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Mommie Brain

Rachel Zients Schinderman

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Failing to connect over special needs

THIS IS MY FIRST PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION as a mother, so forgive me for straying from the normal mom musings, but I need to comment.

I am proud to say I am voting for Obama. I have even taught my son to say, "Obama!" It's pretty cute and a bit of an accomplishment because his speech is delayed.

My son is in speech therapy as well as occupational and physical therapy as well as attending an early intervention school. This is because he is developmentally delayed, though catching up every day.

I mention this because though there are several issues I could discuss while bringing up the election (vote No on Prop. 8), the one that is really getting to me is Sarah Palin, that is Sarah Palin as a mom. Specifically, Sarah Palin as a mother with a child with special needs.

Sarah Palin's son Trig has Down Syndrome.

Now, I do not know how she raises her children. I hope she is a good mom. It makes me uncomfortable to actually put down in words in this paper the comments and judgments that I admit I have made about her and her parenting based on very little information. After all, I do not know her.

But I have never seen her offer a moment to admit to the struggle of having a child with Down Syndrome.

I have not seen emotion in her with this issue.

Now, for the record, my child does not have Down Syndrome. I do not know that challenge and I would not pretend to. But Down Syndrome children have low muscle tone, hypotonia, and my son has hypotonia. So many of the therapies are similar.

If I saw that she too found having a child with special needs challenging, perhaps it would allow me to understand her and her admirers a little more. Still, I wouldn't vote for her. Our politics are too different. But perhaps I wouldn't be scratching my head so much.

She has said that special needs families have a friend in her, but I feel no connection to her in this regard. And I don't know if I really believe her.

She spoke recently about what her policy would be regarding children with special needs. She would provide quality education to special needs children, even have the government pay for private school if needed. I was happy to hear her address the issue and to be a part of the story. But it took until a week and a half before the election for me to see this in her. Why so late?

I sit in the waiting rooms of all of my son's appointments. I talk with the other moms, the other dads. We all have a certain look in our eyes. We're all looking to share our stories with each other. Most of us are at different points, some struggling with acceptance, some calm after years and years, but no matter what, we get it and we listen.

Regardless of our politics, I would listen to Sarah Palin if she would talk about it. Now, these are personal issues, she owes me nothing in sharing that part of her life, but she has trotted Trig out. He is out on the road with her. She strolls into Wal-Mart with

him to grab some diapers with the press following her. And all the while I am wondering if they are traveling with an occupational therapist as well as her hairstylist? What sacrifices is she making? Whose needs are being met?

MANY HAVE ASKED WOULD WE BE COMMENTING OR ASKING OURSELVES ABOUT SARAH PALIN'S PARENTING CHOICES IF IT WERE TODD PALIN WHO WERE RUNNING. PERHAPS WE WOULD NOT. BUT SARAH PALIN HAS SPECIFICALLY PUT HER STATUS AS A MOTHER AS ONE OF HER QUALIFICATIONS.

Many have asked would we be commenting or asking ourselves about Sarah Palin's parenting choices if it were Todd Palin who were running.

Perhaps we would not. But Sarah Palin has specifically put her status as a mother as one of her qualifications. She's just a hockey mom, she tells us.

Well then, as another mom, just as I would if I saw something in the park I did not like, I am making judgments. And with that judgment I will cast my vote.

If she does not become vice president, it will be interesting to see if she continues to speak out for special needs families. As a mother in that club, I hope so. The more voices the better. I guess we'll see.

So, as I approach this election day, I will vote this year as a mother.

I have not yet decided whether I will bring my rambunctious two year old with me to vote. I have brought him to vote with me several times before in his stroller. In fact, my "I Voted" sticker from the primaries is still stuck to his wipes container in his room. But the anticipated long lines may not be easy for him.

This election year motherhood was part of the conversation. And whether I bring my son or not, when I go to vote, my child and all of his needs, special and otherwise, will be there with me.

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