A License for Parents

On August 12 2016, Jennifer Denen and her boyfriend Clarence Reed were charged with domestic battery after Denen’s daughter was found bruised and malnourished when police arrived to the family’s home in Hot Springs, Arkansas. When asked for her name, the girl replied “idiot”, evidently because this was how she was called at home. Denen and Reed were charged with child abuse.[[1]](http://www.nydailynews.com/news/crime/abused-ark-girl-zip-tied-bed-believed-idiot-article-1.2754619)

Child abuse is one of the most prominent social issues in our contemporary society. The National Children’s Alliance reports that approximately 700,000 children are abused in the U.S. each year –and that in 78.1% of the cases the abusers are the parents.[[2]](http://www.nationalchildrensalliance.org/media-room/media-kit/national-statistics-child-abuse)

A potential solution for the staggering rates of child abuse may be parental licensing – requiring a license for anybody who wishes to have and/or raise a child, similar to a driver’s license. This idea was first introduced by author and philosophy professor Hugh LaFollette in 1980 in his article *Licensing Parents.*[[3]](http://www.jstor.org/stable/2265111?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents)

Proponents, such as authors Peg Tittle[[4]](http://www.albertmohler.com/2005/04/28/should-parents-be-licensed-an-ominous-new-debate-2/) and Andrew Cohen[[5]](http://bleedingheartlibertarians.com/2014/07/libertarianism-and-parental-licensing/), as well as LaFollette, argue that parental licensing would drastically reduce child abuse cases such as Jennifer Denen’s and would lead to better parenting in our society, creating better citizens and minimizing crime. Moreover, both adoptive and foster parents are required to possess certain qualities in order to become eligible as potential parents.[[6]](https://www.dfps.state.tx.us/Adoption_and_Foster_Care/Get_Started/requirements.asp) It only seems logical, then, that similar criteria be required of biological parents as well. Advocates of parental licensing also reason that more potential parents would be encouraged to take parenting classes, such as those currently promoted by institutions like hospitals, high schools, and recreation programs, if licensing were required. This argument asserts that a license would increase the number of healthy families and would help both children and parents live happier lives.

Some, however, believe that legalizing a required parental license would be a violation of natural rights, and that it is not government's role to intervene in cases relating to familial issues. In Article 16 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, it is stated that “Men and women of full age, without any limitation due to race, nationality or religion, have the right to marry and to found a family”.[[7]](http://www.claiminghumanrights.org/udhr_article_16.html#at17) The right to have a family is thus natural, and constraining it would be unethical. Others think the government shouldn’t intervene in cases concerning family since government institutions, such as the police and Child Protective Services, lack an understanding of the specifics and subtleties of each case and are unlikely to make good, informed decisions. This point of view is supported by the famous case of a couple in Maryland, Alexander and Danielle Meitiv, who were charged with neglect after a pedestrian called Child Protective Services when they saw the Meitiv children, aged six and ten, walking home from the local park without an adult.[[8]](https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/maryland-couple-want-free-range-kids-but-not-all-do/2015/01/14/d406c0be-9c0f-11e4-bcfb-059ec7a93ddc_story.html?utm_term=.858076665def)

Lastly, some assert that, although parental licenses may be a good idea in theory, the implementation of licenses would be unethical in practice. A license should, in theory, filter out unsuitable potential parents by identifying those who are not able to pass the requirements, such as tests or background checks. In reality, however, it would be challenging to decide exactly what “suitable parenting” is, and to agree upon a standard that would promote better parenting without excessive conformity. Furthermore, it would be difficult to implement a fair test of parental ability that would not discriminate against any minority groups. Cultural styles of parenting may vary, and the notion that some of those styles may be deemed “bad” is discriminatory and incredibly worrying.

**Study Questions:**

1. Is parenting a natural right?
2. What is the exact distinction between conceiving and parenting a child in terms of rights? Is it possible to have the right to conceive but not the right to raise a child?
3. What are the obligations of a parent to their child? How does the responsibility of parenting interact with the right of parenting? Do the two ever oppose each other?
4. How can we decide upon the definition of good parenting?
5. How involved should the state be when it comes to regulating parenting?