

Cuban boy forces profound questions

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At first glance, the Elian Gonzalez story seems like a weird twist on an old-fashioned custody dispute. Ordinarily, if a child had a living parent, there would be no question about his belonging with that parent. Nor would there be a question about the parent's right to raise the child, assuming there were no issues of gross neglect or parental unfitness.

But in this case, a larger community of relatives and expatriates claims responsibility for the child and the right to rear him in their home instead of the father's. The Cuban-American community in Florida wants Elian to be granted political asylum and to become one of them. They argue that he would enjoy a better education and standard of living in the United States, and that he would have greater opportunity all around.

The INS made the right decision in allowing Elian's father to take him home. The mark of a free society is its willingness to respect family bonds, as long as they are loving and healthy; slave societies sunder family bonds with abandon. Nevertheless, a decent society must also take responsibility for the well-being of its members, and especially its children. It takes a village, as the saying goes. In demanding to care for Elian, the Cuban-American community challenges us to think about what community responsibility for children really means.

However unique the Gonzalez case may be, the kinds of claims the Cuban-American community is making are in fact very common. They are the typical claims of an embattled minority struggling to survive against oppression, poverty, or sheer assimilation. Cuban-Americans may be a strong local force, but they are a numerical minority in the United States and an embattled minority in exile, still fighting the Cuban revolution.

We think communities have an obligation to educate their children. But what if they choose to educate their children narrowly, in a language that is



not the common language of their political home? What if they choose to rear their children in a religious tradition that prevents them from mixing with peers outside their small sect? What if they choose to restrict or discipline their children in ways that violate civil rights and child protection laws?

Minority communities often see their children as the only likely source of "new recruits" and so try to prevent them from learning about other subcultures and leaving the fold when they grow up. From the point of view of community leaders, community survival is at stake. Yet, it's a fine line between educating children in language and cultural traditions in order to preserve a community heritage and restricting children's horizons and opportunities. Strong cultural roots are good for children, but intellectual and social confinement are not.

Many African-American and Native American leaders have opposed adoptions of their community's children by white parents for similar reasons. Letting the children go, to be reared by another community and in another culture, means fewer members of the minority community, the loss of its cultural heritage, and eventually its demise. Several years ago, a disability activist

magazine railed against a new treatment for congenital deafness. Parents shouldn't let doctors treat their children, the magazine urged, because to do so would deprive the deaf community of new members.

We are, irrevocably, an immigrant society and a multicultural society. We aspire to be a tolerant society. We want ethnic, racial and cultural groups to coexist peacefully, respectfully and even lovingly. But as various groups work out their conflicts and their own internal battles for survival, children are often the pawns in the struggles of their elders. Embattled communities are prone to hoarding their children and raising them to be flag-wavers first and foremost.

In the struggle over Elian, flag waving nearly eclipsed the child's welfare and the nation's core political values. Since in this case the flag is so popular, some are tempted to jettison one of the most basic principles of a free society: the right of competent parents to rear their children. Elian will have given us a precious gift if his ordeal reconnects us with our democratic selves.

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