

'Sexting,' fight clubs suggest kids short on character



ROBERT COLES, the Harvard social psychiatrist and Pulitzer Prize-winning author known for his research on the moral development of children, defines "character" as "how you

behave when no one is looking."

In his book, "The Moral Intelligence of Children," Coles suggests that it takes a great deal of moral courage to act as an individual when confronted with peer pressure, and that such issues must be addressed both in the home and at school.

Coles' advice is especially relevant, considering the recent behavior of certain, local high school students who've indulged in "fight clubs" and "sexting." Fight clubs feature a no-holds-barred combination of wrestling, boxing and martial arts that has become popular among teens; the brawls are often bloody and can result in significant injuries to the neck and bones.

State police recently investigated two incidents of fight clubs in Shickshinny reportedly involving Northwest Area High School students. More than 30 teens apparently cheered on the off-campus event as two male students brawled, using kicks, body blows and choke holds in a contest of physical submission.

The brawlers might have deluded themselves into believing that their brutality was simply a demonstration of "machismo," but they acted without any self-discipline, com-

COMMENTARY

WILLIAM C. KASHATUS

passion or character.

Almost as shocking was the response of some peers who dismissed the incidents as "no big deal" and "just getting caught up in the moment." It almost sounds as if it's acceptable to inflict physical violence.

"Sexting" – sending sexually suggestive photos and text messages by cell phone – placed Tunkhannock Area High School in the spotlight. In 2008, school district officials discovered nude and seminude pictures of three female students on cell phones belonging to classmates, who had been exchanging the images.

The officials confiscated the phones and turned them over to the district attorney, who threatened to prosecute the female students on child pornography charges unless they enrolled in an educational program covering sexual harassment and sexual violence.

The parents of the three students refused to enroll their daughters in the program and took the district attorney to court. The cases against two of the girls recently were dropped and the third student and her parents are likely to succeed on the basis of the 14th Amendment right to parental autonomy. Let's hope everyone involved learned some-

thing about the potential dangers of sharing these kinds of images.

Too often, parents abandon their responsibility for disciplining their children. When the child gets into trouble, they're quick to dismiss it as teenage rebellion or "victimization."

The real problem often is our failure as a society to raise our children with a sense of compassion for others, with respect for human decency and, above all, with character.

If we are raising an ethically bankrupt generation, we have nobody to blame but ourselves. Our children don't want to be victims; they want to be loved, respected, and disciplined – yes, disciplined.

Good discipline teaches respect for self and others. It is one of the truest forms of love any adult can give a child. Young people realize that, though they might not always appreciate it until later in life, we must cultivate discipline, respect and love in the home and school if we hope to build character in our children.

Perhaps in the future we will listen more carefully to people such as Robert Coles and other reformers who press for community service programs in our schools, a reduction in the glorification of violence and the commercialization of sex, and an increase in the quality of time we spend with our children.

William C. Kashatus is a writer, historian and former high school teacher. He can be contacted at bill@historylive.net.

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