

Where have all the gray areas gone?

The other day I went to the dentist. For a long time now, there has been a sign-in sheet to let the hygienists know who is there and when they arrived. This time the sign-in sheet was gone. I asked why. Privacy. So has it come to fearing anyone knowing that I have been to the dentist?

Teachers are no longer able to hug and cuddle, even touch their students for fear of litigation for sexual inappropriateness. What about all those kindergartners fresh from daily hugs, suddenly left without? What happens when those elementary children feel left out, sad about missing mommy, suffer a skinned knee or simply need a good morning hug? What is the message to our children about human contact?

It seems as if blanket policies have become the general rule no matter what? How soon do these fear tactics reach our living rooms? Or have they? If I am afraid of anyone knowing I have been to the dentist, what of any other preventive measure I might take to help my life? It has always been hard to convince parents that a parent education class is helpful for any and all walks of life without a parent worrying that someone might think their attendance is a red flag to her poor parenting. Where and how far are we going with this right to privacy?

I recently heard that community lists of sexual predators include those arrested for public urination! Apparently, if you read a list of sexual deviants living in your community, it may include some guy who just had to go.

Parents who are under the spotlight of state agencies for questionable abuse fear using disciplinary measures that many of us, not under suspicion, use on a daily basis. No one likes being watched. We tense up and often act up. Sometimes those in a helping profession, attempt to protect a child or an adult from the black and white rules of state officials. Yes, rules are essential, but when rules cannot be flexed to suit the individual requirements of specific situations and people, they can be downright harmful.

Sometimes strict rules work against the best interest of the individual prompting others to step in at great risk to themselves to give the help they see needed. Unfortunately there are too few willing to take that risk—to help a child or family in need—after they see the punishment their involvement could incur.

Gray areas are essential to account for individual needs and situations. When the average citizen is afraid to step in to protect another from the black and whites, we move a step further toward a fascist state. I don't presume to have an answer. But when federal or state agencies invoke policies meant for all with no leeway for the one, many of the ones get lost in the cracks. And when those who step in to protect the ones are driven to lie and scheme, we must not only look at the lying and scheming, but also the policies that provoked the lying and scheming; the ones that have forced most of us into silent compliance.

To bring these points home: Take a look at your household rules—the standards that run your family. Are they black and white or are there gray areas for negotiation? Are they blanket rules for all, or do you set different expectations for the differing needs of your children? Do they provoke your children to lie or withhold information from you, later to rebel and break connection? Do you blame and punish your child for lying when she protects herself from the black and whites of your rules because they don't consider who she is and what her needs are in a given situation?

For instance, if a curfew is broken, are you willing to find out your child's side of the story and act accordingly, or "is a rule a rule"? Do you ever adjust a rule if your child has shown progress in taking responsibility and maturity? When your child behaves suspiciously, do you see only the behavior you don't like or are you willing to look at what you may have set in motion to cause the suspicious behavior?

Let's not allow the fear tactics of higher up authority to trickle down into our living rooms. Our children need our trust in order to become trustworthy. When they believe they are not to be trusted, they are more likely to become untrustworthy. These are not the children we want growing up to set our policies. "You're either with me or against me" leaves no room for talking, negotiating, seeing other points of view besides our own, and invoking feelings of caring. It's the black and whites we must keep questioning. It's the grays we must mightily defend.