from Phyllis Schlafly December 2, 1993 SHOULD SELF ESTEEM REPLACE THE 3 R's?

Elementary school children may no longer be taught to read and write, but they will almost surely be given one of the trendy new psychological courses in self-esteem. Self-esteem is supposed to be the magic bullet that will cure all school and social problems, from poor academic performance to teenage pregnancies, VD, drug abuse, and dropouts.

Since the teachers' colleges now promote self-esteem as the most up-to-date philosophy of education, entrepreneurs have met the challenge by producing innovative and expensive curricula to sell to the vast public school market. The most successful courses are those called "Pumsy In Pursuit of Excellence" (which claims to be in 40 percent of the nation's elementary schools) and DUSO (Developing Understanding of Self and Others).

The eight-week Pumsy program designed for ages 6 to 11 is made up of stories and activities featuring a small female dragon named Pumsy, who comes alive in the classroom through the use of a puppet. Pumsy has three mind-sets -- her Mud Mind, her Clear Mind, and her Sparkle Mind -- which children are taught to emulate.

When Pumsy finds it difficult to feel good about herself, she is said to be in her Mud Mind. With the help of her friends, Pumsy develops positive thinking and self esteem so she can feel good about herself in spite of things that happen to her which she dislikes.

During the classroom sessions using Pumsy, the counselor leads the children in "painting mind pictures" -- a euphemism for guided imagery. The exercises call on the children to mentally transport themselves into the Mind Pictures where they meet and talk to imaginary friends who give them good feelings, wise counsel, and self esteem.

Pumsy directs elementary school children to place their trust in imaginary friends, peers or school counselors, instead of their parents, for help and guidance in difficult life situations. One counselor even told her class, "Jesus and God can't be with you all the time, so you need to call on Pumsy who will never leave you."

Of course, there's nothing wrong with developing children's imagination. But there is a lot wrong with using progressive relaxation techniques that are akin to hypnosis, followed by guided imagery that crosses the line between reality and fantasy.

The difference can be illustrated by the popular children's TV show "Barney & Friends." The characters in "Barney" do not engage in psychological manipulation. Barney gives children such sound advice as "Monsters aren't real -- they're only in story books" and "It's good to talk with your parents about things you are afraid of."

You would think that, before a school district embarks on such a radical new type of curriculum, it would demand evidence (a) that the concept is sound and (b) that the curriculum is a proven success.

Alas, these courses can produce no such evidence, and the few studies that have been made show just the opposite.

A Ph.D. dissertation this year by Dr. Julie Ann Kummer at Marquette University shows that Pumsy has no significant measurable effect on children's self esteem. The findings of her empirical study are a direct challenge to prevailing education establishment views.

Dr. Kummer's research was based on accepted procedures of comparing a class that used Pumsy with a control group that didn't use any self-esteem curriculum. The children's self esteem was measured before and after on the Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale, which is generally recognized as the best available testing technique.

Timberline Press, the publisher of Pumsy, is fighting back against

its critics by distributing instructions to schools on how to deal with parents. The instructions use the now-popular technique of attacking parents as "fundamental Christians" who favor censorship.

DUSO has 42 guided imagery lessons in which children are ordered by teachers to relax and close their eyes. Then the children are told to pretend they are traveling to faraway places where they meet friendly creatures, such as DUSO the dolphin.

Like most self-esteem courses, DUSO attempts to reorganize the belief and value systems of children. DUSO elevates feelings over facts and standards, and involves group dynamics in which children reveal their inner thoughts and conflicts.

Parental opposition to DUSO resulted in the New Mexico state senate passing a resolution urging that "the teaching of or counseling by certain mind-altering psychological techniques be entirely eliminated in New Mexico public schools."

The use of Pumsy, DUSO, and other psychological courses caused the Alabama State Board of Education this year to adopt a regulation that prohibits public schools from using "hypnosis and dissociative mental states" where "the boundary between the real and fantasy or illusion becomes blurred." The regulation also forbids the use of guided imagery and transcendental or similar types of meditation induced by progressive relaxation.

Other states should do likewise. At best, these self-esteem courses fail in their announced purpose, are a waste of time, and divert precious school hours away from the basics. At worst, they are unlicensed group psychotherapy conducted on minors without the informed consent of their parents.