

When I was in seventh grade, I really wanted to become a lawyer. I watched daily reruns of Perry Mason when I got home from school. In each episode, Perry's case seemed doomed until the last minute when his girl Friday, Stella, or private investigator, Paul, turned up evidence to reveal the truth and clear his client. Ah, the glory of truth and justice!

My infatuation with law led me to take several seventh grade level books on law out of the library. I started my legal notebook, making a vocabulary list of Latin legal terms. I was fascinated with terms like *habeas corpus* and *amicus*. In my present position, I spend way too much time with lawyers. (Don't get me wrong, I like the lawyers who represent me and the district but most of the time, but we're not together to improve reading or math in the district!) In my current dealings with lawyers, I've come to enjoy the way they use the word, *animus*. No real reason, I just think it's cool.

Despite my fascination with legal lingo, I have come to identify a serious problem with our legal system when it comes to our children. While the job of those in the legal system is to parse words and be obsessive/compulsive about due process, the minutia and detail of how legal decisions are made are misleading to young people. In the legal system, the truth is not always served in the name of expediency. To explain my point, I will use a case recently in the news.

There has been a case in Corry where charges were filed against a student who went to the opponent's side during a football game and held up a sign that said, "#32 Sucks." Most people would agree that holding an offensive sign in front of opposing fans is not something we want students to do. While it was clearly a violation of school policy and decorum, the filing of disorderly conduct charges raised the issue of first amendment rights, etc. While a case like this may have much legal fodder to chew, doing so deals a heavy blow to the teaching of morality and the development of right and wrong. Determining whether a behavior that is clearly unacceptable from a standpoint of politeness is wrong according to the nuance of the law, sends the message to kids that the behavior is acceptable under certain circumstances.

[To be clear, I don't know anyone involved in this case and have no first hand knowledge of it. I am not judging the facts of the case but what I do know is that this case resonates with many situations I've seen in my career.]

I can't tell you how many times in my career I've heard: "I know what my kid did was wrong, BUT . . ." But, the punishment isn't just, so and so did a similar thing, the teacher contributed to the problem, the coach is biased, etc. etc. etc.

Someone once said, "Children do not hear anything that comes before the word, BUT. They only hear what comes after." I concur with that statement. There is a biological basis why this is true. We know that the frontal lobe is the last part of the brain to develop sometime in the mid to late 20's. One of the functions of the frontal lobe is to give us the ability to make judgements. (Using their spouses as *prima facia* evidence, some women would contend that the maturity to which I refer comes a much later time.)

When an infraction occurs that is clear to us as mature adults, it is made *unclear* to children when they hear that someone's actions were acquitted in the eyes of the law. Children and young adults just don't have the brain development to understand the finer points of law. The legal system is not going to change, so how do we help our children develop a solid moral compass?

First, parents need to understand that their children do not need them to be lawyers. While parents must certainly advocate for their children if they believe they are wronged, it must be done in a way that is sensitive to the developmental aspects of brain development. If an action by a child is inappropriate, don't let them hear you use the "but" word to justify or make excuses for the action. Even if the words you would place after the word "but" have some merit, address them through the appropriate channel without your child present. Let your child know in clear terms where he went wrong. Introducing what you consider may be mitigating factors will only cause a glitch in your child's moral development.

Secondly, parents should be aware that their children do not need another friend in the form of their parents. Kids have plenty of friends. They need a responsible adult to guide, love and discipline them. You may find it rewarding to have your child think of you as her "friend" but trust me when I say I've seen that go awry quite often.

Finally, as your child matures, take time to discuss legal cases that are in the news. If it is a situation where someone seemingly "got off on a technicality," carefully explain to your child that what the person did was still wrong and that you would not condone it. Explain that our legal system has many requirements to protect us but in the process, sometimes bad behavior goes unchecked. Stress that a legal acquittal based on technicalities does not make something wrong correct.

In conclusion, the *modus operandi* (mode of operation) of the legal system can leave children *contra bonos mores* (against good morals). Adults must work hard to carefully guide and mold a child's moral compass in a society that often seems to promote the idea that bad behavior is OK if I don't get caught or get off on a technicality.

Caveat lector! (Let the reader beware!)