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VP candidates set the tone

Bush, Gore should listen to Dad and Uncle Joe

Watching the vice-presidential debates brought the embarrassing suggestion that maybe Richard Cheney and Joseph Lieberman have more presidential timber than the tops of their tickets. Maybe this election has kangaroo pairs, as an old saying goes, with the back legs stronger than the front.

Most observers were surprised when the two men around the table with Bernard Shaw acted so civil and even friendly with each other. They broke the pattern of vice-presidential contenders venting the campaign's aggressions.

Cheney and Lieberman talked out the issues, framed their disagreements succinctly, and even seemed to enjoy each other. Central casting could not have picked better characters than Cheney as a dad and Lieberman as a kindly uncle.

George W. Bush and Al Gore have displayed very little of these dignities in their campaigning, especially in the first debate. In place of a fatherly and avuncular presence, they look like tense school kids jockeying for the teacher's attention. Bush sends jabs at his opponent, not-so-gently reminding viewers about Gore's "character" flaws in fund raising, and supposed claims to influence and inventiveness. And that smirk doesn't help. Gore gets easily

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caught up in details, so he often doesn't look presidential. That can leave his audiences wondering about the broad principles that he stands for.

If Bush is the "bad boy" in class, chopping down his rival and trying to be king of the hill, Gore is the "good boy" who knows all the answers, but makes his classmates' eyes roll. By acting more their shoe size and not their age, Bush and Gore tend to be tiresome squabblers.

The debates we hoped would be a thoughtful exchange of opposing views, have been a bore. How many times did Bush say he would turn money back to the "people who pay the bills," and Gore say "the richest 1 percent"? A cynic could easily guess that they were hammering at these headlines in order to make easy sound bites for TV news or to scare citizens away from the other side. Since then, they have scared themselves into blandness from fear that these negative images might take root in voters' minds.

Both men have missed opportunities to talk out the ideological differences that are the real contenders in this campaign. Where is Gore's hearty endorsement of the core of

Democratic convictions — the conversion of anti-government sentiment into a rallying cry for better government? He has failed to defend the Democratic way against repeated Republican slurs and has not articulated a pattern beyond the particulars. Similar things could be said about Bush: Beyond the slogans, how will Republicans deal with pressing problems?

Bush and Gore could benefit from watching what worked in the vice-presidential debate. They both could use words to express how their particular policy positions fit into the pattern of their plans for the next few years. Fortunately, these two young fellas have a bit more time to find their bully pulpits.

Richard Cheney and Joseph Lieberman offered examples about how to lay out the parties' differences clearly, fairly, and in an engaging style.

The presidential competitors could help themselves by listening to what your dad or favorite uncle would say on the day before your big game — relax and think of the big picture. And so, Mr. Bush and Mr. Gore, listen to your elders.

— Croce, an associate professor of American Studies at Stetson University, is teaching a course this fall called *Campaign Watching 2000*.