

RDS EDITORIAL

Weak and Lame: Parenting in the 21st Century

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It's not often that a statistical report robs me of my sleep for a week, but that's exactly what happened when the National Council on Disability (NCD) released its September 2012 report, *Rocking the Cradle: Ensuring the Rights of Parents with Disabilities and their Children* (<http://www.ncd.gov/publications/2012/Sep272012/>). The long-overdue report includes findings such as:

“The child welfare system is ill-equipped to support parents with disabilities and their families, resulting in disproportionately high rates of involvement with child welfare services and devastatingly high rates of parents with disabilities losing their parental rights,” and

“Parents with disabilities who are engaged in custody or visitation disputes in the family law system regularly encounter discriminatory practices.”

In my 2 AM weariness and blariness, I could hear the FBI pounding on my door, demanding the relinquishment of my seven-year-old daughter. “But officers,” I would cry, “I carried her for nine months in my womb just like any other woman!”

“That is no matter, you are not woman enough.”

“I nursed her and bathed her and held her when she cried!”

“That is no matter, you are not woman enough.”

“I fed her, I clothed her, I protected her and loved her!”

“That is no matter, you are not woman enough.”

“But I *agonized* over sending her to public school versus private school...and the local public school is really rather good...”

“You sent your child to public school? Officers, take this child away!”

Fortunately this is the point where my imagination realizes it is ridiculous, waking me from my trance. But realities are so much more sobering.

From the NCD report:

“Parents with disabilities and their children are overly, and often inappropriately, referred to child welfare services and, once involved, are permanently separated at disproportionately high rates. The children of parents with disabilities are removed at disproportionately high rates owing to a number of factors, including...state statutes that include disability as grounds for termination of parental rights...” and

“...[There are] inconsistent state laws, many that overtly discriminate against parents with disabilities, others that fail to protect them from unsupported allegations that they are unfit or create a detrimental impact on their children solely on the basis of presumption or speculation regarding the parental disability...”

What if my husband's habit of leaving his socks scattered all over the house and my habit of rearranging his belongings finally get to be too much and we should decide to part ways? Would I lose custody of my daughter because my husband can drive and I cannot? What if someone observes my daughter taking my arm as we approach the sidewalk curb, saying, “Curb, Mommy,” and decides my daughter has too much responsibility for a seven-year-old? What if my tolerance of my daughter's current liking for polka-dot pants paired with striped shirts is interpreted as negligence rather than parental indulgence?

Observing interactions between parents and their children has always amused me. Since my daughter's birth, I have had ample opportunity to indulge myself in this interest. The struggles of the 21st-century parent never cease to amaze me. My daughter has a friend, “Amy,” who we invited to dinner. I asked Amy's mother the obligatory, “Does Amy have any dietary restrictions?” I received the following instructions:

“Amy will not eat tomatoes of any kind, cooked mushroom (raw is fine), pasta (except the bow shaped ones), brown rice, peanut butter and jelly sandwiches (unless the peanut butter and jelly are served on separate pieces of bread that are not stuck together), cheese (she does like string cheese), meat that is not shaped like a bunny rabbit, nor mashed, baked or boiled potatoes (french fries :-).”

Another friend, “Blaire,” has a flair for the dramatic. One evening as we sat enjoying a glass of wine with Blaire's parents, Blaire led my daughter into the living room, both

stark naked and giggling, "We are the forest fairies." Blaire's mother jumped to her feet and said, "Oh how cute! Let me get my camera..."

There is a darling little boy in my daughter's class who insists on Kung-Fu-ing every individual who crosses his path. His father explains with a smile to the individual who is grimacing and holding their shins, "Oh, he doesn't mean it really. We're trying to get him to be a bit more assertive, so he won't turn out to be a homosexual, ha, ha."

Then there is "Frank," who just last week, with the unfortunate perception of all bullies, told my daughter within earshot of her friends, "Your Mommy is weak and lame!" My daughter came home from school indignant, telling me what Frank had said. After I had given the maternal pep talk about how "you and I are stronger than Frank any day of the week," and also checked the web for martial arts studios in our neighborhood, I reflected, "How on earth does a seven-year-old already know how to objectify and demean a person with a disability?" And a scary thought, "What if little Frank becomes Judge Frank one day?"

"Mommy," said my daughter later, "When Frank says mean things about me it hurts my feelings. But when he says mean things about you, it hurts me even more."

My daughter has compassion, the capacity to love and a sense of responsibility. Where did I go wrong?