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It's dangerous to be parenting under the influence...of certain books

By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—If I wanted to start a Virginia business to provide nail care, waxing, hair braiding, tattooing or “esthetics,” I would have to pass an exam and acquire a license.

But I need pass no exam and acquire no license to practice either electrolysis or...parenting. Anyone who's so inclined -- and even those who are not -- can have children and raise them, too.

Most Americans would agree, I think, that having government decide who can and who cannot be a parent, what qualifications need to be met and what practices must be followed and avoided is a twisty road that has led to crashes involving discrimination, eugenics and worse.

After 65,000 forced sterilizations in 33 states, we came to understand that preventing certain people from becoming parents violates our laws and costs more on many dimensions than its supposed benefits. It's too big a hammer that hits too many thumbs too often.

The cost of our laissez-faire is, however, high. Some people have kids who -- to be blunt -- shouldn't have kids for many reasons. We, as a society, have decided that state regulation of who can and who can't is more troublesome than letting the chips fall where they may.

Laissez-faire is not free. Inadequate parenting costs a lot.

America has some 425,000 kids in foster care, with another 115,000 awaiting placement. We have roughly 100,000 juveniles in “residential placements” (detention, correction and shelter facilities)—the most of any Nation.

The U.S. teenage (15-19) birth rate is the highest in the developed world; it comes to almost one million births a year, of which 80 percent are unintended. About three-quarters of these birth mothers are unmarried. Teenage pregnancy is estimated to cost taxpayers \$7 billion annually. And, then, we should start counting lost education; lost income; lost opportunities for both child and parents, particularly the mother.

We have a minimum-age requirement for voting, driving and drinking, but not for giving birth. One Idaho county tried criminalizing teenage births under an old anti-fornication law when unwed mothers applied for public assistance. It didn't work, and one can imagine the next step—fines and jail time for repeat offenders.

We have laws that prohibit parents from abusing children and neglecting them. Child support in the form of money is required. But we are okay with children being homeless, as are 1.5 million.

Aside from requiring compliance with certain public-health standards and school attendance, we impose few standards that tell parents what they must do for their children.

Farm families have been celebrated for expressing good values, family values, American values. I'm not sure that was a universally true picture of the past. Today, we bear our share of family woes.

This weekend a 17-year-old in our county's K-12 system of 210 kids died from a .30-30 bullet to his head. It's under investigation. He was no longer living with either parent; an older friend had taken him in.

What duties do parents owe their children? And what establishes and enforces those duties?

I did not think that I was prepared for and capable of raising my first child. Had there been a license, I would not have given myself one. It was on-the-job training. As politicians say, “Mistakes were made.” In a second marriage, I felt that we could do a good job with one child, but not two. I still think that was the right call.

Amy Chua, a Yale Law School professor of contracts and business transactions, published *Battle*

Hymn of the Tiger Mother this year. In it, she presents her "Chinese Mother's formula" for engineering children to achieve great academic success.

Chua programmed her children for certain types of academic achievements—nothing else. She extracted hours of practice and rote learning through coercion, guilt and shame. Her children were not allowed to participate in sports, school plays and sleepovers; watch TV; choose their own extracurricular activities; get any grade less than an A; play any instrument other than the piano or violin; and not play the piano or violin.

She produced two high-achieving daughters. Mission accomplished.

I can only wonder what the costs of these achievements were.

A boot-camp style will work with some kids. Others will rebel, or endure lives of chronic failure no matter how successful. Is Chua a good parent? Should she be prosecuted? Is an A in geometry the only measure of intellectual growth? How does the Tiger-Mother system work with average and below-average kids?

Another view -- sort of opposite -- comes from economics professor Bryan Caplan's *Selfish Reasons to Have More Kids*. He feels that parenting should be not much more than providing a positive environment and then getting out of the way.

He believes genetics, rather than home environment, determine child outcomes. A child's future is not very manipulable by parental interventions, he says, because the genetic dice have already been rolled and the pot picked up at the moment of conception.

Caplan would have us believe that a child of Albert and Mrs. Einstein would express a genius for math and physics even if he were raised in a doghouse by Spot.

Parental effect, he says, is basically limited to passing along religion, politics and how children perceive their parents.

Don't sweat it, Caplan counsels. Kids can be raised cheap, and you don't even have to try very hard. Maybe this works in one professor's household, but I've seen poor families have one child after another, thereby forfeiting any chance that they might do a half-decent job with just one kid.

In one sense, these dueling books have Joseph Stalin facing off against Ayn Rand.

Neither model appeals to me, and neither would have succeeded with my daughter.

If you want to produce trained monkeys, get out the whip and follow the Tiger's tracks. If you want a nanny to stick your kids in front of a television because you think it doesn't much matter one way or another, go with Caplan.

Environment and genetics together determine how kids turn out, along with bad luck, good luck, health, connections, money, pluck, reinforcement, internal motivation and a dozen other factors.

Parenting in my limited experience is very simple in concept and very complicated in practice. It's about customized nurturing. Each kid is a different size, but every kid needs the same kind of garment. Kids who aren't nurtured don't turn out well.

Both Bill Clinton and Barack Obama grew up in unstable families, with a stepfather or father who didn't care much. But each had at least one adult who nurtured him, who brought out the potential. Both mothers produced achievers, but not by grinding them through a Tiger-Mom mill.

It's heartbreaking to watch kids drown in the undertow of their own families. Often, but not always, they are pulled down by the same currents that caught their parents. A few break free.

I keep thinking of a dead 17-year-old and wish that licensing was not such a bad idea.

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