

## A BLOW AGAINST HUMAN DIGNITY

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It was with concern and sadness that I read that the Virginia State Board of Social Services voted to change its rules to permit foster parents to spank. I am concerned about the impact such a policy will have on many foster children who are already suffering from the trauma of violence and neglect.

Spanking (the purposeful infliction of pain to achieve the purposes of the caretaker) by state-selected caretakers cannot help but reinforce many of the psychological and behavioral difficulties many foster children already face. If foster children had adults in their lives who were loving and supportive of their human dignity, perhaps such a regulation might make sense. However, the life conditions of foster children usually speak volumes about the lack of such "points of light."

Those working in social services see this every day. Foster parents see this every day. Spanking is usually used by parents to satisfy their immediate need for control. No matter how dressed up in the language of love and concern, spanking has little to do with improving the long-term life chances of children, especially foster children.

The new regulations are supposedly designed to help parents distinguish between abuse and discipline and to help in the recruitment of foster parents. How either of these goals necessarily leads to the decision to permit spanking - and what either has to do with the long term well-being of foster children - is difficult to fathom.

First, if foster parents are not allowed to hit children, there should be little problem distinguishing between abuse and spanking as discipline, since spanking will not be part of the process and abuse will stand alone.

In any event, making decisions about whether a particular parental action is abuse or not is a legal question and can only be decided after the damage has already been done to the child. Such decisions are irrelevant to the child whose interests the State Board is to serve in this matter.

Secondly, it speaks volumes about the processes of recruiting foster parents if the only way to improve recruitment is to be sure that those who feel the expressed need to spank children are supported in their desires.

If the concern is to recruit more loving foster parents, pandering to the would-be-spankers is not the way. I suggest a more thorough review of positive recruitment practices in other states and nations, and a review of other mechanisms of state support for foster parents before some of the commonwealth's most vulnerable children are put at further risk.

Everyone concerned about children write their legislators and the Virginia Department of Social Services (Sonia Rivero, commissioner, and Doris Jenkins, child welfare licensing) to demand a reconsideration of this process.

While other states and nations are moving to ban spanking, especially in state-sponsored activities, Virginia administrators are once again moving against an enlightened tide of concern for the human dignity of children.

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