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Professors want
prospective
parents to meet
strict criteria

REQUIRE LICENCE, EDUCATION

BY JOANNE LAUCIUS

OTTAWA • No one should be allowed to raise children until they have finished high school, completed a parenting course, and obtained a licence, according to two Nova Scotia academics.

The costs to society of poorly raised children are too high to be left to those without resources or demonstrated commitment, say psychology professor Katherine Covell and political science professor Brian Howe.

"Children have rights and parents have responsibilities," said Ms. Covell. "A lot of people are having children who have no interest in raising them."

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Academics
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licensed

PARENTS

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The professors, who suggested licences for parents in the September issue of *Policy Options*, have been called fascists and eugenicists for their views.

The two are directors of the Children's Rights Centre at the University College of Cape Breton. They are also a couple.

Ms. Covell said the many examples of children battered or starved to death, often after child-welfare workers knew of the abuse, points to the need for action. The murder rate for infants in Canada is more than double that of adults, she said.

"It takes an average of four years between when a child is brought to the attention of the Children's Aid Society and when something is done about it. You could do a lot of damage in four years.

"Legislation gives parents every conceivable first, second, and third, and fourth chances. Meanwhile, children are being abused."

Teenage pregnancies remain a problem and little is done to discourage teens from having babies, Ms. Covell said. If a teen has one baby, she is likely to have a second.

"If you can get [a teenager] to finish high school, she won't choose parenthood as a route to adulthood," she said.

The solution she and Mr. Howe proposed, excerpted in the current issue of *Next City* magazine, argues when adolescents become pregnant, a person who is licensed to be a parent "must agree to accept responsibility for the child rearing until the adolescent has completed high school and is able to apply for a full licence."

Prospective parents would have to complete a certified course on early-infant development and sign a contract agreeing not to abuse or neglect their child. They would have to upgrade their licences with follow-up courses throughout the stages of the child's life.

Far from a state intrusion into family life, the two academics argue a licensing system would reduce interference — "family life and parental freedom already are regulated. But the current regulations are reactive. Parent licensing would be a more pro-active approach, lessening the need for intervention."

It is not a new concept. Four years ago, Dr. Jack Westman, a University of Wisconsin psychiatry professor, published *Licensing Parents: Can We Prevent Child Abuse and Neglect?*

"If we want to do something about the violence and habitual crime and the welfare dependence in our country, we need to do something to prevent child abuse and neglect. And the best way that we know to do this today is to set expectations for parents by having a licensing process," he wrote.

The American Civil Liberties Union said it "smacks of Nazi Germany and Communist China."

Mr. Howe is undeterred: "Licensing is licensing. It's not Big Brother."

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