

Growing Criticism

Groups back away from Preparation for Parenting

The Chatsworth, California-based organization Growing Families International (GFI) claims that more than 3,500 churches worldwide use GFI-published resources for guidance on child rearing. But despite such apparent popularity, the list of critics of GFI—and of its executive director, Gary Ezzo—continues to expand.

More than four years ago, CHRISTIANITY TODAY reported on questions being raised about the parenting advice offered in *Preparation for Parenting*, coauthored by Ezzo and his wife, Anne Marie, and *On Becoming BABYWISE*, a secularized version containing the same concepts but without religious references (CT, Aug. 16, 1993, p. 34.)

At that time, Ezzo served on the staff at Grace Community Church in Sun Valley, California. Recently, however, the church's board of elders issued a public statement disavowing any affiliation with GFI and outlining "serious concerns" about the organization and its teachings, as well as concerns about accountability.

UNCONVENTIONAL MEDICAL WISDOM: Critics maintain generally that the Ezzos advocate a style of parenting that overemphasizes control and discipline at the expense of parental intuition and compassion. They say the medical advice offered or implied by GFI materials runs counter to current medical wisdom.

In a Web site, the Ezzos have claimed GFI is supported by "a network of health care professionals" that includes "hundreds of pediatricians." GFI has not documented the claim.

Says Kathy Nesper, president of the Artesia,

California-based Apple Tree Family Ministries, "I don't know who their doctors are, but I'm not aware of a single International Board Certified Lactation Consultant (IBCLC) who has publicly supported their program."

Calls from pediatricians and emergency-room physicians prompted the Child Abuse Prevention Council of Orange County to conduct an extensive study of GFI materials. Physicians had been reporting a high incidence of dehydrated and failure-to-thrive children whose parents were adhering strictly to the Ezzos' program.

Colleen Weeks cochaired the committee, which conducted a detailed investigation of GFI materials spanning a year and a half before releasing results in 1996. Weeks says, "We established six criteria for healthy parenting education, and our committee concluded that [the GFI materials] met none of those standards."

GOD'S ONLY PARENTING PLAN? What complicates matters, according to critics, is that GFI represents its principles as being the only biblically prescribed approach to parenting. GFI materials acknowledge that the Bible is silent on such issues as infant feeding. But Nesper, whose ministry specializes in childbirth education and family life education of young Christian couples, says, "The underlying message is that their way is God's way."

The Grace Community Church statement supports Nesper's assessment. "Portraying scheduled feeding as the true biblical practice, GFI strongly implies that demand feeding should be regarded as an unbiblical, humanistic—even sinful—approach to caring for infants. As elders, we see no biblical basis for dogmatism on this issue."

Phil R. Johnson, an elder at Grace Church and the statement's main author, says the Ezzos "built their program on credibility they borrowed from Grace Church." Johnson says that a "case could also be made to suggest that those of us with serious concerns about Gary's

character should have pursued the discipline process more aggressively."

A CHORUS OF CRITICS: Focus on the Family cites the Ezzos' "misuse of biblical texts" as a "cause for serious concern." Focus points out that the Ezzos repeatedly cite Matthew 27:46 (where Jesus cries out from the cross "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?") in support of their teaching that mothers should refuse to attend to crying infants who have already been fed, changed, and



Growing resources: The Ezzos have written three parenting programs.

had their basic needs met. Focus says, "We see no way to make such an application of this verse without completely disregarding its original context and purpose."

The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) may join the GFI critics. A resolution proposing that the AAP comment publicly on GFI materials is before the organization's southeast region. If approved, similar action is likely to follow at the AAP's annual meeting this fall.

INHIBITING EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT? While many have focused their critique of GFI on the potential health dangers to infants, others have raised concerns about possible negative psychological and spiritual effects on children's development. In November, marriage and family counselor Barbara Francis focused on the GFI parenting program in a seminar at the annual meeting of the American Association of Christian Counselors.

"The GFI model does not acknowledge God-designed levels of human development," says Francis, adding that she is uncomfortable with the Ezzos' advice to allow a baby to cry unattended.

Francis stressed the importance of two- and three-year old children being given the space to develop a "sense of self." Noting that, according to the Ezzos,



no is not permitted, Francis says, "If a child can never say *no*, that child will not develop a sense of autonomy." While "Ezzo children" may be more obedient, Francis says, that obedience will likely be rooted in "fear of abandonment or punishment rather than in love."

DEFENDING THE PROGRAM: Those in a position to receive inquiries about GFI agree that its materials are extremely popular and that its parenting philosophy has developed a following that reaches far beyond the influence of Grace Community Church. Critics acknowledge that amid the ideas they consider

misleading or dangerous can be found much sound advice and many helpful ideas.

GFI's Web site includes testimonies and newspaper articles feature people whose family lives have improved as a result of GFI's parenting curriculum Growing Kids God's Way. Articles point out that the curriculum provides practical advice to help children learn to respect their parents and to put others' needs before their own. For example, it suggests that children not be allowed to begin eating dinner until whoever prepared the meal sits down.

GFI's lengthy response to the Grace Community Church statement can also be found at its Web site (www.gfi.org). According to that response, the Ezzos are "deeply disappointed" by Grace's decision to issue a statement. Among other things, GFI claims that for the 30 months previous to the statement, no member of Grace Church "pursued the Ezzos on any church-related issue." Johnson refutes this claim and several others made by GFI.

Beyond referring to its Web site, GFI declined to respond to written questions.

By Randy Frame