of what parents do. This

sounds obvious, but it is too often overlooked. There are very few times in a lifetime when parents are publicly recognized and praised for their work and sacrifice in raising kids. High school graduation may be the only public occasion when parents hear words of thanks and praise.

Democrats can say to parents: You are doing an important job. You are making an indispensable contribution to society. Every American has a stake in your success. Every American is grateful when you do your job well.

At the same time, Democrats can also ally themselves with parents against the corporate forces that threaten their ability to raise good kids. The party can say: We recognize what you are up against. To us, the health of next-quarter profits should not outweigh the moral health of the next generation. In your struggle to battle adverse cultural influences, we are on *your* side.

Bill Clinton's support for school uniforms in the 1996 campaign is a prime example of how to use the bully pulpit to identify with parents' cultural concerns. Clinton knew that parents resented the heavy marketing of expensive sneakers and sexy celebrity-style clothing to their kids. He realized that this grievance had both an economic and a moral dimension. The pressure to buy such pricey gear imposed a financial burden on parents and it sent the wrong message to kids about what was important to pursue in school. Clinton obviously had no power to impose school uniforms on the millions of school kids in the thousands of local public school districts across the nation. But he did have the bully pulpit. And he used it to strike a chord with parents. And it is perhaps not mere coincidence that Clinton won married parents in 1996.

Or consider a more recent example: Democratic Gov. Rod Blagojevich of Illinois has launched a campaign to ban the sale of violent video games to kids under 18 by setting stiff penalties for retailers. In addition, he has made effective use of the bully pulpit to assert a crucial principle: "Parenting is hard work, and the state

has a compelling interest in helping parents to raise children to be upstanding men and women." In a letter to parents posted on the governor's website and co-signed by his wife, First Lady Patricia Blagojevich, the governor elaborates on this principle. The letter is worth citing at some length because it is such a good model of how Democrats can combine support for parents with protest against the corporate marketers who peddle violence to kids.

"To the parents of Illinois:

As parents, our first responsibility to our children is to make sure they are safe and to teach them right from wrong. When we were growing up, our parents had to worry about what dangers we could encounter outside the home, but at least in the home, we were safe.

Today, with the advent of so many types of new technology, it is a lot more difficult to know what our children are doing. And with a multi-billion dollar industry geared towards marketing violent and sexually explicit video games to our children, it is harder to shield our children.

Too many of the video games marketed to our children teach them all of the wrong lessons and all of the wrong values. These games use violence, rage and sexual aggression as play. That is not acceptable. When kids play, they should play like children, not like gangland assassins."

This letter contains a few simple but compelling populist appeals. It is written parent-to-parent, not governor-to-constituents. It acknowledges that parents have the primary responsibility to shape the moral character of their children, but it then makes the case that it is harder to do so today than in the past. It identifies with parents against a powerful multibillion industry, offers a critique of video games themselves, and ends with a statement on the value of encouraging pro-social, rather than anti-social, behavior.

More to the point, it reasserts and reclaims a principle that has been central to progressive child-saving reforms: Rearing children is not just a private responsibility for parents to bear alone. The state has a role—and the public has an interest—in supporting parents. And this includes helping parents fulfill their moral responsibilities to raise upstanding kids. In the progressive tradition, Democrats have been at the forefront of efforts to create a zone of protection for children against the incursions of the marketplace and to provide kids with more wholesome alternatives to the allures of adult entertainment. This was an animating idea behind the great reforms of the Progressive Era. Anti-child labor laws, compulsory education, and the creation of settlement houses as an alternative to the city streets were all designed to create a protected zone for children in a world where they were too often exploited and corrupted by commercial interests. And, as the Illinois governor makes clear, this is still part of the Democratic message and mission.

Taking aim against the powerful forces of Big Sleaze is just one form that a progressive cultural populism could take. There are other pro-parent initiatives that Democrats might consider as well. For example, why not form a Parents Caucus in the House or Senate or in state legislatures? A Democratic Parents Caucus could pull together elected officials who want to support parents with children. It would be a big tent. Some members would bring concerns about bread-and-butter priorities. Others might focus on child health insurance or child obesity. Still others might attend to cultural concerns.

If Democrats begin to reach out in this way, they will have a good chance of being more competitive with married parents—or even winning them. And single parents, who already strongly favor Democrats, will respond positively as well. Married parents are not alone in their critique of the culture. Single parents feel embattled by the same forces. In a letter to the editor in *The New York Times* that appeared shortly after the presidential

election, an African-American single dad of an 11-year-old girl and self-described blue state voter wrote, “What sentient parent has not fretted about the anti-childhood direction of our oversexed, body-image-shaming, hyper-individualist and materialist society? ... I know of countless African-Americans who have moved back down South in an attempt to shield their children from what they see as the irreligiousness, amorality and danger of Northeast urban life.”

In helping parents fight against the morally corrosive forces in the culture, Democrats have the wind of popular opinion at their back. Most Americans agree that the popular culture is getting sleazier. In a *Times*/CBS News poll taken a few weeks after the presidential election, nearly two-thirds of respondents said that Hollywood was lowering the standard of popular culture. And 70 percent said that all popular culture—including music, movies, and television—was lowering moral standards in America.

Finally, in taking the side of parents against the marketing of graphic sex and violence to kids, Democrats stand on firm political ground. They do not have to dispense with long-held issue positions, abandon core constituencies, or retreat from fundamental values. Supporting parents against powerful interests is in keeping with the party's principles and traditions. Democrats have always stood for the little guy against the big guys, families against big corporations, and the goal of creating a better future for the next generation. And, when it comes to parents who are engaged in raising children, there is more at stake than winning back the support of a culturally estranged group in the electorate. Democrats have a long tradition of standing up for parents and children. It is part of who they are. And it is vital to the future of the party itself to continue to build strong ties to parents. Democrats cannot be a party of the future if they lose their connection to the very people who are creating the future by rearing the next generation.