EDITORIAL

Paddling for tagging is not the way to go

Is that child a delinquent? Unruly, always "tagging" public property with graffiti? Never fear, the California State Assembly Public Safety Committee has approved a bill allowing juvenile court judges to issue parents of the adolescent vandals this command: whack the little bugger 10 times with a wooden paddle. Do it right here, in the courtroom.

The landmark bill, which still must survive another committee hearing and an Assembly floor vote, would, if enacted, institute court-ordered corporal punishment for the first time in more than 40 years.

This is not the way to deter crime. It may have worked to deter Michael Fay, the spray-paint wielding American adolescent who got caned in Singapore for his deeds of vandalism. But that was Singapore, where they have caned vandals all the time without a murmur from the United States until an American boy received the punishment.

Rather, the proposed measure is a way for the state to control parenting. For a young person, a parent's advice and then the law provide the most powerful deterrents against wrongdoing. For example, a parent tells a child not to spray paint cars or else they will be grounded. To reinforce how wrong the act is, the state will enact a law punishing juveniles who spray paint cars.

The threat of spanking is a deterrent reserved for two to three year olds in a family setting. The state has no business authorizing that a child be spanked. Furthermore, they have less business authorizing that a parent spank their own child in a courtroom.

Threatening a naughty child with some swift swats works as a deterrent because the act of spanking is one that humiliates the child. The judge-sanctioned swatting proposed in California works upon the humiliation principle as well. In fact, the bill requires that the names of juvenile offenders who get paddled be made public — a tactic used to humiliate the offender and deter other would-be taggers.

This punishment is not aimed at two and three- year-olds. It is aimed at teen-agers, many of whom presumably have been subjected to worse acts of violence than a spank with a wooden paddle. This bill seems to say that the Assembly of California makes no distinction between the intellects of three and 13-year-olds, and that they deserve the same punishments. This bill is not geared toward making a child understand that there are other outlets for fun besides spray painting black letters on public property. Like a three year old who gets hit, the adolescent will not understand why his act was wrong, but only that he has done something bad.

The proposed legislation, which was not inspired by any court case but by an Assembly member who admired the outcome of the Fay case, is not going to stop kids from tagging. Ordering a parent to whack their child with a paddle of specified size (three-fourths inch thick, 18 inches long and 6 inches wide with a 6-inch handle) while a judge looks on to determine whether the paddling is "satisfactory" is only going to create an unfavorable situation.

The child will probably be angry and humiliated (and perhaps inclined to retaliate with another act of violence), the parent will be a instrument, instructed by the state on how to punish the child and the judge will have too much power in telling the parent to whack harder or more times.

In order to deter a crime, a balance must be struck between telling a would-be offender what will happen if the crime is committed, telling him how his criminal actions will affect society and telling him what options are available for him besides crime.

Why not enact a punishment that puts something back into the community and make the adolescent offender scrub graffiti-covered walls for a few hundred hours? Some may argue that if that worked, it would have been tried already and would still be happening. Well, whacking the offender will not make him understand the consequences of his actions any better. If the vandalizing teen-ager doesn't realize the consequences of his actions after hours of scrubbing and repainting walls, at least the state has a clean wall and not someone else's sore behind to show for it.

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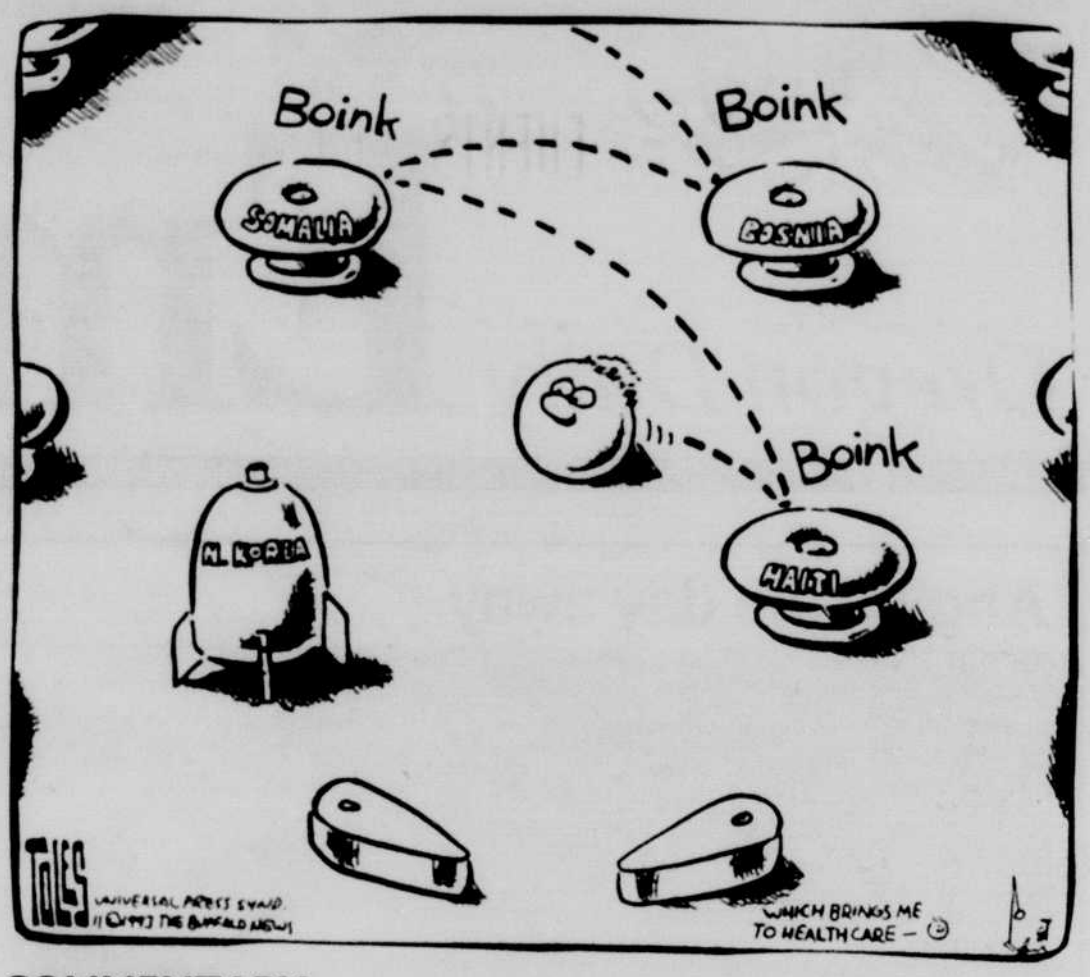

COMMENTARY

Growing up is hard these days

ANNE MOSER-KORNFELD

Summer brings many things: vegetables, trips to the beach, suntans and class reunions. This year marks the tenth anniversary of my graduation from high school. I got my invitation to the class reunion a little while ago and it started me thinking about what it was like growing up and being a teen-ager.

So much has changed since 1984. Kids today have it harder. They're faced with increased pressures surrounding their future. The job market is insecure. Life as a kid is tougher. Besides the pressure to wear outrageously expensive clothing, life itself is more unsettled. Nothing is as it was.

When I was in high school, the cliques were defined as the preppy-smart kids, the losers and the non-conformists.

Unless kids came from backgrounds where they experienced abuse at home, basically everyone was going to go on to college after graduation.

Today teens and adults have become more divided. One generation has no idea what the next is doing or what they want. What are adults over 30 afraid that teens are going to do? Just because a kid expresses his or her anger doesn't mean he or she is going to lash out at strangers on a street corner.

Adolescents coming up in our society are not alone in their feelings of anger. Even back in 1984, the world was changing in dramatic ways.

Teens today are living with social problems that, in the past, have been exclusively thought of as "adult in nature." Kids don't have much of a childhood anymore.

The anger manifested by teen-agers isn't directed into constructive venues. Kids don't have any place to vent their pent-up emotions and they don't get the attention they need to learn about their choices. Teen pregnancy and drugs become alternatives because they feel good — not because teens are aware of the outcome of their actions.

Kids have figured out how to gain access to illegal drugs and alcohol. Teen pregnancy is pervasive. Denying that this access exists, or believing it exists among only the bad kids, shows how little responsibility we, as a society, want to share for our future.

Some young teen-age mothers are tomorrow's leaders. When those leaders are, as the *Utne Reader* characterized them, "dissed and totally pissed," what will their response be toward the elderly 20, 30 or 40 years from now? Given the opportunity to give back to society, will they, or will they just turn off as they feel they're being turned away from today? If a teen mother is forced off welfare after two years and can't give her children proper care, how will her kids make a difference later?

Society is changing at an incredibly fast rate. The information superhighway is permitting people to meet each other and communicate in ways they've never met and communicated before.

Men and women relate to each other differently and address issues of equality and violence.

There are no clear guidelines as to how to achieve balance in a culture spinning around and around.

The complex energy and intense feelings a kid experiences from 13 to 17, compounded with parental figures who are themselves uncertain as to what will happen next, are overwhelming and intense. It's no wonder they're going crazy and acting out.

Teen-agers at 18 know more about life than people of the same age at any time in our history. But kids are still kids. They still eat candy. They still feel growing pains and they still have to have a first time for everything.

The high school I went to was located in an African-American community. Most of the students were white and middle-class. We were bused in and the experience as a whole was wrenching for the mostly affluent students of that Ohio public school.

Teen-agers at 18 know more about life than people of the same age at any time in our history. But kids are still kids. They still eat candy. They still feel growing pains and they still have have a first time for everything.

The time of my life, which for many people is high school, was different for me, and is probably what brought me to the University last fall. It isn't what teens have to deal with every day in 1994. I may have escaped the boredom and uncertainty a kid who graduated from high school this past June has to face.

Now, with young people, I'm stumbling along trying to determine my future. At least I'm not going to an overpriced, formal dinner with a bunch of losers from high school, and then a class picnic. Gee. Well, teens can be assured of one thing after graduation. Class reunions are so cheesy.

Anne Moser-Kornfeld will be a columnist for the Emerald *next fall.*