

War on Drugs? War on Parents

By DANA MACK

In a bright and airy suburban classroom, second-graders are introduced to the concept of coping. "Pretend," says the teacher, "that your pet has died. Are you feeling sad?"

"Now," she says, "let's sing a song to make us feel better." And the children join in two rousing choruses of a famous tune: "If you're sad and you know it, shed a tear . . ." So goes the art of "coping" with grief and separation.

Scene from a black comedy? No. Just an ordinary exercise as described in a so-called "Comprehensive Health Education Curriculum" mandated by the state of Connecticut, and taught in hundreds of public school districts throughout the country. Through puppetry, song, story, film, drama and games, the "Here's Looking at You, 2000" curriculum offers lessons for grade-school children. It purports to be about "drug education" and "refusal skills." But its major thrust is pure brainwashing.

As parents, my husband and I first became aware of the 2000 program at the dinner table one evening last fall, when our seven-year-old child suddenly asked us if we were alcoholics.

"I beg your pardon?" my husband answered, pouring himself a glass of Sancerre.

"You drink wine," she said, in defense of her question, "and sometimes you even yell at me."

Apparently, earlier that day a cuddly little puppet named Miranda had told the second-graders a story about her "Uncle Bud." Like most of us, Uncle Bud occasionally loses his patience with the younger generation. But only, claims little Miranda, when he has had a bottle of beer.

Our daughter informed us not to worry that she had noticed our "habit." "Lots of people," she said, "can help alcoholics and their families."

"Surely not children, though," coun-

tered my husband, in disbelief.

"Oh, yes," our daughter replied, confidently. "If a child tells a teacher or a friend, they will find someone to help."

My husband—as resigned to the puritanical idiosyncracies of elementary school teachers as he is convinced of the pleasures of good wine—let this little incident go unremarked. He urged me to exercise the same discretion.

But even he was annoyed when, as part of a unit on "poison control," our daughter exhorted us to comb through



every inch of our house, making it "safe." That meant inspecting for the presence of alcohol, nicotine and caffeine, as well as ammonia and muriatic acid.

"No doubt those Schnapps bottles in the wet bar will be reported at school," my husband commented wryly, after our worried little girl had gone to bed reciting the Poison Control 1-800 number. "Pity the poor child whose parents smoke as well as drink."

A few weeks later our child came home with a worksheet that finally sent us banging on school doors. Titled "Chase Your Monsters," it presented a list of scary thoughts that had been unveiled to her, in an animated film, as the major bugaboos of seven-year-olds. Among these: "Grown-ups must be feared"; "Your home-life is a war"; "Someday you'll use drugs"; and "People of different colors should not work together."

Now, these are truly ugly suggestions to put into the head of a child. But even uglier was a follow-up assignment on the "monster" theme, which instructed our daughter to close her eyes, visualize a "monster problem" of her own, and then write about it. What, we wondered, could possibly be behind such

an invasive exercise in negativism?

What is behind it, we suspect, after having looked further into the curriculum, is the desire to harden children—the better to wean them from the potentially insidious influence of their parents.

Indeed, in the war on drugs launched by the "Here's Looking at You, 2000" curriculum, parents—not pushers—are the enemy. Parents are purported to transmit "positive attitudes" toward drug use and to "involve" their children in it. How? According to the teacher's guide, when they request children "to bring a beer from the refrigerator."

And parents are noted in the curriculum to have more destructive propensities than simply encouraging chemical dependency. Teachers, in fact, are asked to pay close attention to any suspected "family management problems" in their classroom; they are coached in the warning signs of family conflict; and they are prompted to remind their pupils "to talk to a friend or a teacher if they need help with a problem." One exercise in the second-grade lesson plan fairly extracts family confessions. It invites children to send "secret messages" to their teacher about "problems at home."

My husband and I have requested that our child be exempted from this "health" program, the hygienic benefits of which, we are convinced, only a Goebbels could truly appreciate.

The school authorities have politely acceded to our wishes. Of course, we were informed that taking our little girl out of the program might make her feel ostracized. But this, apparently, has not happened.

I asked my daughter only last week whether she feels unhappy about being sent out of the room during "health" lessons. "Oh, no," she answered emphatically. "I get to go to the library!"

Ms. Mack is writing a book on the cultural environment of childhood.

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