



# EMPATHIC PARENTING

Journal of the Canadian Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children

Volume 24

Issue 2

Spring 2001

The time has come to consider protecting children from incompetent parenting by setting parenting standards through licensing **before** they are damaged by abuse and neglect.

page 3

# EMPATHIC PARENTING

Journal of the Canadian Society  
for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children

Volume 24

Issue 2

Spring 2001

## Stressed out

"In the 9 years I've grown along with my children – learning and growing right along with them in an atmosphere of mutual trust and respect – I've become dismayed and critical about the unparented way society here raises children. I see too many worn out little ones, as stressed out as their parents, raised on a junk food diet of "babysitters" (ranging from daycare to the electronic kind); children who are pushed to excel at a very young age in academics and extra-curricular activities by parents driven to show them off as trophies. The playgrounds are empty and youngsters don't know how to play all those simple, spontaneous games anymore that challenged our natural creativity and social skills. Even the media promotes children as young adults and no one seems to be trying to shelter them from the adult world. Why must they grow up so fast?"

see "One Mother's Journey" - page 2

### WHAT IS EMPATHIC PARENTING?

**Being willing and able to** put yourself in your child's shoes in order to correctly identify his/her feelings, and  
**Being willing and able to** behave toward your child in ways which take those feelings into account.  
**Empathic Parenting** takes an enormous amount of time and energy and fully involves both parents in a co-operative, sharing way.

ISSN. 0825-7531

**EMPATHIC PARENTING**

Journal of the Canadian Society for the  
Prevention of Cruelty to Children

Volume 24 Issue 2 Spring 2001  
(Date of Issue -- May 2001)

Editor: E.T.Barker M.D., D.Psych., F.R.C.P.(C)  
Editorial Assistant: Jan Hunt M.Sc.  
Printed by Midland Printers, Midland, Ontario  
on recycled paper

With Vol. 7, Issue 3, Summer '84, EMPATHIC PARENTING became the official title of what was formerly the Journal of the Canadian Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (ISSN 0705-6591)

EMPATHIC PARENTING, official publication of the Canadian Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, is published four times a year (Winter, Spring, Summer, and Fall) and is mailed without charge to all CSPCC members.

Single copy	\$3.00
Annual Subscription (four issues)	\$12.00
Annual CSPCC Supporting Membership	\$25.00
Annual CSPCC Sustaining Membership	\$100.00
Annual CSPCC Endowing Membership	\$250.00

Membership fees and donations in excess of the cost of the journal are income tax deductible. Registration No. 11921 9962 RR0001.

The Editor welcomes letters, suggestions for content, articles, photos, drawings, etc. for consideration. Opinions expressed in EMPATHIC PARENTING are not necessarily those of the CSPCC or the Editor.

Copyright © Canadian Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children 2001. Requests for permission to reprint will be granted whenever possible.

Second Class Mail registration No. 4947. Return postage guaranteed.

Subscription orders, undeliverable copies, and change of address notices should be sent to CSPCC, 356 First Street, Box 700, Midland, Ontario, L4R 4P4. **Phone: (705) 526-5647 Fax: (705) 526-0214 Email: cspcc@look.ca**

Indexed in the Canadian Periodical Index, the Canadian Magazine Index, and available on-line and on CD ROM through Canadian Business and Current Affairs.



EMPATHIC PARENTING

Journal of the Canadian Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children

## In this issue...

**One Mother's Journey** pp 2-3

**The Evolution of Childrearing** p 4

**The Rationale and Feasibility of Licensing Parents** pp 5-15

**Parenting Course available on CD** p 16

Many articles from past issues of Empathic Parenting are available on the Internet at:

<http://www.empathicparenting.org>

**There you will find links to all our sites:**

Empathic Parenting  
Crime Prevention  
Psychopathy and Consumerism  
Daycare is for Parents Not  
Infants and Toddlers  
The Fastest Growing Religion  
Physical Punishment in the  
Home  
A Certificate for Parenting

## One Mother's Journey

As a devoted mother of two children, aged 7 and 9 (plus one on the way), I have dedicated my parenting years to one ideal, namely to raise whole human beings who are self-confident, secure, and free from any emotional baggage. Not easy! Attachment parenting practices I learned from wonderful La Leche League meetings, like 100% breastfeeding, child-led weaning, kangaroo care, co-sleeping, empathic reflexive listening...are second nature to me now. I also chose to home school my children which I believe furthers this process of respecting their individual needs.

At the same time, in the 9 years I've grown along with my children – learning and growing right along with them in an atmosphere of mutual trust and respect – I've become dismayed and critical about the unparented way society here raises children. I see too many worn out little ones, as stressed out as their parents, raised on a junk food diet of “babysitters” (ranging from daycare to the electronic kind); children who are pushed to excel at a very young age in academics and extra-curricular activities by parents driven to show them off as trophies. The playgrounds are empty and youngsters don't know how to play all those simple, spontaneous games anymore that challenged our natural creativity and social skills. Even the media promotes children as young adults and no one seems to be trying to shelter

them from the adult world. Why must they grow up so fast?

Many addicts in 12-step programs cling to their addictions because they had no loving caregiver to cling to as children. Theirs was often a painful childhood of neglect and I wonder if today's children will become the next generation of addicts. Teenagers today express so much rage in their music and dress. So much of it is negative, despondent, angry, and I think I know why.

I will share with you what made me a devoted mother. When I was 6 weeks old, my mother handed me over to her mother to care for during the day so she could return to her corporate climbing career. That was in the 1960's when feminism was still in its infancy, and I grew up in a neighbourhood where all my friends' moms stayed at home. While my grandma was loving and attentive, my mother was so absorbed in her career that I felt neglected and unimportant, even unlovable as a piece of furniture. Neither of my parents were able to relate to me on an emotional level, a legacy of their own childhood pain as I later discovered. I have vivid memories of hiding in my closet wishing I were dead, or crying myself to sleep – not a nice way to be young. My grandmother softened the blow but she couldn't prevent the crippling effects of the neglect I suffered. Today, when I see mothers being focused on themselves, or their careers, rather than on their chil-

## Letters

---

dren, I cannot help but feel the silent agony their children must be feeling, an inexpressible hollow ache that nothing can fill, and it is very hard for me to see these so-called liberated moms as anything but cruel and despicable. I see the baby-boomers as self-centred beyond redemption, incapable of the self-sacrifice so vital to the task of ensuring the emotional health of their children. Why do they bother having children at all?

Many people probably label me an extremist but really I'm following humankind's natural pattern – the one before modern society interfered with it. The radiant smiles of my children who are intelligent, full of zest for life, able to take on new challenges because mama is always there providing a secure home as their safety net – these signs all tell me that my instincts are right on track. Jean Leidloff's **The Continuum Concept** is an anthropological perspective of childrearing, comparing the superior methods of a stone-age culture to those barbaric ones of modern western society. I wish I could include it in a parenting package together with a sling (for baby-wearing), a copy of the Empathic Parenting Certificate course and La

Leche League's, **The Womanly Art of Breastfeeding**. Parenting is part skill and part heart-felt instinct, both resources which have been corrupted by experts who have tunnel vision. So much parenting info today is heartless.

Many people probably label me an extremist but really I'm following humankind's natural pattern -- the one before modern society interfered with it.

In my own case, I have been motivated to adopt the attachment parenting style out of a fearful urge to protect my children from the pain I suffered. For what skills I brought to parenting, I can thank first of all my Grandma and also La Leche league

which is truly a one-stop parenting resource although they chose not to promote themselves as such. My Grandma was a product of an eastern European culture of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, when a woman's role of mother was to be taken seriously. I have a university education and put as much effort into my role as mother as I would any dream career. I am paid in loving memories. I will be able to look back when my darlings have grown up without a guilty conscience, knowing I've done my best in this most sacred of tasks. I hope this inspires someone. At least I'm grateful to vent a bit.

Anonymous



# *The Journal of Psychohistory*

---

---

## **The Evolution of Childrearing**

...Although it is extraordinarily difficult to believe, parents until relatively recently have... killed [their newborn infants] by the billions, routinely sent them out to extremely neglectful wetnurses, tied them up tightly in swaddling bandages... starved, mutilated, raped, neglected and beat them so badly that prior to modern times I have not been able to find evidence of a single parent who would not today be put in jail for child abuse.

I have searched so hard during the past three decades for any exceptions to this extremely abusive pattern that I have offered a prize to anyone who could find even one "good mother" prior to the eighteenth century—the definition being one who would not today be incarcerated for child abuse. No one so far has claimed the prize.

Instead, historians have assumed that

my evidence for routinely abusive parenting must be terribly exaggerated...

It is not surprising that the existence of widespread child abuse throughout history has been viewed with disbelief. In this chapter, the historical evidence for each childrearing practice will be presented, focusing on the actual statements made by caretakers and children...

Obviously, despite the achievement of empathic childrearing among some parents today, most of humankind still has a long way to evolve to get beyond severe abuse and give their children the love and respect they deserve... It is no wonder that historians have chosen to hide, deny and whitewash the record here uncovered, in order to avoid confronting the parental holocaust of children that has been the central cause of violence and misery throughout history...

Excerpted with permission from the article *The Evolution of Childrearing* by Lloyd deMause in *The Journal of Psychohistory* Vol. 28, No. 4, Spring 2001 pp 362-451. (601 references) © 2001 The Journal of Psychohistory 140 Riverside Drive, Suite 14H, New York, New York 10024 (212) 799-2294 email: psychhst@tiac.net website: <http://www.psychohistory.com> The complete article can be found on the Website.

# The Rationale and Feasibility of Licensing Parents

*Jack C. Westman*

**We should not continue to wait until parents damage their children by neglect and abuse and then apply parenting standards, as we do now.**

Even though appearing to decrease somewhat recently, violence and crime have reduced public safety in the United States to an unacceptable level. The rising rates of juvenile violence and crime portend greater social problems in the future.

The past focus on socioeconomic, racial, educational, and biological factors that contribute to violence and crime has obscured the most important element - parenting. The main source of these social problems is the cycle of child abuse and neglect that results when parenting fails. Incompetent (defined in legal terms as unfit) parenting is the most important factor in those adult outcomes. Competent parenting protects even biologically vulnerable and socioeconomically disadvantaged children from those outcomes.

Because of the high financial and social costs of dealing with adult and juvenile violence and crime, in 1991 the National Commission on Children, appointed by Congress and by the president, urged a change in focus to preventive interventions during early life.

By far most children who live in poverty, who come from broken homes, who

receive welfare, who have been abused, or who have criminal relatives do not become habitual criminals or welfare dependent. When any of these factors converge with parental abuse and neglect, however, one of two or three of these children is destined for criminality or welfare dependency. Some are handicapped by brain damage resulting from maternal drug abuse and alcoholism and inadequate prenatal care. All do not learn from their parents the values and personal skills necessary for effective education and for productive employment. These dangerous and dependent persons are increasing in numbers to further drain public funds and to erode the productivity of our workforce.

## **Society Depends upon Competent Parents**

The Committee for Economic Development, a national organization of leaders in education and business, and the U.S. Department of Labor's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills noted that children are a shrinking proportion of our population. They warn that unless preventive investment in early childhood is made

Reprinted by permission of Transaction Publishers. The Rationale and Feasibility of Licensing Parents by Jack C. Westman, *Society*, Vol. 34, Iss 1, 1996. Copyright © Jack C. Westman; all rights reserved. Dr. Westman is emeritus professor of psychiatry at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, Medical School. He is the author of *Licensing Parents: Can We Prevent Child Abuse and Neglect?* New York: Insight Books/Plenum Press, 1994.

## **Society must engender within its citizens the awareness of what it is to be a good parent.**

a national policy, our future labor force will be disproportionately poor, unhealthy, uneducated, and untrained. They concluded that our nation cannot continue to be economically productive when a quarter of our young children live in poverty and a third of them grow up without learning the skills necessary for life in modern society.

This grim forecast occurs in the context of an emphasis on hard work and the relative affluence of most people in the United States. It vividly contrasts with the excellence in academics, athletics, and creativity shown by many American children and youth. It reflects the growing disparity between the lives of the advantaged and the disadvantaged.

This forecast also is a consequence of valuing financially remunerated activities more than parenting. The emphasis on employing parents away from home and on paying for family support and day-care services obscures the role of unpaid competent parenting in preventing social problems. The prevailing message seems to be that parenthood is a secondary role in our society.

But parenting is vital to the future of our society, as the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges pointed out:

Society must engender within its citizens the awareness of what it is to be a good parent. No public or private agency, child care giver, social worker, teacher, or friend can replace the parent in the child's mind. To the extent that family life is damaged or failing, our children, their children, and the nation will suffer. The high calling of "parenthood" must

be more adequately recognized, respected and honored by our society. Therein lies the future of our nation.

Although they are only a small fraction of all parents, incompetent parents gravely endanger our society. I estimate that 4 percent of parents in the United States are grossly incompetent and that 3.6 million of our young people have been damaged by both neglect and abuse. Some seven million have been abused or neglected.

It now falls upon the government to intervene in families after children have been neglected and abused. Often those interventions are too late and ineffective, resulting in enormous rehabilitative, treatment, and later incarceration costs. If we take only the most clear-cut evidence from the lives of incompetently parented habitual criminals, each one costs society \$ 2 million; contrast that to the \$ 1 million contributed by each adult raised by competent parents. This waste of human and economic resources cries out for solutions. It highlights the cost to society of failing to recognize the financial value of competent parenting.

### **A New Paradigm for Parenting**

If our society is to appropriately value parenthood, a new paradigm for parenting is needed. The existing paradigm is that children are the property of their biological parents. Anyone who conceives and gives birth to a child has the full care and custody of that child until the child is damaged by abuse or neglect. No one asks if that person is capable of parenting that child. That person, often referred to as the



“real” parent, can lay claim to the child years after the child has bonded to parents who reared the child.

The vast majority of biological parents are in the best position to represent the interests of their children, but we need to move beyond the view of children as the property of their biological parents. A strong argument can be made that every male and every female has the biological right to conceive a child, and that every female has the biological right to give birth to a child. But true parenthood is defined by the earned relationship between parent and child over time. It is not permanently endowed by the events of conceiving or giving birth to a child. We need a new paradigm in which parenthood is a privilege, as it is now for adoptive and foster parents, rather than a biological right. We need to see parenting through the eyes of children and of society.

For the well-being of our society, we also need to accord children a civil right expected by adults: the opportunity to be free of insurmountable obstacles to developing one’s potential in life. The civil right to competent parenting is widely acknowledged in declarations of the rights of children in the United States and by the United Nations. Competent parenting is a legal right because incompetent parenting is a cause for state intervention and the possible termination of parental rights. It is a divine obligation when parenthood is viewed as a covenant with God.

A new paradigm in which parenthood is an earned privilege and competent parenting is our objective for all children would focus on preparing young people

for parenthood. It would call for nurturant homes and adequate education for all children. It would encourage recognizing the financial value of competent parenting in taxation policies and in the workplace. It would target our resources on identifying, remediating, and replacing incompetent parenting when necessary.

### **Creating a New Social Value**

How can parenthood become a privilege and competent parenting be ensured as a civil right for children in the United States?

Changing a social value in our democratic republic is a major challenge. Because our society is based on the freedom of individuals in successive waves of minorities, forming a consensus on a social value and ensuring universal compliance with that value are virtually impossible. Persuasion and education are enough to gain most people’s compliance with an established social value, but a sizable segment of the population does not respond to those measures and requires the constraint of laws. Consequently, our society relies upon the rule of common and legislated laws to formulate and express our social values.

The creation of a new social value in the United States goes through a process of identifying and discussing an issue in organizations and the media. Persuading arguments in the form of editorials, essays, and political policies shape the issue so that it assumes the specificity of a value. Then education promulgates the need for the value. Finally, legislation embeds the

**The high calling of “parenthood” must be more adequately recognized, respected and honored by our society.**

value in our society.

For example, racism was expressed though slavery at one time. The cultural value that opposed slavery did not permeate our society. A long process followed, a process that included the identification of slavery as a form of racism, discussion of the issue, education about its harmful effects, and ultimately the Civil War that produced the Thirteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution outlawing slavery. Since that time a series of laws have affirmed the social value that racism is unacceptable in our society. A similar process has taken place in redressing sexism.

At another level, the desirability of safety car seats for children was identified, discussed, educationally disseminated, and ultimately crystallized in state laws. The same process has been used to implement values related to conserving the environment by regulating pollution, including smoking.

The most important, but unrecognized, issue facing our society today is whether or not we value children and the future of our nation enough to try to ensure that every child receives competent parenting. We cannot universally assume competence in parenting any more than we can universally assume competence in any other activity that affects other people. Irresponsible people do conceive and bear children. We cannot rely upon every irresponsible person becoming responsible through persuasion, education, or treatment. Our children and society need protection from incompetent parents who are handicapping the next generation now.

Most adults and teenagers already know that parenting is an important responsibility. For most of the others persuasion and education are sufficient to convince them that it is. But for a small but crucial percentage, the only available

means of inducing them to function as responsible parents is by enforcing child-abuse and neglect laws after they have damaged their children. But children need society's protection before they have been damaged.

Persuasion and education in themselves are insufficient to ensure general compliance with any social value, as is evident in the need for laws against criminal and exploitative sexual behavior. Just as aggressive and sexual behavior can adversely affect others, incompetent parenting also adversely affects others - the children first and society later.

Because our society must contend with the social repercussions of incompetent parenting, government has a role in preventing child neglect and abuse. This could be done by setting standards for parenting in the same way that we set standards for everything else we do that affects other persons - and children are persons.

### **The Evolution of Parenting Standards**

The evolution of families in Western civilization has been marked by successive societal restrictions on the authority of parents over their children. Families originated out of clans with power invested in leaders and fathers, who were free to do as they wished with their wives and children. This meant absolute power over the life of a child, including the right to kill the child.

The Jewish tradition introduced marriage as a sacred bond between husband and wife with procreation as its goal. Husband and wife were seen as children of God, as were children. Fathers no longer had absolute power over the lives of their children, but they remained the heads of

their households.

In the context of the rights of individuals, Christianity introduced the idea that wives and husbands were to mutually respect each other and that children were autonomous beings whose loyalties were primarily to God.

The Industrial Revolution stripped away many of the functions of the family, which was the dominant social institution during the agricultural age. Production went out of homes, the education of children shifted from the home to schools, and the care of the elderly fell to the state.

In the United States the last century has witnessed the appearance of child-labor laws, child-abuse and neglect laws, mandatory education laws, juvenile courts, family courts, and child-support laws. In recent years the trend toward sidestepping parental responsibilities in child-bearing and child-rearing has necessitated a series of new laws that define parental responsibilities in child-rearing. Laws now mandate parental participation in school conferences when their children pose behavior problems, the liability of grandparents for the children of their children, the liability of parents for the crimes of their children, and stringent interstate enforcement of child-support laws. All of these laws are moving in the direction of applying the parenting standards set forth in child-abuse and neglect laws before rather than after children are damaged by abuse and neglect.

## Reasons for Licensing Parents

The time has come to consider protecting children from incompetent parenting by setting parenting standards through licensing before they are damaged by abuse and neglect for five reasons.

**The first** is the human rights principle that all persons, including children, should be free from abuse, oppression, and rejection. Now millions of children are abused, oppressed, and rejected by incompetent parents. Little is done before these children are damaged.

**The second** is the civil rights principle that all persons should have equal access to opportunities to develop their potentials in

life, an especially important right for children whose future opportunities can be permanently foreclosed by parental abuse and neglect.

**The third** is the common good principle through which government can regulate activities that are potentially harmful to others and to society. As it is now, incompetent parents harm their children and gravely endanger the internal security and productivity of our nation.

**The fourth** is the humanistic principle that the future success of children as citizens and as parents depends upon forming affectionate attachment bonds with their own parents. Incompetent parents do

Our children and society need protection from incompetent parents who are handicapping the next generation now.

## A licensing process for parents would demonstrate that our society values competent parenting.

not form healthy attachment bonds with their children and thereby deprive their children of learning how to become responsible citizens and parents.

**The fifth** is that adolescents are not ready for parenthood in modern society after the attainment of biological puberty, a fact recognized by separate rites of puberty and adulthood in aboriginal cultures. Parenthood consists of more than child care. It is a responsible developmental stage in the life cycle that follows childhood and adolescence.

A licensing process for parents would demonstrate that our society values competent parenting. It would implement the rhetoric that children have a civil right to competent parenting. It would accord parenthood the status of a privilege rather than a biological right. It would elevate child-rearing from the realm of caprice, accident, and ulterior motives by according parenthood the dignity and legitimacy it deserves. It would encourage people to become more responsible in their sexual behavior and in child-rearing.

A parent license would validate parental rights and focus public policies on supporting competent parenting and on remedying or replacing incompetent parenting. It would hold parents responsible for being competent rather than forcing children to endure incompetent parenting until they show publicly recognized signs of damage. The responsibility would fall on parents to demonstrate their competence before a child is damaged rather than on the state to prove unfitness after a child has been damaged, as is the case now. Parents indeed would bear the

responsibility for rearing their children. Then there would be little need for governmental interventions.

Parent licensing would not attempt to distinguish between "good" and "less good" parenting or to prescribe parenting styles. It would exclude only those who are obviously unqualified. It would not be a birth control measure, although it probably would influence procreation by conveying the message that society holds expectations for child-rearing.

### Procedures for Licensing Parents

The purpose of licensing would be to accord parenting appropriate status in society, not to create a new bureaucracy. As a preventive extension of the child-protective system, the licensing process would be a screening device rather than a definitive evaluation. Establishing procedures for licensing parents would entail little more administrative structure than currently is involved in marriage licensing, birth registration, and protective services for children.

The practical aspects of licensing parents would include its eligibility criteria, its administration, the consequences of denial of licensure, and the question of testing for parental competence.

### Criteria for Licensure

The criteria for obtaining a parenting license would fit a straightforward credentialing process, like marriage licensing. Unlike the marriage license, it would be obtained for each parent and validated for each child.

**The first criterion** would be the attainment of adulthood based on the principle that a parent should be able to be responsible for one's own life before assuming responsibility for a child's life. Eighteen would be a reasonable age based on physical, social, and emotional maturity and the likelihood that the applicant had completed a high school education. For parents under the age of eighteen who still need parenting themselves, parental assumption of responsibility for the minor and the child as licensed foster parents would be required so that the minor could obtain a provisional license that would be fully validated when the minor becomes an adult.

**The second criterion** would be a pledge by the parent to care for and nurture the child and to refrain from abusing and neglecting the child. If this commitment was broken at a later time, the intervention upon a parent's rights would be based on the failure of that parent to fulfill a contractual commitment to the child with revocation of a license rather than on a quasi-criminal action, as is now the case.

**The third criterion** would be possession of basic knowledge of child-rearing, such as by completing a parenting course in a school or clinic or its equivalent. In all likelihood, parent licensing would stimulate the development of family life education, already offered in many communities. The mass impact of such a program would likely discour-

age premature marriages and reinforce awareness of the gravity of child-rearing responsibilities. From the point of view of the educational curriculum, preparation for parenthood is more important than any other academic subject. Moreover, the need for education in parenting is widely perceived today by most parents.

### **The Administration of Licensing**

The administration of parent licensing would be through state and local governments, although enabling federal legislation, such as requiring licensure for the receipt of federal funds, would highlight its importance. A new bureaucracy would not be needed since licensing would involve revising the mandate of the existing marriage licensing, birth registration, and child-protection systems.

The license application process could be handled through the channels of marriage licensing, prenatal care, and birth registration since it essentially would be a question of credentialing. Questionable situations and appeals could be handled through existing protective services for children in county departments of human services guided by state statutes. Vulnerable parents and children would be identified at the outset of the children's lives, and parent support services could be provided earlier than is now possible. The shift of protective services for children from an adversarial criminal focus after children have been damaged to a preventive focus would reduce the need for ex-

**Parent licensing would not attempt to distinguish between "good" and "less good" parenting or to prescribe parenting styles. It would exclude only those who are obviously unqualified.**

tensive interventions years later.

A general parenting license for each mother and father would be granted on meeting the criteria. It would then be validated for each child, clearly establishing a child-parent contract that includes financial responsibility and expectations of parental competence.

If protective services for a child were invoked by child abuse or neglect, the license could be placed on probationary status while treatment was ongoing, or it could be suspended during foster placement of the child and treatment of the parent. When a parent is unable or unwilling to meet parenting standards as defined by child-abuse and neglect laws, the license could be judicially revoked for that child through existing termination of parental rights procedures modified to correspond with revocation rather than quasi-criminal procedures.

The administration of protective services for children and the enforcement of child-abuse and neglect statutes would be facilitated by parent licensing. From the legal point of view, the burden of proof would lie with parents - they would be required to demonstrate evidence of minimal competence or of their parental fitness in legal terms - rather than with the state, which is now required to prove parental unfitness. If the state required all parents to become licensed before or upon the birth of their children, much later and costly case-by-case adjudication under child protection laws after parents have damaged their children would be avoided.

Parent licensing would remove protecting the welfare of children from the criminal arena of perpetrator and victim

after children have been damaged prevention and treatment arena, in parents could be helped to avoid abuse and neglecting their children.

### **The Denial of Licensure**

If the parent of a child was ineligible for a parent license because of age or incapacity, that person could have a provisional license under the aegis of children's protective services with parent training and supervision or foster placement and with a specified time during which that person could qualify for a license. If the person was unable to qualify at the end of that time, parental rights would be terminated and the child placed for adoption in accordance with existing child-abuse and neglect laws.

Individuals denied licensure would have opportunities for appeal through the usual legal channels. Those mistakenly denied licenses would be able to demonstrate their competence. Those whose parenting licenses were placed on probationary status or were suspended would be able to obtain treatment in order to qualify for reinstatement.

The denial or revocation of a parenting license would be expected to be a painful experience, particularly for mothers. But disappointment or inconvenience for people who are denied other licenses does not diminish the need to regulate activities that are potentially harmful to others. All other licensing procedures and competency tests are maintained even though they are subject to error. The overall importance of protecting children from incompetent parenting justifies the inconvenience to a few parents and the inevitable imperfections of a licensing system.

## Parent Competence Testing

At this time large-scale testing for signs of parental incompetence is premature. Efforts to predict the parenting potential of pregnant women by testing have yielded inconsistent results. There are ways of predicting parental competence through intensive evaluations, such as the rigorous assessment procedures employed for adoption. However, those measures are not practical for large-scale use.

At the same time, research should be focused on the early detection of parental incompetence. This ultimately would enhance the prediction of child abuse and neglect in a licensing process. It could alert vulnerable persons to examine their motives for child-rearing and encourage them to improve their parenting skills.

## Objections to Parent Licensing

No reasonable person would deny that children should be competently parented. Yet any effort to ensure that children have competent parents meets strident objections. Licensing parents seems especially unthinkable to many people.

The intense emotions evoked by the idea of licensing parents often leads to the categorical dismissal of setting any standards for parenting. Underneath these sentiments lie the presumption that children are the property of their biological parents and the mistrust of government.

The political Left fears that parent licensing would unduly restrict individual

freedom and could be used as an excuse to curtail governmental support of families and as a tool of racism. The political Right regards parent licensing as an intrusion of government into the private affairs of families and as a violation of the sacred parent-child relationship. Parent licensing actually would identify foundering parents and target private and public programs to help them. It would no more

invade the privacy of families than do existing child-abuse and neglect laws. It would formally consecrate parenting.

Setting standards for parenting also can be construed as "blaming" parents who already are stressed by living in an unsupportive society.

All parents have acted in ways that fall short of their parenting ideals. The mere mention of parental incompetence in itself can evoke the fear that a parent would not qualify as competent. But a statement by society that parenting is important enough to license would have the opposite effect. Because only a small fraction of parents would not meet the standards of minimal competence, the vast majority of parents would be affirmed. Rather than being taken for granted as a secondary role in our society, parenting would be valued as an essential social institution. The due process of law and appeal procedures would ensure that a competent parent would not be improperly denied a license.

The argument is advanced that we should not inconvenience all parents by a licensing process for which only a small percentage of parents would not qualify. This does not deter us from other licens-

**C o m p e t e n t  
parenting is  
essential for the  
survival of our  
society.**

## **Because of the damage that incompetent parents cause their children and society, the accountability of parents to society needs to be made clear.**

ing procedures that only screen out a similar small percentage of all who apply. In addition, the purpose of licensing parents would be not only to identify vulnerable parents but to generally enhance the status of parenting.

Even those who agree that standards should be set for parenting might feel that such a procedure is utopian and unworkable because of the complexities of administering a licensing process. They point to the practical problems involved in predicting parental incompetence and in realigning and expanding protective services in order to deal with the current overwhelming burdens imposed by abusive and neglectful parents. They should be reassured by the screening intent of a credentialing process. They could add their support to allocating more resources to deal with the current situation.

All of the objections to licensing parents can be regarded as insurmountable obstacles, or they can be seen as hurdles to be taken into account in designing and implementing licensing procedures. A process for licensing parents should not be ruled out simply because it has not been done before or because it would be too much trouble. The excuse that according parenting the status of operating a motor vehicle would be too difficult constitutes societal neglect of our children.

### **Alternatives to Parent Licensing**

The existing child-abuse and neglect reporting system could be intensified by monitoring deviations in the behavior and condition of children in schools and communities. But this would not protect children before they are abused or neglected and would continue to place responsibility on other people to detect child abuse and neglect rather than on parents to refrain from harming their children in the first place.

Entering both parents' social security numbers, when known, on every newborn's birth certificate would identify both parents of each child. Withholding child support from the wages of absent parents would help to bring affected children out of poverty and to persuade boys and men not to father children whom they cannot support.

Measures that support the education and development of children and youth reduce premature parenthood. In Rhode Island a plan was devised in which certain children who pass their academic courses, obey the law, avoid pregnancy, and do not use drugs receive help from a trained mentor throughout their elementary and high school years. Students who fulfill the contract and are accepted into college or a job training program receive free educa-

**The ineffective expenditure of our limited resources on trying to repair children and adults who have been damaged by incompetent parenting makes setting standards for parenting necessary today.**



tion or training.

An intriguing proposal has been made by the political scientist Paul Peterson that minors should be represented in the political process by having votes cast for them by their parents or guardians. This would be an effective means of giving children a political voice.

Any efforts that strengthen families, that instill pro-social values in children, and that protect the ecological and economic environments of future generations will help create a climate that values parenthood. But relying on family life education, mentoring, the elimination of poverty, the prevention of adolescent childbirths, or spiritual renewal of the nation to protect children from abuse and neglect would not protect the children of most incompetent parents; these parents necessitate a licensing process because, as is the case with habitual criminals, they do not respond to education or persuasion.

Competent parenting is essential for the survival of our society. Parents are in the best position to represent the interests of their children. But because of the damage that incompetent parents cause their children and society, the accountability of parents to society needs to be made clear. This could be done by recognizing parenting as a privilege supported by society, rather than as a biological right, and by affirming every child's civil right to competent parenting.

The ineffective expenditure of our limited resources on trying to repair chil-

dren and adults who have been damaged by incompetent parenting makes setting standards for parenting necessary today. Setting minimum standards for parenting would help to prevent child neglect and abuse. We should not continue to wait until parents damage their children by neglect and abuse and then apply parenting standards, as we do now.

**We should not continue to wait until parents damage their children by neglect and abuse and then apply parenting standards, as we do now.**

Licensing parents would lay the foundation for dramatically reducing the need for costly and ineffective governmental welfare and correctional programs. It would affirm parental responsibility for child-rearing and reduce the need for governmental involvement in families. It would increase the general level of competent parenting and positively affect gen-

erations to come.

Imagine what our nation would be like if every child had competent parenting. This is not an unrealistic goal if we really care about our future.

### **Suggested Further Reading**

James G. Dwyer. "Parents' Religion and Children's Welfare: Debunking the Doctrine of Parents' Rights." *California Law Review* 82 (1994): 1371-47.

David T. Lykken. *The Antisocial Personalities*. Hillsdale, N.J.: Erlbaum, 1995.

Jack C. Westman. *Licensing Parents: Can We Prevent Child Abuse and Neglect?* New York: Insight Books/Plenum Press, 1994.



**This 10 hour parent education course is available on CD ROM from the CSPCC for the cost of postage. Available in quantity for use in schools, prenatal classes etc.**

**CSPCC (705) 526-5647 email [cspcc@look.ca](mailto:cspcc@look.ca)**

## **The Canadian Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children**

The CSPCC is working to change those things in Canadian society that are making it difficult for parents to give their children the care they need to grow into healthy, confident, non-violent, loving adults.

### **In general we are working for:**

- ◆ a shift from arbitrary male dominance to no-one's arbitrary dominance
- ◆ a shift from the essential beliefs of our society's consumer religion -- envy, selfishness and greed -- to trust, empathy and affection in a community-centred, sustainable society
- ◆ a shift from violence and sexism as the warp and woof of entertainment
- ◆ a shift from treating children as sinful or stupid to empathizing with them and fulfilling their expanding and particular needs

### **In particular we are working to:**

- ◆ raise the status of parenting
- ◆ implement universal parenting education from kindergarten to grade eight
- ◆ encourage parents to make their children's emotional needs their highest priority during the critical first three years
- ◆ facilitate a positive birthing experience for every father, mother and baby
- ◆ promote extended breastfeeding with child-led weaning
- ◆ make it easier for parents to meet the emotional needs of each child by encouraging a minimum three year spacing between siblings
- ◆ increase awareness of the potential long term hazards of separations between children under three and their mothers.



Recognizing that the capacity to give and receive trust, affection and empathy is fundamental to being human.

Knowing that all of us suffer the consequences when children are raised in a way that makes them affectionless and violent, and;

Realizing that for the first time in History we have definite knowledge that these qualities are determined by the way a child is cared for in the very early years.

# CREDO



## WE BELIEVE THAT:

- The necessity that every new human being develop the capacity for trust, affection and empathy dictates that potential parents re-order their priorities with this in mind.
- Most parents are willing and able to provide their children with the necessary loving empathic care, given support from others, appropriate understanding of the task and the conviction of its absolute importance.
- It is unutterably cruel to permanently maim a human being by failing to provide this quality of care during the first three years of life.

## THERE IS AN URGENCY THEREFORE TO:

- Re-evaluate all our institutions, traditions and beliefs from this perspective.
- Oppose and weaken all forces which undermine the desire or ability of parents to successfully carry out a task which ultimately affects us all.
- Support and strengthen all aspects of family and community life which assist parents to meet their obligation to each new member of the human race.