

## **Little bit of education sweetens a lesson on lollies**

**By Ruth Ostrow**

EDUCATE not legislate. It's been my mantra since I was at university, fighting battles against censorship, coming up against government policy on many issues such as film regulations, the words of rock songs, and other issues of personal freedom.

I've stood on podiums being booed and hissed as I've advocated that we shouldn't stop people doing or saying things, rather as a society we should take the harder road of educating others and ourselves so that wisdom not regulation guides us.

"What about racism?," yelled one man once. "What about perversion?" yelled another.

And now I am faced with an even more pressing issue that pits me against the very philosophy I have lived by. The all-important: "What about lollies?"

As in: "What about unzipping your daughter's school bag and discovering a whole pouch stuffed with sugar-coated, artificially coloured poisons hidden there?" I stand in my nine-year-old's bedroom holding the purse in my hand.

It's the equivalent of finding the cigarettes or condoms in a teenager's bag.

Lollies are not banned in my home.

I've tried to do the very thing I preach. Tried to teach her about what happens to our arteries and our bodies when we eat too much rubbish. "Educate not legislate."

I've shown her the fillings in my teeth. Taught her the joys of eating an apple, yoghurt and a slice of mango instead of sugar. Weaned her on nuts and dried fruits.

I've tried not to forbid her sweet tooth, rather shared with her an odd piece of chocolate that I'm prone to myself, the occasional marshmallow in hot chocolate, or ice-cream.

I don't want her to feel deprived, rather indulged, so she can come to understand what it's taken me a lifetime to understand -- that sweet things should come in small doses, to be savoured in moderation, then put aside.

And still she decided to sneak off down the street in a furtive manner.

"Where did you get these?" I asked as she entered the room, looking hang-dog.

"Ummm, they're not mine," she said. How many times have we all used this unconvincing line?

The most creative porky was a best friend who, when caught at 12 years of age with cigarettes in her bag, said even less convincingly: "The teacher asked us to make a cigarette mobile."

A bit of prodding leads to a teary confession: "I had some money of my own and I bought lollies a few days ago."

What happens when gentle education doesn't work?

When should the long arm of the law come in, particularly in matters of health? When do we step in and legislate?

"No lollies in this household ever, and if I catch you you'll be punished."

And then what? No Eminem music because of racist or misogynist undertones? No surfing the Internet because something unsavoury may be lurking? No movies we deem unacceptable?

Banned children grow into banning adults and I don't believe in authority figures imposing their moral beliefs and "know-better" ideals onto others.

A rap song considered anarchistic and misanthropic by one culture or socio-economic group is another group's cry for freedom, expression of rage, expression of art. I've actually taught the words of controversial rap songs to school kids and we've analysed them, looking at the cadence and beauty of street music as well as the ugliness -- working towards understanding the deeper meaning behind the lyrics without vindicating all of the sentiments.

As Voltaire so beautifully wrote: "I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it."

I don't want to be a forbidder, a nay-sayer. I've seen strict parents do more harm to their children's sense of responsibility, discipline and discernment than liberal ones.

Nor is liberal-and-lazy the alternative.

Parents who either allow or disallow things and don't then educate -- that is, don't explain the reason certain values or behaviours are damaging -- themselves do damage.

My daughter comes and sits next to me.

"I'm sorry for being sneaky. But I don't know why lollies are bad. Tell me again, because on TV it said that sugar is good for you, and these lollies have real fruit flavours." A product of television advertising, she has been hypnotised. They say you need to say things 100 times before the facts sink in.

I explain again about refined sugar and body fat, show her honey and unrefined sugar, tell her about my fillings and about food coloring and additives.

"Do I have to throw them away?" she asks.

"No," I say. "Make your own decision."

It's a gamble being a parent like this -- taking the middle ground, letting her find her own voice and sense of responsibility.

She stands up. I watch with pride as she opens the lolly bag and takes out a couple of lollies, and throws the rest into the bin.

She has been fair, she's been realistic, and balanced. And what better outcome could a liberal parent wish for?

Ruth Ostrow's book *Sacred & Naked* (Hardie Grant Publishers \$29.95) is available at all bookstores or visit [www.ruthostrow.com](http://www.ruthostrow.com)

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