

## Developmental Psychology I Debate

**The topic:** Licensing for parents

**The question:** Should being a parent require a license?

**The problem:**

- The evidence of bad parenting is hard to miss
- Much child abuse; over 3.5 million cases each year
- Many parents have limited control over their own lives, they have limited commitment to child rearing, and they have little knowledge of effective child-rearing
- High positive correlation between out-of-wedlock births and violent crimes
- Cycles of abuse and violence between parents and children

**The possibility:** (Jack Westman, child psychiatrist and professor at the University of Wisconsin Medical School; and David Lykken, professor of psychology at the University of Minnesota; both have written books, *Licensing Parents: Can We Prevent Child Abuse and Neglect?*, and *The American Crime Factory*, respectively)

- People who want children should meet certain criteria for licenses
- Parents would have to be at least 18 years of age
- Parents would have to make a written commitment to rearing a child in a signed document similar to an application for a marriage license
- Parenting classes would be required before the birth of a child
- Only married couples would be licensed
- Parents would have to be self-supporting
- No one who is actively psychotic would be licensed
- Children of parents who fail to meet these requirements would be placed in foster care and ultimately put up for adoption, pending the termination of parental rights
- Parents could appeal the process
- If children were born to unlicensed parents, the state would intervene immediately.
- Licenses would be checked in hospital maternity wards
- Repeat offenders might be required to submit to an implant of birth control such as Norplant (a chemical contraceptive) as a way to keep from having another baby for five years

**The debate:**

Students are randomly divided into two groups

- Perspective 1 – Being a parent should require a license
- Perspective 2 – Being a parent should not require a license

Groups are given 10 minutes to prepare their argument

Group 1 presents their perspective in 3 minutes

Group 2 presents their perspective in 3 minutes

Group 1 presents their rebuttal in 2 minutes

Group 2 presents their rebuttal in 2 minutes

Discussion by the entire class

Typical responses by students to each perspective include the following:

### **Perspective 1: Being a parent should require a license**

1. We need permits to do nearly everything else - to fish, to hunt, to drive, to marry. Isn't the raising of children more important than these things?
2. Crime (especially violent crime) will be cut by weeding out minimally competent parents.
3. People may feel sorry for the parents, but aren't the innocent and helpless children to be considered, too?
4. Parenthood is earned. Parenthood is not a biological right.
5. The child is not the possession of his/her parents. Parenthood is a responsibility, an opportunity, and a privilege.
6. This is not racially based, since most of the parents who neglect and abuse their children are Caucasian.
7. This is not classist, since half of the children who are neglected and abused do not receive public assistance.
8. As a society, we're not reacting appropriately to the 3.5 million children a year who are neglected or abused.
9. In the long run, licensing parents would save the nation billions of dollars, since we wouldn't need all of the governmental services which are brought to bear because of incompetent parenting.
10. This is one way to break the cycle of abuse.
11. Imagine a world in which every child was being reared by biological parents who were mature, grown up, self-supporting, and not crazy or criminal. That's what could happen if we implement this plan.
12. The cost of incompetent parenting under a worst-case scenario amounts to a total monetary loss to society of \$1,975,475. This includes a child born to an incompetent single parent in a welfare family, who grows into a habitual criminal and spends 40 years of his/her life incarcerated. Payments include AFDC, social services, arrests, court costs, probation services, correctional facilities, juvenile facilities, jail detention, prison, loss in federal income taxes, and loss to national economy.

### **Perspective 2: Being a parent should not require a license**

1. This proposal is simply too radical, too totalitarian, too extreme.
2. This proposal is sexist, racist, classist.

3. This is representative of Big Brother intrusion by government into the most sacred of all institutions, the family. This is frightfully intrusive.
4. This is another cold-hearted attempt to punish the victim
5. This evokes images of babies being torn from the arms of crying mothers.
6. Enforcement of this would be impractical.
7. Setting standards for the parents would be impossible and politically hopeless.
8. How would one know who is going to be an incompetent parent? Even the scientific community probably doesn't know enough about what makes a good parent in order to make that kind of a judgment.
9. This is a case of blaming the victim. Our real investment needs to go with strengthening the family and providing them with resources for staying intact.
10. Regulating parenthood goes against a basic concept of our democratic society, which is: It is the citizens who are sovereign.