



OPINION

THE CANADIAN CHAMPION

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Helping children cope

Did you know that the vast majority of children would be classified as 'at risk' for at least some period during their childhood years? We're not talking semantics here.

Most kids will be at risk for serious behavioural, academic or emotional problems during their early years.

The definition of at risk children is changing with the times. Recent studies suggest that children who live in single-parent homes, children with low self-esteem and children from low-income homes are at risk for dropping out before they finish high school.

Whether or not a kid stays in school is an important measure of a child's well-being. It is also an excellent predictor of the child's future. We know that kids who drop out of school will on average engage in more anti-social behaviour, more crime, suffer more unemployment and psychological problems during their later years.

When you consider the present divorce rate, this factor alone means that almost half of all children will be at risk for dropping out of school. Add to that the number of kids who have low self-esteem (which is very high during the teenage years) and families that have a low socio-economic status, it is safe to assume that almost all children will experience at least one of these factors at some point during their childhood years.

An interesting study in a recent issue of the Journal of Applied Psychology suggests that we can help kids who are at risk for dropping out of school. The authors describe a set of "engagement behaviours" that can make the difference.

The goal of an engagement program is to get kids to school and get them to do their schoolwork. Parents and teachers need to ask them to go, and check whether they did their homework. Attendance needs to be monitored carefully, so that any problems can be identified early. We also need to measure whether kids are on time and whether they did their work at school.

The goals were not ambitious. There was no special program for tutoring, no buddy systems, no major arm-twisting. Instead, staff and parents were simply taught to encourage and reinforce kids for showing up at school, being on time and completing their work.

As simple as it sounds, you have to remember that this becomes much more difficult when the



*Psychology
in the '90s*

with DR. ARNOLD RINCOVER

child is at risk. If you are going through a divorce, you are under tremendous stress. Supervision and parenting skills are much reduced, and the child may be feeling abandoned or traumatized.

A child may feel hopeless, embarrassed, lost, unable to concentrate on schoolwork. Parents often don't know how to help their children during such stressful times.

This study strongly suggests that, in addition to supporting a child emotionally, we must be firm about school. It is a time when a child's normal patterns can be broken and new patterns may develop ... if we're not watching carefully.

The results of the study revealed that engagement behaviours could be taught to at-risk children. This does not mean that all of the kids excelled in their schoolwork, but they showed up and did the work.

The results also showed that engagement behaviours were more important than any risk factor. They overcame virtually all major risk factors — low self-esteem, a low income home environment, single parenting — which would otherwise impede a child from finishing school.

There was another very important finding. At-risk kids who learned engagement became more resilient. Resilience is a very special attribute. People who are resilient handle problems well, adapt to change, cope with stress in appropriate and effective ways.

They are tougher, harder to knock down. They are not blown away when things go wrong, instead they learn from that. They persevere, and believe that they can solve their problems.

It would appear then that there is some good that comes from experiencing stress — such as divorce or poverty — if kids are taught engagement behaviours to overcome it. These kids will more resilient when it comes to facing future stresses that are an inevitable part of life.



A memo to Paul Martin

Editor's note: This column from the Canadian Taxpayers Federation was written just prior to release of the federal budget, and is perhaps noteworthy as a point of comparison with what Finance Minister Paul Martin chose to do:

To begin, muted congratulations are in order, Mr. Martin, for balancing the 97-98 budget.

However, the real thanks should go to hard-working Canadian taxpayers. Sure, you have cut program spending by \$15.2 billion over the past four years. But taxes have increased by \$24.9 billion over this same period.

And \$11.9 billion of this bonanza comes from personal income taxes. Which is why we find it astounding that you boast that you have not increased taxes.

Such an assertion is less than truthful. Taxes have increased consistently every year since 1992 due to bracket creep. Bracket creep occurs because income tax brackets do not move with inflation until the annual rate surpasses 3 per cent.

So workers who receive raises to keep pace with the cost of living have actually fallen behind as their higher incomes mean higher taxes, which means less take home pay.

The federal finance committee estimates that bracket creep has moved 840,000 low-income families onto the tax rolls. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development estimates that 18 per cent of Canadian workers have been moved onto the tax rolls or into higher tax brackets due to bracket creep.

Statistics Canada has also identified the increasing tax burden on Canadian families. Twenty-two cents of each family dollar now goes to pay income taxes. This is more than

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families pay for food, shelter or transportation. And this tax burden has increased by 15 per cent between 1992 and 1996.

All the while you claim that when tax relief comes, it will be targeted to the poor in our society. Forgive us for sounding skeptical, but your failure to act on bracket creep for almost five years betrays your newfound interest in tax relief for poor Canadians. Shame.

As for the much-ballyhooed surplus that you will announce for the 98-99 budget, four words come to mind; debt and tax relief.

Half of the surplus should go to debt relief. To this, you can also add the \$3 billion contingency reserve fund. The markets are waiting for that symbolic first installment, and successive installments, on the debt.

The other half of the surplus should be put towards tax relief. A fiscal surplus means that government is taxing more than it needs. This money belongs back in the pockets of taxpayers, period.

Removing the stealth tax of bracket creep will put \$700 million back into the pockets of Canadians for each percentage point of inflation.

But don't stop there. Trash the Mulroney-Wilson 3 per cent and 5 per cent surtaxes that were brought in as temporary weapons in the war against the deficit. With the deficit battle won, the raison d'être for these taxes has vanished. Eliminating both these taxes would leave \$2.6 billion in the pockets of Canadians.

And before you spend a penny of the surplus on programs, clean up your own backyard. Money for health care or education can be found within current budget envelopes. You can start by trimming \$1.8 billion from Industry Canada and its corporate welfare subsidy programs. Then take \$800 million from Heritage Canada communications activities, among other things.

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by
Steve
Nease

