

OUR CHILDREN DON'T DESERVE TO BE BEATEN

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In response to the recent killings of children by parents in Hampton Roads, Kerry Dougherty observed last month that ``we're prosecuting the wrong parents."

She's right. Law enforcement just can't seem to get it right when it comes to children. No matter how our legislatures tinker with definitions of abuse and neglect, no matter how strongly we urge prosecutors to act in punishing those who neglect, injure or kill children, we will fail to reach our goal - protecting children. Prosecution does nothing to protect the children who are killed and harmed. The acts of cruelty have already been committed.

Some parents or caretakers may refrain from injuring their children in fear of possible intervention by those agencies charged with protecting children (a good thing). But other parents, citing their family responsibility, will continue to injure children ``for their own good."

A law enforcement approach to the problem of violence against children relies on the psychology of deterrence, a principle that has shown little success in stopping crime in the broader sense. This is so even when there is broad public and legal support for the idea that specific criminal behaviors such as theft, rape and murder are wrong.

Deterrence with regard to violence against children is certainly less likely to be effective when our social and legal opinions support corporal punishment to discipline children.

Many of the child killings and injuries in our community are the result of this violent behavior toward children gone wrong. In these cases, deterrence has no effect because the perpetrator believes he is doing a good and appropriate thing, and our public policy supports that basic idea. (Just Tuesday, a man was arraigned in the beating death of his 8-month-old daughter in Suffolk.)

It seems that, in America, causing pain and suffering to children is not wrong in all cases. If it is reasonable, if it doesn't reach some magical threshold where it is called abuse or neglect, causing harm to children is not punishable under law.

Indeed, causing pain to children is supported by some child development specialists and even some religions. It is certainly part of most of our personal experiences, and we draw on those experiences to determine how we should treat our children.

In America there is little hope of protecting children, preventing harm to them unless we, as a community, connect ourselves to principles that protect and support children before harm comes to them.

A human rights approach provides a set of principles that give children a chance before they are harmed or killed.

A human rights approach sees children as contributors to our families and communities and not as the property of parents or as helpless objects that we adults mold.

A human rights approach sees children as individuals and as members of families and communities with rights and responsibilities appropriate to the child's age and development.

These principles put children first and at the center. They provide parents, teachers and other caretakers with guidelines that seek to eliminate the harm we cause to children, often in the name of doing good. They also articulate ways to nurture and strengthen children's participation in the family and community.

These principles can be found in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Every country in the world except

the United States and Somalia has ratified the convention. (See the Web site: www.unicef.org/crc/crc.htm.)

Everyone should read this thoughtful document and think about the many ways we put it into practice in our individual and community lives.

If we truly believe that children have a right to physical integrity and human dignity, and, if we act on those beliefs, then we have a chance to reduce the killing and abandonment of our children.

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