



Being positive, sure, and certain about solutions to problems besetting us today is a marvelously comfortable position; one I wish mightily I could achieve. More often than not, I'm less certain than I wish to be. Could be I'm misinformed or misguided, but knowing what's absolutely right, even after a lot of study and thought, can be difficult.

A recent blast at proposed child advocacy laws to protect children's rights attacks government interference in the traditional freedom of the family to teach its children as it sees fit.

Americans old enough to remember the effects of such totalitarian interference prior to and during World War II may feel the proposed child advocacy laws threaten the American system, the democratic process, and the individual freedoms Americans traditionally enjoy. All who believe American freedoms worth preserving recoil at the idea of state control of the family.

I do. You do. The government has no business telling you how to raise your children, what standards, precepts and moral values you will instill. And it's got no business telling you what you'll teach your young ones, even if what you teach them is the exact opposite of what your neighbor teaches his children.

On the other hand, in too many American families children are taught no moral standards, given no religious training, receiving no firm direction about right and wrong. They aren't getting it because the parents don't have it to give.

What about these youngsters? Do we need government intervention to reinforce the fabric of character-building in such families? Can government provide a healthier set of standards? Will today's children grow up to become better citizens and parents if they learn values in government-sponsored programs? Or will they all learn a specified set of lessons, so when they are adult, they will all think the same?

If parents won't, don't or can't teach their children, and the government doesn't step in and do it, then who will?

We're not dealing with hardened criminals who are also parents. We're dealing with a generation that includes many young unmarried mothers who can't support, nurture, and teach their children. They don't know how.

We're dealing with parents who can't fulfill their own needs, let alone those of their offspring, and parents who want to be free from parental responsibilities. Who's to care for little children when their parents abdicate? What chance have children to build healthy families themselves when they receive no training in their own homes in traditional values?

We're also dealing with many devoted parents who mean to instill proper standards but who are, themselves, severely limited by their own weaknesses. Alcoholism, drugs, debts piled on debts, ignorance and inexperience.

Are these the exception? Increasingly, evidence shows they are the rule; the exception is the family with enough: enough money, time, addition; enough personal strength to stay off drugs, go on the wagon and stay there, inner fortitude to be good parents.

Surely I'm wrong. I wish I were. Look about you. Make a list of parents of small children; list those you know. How many are alcoholics? How many haven't tried pot or some other drug? How many aren't separated or divorced?

How many young parents have enough money to provide comfortably for their families without going into debt; not just a mortgage, but car payments, installment payments on appliances and even clothing?

Cross off your list all who aren't able to give enough, who haven't enough time for their kids, who are too busy to talk, read, play with and enjoy their children. Cross off those who drink too much, use drugs, are divorced or separated, are debt-ridden, and families where both parents work to make ends meet.

How many are left? Half? One of five? One of ten?

Those you've crossed off aren't bad people or bad parents. They're just people who're unable to "make it".

Many families today seem hardly more than a group of people of varying ages who happen to occupy the same living quarters. If they communicate at all with one another, it's on a superficial level or a hostile one.

What's right? What's wrong? Is state intervention in the lives of citizens a form of Communism? If so, I want no part of it. Alternatively, I see families disintegrating, children feeling isolated, individuals aimlessly roaming through daily routines without being in touch with one another except in aggressive and destructive ways.

If child advocacy isn't the way to go, what is? In our rush to embrace advantages and advances of modern progress, the American family is being trampled. Cultural and moral values are cast aside as encumbrances to be jettisoned.

Remember when marriage was "'til death do you part" whether you were "happy" or not? Remember when "Honor thy Father and Mother" was the rule in every home? Remember when alcohol was served, if at all, only on special occasions? Remember when a joint meant a dive, a low bar, or an elbow or knee? Remember when families sat down at the table to eat together three times a day, every day? Remember when fathers brought home the bacon and mothers cared for children and did the housework?

I doubt government can re-create that atmosphere through legislation. Only people can do it. They can do it only if opportunities enable them to organize their lives that way, and only if they have the knowledge and desire to create a home for their children.

Government can, if forced to do so, make it possible for people to meet their obligations to their children and to society. Government can provide training and counseling to parents to help its people be better mothers and fathers, husbands and wives.

There is now emerging a spate of publicity about proposed restructuring of our laws and institutions regarding the rights of children. "Children Under the Law", by Hillary Rodham; "The Massachusetts Task Force Reports: Advocacy for Children", by Peter B. Edelman; "White House Conferences on Children: An Historical Perspective", by Rochelle Beck; these papers are now available on the subject of child advocacy.

In coming months we shall hear more about movements now afoot to restructure American laws and education to meet the needs of American children. We shall hear arguments for and arguments against.

If we are honest we recognize the American family unit is in serious trouble; we also recognize that traditional freedoms may be threatened with further erosion. Protecting both institutions is vital to continuing our democratic society. Protecting children is vital to the nation's future.

In this regard I'm less certain than I'd like to be of the appropriate steps to be taken. While I've no difficulty feeling sure what I'd like to see — that is, strong healthy parenting providing children everything needed to grow and develop to their full potential — what troubles me is how best to achieve it, given the materials — the people — we have to work with.

Unless we as a nation of individuals move very carefully, however, we may be tumbled through legislative action into totalitarian state-controlled mindlessness. When government assumes control of children's minds in the formative years, government gains control of individual independence and freedom of thought and action of its people.