Try Parenting Instead Of Mental Health Screening

by Phyllis Schlafly February 7, 2007

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Mental health screening of all children is the goal of legislation introduced into many state legislatures this year. Typical of these highly controversial bills is the Missouri bill that would require every Missouri school district, in collaboration with "the office of comprehensive child mental health," to develop "a policy of incorporating social and emotional development into the district's educational program."

The Missouri bill requires schools to "address teaching and assessing social and emotional skills and protocols for responding to children with social, emotional or mental health problems." The bill also requires the Missouri state board of education to set "social and emotional development standards."

One marvels at the arrogance of government officials who think they can set children's social and emotional standards. Where on the chart would they place a child crying because he fell and skinned his knee?

Cortland County, New York, has already announced a plan to annually screen every fifth-grader and ninth-grader for mental health problems. The purpose, according to the county director of youth services, is "to raise awareness that

mental health issues are in essence no different than other physical issues, such as heart disease." Apparently, you are not "aware" if you think otherwise.

The screening process, which takes 15 minutes, involves getting the kids to answer a series of yes-or-no questions, on either computer or paper. It is claimed that parental permission will be necessary, but all children of any age in foster care will automatically be screened.

Mental health screening is based on the assumption that ten percent of children suffer from a mental disorder severe enough to cause impairment, and that five percent of children have emotional or behavior difficulties that interfere with learning, friendships and family life.

Cortland County plans to refer the ten percent to the county mental health clinic or other providers for further evaluation, and it is well known that referrals often result in orders for drug therapy. The clinic will be rewarded with $50 of taxpayers' money for every child sent to the clinic.

Parents are starting to wake up to this invasion of their authority over the care and upbringing of their own children. A bill that would prohibit school personnel from making mental health recommendations or requirements for children, including the use of psychotropic medications, just passed out of a committee of the Utah legislature.

This bill would also prohibit schools from requiring a student to take psychiatric medication in order to attend school and prohibit the state from removing a child from parental custody based on a parent's refusal to consent to the administration of psychotropic medication.

A bill introduced into the Connecticut legislature is more specific. It would require that all parents who are requested by the school to have their child evaluated be

first provided with a statement that the government does not recommend any particular checklist, assessment or evaluation for psychiatric or psychological disorders, plus a copy of the Protection of Pupil Rights Amendment (the federal law that requires prior written parental consent before schools can require students to submit to psychological or psychiatric testing or treatment).

Last year, Alaska enacted a law forbidding schools from conducting psychiatric or behavioral health evaluations and from requiring that a child take a psychotropic drug as a condition for attending a public school. Also last year, Arizona passed a law requiring that schools obtain written parental consent before conducting any mental health screening on any pupil and must make the actual survey questions available for inspection by parents.

Someone should notify state legislators and school districts that are contemplating mental health screening requirements that the American Psychological Association recently urged that "in most cases" of childhood mental disorders, non-drug treatment should "be considered first." This should include techniques that focus on parenting skills as well as help from teachers.

Even the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, an organization whose members strongly favor drug treatment, just completed new guidelines recommending that children receive talk therapy before being given drugs for the common complaint of moderate depression.

Parents should take on the responsibility of being parents, and they should beware of the psychotropic drugs that have unfortunate or even tragic side effects. Parents should help to pass pro-parent legislation before those who think the "village" should raise all children use mental health screening to label their child as nuts.