PS for 7/19/90

How Children Acquire Values

The National Commission on Children has held a series of hearings to explore the problems of children. As we emerge from the "Me" decades of the 1970s and '80s, it is encouraging that someone is addressing the needs of children.

The last hearing focused on "how children acquire values." Indeed, that may be the most important question for the Commission to ask because, more than any other factor, a child's values will determine whether he grows up clean in mind and body, or whether he becomes what is now called "at risk."

What values children acquire from their home life and from television may be beyond the reach of a government commission, but surely it should take a long hard look at the public schools, where 89 percent of children spend so much of their formative years.

It would be impossible for a child to spend some 30 hours a week for 12 years in a school environment without learning values. If the child finds that accurate, neat, on-time work is rewarded, he will learn those values; if the child finds that stealing another kid's lunch money, destroying property, and assing the teacher are not punished, he will learn those values.

In the first half of the 20th century, the readers used by elementary public school children were filled with stories that taught moral lessons. Here's a random sample of such lessons I found in some old readers used by our grandparents: thrift, honesty, respect for elders, where there's a will there's a way, the Golden Rule, true courage, kindness to the less fortunate, obedience to parents, the consequences of idleness and truancy, and why virtue and love are worth more than material riches.

By the 1950s, in the heyday of the Dick and Jane readers, school books were purged of such moral lessons. Dick and Jane looked up and looked down, heard the duck quack and the cat meow, and uttered repetitious trivia.

By the 1970s, the values situation in public schools was far worse than Dick and Jane's moral neutrality. Under the influence of such prominent psychologists as Abraham Maslow, Carl Rogers, and Sidney Simon, the public schools began

affirmatively teaching that each child can construct his own value system by getting in touch with his feelings.

Through hundreds of lessons and activities, the public school child is taught that values don't come from authority (such as parents) but from within himself, that any behavior is okay if he feels comfortable about it, and that he should not be judgmental about anyone else's actions. Cut loose from any values he may have brought from home, the child is confronted with moral dilemmas for which he is told there are no right or wrong answers.

The classroom is turned into encounter sessions and discussion groups. The teacher is demoted from the position of an authority who sets standards, imparts wisdom, and guides learning and conduct, to one of mere facilitator or discussion leader.

This type of teaching used to be called "values clarification." Since parents have caught on to what that means, it now usually goes under the labels "non-directive education," "decision-making," or "critical thinking."

Don't we want children to learn "decision making"? Consider this typical teaching from a public school textbook: "Steps in decision making can apply to something so simple as buying a new pair of shoes. It can also be applied to more complex decisions such as religious preferences, use of alcohol, tobacco and drugs."

It is positively evil for the school to teach that use of alcohol, tobacco and drugs is a decision for the child to make, just like choosing a new pair of shoes. Yet that type of non-directive teaching characterizes most, if not all, drug and sex curricula currently used in public schools.

In one widely used drug course, 4th graders are shown a "drug family tree" on which the branches growing out of the same trunk are labeled coffee, tobacco, Tums, Pepto-Bismol, alcohol, sleeping pills, glue, aspirin, cough syrup, marijuana, heroin, LSD, and cocaine. The child is taught that "everybody" takes some kin d of drugs, and that it is up to the child to decide which he will take and how much.

This "non-directive" education leaves the child easy prey for the street peddler with the hard sell. We owe it to our children to tell them that society has already decided that illegal drugs are bad.

A new federal law has just gone into effect that mandates that all public schools teach that illegal drugs and the illegal use of drugs are "wrong and harmful." It

remains to be seen whether or how soon the public schools will obey this new law, because it will require almost every current drug curriculum to be revamped or replaced.