

THE FUTURE OF SENSIBLE PARENTING



RICHARD BERCUSON

It is tomorrow.

A young couple is being interviewed by an officer of the Directorate of Parental Efficacy (DOPE). DOPE is a branch of the National Capital Commission, an arm of the city's family services office, and an offshoot of OC Transpo, which wants a vote on any board that determines future ridership.

The couple is a male and a female with an average age of 22.4 years. They want to get married but, under provincial regulations, cannot obtain the marriage licence without first having the DOPE interview.

They are understandably nervous. They've brought affidavits and references to demonstrate they will be conscientious, law-abiding, quiet parents.

The interviewer, herself a parent, has a post-graduate psychiatric forensic accountancy designation and a Master's of Parenting degree. She has seen and heard it all.

"Why do you wish to be a parent?" she asks the young man. Already flummoxed, he stammers, "Because I can?"

His fiancée adds, "He means we're both fertile, so it's the natural thing to think of before marriage."

The interviewer sighs. "Do either of you have a temper?" The boy and girl shake their heads.

"Will your child be involved in activities?"

The couple nods. "Oh, yes. Yes, yes, yes," they say in unison, though the girl adds an addi-

tional yes.

"Such as ...?" asks the woman. "Baseball," says the girl.

"Ballet," says the boy, and swallows hard.

"Piano," says the girl. "Flute's okay, too. Just not drums."

"Bagpipes?" asks the woman. "No," says the boy, "certainly not. It's Ottawa."

"Soccer and karate," says the girl. "And later, guitar."

"But not outside, eh?" says the woman.

"Oh, no," says the boy. "At least not without a permit." He smiles at his fiancée.

The woman scribbles this down, punctuating the end of every line with her writing hand dancing in the air like a butterfly taking flight. "What about hockey?"

"Of course," says the boy.

"No way," says the girl.

"Yes," says the boy, ignoring his fiancée.

"Not a chance," says the girl

glaring at him.

They argue. Then they shout at each other. Then they stand and face each other, both red with anger.

The woman thinks to herself, here we go again — she's seen and heard it all. She interrupts them. "How many children do you want?"

The couple realizes its folly and both sit back down. "Three or four," says the boy.

"Two, and then we'll see," says the girl.

The boy straightens. "What-ever we can afford and as long as we're all happy," he says.

"We just want the best for our kids," adds his fiancée.

The woman yanks a spreadsheet from the file. "Checklist."

The couple lovingly edge towards each other.

"Answer yes or no. Will you spank your child?"

"No!" says the girl.

"Will you yell at your child?"

"Can I say 'sometimes'?" asks the girl.

"No."

"Then no."

"Will you do everything for your child?"

"Yes," says the girl, though it sounds like a trick question.

"Will you defend your child no matter what?"

"Yes." A silly one, she thinks.

"Will you behave appropriately at all times at your child's activities?"

"Yes." That's obvious, too, the girl says to herself, but she notices the boy grimace ever so slightly.

"Will you always take responsibility for your actions?"

"Yes, of course," says the girl.

"Will you own a dog?"

"I suppose," says the boy and catches the woman's eyebrows furrowing. "Yes."

"Will it have more than the legislated eight teeth and weigh more than the legislated 20 kilos?"

"No." He turns to his fiancée and whispers to her to take Horse to the vet tomorrow.

The woman scans her paperwork, flips shut the folder, and leans back in her leather swivel chair. Her eyes momentarily scan the wall behind the couple, stopping for a moment at the framed photos of Mayor Terry Kilrca and Premier John Baird. Her heart feels lighter.

"How'd we do?" asks the boy. "They both move forward on their seats."

The woman yawns. She stamps their application form and hands it to them. "I am hereby authorized," she recites without glancing at the forms, "to pronounce you psychologically fit for parenthood."

The couple hug each other then shake the woman's hand. "We'll be great parents!" the girl proclaims. "We'll do everything right." And they flit from the room, squealing with glee.

Sure they will, thinks the woman from DOPE, because she's seen and heard it all before.

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