Protect parental rights


Having familiarity with the bill but confused by the above statement, I wrote the sponsors for a copy of the actual bill. Section 4 clearly states its objectives: “No Federal, State, or local government, or any official of such a government acting under color of law, shall interfere with or usurp the right of a parent to direct the upbringing of the child of the parent.”

Regarding the statement that it “would jeopardize the safety of abused and neglected children,” Section 7 includes the following: “This Act shall not apply to any action to terminate parental rights with respect to a child who has been determined by a court of appropriate jurisdiction to be abandoned, abused, or neglected; or any act or action concerning abandonment or neglect (as such terms are defined by State statute) of a child; or any act or action concerning abuse (as such term is defined by State statute) of a child.”

AAP News also states that this bill “would undermine public health by discouraging adolescents from seeking treatment for sexually transmitted disease and other serious health problems.” Section 3 explicitly states that parents cannot withhold “a medical service or treatment that is necessary to prevent an imminent risk of serious harm, or remedy serious harm, to the child.”

This act was drafted to enforce the provisions of the 14th Amendment (Civil Rights Amendment) by protecting the right of a parent to direct the upbringing of the child of the parent. Wisdom would interpret the 14th Amendment as inherently granting such rights, yet history tells us that in other instances, this has not been borne out. Certainly, the 14th Amendment includes bans discrimination because of a person’s color, race, national origin, religion or sex. Yet, nearly 100 years later, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was passed to ensure such freedom.

It seems the issue at hand is one of authority rather than public health. Why should the state have more control over a child than the parent? In our present environment, which seems favorable for a state-run institution, a “Parental Rights and Responsibility Act” ensures parental freedom as previously mandated by the 14th Amendment.

I would encourage AAP members to be familiar with the content of this act before contacting their senators and representatives. A complete copy of the act may be obtained by writing: Senator Charles Grassley, 131 Hart, United States Senate, Washington, DC 20510; or Congressman Steve Largent, 410 Cannon House Office Bldg., United States House of Representatives, Washington, DC 20515.

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Editor’s note: Additional information on parental rights legislation was provided in the July AAP News cover story, “Advocates fear parents’ rights bill will trample child abuse laws.”

Turn off the tube

Dr. Koop’s hopes for improving TV programs for young children (“Broadcasters owe children quality TV programming,” June AAP News) are misguided. Television serves no useful role for young children. They learn by interacting with objects and people around them, not by passively being subjected to input from a shimmering screen.

“Sesame Street” often held up as an example of benefits derived from educational TV, but evidence is lacking. Children who watch TV learn to count, but they do not learn mathematical concepts. These are learned by hands-on play with blocks and puzzles.

Children who watch “Sesame Street” learn the alphabet but do not learn to read better or at younger ages. “Sesame Street” encourages children to become avid TV watchers, not good students.

Many studies show a clear relationship between the amount of TV watched and a variety of deleterious effects. The shows that attract the most viewers will continue to have these effects, despite the well-intentioned sponsors of the Children’s Television Act. The only way to avoid the harmful effects of TV is to turn it off.

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Spanking studies needed

The issue of disciplinary spanking certainly is controversial. Dr. Den Trumbull’s column (“Spanking is an effective disciplinary method,” April 1996 AAP News) was an admirable attempt to look at both sides of the coin. Thank you for publishing his opinions.

The whole debate around this topic has been colored more by emotion than by facts.

Corporal punishment, for example, includes a number of unacceptable ways of disciplining children. I think Dr. Trumbull makes a specific point for disciplinary spanking done in an effective way. It is a tool to discipline a child and, like any other tool, obviously can be used in the wrong way. A knife is a useless tool, but if you grab it by the blade, it will cut you. If you grab it by the handle and use it appropriately, it then becomes a useful tool.

I certainly do not agree with using effective disciplinary spanking as the first mode of child discipline. In fact, if other techniques of discipline such as “time out” are used, often it is not necessary to apply a method of disciplinary spanking. I think we, as pediatricians, have to ensure that parents do not use spanking in an inappropriate fashion. Of course there are parents who do, and clearly, they give spanking a bad reputation.

I think academic pediatricians should continue to do research that will be published in peer-reviewed journals on this emotional topic. I would hope the Academy of Pediatrics will resist the temptation to pass judgment on this topic before we have strong academic data to prove issues involving increased aggressiveness, problems with self-esteem, etc. Many of the past quoted studies were done in circumstances that certainly are not academically acceptable. One cannot group all forms of corporal or physical punishment in one category.

Dr. Trumbull’s column underlines this specific fact. He argued convincingly that we need to be scientific and academically rather than emotional about this specific topic.

My personal view as a pediatrician is that we practice, but also in academic practice, need to ask more questions about how parents discipline their children. We then need appropriate information to give to parents in anticipatory guidance. That information should discourage spanking and should instead focus on praise. In other words, one should focus on the positive and not the negative. Parents who spank their children inappropriately should certainly be told that it is inappropriate.

This debate will be an ongoing debate, I am sure. I look forward to the American Academy of Pediatrics continuing to provide its membership with views representing both sides of the coin. I am also looking forward to definitive academic data to perhaps settle the argument. Maybe I am naive to believe that we will ever get there, but I am hopeful.

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‘Hostile and demeaning’

As members of the Monroe County Council on the Prevention of Child Abuse, in Bloomington, Ind., we would like to respond to the opinions Dr. Ravenel gave about spanking children (“‘Emotions shouldn’t prompt spanking policy,’” Second Opinions, June AAP News).

Dr. Ravenel says that based on a study done in Sweden, prohibiting spanking children may increase the incidence of child abuse. He says that by making parents feel they have no means to control their children, they may then lose control of themselves and beat the children. This should not be an argument for spanking children. Parents who give up spanking need education and support.