

## POINTS OF VIEW

## Letters to the editor: If you write 'em, we'll print 'em

**A**tentive readers of this column know that my regular practice is to solicit responses to it — delighted, outraged, whatever — either by phone or e-mail. I generally also ask permission from senders to have their reactions printed in the newspaper as letters to the editor.

I've always felt that letters to the editor are an essential, vital part of a home town paper. As a columnist, I consider it an obligation to print reader reactions to what I write. Moreover, running letters to the editor, especially if there is a heavy community issue up for debate, helps make the paper an open forum of community opinion.

So over the years I've tried to make sure our editors welcome letters to the editor and tell readers how best to submit them for publication. Our policy has been to print as many letters as we can, subject only to making sure that letters we receive are in fact written by the person who signs them and checking them for libel, slander and other considerations of good taste.

Imagine my surprise, then, at receiving

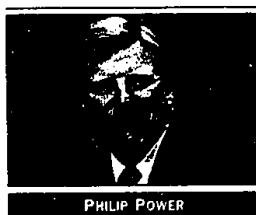
a letter the other day unlike any I have received in my entire 35 years in this business.

"Apparently, the policy of your newspaper is to print all letters to the editor short of the use of blasphemy or false accusation. ... I find it extremely unusual that any newspaper would print all letters to the editor. I am not aware of any other newspaper with this policy. ..."

"My father used to write letters to the Bay City Times and Detroit Free Press and would occasionally have one printed. However, 80 percent of whatever he wrote ended up on the floor of the editor's office."

My correspondent is absolutely right. In most of the big city papers, something like 80 percent of the letters to the editor that are submitted wind up on the floor of the editor's office. That's one of the things that distinguishes a home town community newspaper like this one from our big city brethren.

As set out in our mission statement, one of our fundamental business purposes is to "nurture the communities we



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serve." As we understand it, nurturing a community involves doing everything we can to make the home towns we serve good places for folks to live. We consider our newspapers to be part of the community rather than standing apart, and so we feel that printing as many letters to the editor as we can helps the paper perform a useful function as a community forum.

But the letter I received went on to make another point.

"The problem that this (printing all letters received) causes is that community malcontents can be extremely abrasive and counterproductive to the operation of a city. It is very difficult to maintain staff morale when the newspaper continually allows the proliferation of personal attacks and insults to become weekly reading. ... I would think that the newspaper has some responsibility to limit the access of chronic complainers to the letters page."

I've got to admit here my correspondent has a point. In any community, there are always a handful of people who are regularly sore about one thing or another. Some people call them gadflies, others style them "community malcontents." Such people are often regular — some would say "obsessive" — letter writers, often repetitively on the same subject.

Here's where the nuanced understanding and judgment of a home town newspaper editor comes in. Most editors believe — rightly, in my view — that community gadflies may be a pain in the

butt, but providing them a forum is an important aspect of nurturing a community. And most editors know there's a difference between a gadfly and a chronic troublemaker who has an ax to grind.

That's why we try regularly to print gadfly letters and to refrain from printing troublemaker letters that insult or slander individuals. A good home town editor knows the people involved and is in a position to make informed judgments about the kinds of letters that deserve publication and the kinds that do not.

Editors on big city papers simply cannot have that kind of intimate understanding of individual home towns and the folks who live there. That's why it's so satisfying to publish the kinds of newspapers we do. To nurture the home towns we serve.

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) 863-2047, ext. 1880, or by e-mail at [ppower@homecomm.net](mailto:ppower@homecomm.net).

## Be clear about the rules of good parenting, lawmaking, too

**L**et's not make parents the enemy.

Raising kids can be a tough job. They test boundaries. It's natural and normal for them to do so. I would argue that it is an integral part of growing up. How can you become an independent adult without occasionally pushing the limits?

So good parenting is a very fine line. One must set clear rules, enforce them consistently and fairly ... and know when to give them up as the child grows in maturity and responsibility.

I raise the point because of a set of bills proposed by Rep. Gilda Jacobs (D-Huntington Woods) and Sen. Gary Peters (D-Bloomfield Township) to address school truancy.

Overall, it's a good package. The key provision is that it would allow a judge to suspend a youngster's drivers license for failing to attend school reg-



MIKE MALOTT

ularly. As Peters has pointed out, youngsters value the mobility that having that driver's license allows. Often they count it more highly than anything else the authorities could offer or

take away.

The bills would also require parental notification if the child is absent twice in 30 days, and would allow for court intervention if the child misses seven days in a month.

The part that bothers me is that parents could be held to account for their youngsters' failure to show up in

school. The bills allow for fines of \$500 or up to 90 days in jail for parents who fail to address the truancy problem.

And, yes, I admit there are some parents who deserve such a penalty. When the Wayne County prosecutor's office called parents into meetings about their kids' truancy, fewer than half even showed up.

But there seems to be a trend of targeting parents for their kids' misbehavior. Many communities now have host ordinances, which hold parents to account when their youngsters hold raucous parties in their homes. But there are also more prohibitions in law about what parents can do to discipline youngsters.

As a child, I knew what would happen if I was caught skipping school. Dad had a razor strap reserved for taking care of just such matters. I only got to see it once or twice in my entire childhood, and never when I

didn't deserve it. But today, that would be child abuse. Keep in mind that we've seen several cases in which parents were charged for slapping their children in the face.

If you ask the authorities how far a parent can go in disciplining a youngster, you are likely to get a wide variety of answers. One judge I queried on the topic said that Michigan's domestic violence laws, which make it illegal for one member of a household to strike another, could be interpreted to prohibit spanking. But a state senator who was there for the debate on that law says it was never intended to outlaw physical discipline.

Another judge told me spanking is legal, as long as it is a swat or two on the rear or back of the legs, doesn't leave an injury, and is done with the hand rather than a paddle or strap.

When I asked a social worker the same thing, she said she refused to endorse spanking because too often

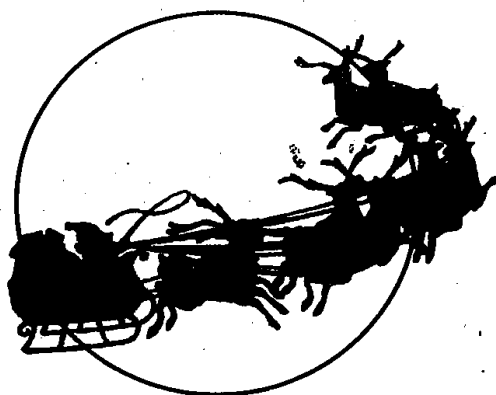
child abuse begins as physical discipline.

Why such varied answers? Because the law does not clearly spell out what is legal and what isn't when it comes to disciplining children.

One lawmaker told me it wasn't spelled out for a reason. They like it nebulous, he said, because they can bring a case when a parent seems to go overboard. Vague laws give police and prosecutors more discretion.

What was that I said about good parenting? It is about setting clear rules and enforcing them fairly. Perhaps lawmakers should apply the same standards to their rules about parenting ... especially if they intend to hold parents accountable later for failing to discipline their kids.

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