

11TH GRADE SECOND PLACE WINNER: CARISSA REDDICK

“I’m Only 17, Blame My Mom” by Carissa Reddick, Eastside High School
Teacher: Sally Hansen

In the 1950s, when little Billy broke the neighbor’s window with his baseball, it was his responsibility to work and pay the neighbor back. Now in 2008, however, it is the parent’s responsibility when their teens vandalize property. Politician Scott Hamilton is pushing for a policy that would allow the law to go after the parents of teenage vandals. “What that statute does is it allows people to sue the parents of children that have intentionally committed an act of vandalism or some other act of wrongdoing,” says David MacAlister, an assistant professor at Simon Fraser University. Hamilton says, “I ask the question, where are the parents?” Why? Statistics show that most children, even at a young age, know right from wrong. Parents can not control the choices their children make. Also, it has become painfully evident that punishing the parents for their teenager’s vandalism has had little effect on the teen who is, ultimately, responsible for the damage. Finally, not only does castigating the parents not help the situation, it may even make the state of affairs worse.

According to *The Children’s Hospital Guide to Your Child’s Health and Development* by T. Berry Brazelton, “A 5-year-old has a budding sense of morality: telling right from wrong, honesty from dishonesty.” This means that by the age of five, a child begins to distinguish between what is right and what is wrong. A sixteen or seventeen year old child has the exact same reasoning power as a full grown adult. Why then, do we hold the parents of a seventeen year old vandal responsible and not the parents of a thirty year old murderer? In the book, *How Children become Moral Selves*, the author, Josephine Russell, details a study she performed with a second grade class, ages eight to nine. In the study, the students were questioned about stealing. Most of the class stated with certainty that stealing was absolutely wrong. This illustrates that children still in elementary school, know what is unethical. Is this to say that this classroom of “angels” will not vandalize a school in their teen years? Absolutely not; knowing what is right and practicing what is right are two very different things.

Armed with the knowledge that teens comprehend the difference between right and wrong, we can now explore why parents are held responsible for the choices their teenagers make. The main reason for this is based on the very false assumption, that when a teen acts out it is because their parents did not teach them better. There is not one person who has done every single thing their parents asked them to do. There is not one person who has not done something knowing in the back of their minds, their parents had taught them otherwise. Statistics show that each year, approximately 750,000 to 850,000 teen girls get pregnant. It would be highly unreasonable to say that there 850,000 or even 750,000 parents in the United States neglected to tell their daughters not to become sexually active. This proves that most of the time when a teen does something immoral, such as vandalism, they are aware that it is wrong. Consider this analogy. A person is taught a specific math problem. However, on the test, they put an incorrect answer, fully aware of the correct answer. Does this reflect poorly on the teacher? Do we pass the

student and punish the teacher for not teaching the subject well enough? Therefore, it is not reasonable or just to punish the parents for the actions of their children because most of them have done all they could do.

Not only is it obvious that teens know what they are doing when they commit crimes, but it has become very clear that coercing the parents of vandals to pay for the damages their children incur is having little to no effect on the teen. When a seventeen year old man's mother is sued for the damages her son caused, it gives the "child" the impression that he is "off the hook." He has suffered no real consequences except maybe a disappointed glance from his mother. What then, stops him from continuing his behavior into adulthood? In fact, a good percentage of teenage offenders do continue with their behavior into adulthood. This may be because they are not fully aware of the results of this behavior, because the law has made it seem as though it is not their mistake. This is where society cripples our youth. They receive no punishment for their crimes in their early teens; however, as soon as they become eighteen, they are subject to severe penalty. The minute they turn eighteen, no one cares how well their parents taught them. All of a sudden it becomes their fault and their responsibility. This seems odd because they were just as capable to controlling themselves the day before their eighteenth birthday as the day of.

As a final point, the decision to penalize parents for their children's vandalism may even make the situation more tragic. According to Irwin Cohen, a criminology professor at the University of the Fraser Valley, "What the research shows is that these things may lead to parents becoming very authoritarian with their children and that leads to rebellion and more delinquency. . ." It has become common knowledge that rebellion is the native tongue of teens. Why should we force good parents to be even more vulnerable to rebellion by becoming stricter parents? In other words, by pressuring parents to assume the form of an authoritative dictator, you may as well be handing a teen vandal a spray can.

We are living in a very unforgiving society. Such societies tend to stress independence and personal liability. We must allow parents to be able to teach their teenagers to become responsible adults.