

POINTS OF VIEW

Holding children harmless

New programs, legislation to ease parental frustrations

It's easier to recognize child abuse when the signs are as visible as broken bones, burns and bruises. But not all abuse is physical. Take the following situation that took place in a women's dressing area at Hudson's Summit Place Mall.

I pass the woman as I enter a dressing stall and close the door, but nothing shuts out what is about to take place.

"What have you been doing in there? I'm tired of waiting."

A door opens. "You're a goddamn brat, you know that? What have you been doing? You're not getting anything."

"But Mom, you told me to try some things on and I was waiting for you to button it."

"I don't care." Her voice lowers but comes out as a hiss. "You're just a goddamn brat. You're not getting anything."

"Wimpering follows. 'Let's see how it looks.' Ah, I think, we all have bad days. 'It looks cute, but you're not getting it. Put your clothes on and let's go.'"

There are outright tears at this point. And maybe because my son grew up too quickly, or maybe because I never had a daughter to dress up, I sit

for a minute, listening to the tears trail off down the hall.

While that conversation happened at Summit Place in Pontiac, it could have happened at any shopping mall. And it could have been any one of us caught up in the frustration that comes with the joy of raising kids, especially when you don't know how.

In a reprise of one of her postpartum shows Monday night, Murphy Brown explains, "You walk in the hospital alone, and they send you out two days later with a total stranger."

"Parenting and taking care of a child is the toughest job in the world," said Youth Living Center executive director Ouida Cash.

According to Sandra Murphy, executive director of the Child Abuse Prevention Council of Out-Wayne County, "The rule of thumb is that for every report of abuse there are two that go unreported."

Statewide for the last fiscal year there were 60,125 cases of abuse or neglect reported. There are a lot of other figures to consider, but for whatever reason — lack of staffing, poverty or determination the report has a revenge motive — that eventually breaks down into 639 cases of physical abuse, 8,098 cases of neglect and 1,084 cases



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of abuse and neglect.

Don't be misled — a case can involve more than one child. An "unduplicated" count of victims for last year amounts to 25,931.

Now, however, there is growing recognition of the problem, some programs to help and a package of 11 bills in the state Senate committee on Family Law, Criminal Law and Corrections.

Help is coming in the form of a campaign for alcohol-free parenting conducted by YLC, the Downriver Guidance Clinic and the Out-Wayne County agency with a \$100,000 federal grant.

Another relatively new program for parents helps teach them to "Be a Hugger, Not a Slugger." The program (728-3400) is offered through Murphy's Out-Wayne County agency with the support of a cadre of volunteers and financial commitment from Target stores.

"We have to start realizing that families need help, that we don't have a microchip that makes instant parents. Even the whole idea of getting help as a parent is new," said Murphy, who runs the program. Included are 12 alternatives to lashing out.

In Oakland County, the Skillman Foundation recently awarded \$46,000

to the Child Abuse and Neglect Council there for its Volunteer Action program.

Objectives include public awareness efforts on the Report Card Reflex; survey public and private schools regarding their policies for reporting child abuse and offer training; act as a central resource agency for related issues by developing a library of articles, books and videos; and develop a speakers' bureau for training and general education.

Anyone interested in giving children a fair shake in life better take the time this week to become informed and to contact your state legislators about the package of bills that must be reported out of committee before the Legislature adjourns for summer recess in the next week or so.

The bills range from keeping the child's best interests in mind (HB 4064) to those dealing with arrest warrants for abusers (HB 4360, 4361, 4362).

The impact of the legislation could be far-reaching, but it's up to you to make an impact on your legislator.

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Religious right misreads recent court ruling

Evangelicals crowded too soon at the Michigan Supreme Court's May 25 home school ruling.

"I praise the court for recognizing the rights of parents in making educational choices for their children," trumpeted state Sen. Gilbert DiNello, R-Macomb County — incorrectly.

"Fighting for higher office, DiNello has cultivated the religious right, a source of money and unquestioning believers. He led a committee that produced a one-sided, wild-eyed and extreme attack on the state's health curriculum.

Others too numerous to quote have proclaimed triumph.

Justice James Brickley's opinion, however, shows home schooling parents won a narrow, procedural victory. Take the case of the Bonnetts of Canton Township, convicted in 35th District Court of failing to send their children to school in 1985-86 in violation of compulsory school laws.

The high court set aside their convictions, saying the parents "were entitled, as administrators of a private home school, to a hearing . . . to deter-

mine whether their home school meets the requirements of the (private and parochial schools) act . . ." The state has never held such a hearing and has no procedures for one.

That's a very small victory. The evangelicals were after something bigger — a determination that parents have the right to educate their children as they see fit, and the state be damned, perhaps literally.

No way, said Justice Brickley. "Parents do not have a fundamental right requiring strict scrutiny under the 14th Amendment to direct their children's secular education free from reasonable regulation."

Brickley added: "The state may reasonably regulate education, including the imposition of teacher certification and curricula requirements on home school programs, in order to advance the legitimate interest of compulsory education."

In short, the state is in charge; it just didn't follow proper policing procedures.

In trying to conjure up a notion of



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parents' rights, the religious right barked up the wrong tree — the U.S. Constitution, which doesn't touch schooling.

But the Michigan Constitution, as approved by all voters, gives the state a potent role. It says the Legislatu-

must "maintain and support" free public schools, and it puts leadership of education under an elected State Board of Education and its appointed superintendent of public instruction.

That isn't, of course, what the religious right and DiNello want. They want to get rid of all curriculum laws (except sexual abstinence). They want to get rid of the State Board of Education. They want to gut state regulation. They want all sorts of parental vetoes over public education. It's all in DiNello's report. If a parent wishes a kid to be taught astrology, voodoo or creationism, the parent's wish is sacred.

They want to cut the legs off legislators, administrators, employers, voters, teachers — anybody but the parents. And who would these parents be? Why,

those mobilized by the evangelical corner of religion.

The "parental rights" argument, plainly, is a sham. Their true goal is a theocracy in which one small sectarian group decides what is the divine will and imposes it through their favorite portraits of religious figures on school walls, their brand of "nonsectarian" prayer, and a voucher system in which taxpayers will support any zany academy anyone wants to start.

Well, Justice Brickley, a mainstream believer, corrected them, even though they don't know it. These folks are into rote learning, not critical thinking.

Tim Richard reports regularly on the local implications of state and regional events. His office phone is (313) 349-1700.

Voters fail Proposal A due to funding, results tests

There were two important questions of public policy contained in Proposal A, which was defeated last week.

1. Should the taxation structure of Michigan continue to rely as much as it does on the property tax?

2. How should public kindergarten through 12th grade education be financed so as to provide the best schooling for all Michigan's children?

The real reason Proposal A failed was that it smeared these two questions — both important, both related, but certainly not both the same — into one complex ballot proposal.

Proposal A was confused and therefore fundamentally flawed from the start. All the huffing and puffing about the indifference of the rich suburbs or voter cynicism are merely convenient rhetoric to disguise its basic design flaw.

As for "indifference," consider voters in the richer school districts, concentrated mainly in suburban Oakland and Wayne counties. Proposal A provided them no particular relief from high property tax rates, offering in exchange a diversion of money to poorer school districts without linking the extra funds to improved student performance.

Is it any wonder suburban voters turned down such a bad deal?

There was a lot of cynicism expressed in the vote, aimed mainly at the folks who run education in Michigan, particularly the Michigan Education Association. The general view was that if Proposal A passed, the only possible beneficiaries would be MEA members and some school administrators.

The intensity of this kind of talk is now to me — some folks even mentioned the "Michigan Extortion Association" — and should be a matter of deep concern for the MEA.

Given this widespread attitude, I doubt very much whether any kind of education finance reform proposal can pass in the future without



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being tied very tightly to improvements in school performance.

Which, frankly, is exactly what is needed.

For far too long, our governmental and political system has concentrated on inputs — how much to tax, how much to spend — without much concern for outcomes — what we actually get for our money.

Education offers the clearest case.

First the inputs. From 1970 to 1990, spending on Michigan kindergarten through 12th grade education grew from \$1.6 billion to \$6.7 billion, or a 25 percent increase after inflation. During this period, student enrollment went down nearly 25 percent. Spending per pupil increased nearly 70 percent in constant dollars!

Now the outcomes. College admission test scores (the only hard outcome measure we have for the 1970-90 period) changed not at all!

The lesson is clear: Heaven only knows we spend enough on education, so it's about time we started getting some results.

As our leaders start mulling over what to do in the aftermath of Proposal A's defeat, they might well begin by reviewing this simple lesson.

Phil Power is chairman of the company that owns this newspaper. His Touch-Tone voice mail number is (313) 953-2047, Ext. 1890.

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