

# LINE ON LIFE

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## Ban the Book! \*

David A. Gershaw, Ph.D.

Censorship is nothing new, but attempts are currently being made to revive it. Supposedly, banning various materials will protect our younger generation from undesired influences. In this way, parents hope to keep their children from adopting unpopular concepts. However, is this an effective tactic?

Mark Twain's 1884 novel, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, has been one of the most frequently banned books in the United States. Reasons for banning the book varied. In 1905, the Brooklyn Public Library banned the book because "*Huck not only itched and scratched, and... he said 'sweat' when he should have said 'perspiration'.*" Currently, the reason is Huck's use of the word, "*nigger*". (This word has become so censored; the media refer to it only as the "*N-word*".)

Racial, religious or ethnic slurs are no longer accepted in public. (Notice how some politicians have suffered, when they carelessly used them in public.) In contrast, they are still used privately. This inconsistency creates a problem. Deleting derogatory names from our conversations creates a more respectful environment. On the other hand, if we ban all literature that contains hateful words, students cannot learn how these words become so powerful. For example, if students cannot read *Huckleberry Finn*, they are less able to understand how these words turn people into despised, faceless, non-human objects. Young readers will never behold Huck learning to regard the runaway slave, Jim, as a real human being.

Those who favor censorship say the social or moral values of the readers should be the standard in banning books. This means that materials used in schools and libraries should reflect the values of that community. If any word, action or idea is judged offensive by a member or leader of a community, its source should be removed from bookshelves. However, community standards vary. With our mobile society, families are likely to move into communities with standards different from their own. This creates controversies.

On the other hand, others believe that literature can express contrasting points of view. However, children are not innately capable of making desirable moral judgments from what they read. They need to learn how to judge things for themselves. How can parents and teachers help children to learn to think for themselves, if all materials that deviate from a given norm are banned?

Those in power find it easier to ban any mention of contradictory ideas. In 1931, the Chinese government banned *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, because "*animals should not be using human language.*" More recently in Irvine, California, some teachers crossed out every "*hell*" and "*damn*" in student copies of Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*.

(Ironically, that novel is about the devastating consequences of book banning and censorship.)

Within the last five years, attempts are being made to ban two children's books, *Daddy's Roommate* and *Heather Has Two Mommies*. (Both books depict nurturing parents who are homosexual.) Copies of *To Kill a Mockingbird* have been removed from libraries, because the book "*represents institutionalized racism*." Some want to ban the *Merriam-Webster Collegiate Dictionary*, because it "*defines obscene words*." Every so often, someone tries to ban the Bible, because it has descriptions of "*lewd, indecent and violent conduct*." (So far, they have not succeeded in banning the Bible.)

Whatever topic we dislike, we do not help our children by avoiding it. No matter where we live, our children will encounter what we consider undesirable aspects in our society — foul language, racism, violence, and variations of sexual behavior. If these topics have been avoided in childhood, young people will not know how to respond to them. How can we help them to make sensible decisions?

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## **Rather than avoiding an aversive topic, it is more effective to train children to make their own decisions.**

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One effective way is to train youngsters to do **critical thinking**. All aspects of divergent ideas and actions need to be discussed in a relatively calm and impartial way. If you are opposed to a particular behavior, don't just give the negative points about it. Also make your children aware of how the opposition will present their arguments and then show the flaws in those arguments. Don't wait for a heated argument to occur, when unacceptable ideas are encountered in real life. Present these ideas in a calmer atmosphere by discussing works of fiction with your children, so they can learn to make their own decisions.

Essentially, you are giving your child a social **inoculation**. As seen with physical diseases, injections of weakened germs are given, so the body can develop immunity to the actual disease. Similarly, children must experience a variety of viewpoints — not just those of your family and community. Otherwise, when contrary views are encountered, young people will be less able to resist their undue influence.

Often parents are afraid. Their most frequent concern is "*What if my child makes the 'wrong' decision?*" To avoid this possibility, many parents shut their children off from other views and *tell them* what to do. In the short term, this works. However, this means that children will learn to *look to others* to make decisions for them. Eventually, we — as parents and teachers — will no longer be available. When that happens, what authorities will our children obey? What will their decisions be? (Adolph Hitler found people who had been well trained to "*follow the leader*.")

Rather than banning books, wouldn't it be better to help our children to develop their *own* decision-making abilities?

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\* Adapted from Jim Carnes' Commentary, "Arrest that Book!", *Teaching Tolerance*, Southern Poverty Law Center, Montgomery, Alabama, Spring, 1996, page 19.