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Please send news items to the Editor.

W. Mack Goldsmith
email: mack@toto.csustan.edu
1223 Yale Avenue
Modesto, CA 95350
(209) 522-1518; fax: (209) 571-8476

For information about advertising, please contact the Managing Editor:

Patricia Ames
PUBLICATION MANAGEMENT RESOURCES
P.O. Box 317, Ipswich, MA 01938
(978) 56-1971; fax: (978) 356-7775,
email: patricia-ames@compuserve.com

CAPS West Board of Directors

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Dftownsend@msn.com

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claudia1@teetot.acusd.edu

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mking1@juno.com

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Kecklund@georgefox.edu
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Gfrincke@csus.edu
Mack Goldsmith, Ph.D.
mack@toto.csustan.edu
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Kshrable@inreach.com

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Mack Goldsmith, Ph.D.
mack@toto.csustan.edu
Brian E. Eck, Ph.D.
Beck@apu.edu

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Growing Families International: An Extreme Response to Attachment Parenting

Editor's note: Barbara Francis, Psy.D., MFCC, is in private practice in El Segundo and Los Alamitos, CA; she earned her doctorate at Rosemead Graduate School of Psychology. She presented a paper on this topic last year at the AACC International Conference. This column is an abstract of a longer paper available from Dr. Francis, one she's already had about 200 requests for. See information at the bottom of her article.

Growing Families International (GFI), popularly known as Growing Kids God's Way, is a series of parenting curricula sweeping the nation in conservative churches, and recently has entered the secular market. It boasts over 500,000 adherents in the U.S. and various mission fields. Curricula extend from newborn through teenage years, including one for sex education. Anne Marie and Gary Ezzo are the sole authors of GFI manuals. For credentials, Anne Marie Ezzo lists experience in pediatric nursing; Gary Ezzo has a degree from Talbot Seminary.

My first exposure to GFI came through clinical experience. A "rebellious and disobedient" 3-year-old was receiving constant corporal punishment for behaviors that were healthy and appropriate for a preschooler. In another case, a young mother expressed pride for allowing her 3-month-old infant to cry for 45 minutes. In yet another, a pastor heard verbal chastisement by one parent toward the other for her lack of spirituality for demand-feeding her infant. The common thread between these and many other examples was that the families were followers of GFI. Concern led to a personal examination of the material; I was struck by the legalistic tone and lack of concern for developmentally appropriate psychological growth and health. For example, an entire chapter of the manual for infants from 5-15 months old is devoted to highchair manners.

Newborns are to be taught self-discipline by learning they are not the center of the universe. This is done primarily through exclusively parent-scheduled feedings and sleep-times. "Disobedient" 2½-year-olds are admonished for soiling' their pants by needing to clean and change themselves.

Children by the age two are to obey first time, every time, without challenge or complaint; saying no to a parent is expressly forbidden. Punishment for children is almost exclusively chastisement (GFI's term for spanking) by the age of two.

In GFI's sex education curriculum, the naming of correct sexual anatomy is forbidden so as not to entice the child's already corrupt mind. Art museums are avoided lest the child see artwork depicting an objectionable body part. The Ezzos teach that this applies to any "child" up to the time of marriage! Sex education is discussed only through the metaphor of a flower, even to adult-children ready to wed. How can this cloistered model be enforced? Children are to socialize only with those in the community; schools are being developed for likeminded followers. What is particularly frightening is that many GFI adherents are zealous followers with an almost cultlike fervor for Gary Ezzo and his teachings. This aspect of GFI has been examined extensively in the cover story of the April-June 1998 edition of the *Christian Research Journal*.

This ideological zeal was demonstrated to me personally as I critiqued GFI in

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light of object relations and self-psychology at a recent professional presentation. Then and since, I was astonished to hear over and over, "Thank you for having the courage to challenge GFI." Courage? It never occurred to me that courage was needed to analyze a Christian parenting program. How is it that a parenting model can evoke such fear?

This fear appears to emanate from two areas. One is the personal attacks that have been directed toward those critical of GFI; the other seems to be the ability of the authors to evoke unconscious childhood fears of disobedience to authority. The overriding theme of GFI is order and obedience from the birth on. A child (parent) is considered to be healthy to the degree that he or she is unquestioningly compliant and obedient to the parents' (GFI's) demands. Peppered throughout the material, alongside of purported flexibility in parenting, are statements and biblical prooftexting that provoke shame and guilt- both conscious and unconscious-for not doing things God's Way.

Parents are given explicit and consistent recommendations that cater to their own needs ahead of their child's. Is it possible that such teachings actually appeal to our selfishness and depravity? Is the need

to root out age-appropriate narcissism in the child actually due to a projection of unhealthy narcissism in the parent? I fear these teachings may set the stage for later self disorders that allow obedience through compliancy, but annihilate any hope of a truly loving, sacrificial obedience to God or community rooted in gratitude and grace. Lest I give the impression that GFI is without redeeming value, let me say that it does present valuable ideas and tools for parents with the spiritual and emotional maturity to sort through the often-legalistic directives, or for those who have difficulty setting boundaries or accepting an authoritative role with their children.

However, my basic criticism of GFI centers upon its disdain for attachment-type parenting, a theory the Ezzos believe to be permissive and ungodly. Their view of "godly" childrearing presents a difficult impasse for those of us concerned with the necessity of healthy object relations leading to the development of a cohesive self as a prerequisite for a lifelong, grace-centered love affair with our heavenly Parent. One cannot truly offer oneself to God if one has no self to offer.

More information on GFI can be found on the following websites:

<http://fix.net/~rprewett/> and
<http://www.mailing-list.net/redrhino/Ezzo/>
or contact me at drbjfrancis@earthlink.net.