Second Opinions

Reevaluate amendment

The speech by Connecticut Superior Judge Charles Gill, as well as the American Academy of Pediatric’s call for a child’s rights constitutional amendment at the Annual Chapter Forum require critical reevaluation (AAP News, Nov. 1996). Judge Gill did not raise a single compelling issue that demands an amendment recognizing children’s rights. The impact of legislation on children can be established legislatively, as was done for the spotted owl. It is doubtful that a constitutional amendment would have changed the outcome of any of his disheartening stories.

Yes, the word “children” is not mentioned in the Constitution of the United States, but neither are the words “father,” “mother,” “parent” or “family.” Children, however, are not excluded from the most frequently used words – “people” and “persons.”

The Academy opposed the Parental Rights and Responsibilities Act of 1995 (AAP News, July 1996). Dr. Berkelhammer stated that parental rights is a “clever name.” Parental rights are “going to undermine the rights of children which we work so hard to protect” (AAP News, July 1996). It is time for the AAP to acknowledge that “children’s rights” is also a clever name and that children’s rights are going to undermine the rights of parents. The Academy should choose to work for “family rights.” What is truly good for the parents is also good for children. What is truly good for children is also good for parents.

Surprisingly, Judge Gill gave no recommendations as to the contents of the constitutional amendment. An amendment must promote authoritative parenting where parents have a high level of control over their children. An amendment must also reflect the authoritative statements of the Academy as found in Caring for your School-Age Child. Families are not democracies. Each family has its own ways of deciding who has the power and authority within the family unit, and which rights, privileges, obligations, and roles are assigned to each family member, and “Parents are the final authorities.” (Pages 295-7)

And as found in Caring For Your Adolescent: “Your teenager is still your legal responsibility until he reaches eighteen.” “Your way of raising your children – as long as it’s consistent and loving – is the best way for your family.” “Take a stand and don’t waver.” “Parents need to relinquish this control gradually.” (Pages 87-8)

Judge Gill closed his talk with the statement, “Today I challenge you to rethink whether children should be property or people.” This is a logically false construct. Children are both property and people. Oh, they are not the property of the parent, but neither are they the property of the government. They are the property of the one who wove them in their mother’s womb (Psalm 139:13) and who loaned them to parents to bring them up in the way they should go (Proverbs 22:6).

Fredric P. Nelson, M.D., FAAP

Auto safety advice

There has been increasing media coverage about the dangers of air bags when infants, small children, pregnant women and short stature drivers are placed in the front passenger seat. Although it is fitting that the public be aware of such risks, we are deeply concerned that the well-established benefits of air bags are being overlooked by this intense media coverage.

Air bags are performing well overall. They saved an estimated 1,100 lives during 1986-1995. Driver side air bags in passenger cars reduce overall fatal risk by an estimated 11 percent, including a 30 percent reduction in fatalities in head-on crashes.

As physicians, we have the responsibility to inform our patients about the risks and benefits of various illness and injury prevention interventions – including air bag safety. We must emphasize to our patients that seatbelts and child safety seats remain the cornerstone of car safety. Each child requires their own safety restraint. To keep children safe, the Academy has advised that infants be kept in a rear facing seat until age 1 or up to 20 pounds, toddlers up to 40 pounds should be in a booster-facing car seat, and children above those limits should be in a booster seat as long as the child fits. These recommendations exceed what is mandated in some states. For example, a toddler in Massachusetts wearing an ill-fitting lap belt is considered within the law.

Frequently overlooked is the advice...