

How to talk to your kids about the referendum

On the 14th of October, Australians will have the opportunity to decide if an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice to Parliament should be enshrined in the Australian constitution.

Given the extensive media coverage as the voting day draws ever closer, our kids are likely to hear about the referendum and want to understand what is going on.

This is a wonderful opportunity for us to have values based discussions with our children about culture, community, democracy, and history. Here's some tips on how to frame those conversations in a positive way, whichever way you plan on voting.

1. Lean in to what you don't understand

Getting our heads around politics can be difficult at the best of times, let alone working out how to explain political processes to children! And then add to that discomfort the fact that many of us grew up without a solid understanding (or even a complete misunderstanding!) of First Nations history and culture.

Start by acknowledging the gaps in your own knowledge. It's great for our kids to hear us admit that we don't have all of the answers. Demonstrate for them the process you're going to take to find answers to questions or concerns you might have.

2. Get clear on the basics

What is a referendum?

For younger children

Imagine the Australian Constitution is like a big rule book for the whole country. It tells the people who run the country, called the government, what they're allowed to do and what they're not allowed to do. It's super important because it helps keep everything fair and organized.

Sometimes the government wants to change the rules in this big book. But they can't just change it all by themselves. They have to ask the regular people, like your mum and dad and other grown-ups, if they agree with the change. And that's where a referendum comes in.

A referendum is like a special vote where all the grown-ups in Australia get to say 'yes' or 'no' to the government's idea for changing the rules in the big book. If most of the grown-ups say 'yes,' then the change can happen. But if most of them say 'no,' then the rules stay the same.

So, it's like a big decision that all the grown-ups make together to decide if they want to change the important rules in the country's rule book or not. It's a way to make sure everyone's voice is heard.

What is this referendum about?

Right now, in our big set of rules called the Constitution, it doesn't say anything special about the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. But some people think it should.

They have an idea called 'The Voice.' The Voice would make a group that speaks for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. This group would tell the government what they think about things that affect these people.

Now, there's going to be a big vote, like when we vote for our favorite things, but this time it's about changing the rules. People will say 'yes' or 'no' to this idea of making The Voice part of our important rules, the Constitution. If more people say 'yes,' then it will happen. If more people say 'no,' then it won't change.

So, on a special day, people will decide if we should have The Voice in our rules or not. It's like a big decision we all make together."

Why might someone vote "yes"?

- The Voice would mean that the First Nations people get to talk about things that are important to them.
- People who vote "yes" think that the Voice will help First Nations people and the government make better rules. They also think it will bring all Australians closer together.
- If we put the Voice in our important rules (the Constitution), it can't be taken away or stopped by a different government. It stays there but can change a little bit.
- Lots of First Nations people like the "yes" vote idea, and it came from a special message made by Indigenous Australians called the Uluru Statement of the Heart.
- The Voice would make sure the First Nations people are remembered in the Constitution.
- It shows that Australians want to keep being friends and making things better together.

Why might someone vote "no"?

- Some people are saying "no" because they don't think the Voice will be good enough to help Indigenous people. They think the government might not listen to the Voice, and there might be better ways to help.
- Other people are voting "no" because they worry that the Voice might make people feel different because of their race. They want everyone to be treated the same.
- Some people say "no" because they think the Voice will cost a lot of money and make it harder to make new rules.
- Finally, some people think a Voice isn't needed because there are already Indigenous people in the government who are supposed to speak for everyone, including First Nations people.

"Yes" or "No", not "Right" or "Wrong"

It's highly unlikely that all the adults in your child's life will vote the same way on the referendum. Emphasize to your children that people on both sides of the argument care very much about First Nations people. Consequently, it's important to frame the discussion so that there are no "goodies" and "baddies". (Even First Nations people are not unanimous on how to vote in the referendum, so clearly there is no right answer.)

3. Give context

Many First Nations people in Australia don't have as good a life as others. They face challenges in their health, happiness, and how long they live.

This happens because of things that happened a long time ago, like when people from Europe came to Australia and didn't treat Indigenous people fairly.

The government makes a report called 'Closing the Gap' each year to show how they're trying to make things better for Indigenous people. But some people say the government isn't doing it quickly enough.

The Voice is an idea that some people think could make the government work harder to help Indigenous people and close this gap faster.

4. Model Values Based Voting

The referendum will be a big lesson for Australians. It's a chance to learn about Australia's history, how our government works, and how we make important decisions together. But the most important thing to learn is that it's okay to have different opinions, even if we care a lot about something. Everyone thinks differently based on their own feelings and ideas, and it's ok to be different.

More resources:

The topics discussed in this article are heavy, but there are many books suitable for children and teens that can be used as a springboard for engaging in discussions about these moments in history.

Somebody's Land: Welcome to Our Country address the mistaken belief of Terra Nullius, Stolen Girl talks about the Stolen Generation, and

Say Yes: A Story of Friendship, Fairness and a Vote for Hope talks about the 1967 referendum that finally saw Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples recognized as Australians.

Finding Our Heart explains the Uluru Statement from the Heart in a way that even young children can understand.

More resources for learning about the history of First Nations people and important Indigenous topics can be found at AIATSIS.gov.au , ulurustatement.org/history , and abc.net.au/education.



AUTHOR

Dr Justin Coulson

Dr Justin Coulson is a dad to 6 daughters. He is the parenting expert and co-host of Channel Nine's Parental Guidance, and he and his wife host Australia's #1 podcast for parents and family: The Happy Families Podcast. He has written 7 books about families and parenting. For further details visit happyfamilies.com.au.