

Should Parents Be Licensed?

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Dear Governor,

I am writing to express my appreciation for the magnitude of the job that you've taken on and for your conscientious efforts to meet the needs of the citizens of our state. I am writing on behalf of our neediest citizens, those with the quietest voice but the most profound impact on all of our tomorrows. I am writing in the best interests of our children.

As governor, you have the resources and the opportunity to make New Hampshire first in more than just presidential politics. It is now within your power to make New Hampshire first in its proactive commitment to family life and to our future, first in its recognition that the quality of parenting today determines the quality of all of our tomorrows. You are now in a position to be the first in the nation –if not in the world- to institute parental licensure.

We know that healthy families tend to raise healthy children. We know that well-informed, sensitive, firm and consistent parents tend to raise children who finish school, who stay away from drugs and alcohol and who lead healthy and productive lives themselves.

We know that unhealthy families tend to raise unhealthy children. We know that dysfunctional, uninformed, over-punitive and rejecting parents tend to raise children who take out their anger and insecurities on themselves and on the society around them. We know that these children are less likely to graduate from high school, less likely to hold down a job and less likely to maintain their own stable relationships and to raise healthy children. These children are more vulnerable to peer pressure, more likely to abuse substances, to become involved in the criminal justice system and to divorce.

And we know that the social and economic costs of that part of our population which is under-educated, vocationally unstable, drug-dependent, criminally involved and/or raising children in single-parent families is huge. High school drop-outs typically fail to maintain consistent and adequate incomes, bloating unemployment doles and welfare lines. Substance dependence and criminal involvement clogs hospitals and courtrooms, costing millions of tax-payer dollars. Worst of all, the children of these parents are far more likely to require special education services in school, social service intervention at home and more frequent and intensive medical services as they grow.

Mr. Governor, you can choose to continue to invest our precious and limited resources only to react to these spiraling costs, to build more courtrooms and hospitals, to fund more remedial services and reactive agencies. But there is an alternative. You can work to change one of the many roots of these problems. You can invest in improving the

quality of our families before they deteriorate into dysfunction. You can institute a program of parental licensure.

Parental licensure? Its not a new idea. Others before have advocated for mandatory training and licensure of parents much the same way that the state requires training and licensure of many professions. But mandatory programs invite punitive responses. A lawyer who practices without a license can be disbarred. A physician who practices without a license can be prosecuted. But parents?

No, mandatory parent training and parental licensure is untenable. We must never accept a government that seeks to control the family by dictating who can and who cannot have children, least of all here in the 'live free or die' state.

We can, however, create incentives and invest in opportunities for parents to improve their parenting skills, recognizing that by acting now we might avoid the need to react at to far greater problems later, at far greater costs. We can do this by establishing an annual parental licensure opportunity and motivate parents to participate through financial incentives.

Money moves people. Unfortunately, the promise of a healthier family and a healthier future is seldom enough. Parents who might never otherwise find the time or have the interest in improving their parenting skills would be far more likely to do so if they saw a real financial advantage. Call it a quality parenting credit, an annual tax advantage accrued by those who earn state validated parent training certification each year. In the short run, the costs of establishing these opportunities would be paid by the greater costs incurred by those who fail to participate. In the long run, the savings in programs like the Division for Children Youth and Families, the state correctional and juvenile justice systems and in the family courts surely would be enough to make this program self-sustaining and a model to the nation.

The curriculum? The greatest challenge inherent in instituting parental licensure is determining what skills to license. At the outset, the basics are clear:

1. Children are people, no matter their age, and all people deserve respect.
2. Children learn by example.
3. Children's thinking, feeling and relationships change as they grow.
4. Children must have permission to express their thoughts and feelings.
5. Children must feel that they are loved and accepted no matter what.

As obvious as these five points may seem, they are not. Far too many parents need to be taught these simple facts, often because they did not grow up with them themselves.

I hold that if every family in the State of New Hampshire lived by these five basics alone, the incidence of childhood depression and anxiety would fall dramatically. When children are less depressed and anxious, they learn better, thereby reducing the need for very time- and labor- and dollar-intensive special education services. These changes also mean less conflict in the home which, in turn, means lower costs associated with child protective services, family conflict resolution services and family court judges.

But this is only the beginning. As your parental licensure initiative expands, more elaborate training can become available. Courses can be aimed at specific developmental periods (parenting toddlers or adolescents, for example), family issues (coping with divorce, remarriage or adoption, as examples) and special needs (parenting the demanding child). Parents seeking to improve their caregiving skills and reduce their tax burden will have a choice of specialty training opportunities while renewing their New Hampshire State Quality Caregiving License.

----- **Parenting Pointer** -----

Both "[Keeping Kids Out Of The Middle](#)" and "[Developmental Psychology for Family law Professionals](#)" feature an appendix that proposes this plan on a national and an international basis.

If you support a proposal of this sort, send this article and write letters to your state and federal representatives. Of course their plates are full and, of course, there are hundreds of other more pressing issues, but that's the point. If we allow the squeaky wheels to get all the oil, we'll always be consumed with wheels that squeak. We must invest in our future, be proactive, so that someday fewer wheels will squeak and our lives will be healthier.