

POINTS OF VIEW

Kids need tender loving care during Christmas season

While many of us are considering the purchase of either our last or first gift of the annual mercantile feeding frenzy better known as Christmas, some of our young people approach the season with dread. They angst over the technological gamut from toddler to teen and the ages in between. Why would any youngster be unhappy about the prospect of two weeks of freedom from school?

Most aren't, but some are. For many kids, the holiday season represents a departure from the structure and protection that the daily routine affords them. These children, either because of divorce, chemical dependency or other disruptions within their family system, recognize that the holidays are often stressful and depressing. For some older children (those attending our middle schools and high schools), the deviation from

the protection afforded by their normal routine invites their own inappropriate involvement with alcohol or other recreational drugs.

Students often approach Christmas Day with visions of alcohol-induced conflicts or divorce-based arguments rather than sugarplums dancing in their heads.

A high school junior once lamented that "my mom and dad feel that they need for all of us to be together because it's Christmas. They have this fantasy that we are one big, happy family when we are not. By the middle of the afternoon, they are fighting and I get put in the middle."

Another senior, in describing his less-than-serene Thanksgiving holiday, reported, "My dad wouldn't talk to me for two days because I told him I was going over to my mom's house on Thanksgiving afternoon."

GUEST COLUMNIST



JOHN FARRAR

Unhappily, divorce and alcohol abuse are part of our society. There are steps that adults can take, however, to make the holiday season less stressful for children of any age. Here are a few suggestions for adults:

Understand that this is a dangerously unstructured time for kids. Older

children need to receive strong messages regarding the illegality and inappropriateness of any recreational use of alcohol. In that vein, adults can support these expectations by being positive role models for their children, younger siblings, and grandchildren through their own abstinence or responsible use of alcohol.

Make the holiday a pleasant one for your kids by setting aside both past grievances and unrealistic expectations. If you can reasonably predict that you and your "ex" are likely to quarrel over the holiday if thrust together, then chances are that your kids can anticipate that, too. Allow time for your children to comfortably spend time with both of their parents. Limit struggles to the wishbone on the Christmas turkey.

For those of us who can expect to have a conflict-free holiday, it is in the

best spirit of the season to open our homes to others who may be faced with less amicable prospects. Letting your own children know that one of their friends is welcome (even on Christmas Day) if things get unmanageable at their house will be appreciated by that young person. A Christmas dinner table which includes such a teen-ager (and perhaps your recently widowed neighbor from next door) demonstrates the holiday spirit more genuinely than a living room engorged by gifts grudgingly acquired at the mall.

Try instead the gift of serenity. Give a young person a reason to smile. John Farrar is a high school counselor, the former director of the Community Commission on Drug Abuse, and an adjunct professor in the psychology departments of Madonna University and Eastern Michigan University.

Here's a primer to penetrating 'charter school' fog

In no state but Michigan have charter schools become such a partisan issue.

State Sen. John Kelly, D-Grosse Pointe, was alone among Democrats in supporting two charter school renewal bills as they went through the state Senate. Kelly apparently was accused of some party disloyalty but argued charter schools were originally a Democratic idea and counted President Bill Clinton among their supporters.

George Ward, the Plymouth Township resident best known as chief assistant Wayne County prosecutor, is a second Democrat who supports charter schools. Ward doubles as an appointive trustee of Saginaw Valley State University, which has been strongly supportive of charter schools.

After them, you can almost count Democratic advocates of charter schools on the fingers of one hand.

The notion of charter schools seems benign enough, at least on paper. Some teachers and parents want to do something innovative — a science program, an offering for delinquent kids, what-

ever. A school district, community college or university grants them a charter and a chunk of state aid, then gets out of the way.

Golly gee, that looks harmless enough.

But the first suspicious thing one notices is that the clamor for charter schools doesn't come from parents. Or teachers. Or students. Or administrators.

The second suspicious thing you notice is that support for charter schools comes from groups with an ax to grind.

TEACH Michigan, founded in 1990, comes to mind. Founder Paul DeWeese, M.D., was pamphleteering at the 1992 Republican State Convention when I first came across him. He starts by talking about "full educational choice." Next he uses the seductive line that there's a social consensus that public schools have failed — you know, the "everybody's doing it" propaganda technique.

By the time he's done, DeWeese is talking about amending the Michigan Constitution to remove Art. VIII sec. 2:



TIM RICHARD

No public money for private, denominational or non-public school; no vouchers; no tax benefits.

Then comes the Mackinac Center with a vitriolic attack on teachers' unions. Its polemicists — they no longer bother with research — offer charter schools as an answer to the union demons. But Mackinac Center tips its hand by making lists of what it considers the better high schools — almost all religious-oriented. It makes grants — all to religious groups. Its real agenda becomes apparent.

Third, consider the Law of Unin-

tended Consequences. Whenever government makes available a pot of money, all sorts of people come out of the woodwork to partake of the pork.

Lyndon Johnson, for example, probably never dreamed that the AFDC program would be interpreted as a subsidy to illegitimate births. But that was precisely the consequence as blacks raised their out-of-wedlock birth rate from 30 percent to 65 percent or more, and whites from 1 percent to about 20 percent. Or take the Indian — whoops, Native American — scholarship program and the hundreds of light-skinned suburbanites who suddenly decided they had Chippewa blood.

In Lansing last week we saw a major lobbying effort to make the Noah Webster Academy eligible for state money, despite the superintendent of public instruction's careful finding that it didn't qualify as a public charter school. (Incidentally, I predict Dr. Robert Schiller will be the subject of vitriolic attacks in the next couple of

years over anything and everything because he saw through the charade.)

Parochial schools are in bad shape. To put it in terms that right-wingers understand, parochial schools have been unable to compete in the marketplace. Their enrollments have plummeted over the last 20 years. They want tax money.

For the last 157 years, Michigan voters have been consistent in denying tax money for teachers of religion and religious edifices. Voters were emphatic in 1970 when they prohibited public funds for non-public schools. Voters weren't fooled in 1978 when they crushed a pro-voucher amendment even though it was tied to elimination of school property taxes.

So that's why charter schools are a major issue in Michigan. Voters can see through the fog about "full educational choice."

Tim Richard reports regularly on the local implications of state and regional events.

Vacation offers hazards for young and old alike

While chuckling over childhood holiday memories, I wondered if there might be a St. Olaf, or some such protector of the clumsy.

Eager anticipation of the Christmas vacation had most of us whipped into a frenzy that would take full possession on that last half day of elementary school. Teachers would stand amazed at some of the oddities parents bestowed on them in their child's name. There would be questionable baked goodies to go with our warm milk while wielding blunt scissors in the maddening attempt to fashion fancy snowflakes out of dingy math paper.

I can still smell the intensely purple copying ink while coloring in Santa's huge face with those enormous industrial-strength slabs of crayon.

Others wrestled with macaroni masterpieces, sampling here the paste and there the little box of hard candies that were given to each.

Excitement and sugar had us all vibrating like tuning forks by the time we were set free. Stampingeding into the ceaselessly stormy northshore winter, we thought only of playing to our heart's content. Some barely got out the doors before turning a foot or busting their butts on a patch of ice.

Most were determined to do themselves by hitching snowy rides on the backs of trash trucks.

Scaling filthy Himalayan snowbanks transported to the beach by the reckless DPW was quite common until some kids sadly disappeared into them. The snow made my grimy neighborhood of tenement tinderboxes into a relative wonderland, so a penchant for tunneling caves and building forts is probably responsible for the occasional fits of claustrophobia.

Compared to the supervision of school, vacations were often reckless and fraught with dangers. When really little, things like searing your fingers on one of those horrid old-fashioned big tree lights while lunging for a present taught one restraint. Sneaking a hunk of unsweetened baking chocolate into your mouth reinforced that.

Leaping and cavoring about the house resulted in crushing an Elch-a-Sketch and cutting a foot on top of that metallic dust. I recall standing on the top of one of my greater igloos, hoisting a hefty niece onto my 12-year-old hip

GUEST COLUMNIST



DOROTHY MATSUI

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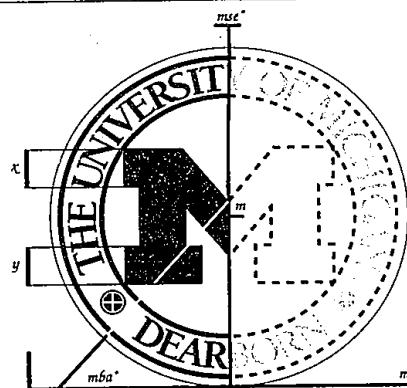
and having just one leg crash through, nearly dislocating my faney.

More fun awaited as we lurched to the pond in our ill-fitting skates with three to six pairs of socks on. Sparks flying across the pavement, we slashed onward, understanding having one's Beanie boots stolen was more likely than any of us being off our ankles long enough to appreciate sharp blades.

Simply evil hockey kids would drive us onto the sunny melted side where we terrorized even them with "jumpin' buckles," those floes, broken bits of ice, to the center and back.

One could also alod into any number of heavily trafficked city dragways. Re-enacting my own candlelight Mass, complete with choir solos, I inadvertently set afire the cotton batting under our tiny manger scene on the mantelpiece. I recall grabbing the Bible to beat it out, and by God, so it did! Take very good care. I wish you safe, warm and happy holidays!

Dorothy Matsui is a Plymouth Township resident.



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