

Homeschooling in the Media

by Howard Richman

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From Howard Richman

A more complex understanding of homeschooling is emerging in the mainstream media these days. No longer is homeschooling either all good or all bad. Simultaneously, there is a growing appreciation that most homeschoolers do a fine job raising and teaching their children, but that there are a few parents homeschooling children in order to hide abuse.

The Bright Side

Four episodes of ABC's reality TV *Wife Swap* show have featured nurturing homeschooling moms trading places with non-homeschooling moms. Despite the name, *Wife Swap* has nothing to do with sex -- it really would be better titled "Mom Swap." Two mothers from opposite families trade places and afterwards come home with a better appreciation by and for their own families:

1. The September 29 2004 *Wife Swap* show had a "Christian vegetarian home-schooler mom" trading places with a "laid-back junk-food enthusiast" mom.
2. The February 15 2005 *Wife Swap* show had a homeschool mom who lived with her family on a bus swapping place with the wife of a town mortician.
3. The March 2 2005 *Wife Swap* show had the wives of two interracial couples, one homeschooling the other not, trading places.
4. The March 16 2005 show had a homeschooling family that is off the power grid trading places with a school-attending family that has \$500 per month utility bills.

The families usually feel "used" after they view the episode on TV. Hours of tape are distilled into minutes, and much is left out. The nurturing off-the-power-grid homeschool mom of the March 16 episode was disappointed that the show did not highlight her family's environmental consciousness. But the working mother had even more reason to be upset. She was portrayed as a coldhearted working mom and the show did not even mention that she had once stayed home for five years to be with her kids full time.

The portrayal of homeschoolers in the movies has also been pretty positive. For example, *Mean Girls* starred Lindsay Lohan as a homeschooled girl who had a positive upbringing which made her a math whiz and a basically good, though socially naive, young person. Just out *Popstar* features singer and actor Aaron Carter (younger brother of *Backstreet Boy* Nick Carter) as a homeschooled popsinger whose mother first sends him to school when he has trouble balancing his career with homeschooling.

The Dark Side

On the other hand, there are increasing reports of homeschool child abuse in the media. It all started in October 2003 when CBS news aired a two-part series about the "dark side" of homeschooling. The Oct. 13 episode discussed a case in AZ in which an abused 14-year-old homeschooler killed himself and his two siblings while the Oct. 14 show discussed homeschool child abuse cases and murders in TX, KS, and NC. Then in February 2004 *Law and Order – Special Victims Unit* became the first television crime drama to feature a homeschool child abuse story.

Then three local Akron area incidents involving child abuse of homeschooled children (including starving homeschooled children found wandering in Akron after they escaped from a closet where they were made to eat from a cat litter box) led two writers for the Akron Beacon Journal to conduct a systematic search of newspaper articles to see if such incidents were isolated. Since child abuse cases are seldom reported in the media, they instead examined murders and found that a relatively high proportion of homeschooled children had been murdered by their parents in recent years. In November 2004, they published their findings.

Ever since, newspaper stories of homeschool abuse that would have once only been local, have been making national and even international news. And the news reporters investigating each story are holding the state governors to account.

The Florida Story

The first national story of 2005 began on February 4 when homeschool parents Jim and Linda Dollar fled Florida after their child abuse was discovered. Governor Jeb Bush told the press, "I hope they find them, and I hope that they put them away for a long, long time. It's disgusting." But if you would just listen to the Dollars talk, you would think that they were loving parents. For example, in a 1995 questionnaire, Linda wrote, "We have five adopted children and have seen what we can do to help those less fortunate, we can see so many children who need special care, love and an opportunity to be part of a warm, loving, caring home atmosphere."

Despite their talk, their child abuse was chillingly cold. Here is a summary, from the February 5 Tampa Tribune of the torture and starvation that five of their children allegedly endured:

Two parents arrested Friday near Salt Lake City are accused of using cattle prods, pliers, vises and starvation to torture five of their seven children. Their adopted 16-year-old son weighed 59 pounds when hospitalized Jan. 21 in Citrus County, which started an investigation, officials said.

Twin boys, 14, subsequently were found to weigh 36 and 38 pounds. Two girls, 13 and 12, also were severely undernourished....

"The twins were particularly shocking," said sheriff's spokeswoman Gail Tierney. "The pictures were reminiscent of something you would have seen at Auschwitz."

Florida law gives families three homeschooling options: evaluations by a certified teacher, testing by a certified teacher, or enrollment in an umbrella school. The Dollars complied with

Florida law by enrolling in an umbrella school that advertised itself as “non-intrusive.” According to the Tampa Tribune, Barbara Dunlop, administrator of the umbrella school that was supposed to be supervising the Dollars, noticed that the children were abnormally small when she tested them three years ago:

The adopted children of John and Linda Dollar appeared abnormally small during academic testing conducted nearly three years ago at a Lutz private Christian school.

Barbara Dunlop, 51, administrator of Tampa Educational Academy of Christian Heritage Inc., said via e-mail Friday that she had noticed “some of the children were very small. The mother explained that they had been adopted and came from a family of small stature.”

Unfortunately, Dunlop failed to act upon her observation, perhaps because she still believed the myth that only parents who love their children homeschool them. She didn't yet understand that there is a small group of parents who homeschool children that they hate in order to better control them and better hide the abuse. If she had acted upon her observation, the abuse of these children could have been ended three years earlier.

The Arizona Story

An underweight 14-year-old Arizona girl escaped from her home after allegedly being locked in her room for 15 months while sexually abused and starved by her homeschooling father. The girl finally broke out of her room and made it to a friend's house, where she talked with child abuse authorities, who believed her.

The girl's father, Rene Valenzuela, had signed an affidavit with the local school superintendent's office back in 1999 when he first began to homeschool her. However, after this step he didn't have to do anything else to comply with Arizona's lax homeschool law. When Governor Janet Napolitano was questioned about this story, she replied with a question, “How could this happen in our state? That a young girl is kept prisoner in a home for years and as you say, no one knows about it?”

During her six years of official homeschooling, since 1999, there are virtually no records to demonstrate that this girl was ever educated. Although she had apparently been given books to read and there was an unused algebra book in her room, there was no evidence that she had received an education. If the Arizona law had included annual accountability, as in Pennsylvania, this girl's lack of education would have been discovered long before she was locked in her room for 15 months at age 13 as a sex slave.

The Iowa Story

The Iowa Department of Human Services first began investigating accused child-endangerer and homeschool dad Jon Neely when his daughter failed to show up for a public school test required by Iowa homeschool regulations.

Later they found his 10-year-old daughter, weighing 59 pounds, locked in a dark room with no furniture or light while her father and his girl friend were out. The couple were charged with child endangerment for leaving the girl with no escape in case of fire.

Quotes from a February 23 Des Moines Register story suggest that Jon Neely hated this child that he had had with his just-divorced wife:

Jon Neely told police he had taken out the light bulbs in the room because his daughter was being punished. He said he had removed all of the furniture because his daughter "breaks everything," according to the warrant.

Police also reported in the document that Neely later said his daughter "peed on everything and she steals."

The Iowa case was nipped in the bud because of the quick reaction of government officials when the girl did not show up for a test required by the Iowa homeschool law. According to an AP story, Iowa Governor Vilsack reviewed the case and "says that appropriate measures were taken."

What We Can Do

The vast majority of us teach our children at home because we love them. Our goodness shines through and can be seen in the goodness of the children that we raise. But there is a very small group of child abusers who keep children home that they hate in order to better control them and hide the abuse. Given the new media template, whenever this abuse is discovered, it will be widely publicized and the state's Governor will be sought out for comments and action.

If the Pennsylvania homeschool community acts responsibly, we may be able to prevent similar incidents from happening in our state. Evaluators who meet in person with children may be able to recognize possible abuse situations. Almost all of these abusive parents isolated their children and use lack of food as a way to control them.

Unfortunately, some evaluators are so trusting in the goodness of all homeschoolers that they sometimes do distance evaluations where they do not even meet with the children of strangers, even though the PA home education law requires that the child be protected by an interview with the evaluator.

These distance evaluators do not exist in a vacuum. Most are homeschoolers themselves. They are supported by homeschooling friends who laud them for their belief in freedom. We need to challenge our libertarian friends to act responsibly.

And when we are working as evaluators and encounter underweight homeschooled children who have been isolated from outside contacts, we should become suspicious. If it is clear that the parents hate or are not educating their children, we should inform authorities. The homeschool law in Pennsylvania gives our community a way to protect homeschooled children and at the same time protect our own reputation.