



OPINION

THE CANADIAN CHAMPION

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Planning school time to cope with gifted children

Mary was in senior kindergarten and extremely bright. Her test scores were through the roof and we identified her as a gifted student. I can't say as much for her father, though.

When a child is identified as gifted, several things happen. First, it means that an individual pupil plan (IPP) must be done every year, with the parents invited, to make sure that the educational program really meets the needs of this child.

Second, as part of this process, the school and the family discuss whether the child's needs can best be met in another setting; a special class for gifted kids, one day a week at a special centre, skipping a grade, or enriching the program in the child's regular class.

There are pros and cons to each alternative, and they need to be weighed carefully for each individual child. There is no one pat answer that holds for all gifted children.

Mary's dad wanted her to skip a grade. He felt the teacher wasn't challenging her enough. He related stories about himself — he was gifted, everything came easily for him in the elementary school years. Everything came so easily, he never learned how to study. In university, he found it didn't come so easily, he had no study skills to use and he almost failed his first year.

That is a real fear. The question though, isn't about dad, but rather what is best for Mary. Dad was never identified as gifted, there was no IPP process for him, there was no one to go to bat for him with the school.

That's not true for Mary. There is a whole team of people who will help the school challenge Mary. There are several (IPP) meetings each year just to review whether Mary's program needs revision.

More troublesome is the fact that skipping a grade does not solve the problem. In no time at all, she will be at the top of her new class, then where are we? How do we challenge her then, skip another grade? Worse, she will be a year younger than the other kids in her new class, just a little bit out of step with their interests, maturity level, coordination.

What will this do to her social life? Will she have good friends? Will she feel like she doesn't fit in? Will she enjoy the same games, activities, social chit-chat? As the years go by and her friends' interest change, will she feel left out?

It will be a tough road to challenge Mary in her regular class — the parents will at times have to keep on the school, especially when Mary gets a teacher that is less than enthusiastic, and the school will have to go the extra mile.

Yet these are known problems, and I wouldn't trade them for all the unknown problems that may arise each year by skipping a grade — in her relationship and emotional development. I'll take the known problems, thank you, and I'll sit on the teacher if I have to.

The option of sending the child to a special class is a common one. It's not for all children though. It's usually located in another school, so the child's new friends won't be in the neighborhood. The child may start to lose touch with her



Psychology in the '90s

with DR. ARNOLD RINCOVER

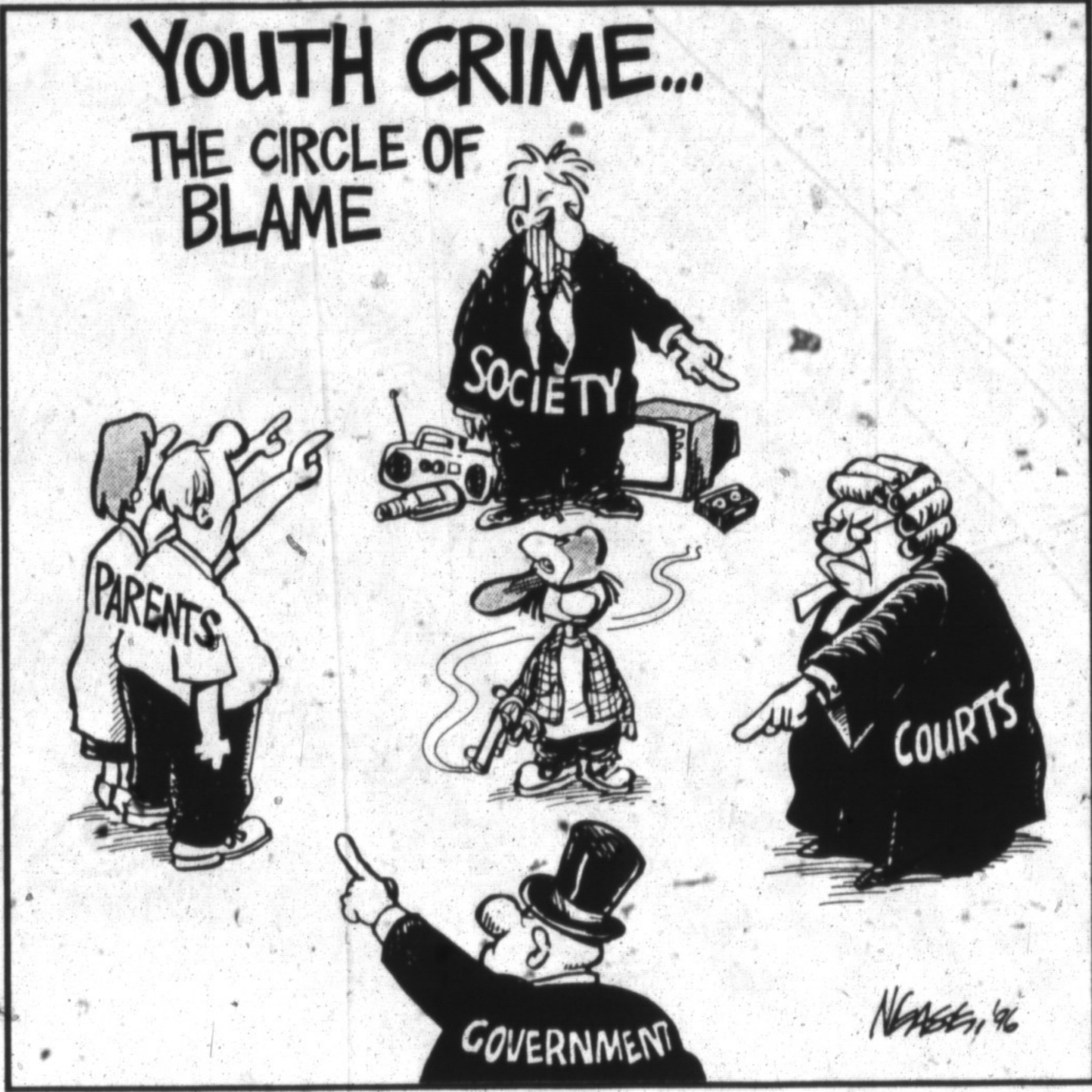
She won't be a hotshot in this class. There's something to be said for being at or near the top of her regular class — it establishes high standards and expectations for her, and these tend to follow a child throughout school and life. Being mediocre (or worse) in a special class for gifted students has done some damage to some of these kids... we've had to remove a few quickly.

The bottom line, though, is really whether or not the home school can program for this child. They should be able to most of the time. After all, what about all the bright children who have IQ scores just a notch below Mary? A teacher needs the same skills to accommodate them as Mary. That's called teaching. A good teacher will individualize programs for any child who needs that.

One of my own children came home last week complaining that she was bored with the "six time tables". I tested her at home — she knew them cold, answered instantly, and she knew her seven and eight time tables too. When I spoke to the teacher about it, she told me "it's only 15 minutes a day... it won't hurt her".

Poppycock. The teacher is supposed to do more than not hurt her. I calmly explained why I thought she should move on with my daughter (and any other child in the same boat) and I'll call back in a few days to see how she resolved it: The next day a special group of children was formed who knew their sixes and they could move on more quickly.

The issue for Mary and other gifted children is really no different than for all children. When you learn something, you should move on to new things. That's what teaching means.



Half a world away, the tie still binds

More than a year ago, the director of the children's choir of which our 13 year old daughter is a member announced that he and the kids would be travelling to Europe in 1996. Wow, we all said. How exciting.

I toyed with the idea of being one of the parent chaperones but decided I could see Europe some other time — without the 38 children and 10 adults. Having shopped with kids, I appreciated how challenging, ushering a group around ancient cities might prove to be.

As the day of departure drew closer, an emotion sprang upon me unexpectedly. Fear. I felt uncomfortable realizing my child was going to be so far from me. My anxiety grew. I worried and worried and I finally worried that my worrying would draw a calamity to us.

And then, the day after she flew across the ocean, the TWA plane out of New York exploded. I heard the announcement on the radio — once. For the remainder of our daughter's absence, I did not listen to the news. I did not want such a disaster invading my thoughts.

I still do not understand the reason for such concern over her welfare. Do I really need to have my kids underfoot to ensure their safety? Am I the only one capable of protecting them?

Do other parents suffer this close attachment with their absent children? Maybe this is just a mother thing. Will I never be able to free my mind of caring for my offspring, wherever they might be in the world and whatever their circumstances?

During our daughter's absence, I drove the rest of the family crazy keeping them up to date on where she was and what she was doing at any time of the day.

I referred to a detailed itinerary and knew that at this particular moment they were touring the canals in Amsterdam, singing at a concert in



On the Homefront

with ESTHER CALDWELL

Bonn, or doing their five-minute cameo at Westminster Abbey. I knew when she should be sleeping too and if I awoke through the night, I knew she would have already started her day in Europe.

My fears escalated as their tour wrapped up, because I knew they would be boarding a second plane to bring them home. Would the charter plane leave on time? Would the flight be trouble free? Would the coach bringing them back to our town arrive safely?

I came to the bus drop-off point expecting a late arrival. I brought a book to read to drive away my anxious thoughts. The bus was due to show up at 5:30 p.m. and as the digital clock in my van clicked over to that time, the bus drove in and pulled up beside the waiting parents.

I stood a distance from the bus and watched the kids step down, look around for their families, and rush over to them with big, tired smiles on their faces.

And then I saw her. Our eyes met and she walked over to me. We hugged and kissed. "Don't leave home without me ever again," I said.

There are rumours of a S. African tour in two years time. I don't even want to think about it.

Pud

by Steve Nease

