

## Innocent children, racist parents: What to do?

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An appeals court in New Jersey has denied Deborah and Heath Campbell custody of their three young children, Adolf Hitler Campbell, JoyceLynn Aryan Nation Campbell, and Honszlynn Hinler Jeannie Campbell. (“Honszlynn Hinler” is meant to honour Heinrich Himmler, the Reichsfuhrer of the SS.)

A family court had earlier found insufficient evidence that the parents had abused or neglected their children (“Court denies parents custody of Nazi-named children,” *Ottawa Citizen*, 6 August). But the three judges on the appeals court panel confidently, though circularly, ruled that the parents had “recklessly created a risk of serious injury to their children by failing to protect the children from harm and failing to acknowledge and treat their disabilities.”

Certainly parents who put their children at risk of serious injury should have those children taken from them. But it's hard not to worry that in this case irrelevant factors played a role in the judges' decision, irrelevant factors such as the names of the children, the social and political beliefs the parents espouse, and the disabilities and psychological problems the parents were said to have.

A similar case in Canada came to a similar resolution just this February when Nazi-sympathizing parents in Manitoba lost custody of their girl (step-daughter to the father) and boy. In 2008, the mother drew racist symbols on the girl, who was seven- or eight-years old, before sending her to school. The Court of Queen's Bench, while finding that the children were at risk of harm, seemed to propose that the risk that the children would acquire racist attitudes was also grounds for removing them from their parents.

We in Nova Scotia can be excused for having doubts about the objectivity or impartiality of authorities in child welfare cases. Back on 18 May 2004, members of the Children's Aid Society (CAS) tried to remove Mona-Clare Finck, then just five months old, from her parents, Carline VandenElsen and Larry Finck. Mr Finck fired a shot and the police responded. After a three-day armed standoff, Mona-Clare was taken from her parents.

Much of what lead up to and followed those events is confidential, so it is impossible to make a final judgement, but nothing in the public realm suggests that Mona-Clare was at any risk of harm. The information that is available supports instead the view that CAS officials in Ontario had a grudge against VandenElsen and Finck, and that CAS officials here were willing to do Ontario's bidding without much investigation themselves.

Racist parents and their children raise a practical problem for all of us. What should we do as neighbours of such families, especially if we have children of our own? What should we do as clerks in the stores at which they shop? As teachers of their children?

We certainly can learn from the New Jersey and Manitoba cases what not to do.

The New Jersey parents seem to have come to the attention of the authorities only after a ShopRight store refused to put Adolf's name on his birthday cake. In Manitoba, a teacher tried to wash the ink from the girl's arm.

Both the pastry chef and the teacher let their outrage blind them to what was really in the child's best interests. They might even have been proud of their actions, thinking that they took a stand against racism and for what is right. But surely if any child needs acceptance and just a plain ordinary life, it's the child of Nazi sympathizers.

"Hello, Adolf! How's it going? Aryan Nation! Always good to see you!" The best thing to do when in the company of children of racists is to ignore their names and the swastikas on their hands, and to help them to celebrate their birthdays, to welcome them into the game, and to be kind and gentle and affectionate.

Our commitment is to keeping families together, so long as children are not at risk of serious injury, for we respect both the aspirations of parents and the needs of children. But we also have a commitment to each child to regard her as an individual and a social commitment to equality for all people.

Should it happen, then, that we interact with the child of a racist, we have the responsibility to treat that child well while unselfconsciously modelling our own egalitarian and non-racist attitudes. We shouldn't make a show of our enlightened attitudes at the cost of belittling or excluding the child. Easy and gratifying though it might be to express our feelings of horror and offence, our responsibilities to the child come first.