

## 'Daddy O' brings parenting into politics

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Just call him Daddy O.

Most leaders' playbooks take at least a page or two from "The Art of War," but President-elect Obama's rhetoric seems to be torn from very different kind of text: the modern parenting manual.

The "change we can believe in," it turns out, shares a lot with the revolution in thinking about child-rearing sprung from the work of Austrian psychologist Alfred Adler, which centers on principles such as mutual respect — or what the president-elect has called "the presumption of good faith" — fostering independence ("Team of Rivals," anyone?), and encouragement ("Yes we can!").

This passage from Obama's victory speech, for example, is a family meeting waiting to happen, complete with attempts to acknowledge his own limits, make room for dissent, make sure the listeners feel heard, and stress the importance of everyone's contribution:

"There are many who won't agree with every decision or policy I make as president, and we know that government can't solve every problem. But I will always be honest with you about the challenges we face. I will listen to you, especially when we disagree. And above all, I will ask you join in the work of remaking this nation the only way it's been done in America for two-hundred and twenty-one years — block by block, brick by brick, calloused hand by calloused hand."

These and other progressive parenting principles are reflected not only in Obama's rhetoric, but also in his approach to leadership — an approach that already seems to be rubbing off.

Sen. Claire McCaskill (D-Mo.), for instance, recently called Senate Democrats' decision not to strip Sen. Joe Lieberman of his chairmanship a "direct result of the tone [Obama] set."

"The old school was that you reward your friends and punish your enemies," she said. "But it's a new day, and there is no reward and punishment going on."

No rewards or punishments? Alfie Kohn, whose book "Unconditional Parenting" is subtitled "Moving from Rewards and Punishments to Love and Reason" approves:

"The most respectful — and effective — approach to parenting consists of working WITH children rather than doing things TO them," he says. 'Working with' parents talk less and listen more. They regularly try to imagine how the world looks from the child's point of view. They bring kids into the process of decision-making whenever possible. 'Doing to' parents, on the other hand, impose their will and use some combination of rewards and punishments in an attempt to elicit obedience."

Kohn says a "working with" approach in the political realm is "essentially more democratic" — particularly if it offers real choices, and not just the illusion of them.

A progressive parenting approach also means taking responsibility for your own role in a conflict, says Jane Nelsen, author of the classic child-rearing handbook "Positive Discipline." She

compares Obama's vow to end the "partisan bickering" in Washington or his determination to use diplomacy as a primary tool in international relations to the efforts of parents who want to break out of power struggles or revenge cycles with their kids: "In order to stop them, someone has to recognize what it is, and say, 'I can even see what my part has been in the power struggle,' and find solutions that work for everyone."

It would be easy to bash Obama's enlightened-father philosophy as an insulting new extension of the nanny state, but the truth is that the exercise of power in any form shares a lot in common with the parent-child relationship.

As President Bush's former chief of staff Andy Card said of his boss during the 2004 Republican National Convention: "This president sees America as we think about a 10-year-old child."

Bush's rhetorical model, however, is typically more "Father Knows Best" than T. Berry Brazelton.

Consider these words from the 43rd president, back when he was keeping his secretary of defense:

"I hear the voices, and I read the front page, and I know the speculation. But I'm the decider, and I decide what is best. And what's best is for Don Rumsfeld to remain as the secretary of defense."

His choice of words suggests a more no-nonsense, SuperNanny-style approach to his job ("It's in their nature to test the boundaries and it's up to you to make sure they don't cross the line") that also has its proponents: Bush's tough, take-no-guff rhetoric led many, including former British Prime Minister Tony Blair, to praise him as a "strong leader" during a time of war.

But progressive parenting experts argue that the "love and reason" approach to leadership is not only more respectful — it might also turn out to be more effective.

According to Kohn, children who feel listened to, respected and understood, and who are allowed to take real responsibility and develop internal motivation, tend to care more and work harder than those who are rewarded for their achievements.

On the other hand, says Nelsen, while rewards and punishments may work in the short term, in the long run children who are raised to respond to them rather become either "praise junkies" or "rebels."

As Kohn puts it in "Unconditional Parenting": "One reason that a heavy-handed, do-what-I-say approach tends not to work very well is that, in the final analysis, we really CAN'T control our kids — at least not in the ways that matter. ... It's simply impossible to force a child to go to sleep, or stop crying, or listen or respect us. These are the issues that are most trying to parents precisely because it's here that we run up against the inherent limits of what one human being can compel another human being to do."

"Sadly, though, that doesn't stop us from trying newer, cleverer, or more forceful strategies to get kids to comply. And when these techniques fail, that's often taken as evidence that what's needed is ... more of the same."

More of the same? There's one phrase that's definitely not in the new top pop's vocabulary.