

PARENTING

Author wants to restore confidence to families

Take Back Your Kids, by William J. Doherty. Sorin Books. 160 pages. Paperback, \$12.95.

Reviewed by Donna Marbach
Guest contributor

Walk into any bookstore or your local library and you will find shelves and shelves of parenting "self-help" books. While we stare foolishly at title after title, a small treasure nestles on those shelves.

Take Back Your Kids by William J. Doherty, Ph.D., is a remarkable little book that discusses the challenges we all face raising children in today's changed and often difficult world. Doherty's eyes are wide open to the fact that life in the year 2001 is not the same as it was in 1950. He makes no attempt to recreate a nostalgic past of stay-at-home moms and children who spend summer days fishing, riding bicycles, or reading Nancy Drew or The Hardy Boys.

Although not always happy about it, Doherty accepts our changed society and

suggests how we, as parents, might adapt and grow with these changes.

The author is professor of family social science and director of the Marriage and Family Therapy Program at the University of Minnesota. He has been a marriage and family therapist for more than 22 years.

Doherty writes as an experienced parent and someone who has been around a lot of other parents and their children. He writes clearly, honestly and with empathy for all families. He illustrates his ideas with fresh, interesting, sometimes incredible stories of child-parent relationships.

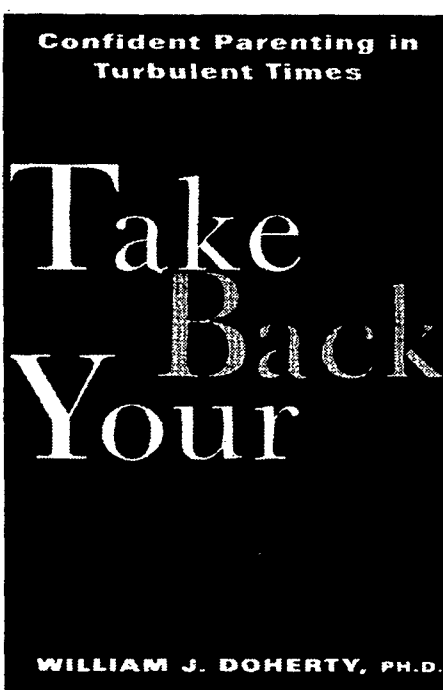
Doherty claims to have written *Take Back Your Kids* to inspire more confidence and self-assuredness in today's parents. He believes we are facing an "epidemic of insecure parenting," where many parents are not only afraid for their children, but of their children as well. He believes this insecurity stems from several factors.

First, Doherty sees many of today's parents making an effort to improve upon the way in which they were raised. Parents no longer want to be mini-tyrants, dictating to children who are obedient but who also grow up in fear of them. Instead, the new generation of parents seeks to explain, to listen and to allow children to "find their own way" in the world. While this has made for parents who are better at being sensitive to children, Doherty claims it has also made for parents who are worse at setting limits for their kids. Doherty seeks to find a middle way for parents — one between being dictatorial and insensitive on the one hand, and cajoling and debating on the other.

Secondly, Doherty argues that the family does not exist in isolation but is strongly influenced by our current view of life. In this current culture, children are viewed as consumers of parental services and parents as both providers of parental services and brokers of community services. Children no longer bear responsibility to the family or to the community.

Thirdly, Doherty maintains that in addition to the consumer culture of childhood, we also live in an era of therapeutic parenting, where the parent becomes a kind of "junior therapist." He or she is always attentive, low-key, accepting and non-judgmental. Unfortunately, while this model might make for good therapy, it becomes distorted and even harmful when used outside the therapeutic context.

However, Doherty claims that even parents who are clear about their values and confident about their parenting practices, have a tough time. Numerous outside forces — including advertising media, television programming, other parents who are permissive, other parents who compete over their children's activities and achievements, and even well-meaning coaches, youth, ministers and other providers of children's activities — can attack and erode self-confident parenting.



Doherty outlines clearly and convincingly the challenges of raising children. He then offers suggestions and strategies to meet them. He describes the importance of setting firm boundaries on behaviors and of developing respect of authority in the context of a loving family. He offers examples of situations when it is important to be flexible, but also gives permission — even encouragement — to express constructive anger.

He stresses the importance of family rituals and the firm expectation that children will be active participants in family life. Such participation is not merely the assignment of "chores." Rather, it is the understanding that children and adolescents will respect family priorities without complaint, participating graciously by attending church or synagogue, visiting relatives, sharing at least some meals as a family, and going on family vacations.

Interestingly, while Doherty offers a wealth of suggestions, ideas and examples of practices that have worked for some families, he has no magic formula for successful parenting. He is respectful that different things work for different families. He devotes individual chapters to two-parent families, single parenting, fathering and parenting in step-families.

Although interesting and enlightening, I sometimes found Dr. Doherty's illustrative anecdotes a bit "over the top" — exaggerated extremes of what each of us as parents struggle through each day. Then again, it is often the extremes that wind up in the therapist's office.

Dr. Doherty's experience as a therapist gives his book weight and validity. However, it is his experience as a parent that gives the book its warmth and ring of truth. Dr. Doherty is quick to show how he too has met with frustration, obstacles and confusion. He does not put up barriers between himself and his readers. In fact, the introduction of the book offers an e-mail address where the reader can contact him directly to ask questions and share stories. (And, I can assure you from personal experience that he does respond with detailed, specific information.)

Take Back Your Kids is a quick, "easy read." It is a book that helps build confidence in parents who are trying to balance authority and sensitivity while raising their children in changing and confusing times. I've decided to keep a copy on my nightstand just to give me an extra "boost" on those days when the me-first world seems to be winning. I recommend the book as a "must have" for every parent's library.

Marbach is a member of St. Ambrose Parish, Rochester. She and her husband, Joseph Brennan, are the parents of five children and have been foster parents for four.

Family events

8 SUN, NOV. 11 — Concert: "Music for Heroes" interactive concert for families with children ages 4-11. Rochester Philharmonic, Performance Hall, 60 N. Plymouth Ave., Rochester. 2 p.m. \$10 adults, \$5 children. Tickets at RPO Box Office, 108 East Ave., Rochester. 147-454-9100 or any Wegmans Music Department.

8 NOV. 14, 15 — Cool Kidz on Campus. Nov. 14: "Be a Weather Reporter" make weather, which is a fun activity for kids. Nov. 15: "Dance to the Beat" dance to the music of the 1950s and 1960s. Both events are free. Cool Kidz on Campus, 108 East Ave., Rochester. SUNY Brockport.com. 147-454-9100. 147-637-3994.

8 NOV. 17, 18 — "Music in the Air" family weekend performances by the Rochester Philharmonic. Nov. 17: "The Nutcracker" and "The Swan Lake." Nov. 18: "The Nutcracker" and "The Swan Lake." Tickets \$10 adults, \$5 children. Tickets at RPO Box Office, 108 East Ave., Rochester. 147-454-9100 or any Wegmans Music Department.

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