



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute  
1994 Volume I: Family Law, Family Lives: New View of Parents, Children and the State

---

## Introduction

### Introduction

The curriculum units gathered in this volume respond in diverse ways to two challenges: the challenge of growing up in contemporary urban America and the challenge of teaching children for whom growing up safe, healthy and secure is not an easy task. The seminar for which they were written, “Family Law, Family Lives,” examined and critiqued the way in which authority over children is distributed in a liberal democracy like the United States.

In our reading and class discussion we sought answers to the questions: What rights do children and parents have against the state and against each other? What limits should the government place on parental power and privacy? And how might such limits be justified? All these questions speak to the larger problem of who controls what happens to children in our society. The goal of the seminar was to reach a clearer understanding of what a just distribution of authority over the youngest members of our community would look like.

Some of our liveliest discussions concerned the questions of child abuse and physical discipline. Does violence in the home repeat itself in the outside world? Is it the government’s responsibility to protect children from physical abuse? How can it do this while upholding the legitimacy of corporal punishment in homes and schools? (About half the states allow paddling in the schools, punishment the Supreme Court has upheld.) Would a law against spanking like the one that exists in Sweden be too great an intrusion on parents’ power?

We also clashed repeatedly on the equally emotional issue of teen pregnancy and out of wedlock births. Was teen parenting always a bad idea? If so, should the government “reward” teen mothers with financial help? What programs could best help teenage girls and boys make responsible decisions about sexual activity and potential parenthood? Is the prevention of teen pregnancy primarily a government problem or a parental responsibility?

In creating a curriculum unit, participants responded to the seminar’s focus on “Family law, family lives” in two ways. Half the Fellows used the compelling subject matter to advance other pedagogical ends, developing units that teach general language, social studies and critical thinking skills by getting children to talk about contemporary controversies involving children. Recalde, Turner and Zhitomi offer exemplary units of this sort, with creative lesson plans that are easily integrated into any number of teaching sequences. Flake provides a similar unit focussed not on children’s rights but on racial discrimination. The remaining curriculum units by Ayr, James, Kelley and White focus on particular challenges of childhood—special education placements, teen pregnancy and parenthood, juvenile delinquency. While they are designed to reach students currently facing these challenges, they are also excellent resources for the larger student population hoping to escape them.

Each of the Fellows in this seminar brought to the group a deep concern for the almost overwhelming demands their students confront as they face the difficult task of growing up in one of the United States' poorest cities. For many, the seminar represented an opportunity to learn more about these demands and possible constructive responses.

But we discovered as the seminar progressed that any improvement in "family lives" would require drastic changes in "family law." I argued throughout that American courts do a poor job of protecting children's rights and that American law has a long way to go to meet children's needs. Each of the curriculum units that follow incorporates this conclusion in some form. But each unit also seeks to use the classroom to make progress where courts and legislatures have failed. The result is a set of curriculum units grounded in a realistic appraisal of the challenges facing urban youth but shaped by the conviction that teaching which confronts rather than ignores these challenges can and will make a difference.

Shelley Burt

Associate Professor of Political Science

---

<https://teachersinstitute.yale.edu>

©2019 by the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute, Yale University

For terms of use visit <https://teachersinstitute.yale.edu/terms>