

POINTS OF VIEW

Rant on hold, but honestly, parents should be kids' filters

I'll admit I may have overreacted. With My Best Friend and his two very well behaved little boys, I took the nickel tour at Sunday's Farmington Hills Police Department open house. They threw quite a party. Not one square inch of space around the department went to waste — from inflatable amusements on the grassy campus to the squad cars lined along 11 Mile.

Police, fire and rescue staff patiently explained their work and showed off vehicles and gear to anyone with a question. The boys went home with T-shirts, badges, coloring books, a little dog drool from an enthusiastic K-9 and one pink, plastic snake.

I went home with something of a chip on my shoulder.

After wandering about in the 80-plus-degree heat, we followed McGruff the Crime Dog inside, where we found a sign that read, "Hands On Weapons Demonstrations."

What reporter could resist?

Along the way, we passed long lines at the child finger-printing station. The 3-year-old, who only wanted to go back to the moon walk, showed interest in the driving simulator, but I explained that was just for grown ups.

He took that pretty well, considering he just had to master the concept of "waiting your turn."

Finally, we walked past a table display of real, unloaded guns and into the firing range, a low-ceilinged room that appeared longer than it was wide. The first thing I saw was a row of children, all roughly 7 or 8 years old, lined up against a rail. I saw an officer helping a youngster handle a simulated weapon. And I saw a black-and-white target, the silhouette of a human being.

Words failed me. And that's saying quite a lot.

I led the way outside as the beginnings of a rant took shape.

"Is it just me," I asked MBF, "or is that the most outrageous thing you've ever seen? Have these people not heard 6 year olds are killing each other with guns?"

Knowing a rant when he hears one, the man wisely remained quiet. He did, however, suggest I call the chief before I wrote something I might regret.

"Sure," I said. "The rational thing."

While the idea of a liberal reporter on an anti-gun mission might have made him nervous, Chief Bill Dwyer said he understood my first impression. Though he was on a tight timeline, he took more than a few minutes to explain exactly what I saw and why.

"That was our Firearms Training System," Dwyer said. "We purchased it with a consortium about nine years ago. It shows different scenarios about when to shoot and not to shoot."

After instruction, the person using the simulator has to decide when it's okay to shoot at the screen. It's kind of like a video game, he said.

Dwyer pointed out the kids are always accompanied by their parents and told in great detail why and how police officers use the system. Most people only see cops on television or in the movies, and while I love "NYPD Blue," it doesn't do much to explain how a police officer determines when to use deadly force.

Parents must see a benefit to it. Otherwise so many wouldn't have been lined up with their children on Sunday afternoon.

"We've never had anybody give us any negative feedback," Dwyer said. "If we had, we would have gotten rid of it."

That was the case with a squirt-gun given away a few years back, he said. People objected, the idea was dropped.

So why hasn't anybody spoken up about having kids shoot a simulated gun on a firing range?

Maybe it's all in how Hills police handle it. They set up their open house to improve understanding between officers and members of the community they serve. The simulator

fits right in.

"It's more of an educational thing for parents and kids, to know there's a lot of training that's required of our officers," Dwyer said.

While I completely understand his point and the reasons behind offering the simulator, I wouldn't want my child



shooting a real weapon at a real person.

firing a fake weapon on fake people. I think it just makes it easier to pull the trigger if children are ever faced with the choice

But those children who tried out the simulator weren't mine.

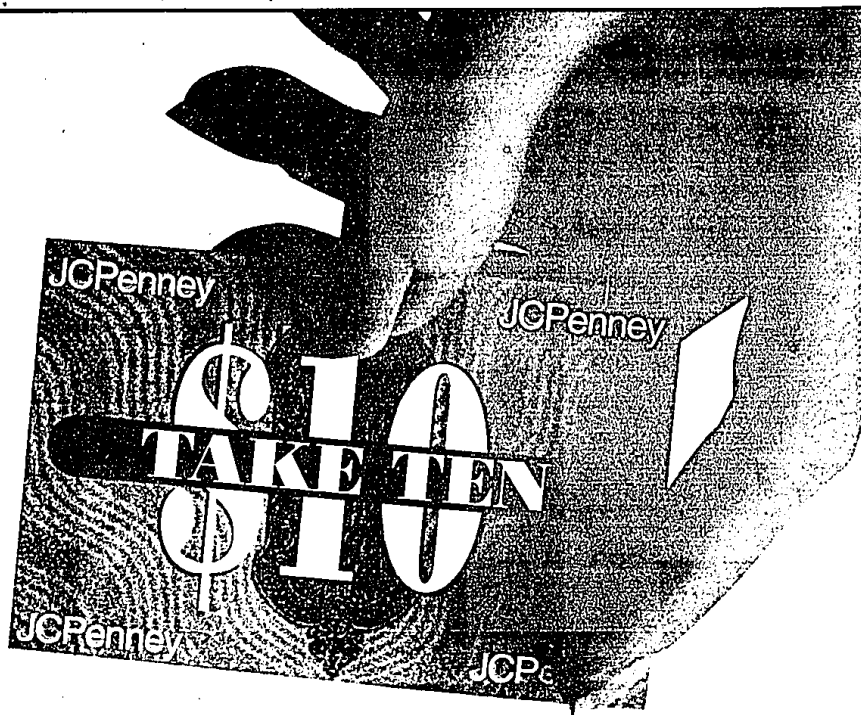
We can't, as a society, stop any legitimate effort to educate people just because the lesson offends some. It's up to parents to act as filters against whatever they don't want their children to learn.

So I bid farewell to another

perfectly good rant, lost in the gentle, but formidable force of reason. I have a feeling, though, another one waits right around the corner.

Dog park, anyone?

Joni Hubred is a staff writer with the Farmington Observer and covers the city of Farmington Hills.



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