

# HELP!

## *Our Daughter Is Being Held Captive by Bossy Boneheads!*

**Just under a year ago**, our young daughter was abducted by strangers and held captive. Her captors tried to indoctrinate her with ideas we knew to be wrong. Day in and day out, they worked on her. They let her come home in the evenings and on weekends but she always had to return. We protested to the authorities, but we could not get her released—which made sense because it was authorities who were holding her. Finally she was set free. Jennifer's back with us now, and everything is going to be all right.

We should explain. Last September, Jennifer, who was going on 7, started first grade at a public school in Prince William County, Virginia. Under the compulsory-schooling laws, we thought we had little choice but to surrender her to the authorities. We couldn't afford private school.

Even before Jennifer started, we didn't like public—we should say government—schools. We'd heard all the horror stories about poor academic standards, crime, drug use, and the rest. Besides that, we didn't like government schools because we didn't (and don't) like government. So you'd think we should have been prepared for what was going to happen when Jennifer entered school. Boy, were we unprepared.

If anything, we probably were optimistic. Jennifer is a bright girl (we're not just saying that). She had already been reading for two years. She had a good attitude about learning, which was reinforced at the private Montessori preschool we had sent her to. As any child would be, she was slightly anxious about her first day at a new school. That did not bother us. What bothered us was when she said several times during the first few weeks, "The funniest thing about first grade is that it's easier than kindergarten."

What a portent of things to come.

It did not take long for us to realize that most of Jennifer's classmates did not read as well as she did (or at all) and that she was being held down to their level. When we made the first of our many complaints, the teacher acknowledged that Jennifer was above the level of her best students at the end of the previous school year. But she explained that we should not rush Jennifer because it was more fun to read something easy than something hard and that Jennifer should be having fun. (Jennifer found any reading fun.)

Early in the semester we attended parents' night. As we entered the building we knew we felt different from those occasions when we visited Jennifer's Montessori preschool. At the Montessori school we were paying customers, and that relationship was reflected in the school personnel's genuine desire to please us and Jennifer. At public school we weren't treated like customers. The people were nice, of course, but the way they treated us reminded us of the post office, another government institution that takes your money whether you like it or not.

At parents' night, Jennifer's teacher, who holds a master's in reading, explained how she teaches the children to read. She reads simple stories out loud until the children memorize them. Then she has the children recite the stories from memory while running their fingers under the words on the page. "That's reading," she said. We sat stunned at this revelation. Wasn't she describing the look-say method of teaching reading that had been discredited long ago? Then she explained that she likes to have the children write something about the story. The children have a range of capabilities, she said: Some can write simple sentences about the story. Others can write the first letters of words. Still others can only draw the characters. "That's writing too," she said. The teacher obviously did not have a master's in writing, we thought. What possible good could come of telling children, and their parents, that drawing is writing?

So we weren't impressed by this teacher's approach to reading and writing. How about arithmetic? It seemed to us that the teacher spent lots of time having the children do exercises based on counting to 10. This seemed peculiar because Jennifer had learned to count years before. She was already doing addition at home. When we suggested that Jennifer be allowed to move ahead in her workbook, the teacher (who must have been getting an uneasy feeling about us by now) told us we should not rush Jennifer and that the class would be doing addition soon—with the aid of calculators. Calculators? How would that *teach* addition, in the sense of having the kids understand what's going on



when they do it? Using calculators sounded like the math equivalent of the look-say method of learning to read.

That was the last straw. We requested a conference, during which the teacher agreed that moving Jennifer to the second grade might be a good idea. Things improved once she had skipped a grade, but not much. Jennifer's school wasn't teaching her to think; it was teaching her to regurgitate. Instead of learning to do and understand arithmetic, she was instructed to memorize "math facts." One plus one equals two. That's a math fact. It was bad enough that they spent time doing this stuff in school. The teacher expected us to spend an hour a night drilling Jennifer in her math facts at home! Sorry, but she's got a life. Besides, she already understood the principle that adding is a form of counting. If she forgot the answer to a problem, she could count it out. Is that such a weird idea that schools can't teach it? When the class conducted exercises in adding up the values of various coins, we thought Jennifer was finally being ushered into the real world. We were wrong. The class wasn't taught to convert the coins into numbers and then add them. Instead, they were apparently supposed to memorize the sum of the various combinations. One quarter plus one quarter is 50 cents. One quarter plus one dime plus one nickel plus one penny is 41 cents. More math facts. What kind of way is that to teach arithmetic?

Then Jennifer told us a revealing thing: If a pupil indicated displeasure when it was arithmetic time, he or she got double the work. What an *excellent* way to foster the love of learning.

We don't want anyone to get the wrong idea. We don't think Jennifer was dealt any

**The education of  
Jennifer Richman  
proved not to be  
a pretty sight.**

**BY SHELDON L. AND KATHLEEN J. RICHMAN ■ Photograph by Darrow Montgomery**



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“bad” teachers. By public-school standards, we’re sure they were fine. The problem lies in public-school standards. In school, teachers must deal with many children, so they’re forced to seek a common denominator. But we don’t want our children held down to a common denominator (we have two children younger than Jennifer). Our kids have individual needs and their own ways of learning and developing and they shouldn’t have to fit someone else’s mold, schedule, and expectations. But that’s what Jennifer’s public school was demanding. Montessori schools, or at least The Springs in Springfield, where Jennifer spent four years, have found a creative way to deal with children as unique individuals. But that is too much to expect from a procrustean government institution, where the rule is “one size fits all” because anything else would violate official egalitarian notions.

As bad as the academic side of school was, it looked good by comparison to the cultural and political side. As the public schools’ interest in teaching the three R’s has declined, they have busied themselves by setting up courses that can only be called political indoctrination. The public schools have always striven to turn children into good citizens (read: pliant, uncomplaining taxpayers), but now they go well beyond that.

One day Jennifer brought home a notice that her curriculum would include a “family

life education” program. The school provided only a sketchy summary of the program, a summary that turned out to be woefully inadequate and downright misleading in several cases. We asked the school office for more complete information, but a staff person could only refer us to the school library. The program featured a series of dubious ethical lessons that included not only a hysterical anti-drug and anti-tobacco campaign, but also propaganda about alcohol and caffeine. Drugs are on everyone’s mind these days, of course, and just to make sure Jennifer had heard of them, on the first day she had to sign a form acknowledging that distributing drugs at school was grounds for expulsion. (There went her plans for pocket money.)

Naturally, we do not want our adolescent children to use drugs, alcohol, or tobacco, but we object equally to the school’s frantic temperance crusade, which seems bent on creating little ax-wielding Carrie Nations. The program instills an irrational fear of inanimate substances and will haunt the children by implying that they cannot trust themselves. Besides, we do not want our daughter taught that we are doing something wrong when we open a beer or pour a cup of coffee.

The other parts of the “family life” program dealt with things such as showing affection, strangers, and the parts of the body. The program, according to the school district, “embraces the concepts of honesty, truthfulness [isn’t that redundant?], diligence, tolerance, responsibility, racial harmony, and respect for self, parents, teachers and other duly constituted authorities. Using teaching strategies that reflect sound instructional principles [this was a relief to hear], teachers are expected to teach students to choose courses of action that contribute to the development of a strong family; that conform to family, community and religious values; and that reflect a healthy lifestyle.”

Religious and community values? Which ones? Zen Buddhism or Scientology? What makes the schools think they should be teaching this stuff anyway? The way we see it, this is the family’s domain, and we parents have too easily surrendered it to the government. If the public schools want to take on the moral education, parents ought to at least decide the specific content. For example, our views probably differ from the state’s regarding the proper attitude toward “duly constituted authorities.” (By the way, we are neither left-wing counter-culturalists nor right-wing Christian fundamentalists, just bourgeois folks—with a healthy distrust of the government, if you haven’t figured that out yet.)

The notice claimed that the program was optional and that we could have Jennifer excused from class during “family life” lessons. That’s better than nothing, but why should that onus be on the child to leave the class? Asked to indicate which lessons we wanted Jennifer excused from, we marked off almost all of them, leaving only the lessons in nutrition. Presumably, no parent had ever opted out of so much, because the assistant principal called to ask if we had misunderstood the directions; she was certain we hadn’t meant to veto a number of the lessons we had marked. We assured her that we could read directions and really did not want Jennifer in most of the program. Henceforth, whenever the teacher prepared to show a film related to the program, Jennifer alone was asked to go to the school library. Did no other parents object?

The environment has become a major preoccupation of the public schools. Although many have been led to believe that science has objectively determined that environmental dangers loom and that governmental solutions are required to save us from catastrophe, our view is quite the opposite. Environmentalist diagnoses, and especially the remedies, are riddled with bad science and big-government ideology. Under

the mantle of science, the public schools are teaching political ethics.

Our daughter was propagandized about how greedy business people are frivolously destroying the rain forests in South America. She has not once had it explained to her that deforestation is largely subsidized by governments and the World Bank and that the destruction couldn’t occur on such a scale without the coercion of taxpayers. Nor was she taught that it is easy for us rich Americans to blithely tell poor, struggling peasants to leave the trees alone. What she has been taught about global warming and the ozone layer—that the ice caps are going to melt and the average summer temperature in Washington is going to top 115 degrees—has been discredited by eminent climatologists, such as Patrick Michaels of the University of Virginia and Richard Lindzen of MIT. The data and the theory just are not there. But that doesn’t stop the public schools from scaring kids about the apocalypse that isn’t coming.

Jennifer has also had the gospel of recycling drummed into her. Recycling is the ethic which teaches that everything is worth saving except your time. We wondered whether it ever occurred to Jennifer’s teacher that separating materials requires more vehicles making more trips, more gasoline, and hence more pollution. She has probably never read that styrofoam containers require fewer resources and are less polluting than paper containers. At any rate, it is much easier to pass along misleading and simplistic views of the environmental movement rather than explain the principles of economics.

The homework in environmental education was a scream. Jennifer was told to collect glass, metal, and plastic for a week and then dispose of them at a recycling center. On the way to the center we explained how absurd this was. If recycling was really a good idea, we said, someone would be paying us to do it. Another assignment required Jennifer to collect litter from the street and

make a collage out of it. The older kids were to be even more creative. One of the assignments for the 10 year olds was to write a local judge to urge him to give litterers tougher sentences.

The political indoctrination of our daughter worked. When Jennifer was asked to write a sentence on how to save the whales, she wrote, “We could pass laws to protect them.”

This faith in government is instilled across the board. The class was told repeatedly that the United States would never start a war in the Middle East. As we recall, no one shot at Americans until the U.S. drew a line in the sand—and then crossed it. This little detail was not shared with the children. This propaganda was reinforced by the *Weekly Reader*, which assured the children that President Bush sent the troops to the Middle East “to help.” When the American troops were sent to Saudi Arabia, Jennifer and her classmates were given American-flag pins to wear each day to show that they were “thinking about the troops.” We opposed the war policy and didn’t like the militarism being promoted in the school. When we spoke to the assistant principal about the flag pins, it was clear that she never dreamed she would get a complaint about this. She explained that wearing the pin was supposed to be optional. Jennifer said it did not seem optional.

## **JENNIFER AND HER CLASSMATES** *were instructed to recite the Pledge of Allegiance. She was never told what it meant. She was just supposed to obediently repeat words supplied by her teacher.*

The matter became moot when Jennifer came home the next day and said, “Mom, you’re lucky. My flag pin broke.”

From the first day, Jennifer and her classmates were instructed to stand and recite the Pledge of Allegiance. She was never told why or what it meant. She was just supposed to obediently repeat words supplied by her teacher. We told Jennifer she didn’t have to say the pledge, but that she should do what was most comfortable. This concern with good citizenship and democracy, we learned, had its limits. When it came to electing class officers, Jennifer’s teacher decided who would run for the offices. Jennifer instinctively knew there was something wrong with this.

We didn’t complain about the pledge requirement. We had called the school so many times already that we feared we were getting an unenviable reputation with the authorities and that it would somehow hurt

Jennifer. This was after only two months into the school year.

We decided that drastic action was called for. We considered yanking Jennifer out of public school and placing her in private school, but that was out of the question. We can’t afford private schools. (It would be a different matter if the government would grant you a refund of taxes if you choose not to use their schools.)

The more we thought about it, the more we decided that the problem wasn’t just public schooling, it was *schooling*. It took us some time to realize this. Jennifer is our first child, and her schooling was an education for us, too. What we learned with each intrusion by the public school was that the problem is systemic; the organized bureaucratic classroom is a stifling environment. No child is permitted to get too far ahead of any other; if he tries, the reins are pulled sharply. (Average students suffer even more

because they are given no incentive to do better.) We realized that the problem would be the same in private school—after all, private schools have to satisfy many of the same state requirements as the public schools. And the environmentalist and nationalist ethos is pandemic.

That’s why we decided to declare our independence and home-school Jennifer. We would have done it immediately except Virginia demands to be notified of such an impertinence by the August before the school term.

Home-schooling will give us a chance to be involved with Jennifer in ways we could never otherwise be. We are also confident that she will get the best possible education. Frankly, we can’t imagine any teacher satisfying us. Of course, it wouldn’t be fair for us to expect a teacher to spend a good portion of her time on work appropriate for Jennifer when the rest of the class is on a different level. But we’re not interested in fairness; we’re interested in Jennifer. We plan to spare her sister, Emily, and brother, Ben, what she has gone through by home-schooling them from the start.

Jennifer also looks forward to her self-education. When she arrived home after her last day of school, she announced with pride, “Well, no more school until college.”

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