

POINTS OF VIEW

Parenting's a job that requires much and gives much

There's only one job I know of that requires a person to work 24 hours a day, without paying even minimum wage! The job is parenting, the toughest job you'll ever love.

One of the reasons I'm happy to live in Michigan is that our state Legislature, six years ago, declared the month of March "Parenting Awareness Month."

The purpose of this month is to celebrate people who are raising children, to show the importance of good parenting to a child's well-being and to promote parenting education.

With March only a few days away, I ask parents, and others who play a caregiving role in a child's life, to help celebrate Parenting Awareness Month by following three simple guides:

Adopt "Every day a little play"

— remember, you're supposed to be having fun.

Focus on spending fun time with your child to develop a sense of warmth and sharing between the two of you. Hold your baby toward you and sing a lullaby. Share in your young child's favorite board game. Ask your teen what he or she would enjoy doing together. Whatever you do together should be your child's choice.

Create balance between your children and yourself — remember, you need time too.

Find time to take care of yourself and you'll take better care of your children. Think about what re-energizes you. Decide on one activity that makes you feel better and do it. Balance is also found by simplifying your life. Can you, your children and your spouse give up one extracurricular

GUEST COLUMNIST



OUIDA G. CASH

activity to find more balance as individuals and as a family?

Practice on-the-job training — children don't come with a manual.

Like any challenging job, parenting requires training. Parenting skills are sharpened and improved over a lifetime, and what works today may not

work tomorrow. It's important to expand your ideas and increase your options. Read parenting books or magazines. Find a parenting mentor — someone whose children you admire — and ask him or her to share techniques. Network with friends whose children are the same age as yours. Lastly, as you educate yourself, think about what will work for you and your family and follow your instincts.

As we celebrate Michigan's Parenting Awareness Month, please take some time to bring these basic ideas to the forefront of your life, and hopefully, you'll carry them with you well into the future.

Note: Professionals from Youth Living Centers will be focusing on a different parenting topic each week in the Observer Community Life section throughout March. We hope you'll enjoy reading these articles to gain

new insights as you explore your role as a parent. If the topics don't apply to your family, please pass the articles on to a friend.

To kick off this special month, you might want to sign up for a Parenting Awareness Month activity. Here's a sampling:

■ Bridging the Gap Family Day, March 14, (248) 644-2245;

■ Dad's Night Out, March 14, (734) 728-3400;

■ Parenting Matters Expo and Conference, March 21, (313) 345-3922.

Ouida G. Cash, Ed.D., has committed the past 28 years to improving the lives of children and families in Michigan. She is chief executive officer of Youth Living Centers, a private, nonprofit organization that specializes in serving children, youths and families from southeastern Michigan.

Ameritech owes some of its customers \$76.1 million

That kind of headline, in inch-high letters, should have been on the notice telephone customers received by their February bills.

Instead, Ameritech printed the notice in teeny-weensy type, designed to produce eyestrain. It disguised the news with a tiny headline with a headline that tells you next to nothing: "Notice of pendency of class action proposed settlement and hearing."

I surveyed eight colleagues. Only one had noticed it.

One sentence contained 170 words, guaranteed to be incomprehensible. The lawyers who crafted this notice ignored the lessons they've been getting about how to write plain English. A court forced Ameritech to send out the notice, and company lawyers vowed they would roast in the netherworld before they would write clearly.

I shall endeavor to translate.

The notice goes to customers of Michigan Bell, Ohio Bell, Indiana

Bell, Wisconsin Bell who had "Line Backer" service between Jan. 1, 1987 and Nov. 7, 1997.

On page 2, under a wooden heading called "description of the lawsuit," we get to the guts of the matter.

A plaintiff named Deborah Todd and others filed a class-action suit in Madison County, Ill., saying Ameritech "misled its customers into paying for an optional service called 'inside wire maintenance service' (IWMS).

"Ameritech markets this service under various trade names, all with the term Line Backer," said the notice. The customers said Ameritech misled them "in violation of applicable state consumer fraud laws."

The parties negotiated a settlement. Ameritech agreed to pay approximately \$76.1 million to all members of the class. In addition, Ameritech will pay the plaintiffs' attorneys fee of \$1.9 million.

If you were one of the misled cus-



TIM RICHARD

tomers, you have three options:

■ Ask to be excluded so you can file your own suit. Write to the plaintiffs' attorneys by March 9 and ask to be excluded in the case of Todd v. Ameritech No. 97-L-1020. The attorneys are Stephen M. Tillery and Richard P. Paletta, 10 Executive Woods Court, Swansboro, Ill. 62228. Give them your name, address and phone number.

■ Object to terms of the settlement (pages 2 and 3 of your fine-print

notice; consult an attorney for further translation). By March 9, send your written objections to the Court Clerk, Madison County Courthouse, Civil Division, Edwardsville, Ill. 62025.

Judge Randall Bono has scheduled a hearing for 9:30 a.m. April 6 to determine if the settlement is "fair, reasonable and adequate." Edwardsville is a bit northeast of St. Louis and just west of I-55, about three-fourths of the way across Illinois.

■ Accept the settlement. To accept, you must file a "proof of claim" form. It's on the back page of your teeny-weensy legal notice. They need your name, address, phone number, signature and a copy of your Ameritech phone bill showing you paid for Line Backer for a home or business with 19 or fewer lines. Send it to: Ameritech/State Bell Companies IWMS Settlement; PO Box 9454; Garden City, NY 11530-9454. Deadline is July 15.

If you threw away your legal notice (as Ameritech hopes you will do), don't call me. Tell Bob Cooper, president of Ameritech Michigan, general offices at 444 Michigan Ave., Detroit (no ZIP code is given in the telephone directory). Office phone is 800-257-0902.

Despite the potential \$78 million cost, the company is defiant: "Ameritech denies that it has violated any laws, and denies that any of its marketing or sales of IWMS has been misleading in any way." Yeah, sure. Ameritech's leaders are the kind who, if they were caught up to their necks in offal, would swear it was rose petals.

The only question is whether Ameritech will cover the \$78 million by a) cutting its dividend, b) axing another 1,560 workers or c) cutting the executive payroll and bonuses. I vote for c.

Tim Richard's Touch-Tone voice mail number is (734) 953-2045, Ext. 1881.

'Cure' doubtful

Remember the old line about the cure being worse than the disease? Here's a real-life example.

The Michigan Senate passed earlier this month a package of bills that would consolidate school board elections on the November general election ballot instead of being held at various times during the year.

The disease, everybody agrees, is poor turnout at school elections.

"I was a township clerk. We have too many elections," said Sen. Loren Bennett, R-Canton, sponsor of one of the bills. "We have turnouts of 30,000 for presidential elections and 1,500 for school board elections."

Worse, there's good evidence that school people — board members, principals, teachers' unions, PTOs, whoever — often conspire to schedule elections at times when low turnout makes it possible for a dedicated minority of supporters to pass bond issues. "I nearly fell off my chair," said Sen. Joanne Emmons, R-Big Rapids, "when a school board member, who shall be unnamed, said in our hearing, 'We don't want all those people voting in our election!'"

A quick look at recent Michigan school election statistics confirms the fear.

Michigan has 555 K-12 school districts and 57 intermediate (countywide) districts. They produce a lot of elections. According to the Senate Fiscal Agency, there were 1,074 school elections in 1994 and 641 in 1995.

This can produce low turnouts, especially in millage elections. In 1994, for example, Birmingham voters by 3-1 approved 24.61 mills in February 1996. That's fine, but only 5,465 people voted out of 60,000 eligible voters, a 9.09 percent turnout.

So what's the cure? The Michigan Senate, 31-5, thinks it's holding school elections only at specified times: Tuesdays following the first Mondays in April, August and at the November general elections. Schools could hold elections at other times, but they would have to pay 105 percent of the cost — a big disincentive.

Maybe so, but consider what really happens when you add school elections to the bedsheet ballot we see in November. When folks are trying to figure out voting for president, governor, U.S. senators, U.S. representatives, state senators, state representatives, county officials and judges, it's easy for school issues to get lost.

This concerns opponents of the Senate bill. Sen. Alma Smith, D-Salem, a former South Lyon school board member, said, "In June, the newspapers can focus on the school board. In November, they are focused on the president and governor. Where do you think we're going



PHILIP POWER

to get coverage of the same quality and quantity?"

Sen. Gary Peters, D-Bloomfield Township, agreed: "I have problems mixing the school board with the general election. It gets lost on the ballot, and school boards don't get the same kind of attention."

They're right. Responsible hometown newspapers such as this one spend a lot of time covering all kinds of races and interviewing candidates. But time is not endless, and space in the newspaper is scarce. Adding school elections to the November ballot can only worsen the crunch of providing solid coverage for important issues.

The Senate bill package is a perfect example of the cure being worse than the disease.

Fortunately, there is a good alternative available to the Michigan House as it starts to consider the matter. That is to lump together all education races into one single education election. Voters would select members of the State Board of Education, regents of the University of Michigan, trustees of Michigan State University, governors of Wayne State University, community college boards, and members of local school boards.

Confronted with an entire election dealing with matters educational, the news media would be obliged actually to cover the races, to question candidates, to evaluate qualifications and question positions. Candidates would be required to explain their positions. "Name" candidates would be discouraged. Voters could think about total education policy.

Interestingly, this is exactly what we did in Michigan prior to adoption of the 1963 Constitution. Education races were clustered into one election held in odd-numbered years. When the new Constitution was approved, it undid a sensible system of education elections.

Members of the House have a terrific opportunity to solve this problem that has been festering for 35 years. Let's hope they can see that the cure proposed by the Senate is far worse than the disease of low turnout.

Phil Power is chairman of HomeTown Communications Network Inc., the company that owns this newspaper. He welcomes your comments, either by voice mail at (734) 953-2047, Ext. 1880, or by e-mail at ppower@online.com

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