

Underage sex illegal, but, is it child abuse?

If your 15-year-old daughter is having sex with her boyfriend, is that child abuse? Would you want it reported to the state?

The courts will have to decide whether Attorney General Phill Kline did the right thing when he declared under-age sex to be child abuse which must be reported by health and child-welfare professionals.

A federal judge heard arguments in Wichita the other day on the ruling, and promised to make a decision later in the year.

What a mess. What Kline's office said, basically, is that it's against the law in Kansas to have sex with anyone under the age of 16. And because it's illegal, sex with an underage child is a form of child abuse.

Kline says that means that, under another Kansas law which requires professionals to report suspected child abuse, anyone who knows of underage sex is required to report it. The decision applies to any sex involving a child, even if both parties are under-age and both consent to the behavior.

It's hard to know where to start. It hardly seems like the state's business if a couple of high school freshmen decide to have sex. It might worry their parents. The parents might well act.

But is it something you'd want reported to the Department of Social and Rehabilitation Services?

Most parents, I'd suspect, would rather *not* sit down with a caseworker and talk about their child's love life.

Health care workers seemed to be split, depending on how they look at the issue. Some testified that reporting would keep kids from seeking medical and professional advice that might save them from pregnancy, disease or worse.

Others said they already report underage sex as child abuse.

Welfare workers said they rarely investigate reports of sex between consenting underage children, and there seems to be a lot of it, more than most parents would like to admit.

There seems to be no "right" answer here. From a technical standpoint, Kline probably is right. If it's illegal for a child to have sex, then inducing that child to violate the law most logically is a form of child abuse.

From a practical standpoint, though, it's silly to assume that teen-agers are not going to experiment with sex. Most parents have a hard enough time dealing with these things within a family, let alone with a welfare worker.

And if a child can't go home for help or advice, is it a good idea to tell health professionals they have to report that patient to the state when he or she comes looking for help?

Kline is a conservative Republican, but he comes from the branch of his party that abhors big-brother government only when they disagree with it. A major intrusion into the family such as this is OK, apparently, when it involves teen-age morals.

We'd like to think that our 15-year-olds are innocent, but experience shows us that is not always the case.

But do we really want the state sticking its nose that far into our kids' lives?

It's not a pretty mess Mr. Kline has stirred up here, that's for sure.

— Steve Haynes



Asa likes parties, prefers paté to Alpo

Asa loves parties. He loves the people, the food, the drink and especially the crumbs.

We were invited to a dinner party at the home of Dean and Sue Mills in Columbia, Mo.

Dean is the dean of the School of Journalism at the University of Missouri. We got our invitation to the party because the National Newspaper Association has its home on the MU campus and Steve is a director of the association.

The Millses live just outside of Columbia in a beautiful country home on the side of the hill with their two dogs.

We met the first dog — a big furry white sheep dog of some sort — on the walk up to the door.

He looked us over, decided we wouldn't harm his sheep, or anything else on the premises, and let us pass.

At the door, Sue took our coats and welcomed us. The house was aglow with lights and good smells and we could see pretzels and fancy hors d'oeuvres on the coffee table behind her. We could also see a large black dog helping himself to the paté.

As she turned around to show us the

Open Season

Cynthia Haynes



house, Sue also spotted the culprit.

This is a hostess' worst nightmare, animals on the table or in the food.

She was cool, however. She shooed Asa off and cut off the section of paté that he had been sampling. Then she moved the food out of the way of his busy tongue and nose.

Denied the pleasure of paté — hey, it looked like dog food to me, too — Asa put nose to floor and spent the rest of the evening alternately putting his head under someone's hand to get a scratch and a pat, and his nose to the floor checking for crumbs.

I was reminded of the cat-and-bread incident.

We were living in Kansas City and had been married about a year with no children, just a cat.

Fancy breads were hard to get back in the '70s, but Steve had picked up a loaf of crusty Italian bread from a mob bakery across town.

He had taken the bread home and then gone to pick me up at work.

On the way home, he was singing the praises of his loaf of bread.

We would have spaghetti and make it into garlic bread. It would be wonderful.

When we arrived home, we found the cat on the floor busily devouring the fancy bread.

He had gone through about a third of the loaf.

Steve was stunned, furious and a little crazy. He grabbed the bread and chased the cat around the house, whopping it whenever he could.

I sat on a chair and laughed until it hurt. It took a lot of soothing of ruffled feathers and a trip across town for another loaf of bread before he could see the humor in the situation.

Today, Steve, like Sue, would probably just cut off the damaged end and go on with his business. Sometimes, getting older and wiser is better. But it's not necessarily as much fun.

Don't trust solar calendar for seasons

A couple of weeks from now, some ignoramus will tell us that the "official" start of winter has arrived.

That person was not out in the open last Sunday, when the wind was gusting 45 miles an hour out of the north, and the mercury plunged to a nippy 8 degrees.

No, that person must have been in Miami, where the "official" start of winter is marked by an increase in the trailer count at the state line.

What an odd concept. The "official" start of winter. Or spring, or summer, for that matter.

What the heck is that supposed to mean?

It's true that Dec. 22 is the winter solstice, the point in the earth's yearly journey around the sun where the days stop getting shorter (in the northern hemisphere) and start getting longer.

It marks the shortest day of the year, and the farthest south in the sky the sun will rise and set, the lowest angle of light for the year.

But it's seldom the first day of winter. To start with, Mother Nature is no respecter of calendars or rules. She does as she does.

On the Prairie Dog

Steve Haynes



Some years, in this country, the first freeze of fall comes in September. Some years, it comes closer to November. The first blizzard might howl through in December, but some years, it's before Halloween.

Climatologist will tell you that winter usually begins about Dec. 1 at this latitude, but that's like saying that it usually rains in May.

It might. It might not. The point is, there's nothing "official" about the start of winter. It's winter when it's cold out. And it isn't really that cold or dreary here most of the time.

Similarly, spring starts about March 1, if you figure the weather, not with the vernal equinox on March 20. The equinox marks the day when day and night are the

same, but the weather has been changing for two to three weeks by then.

Usually.

You have to remember that March is to May as November is to September. The M's are both spring months, but then spring and fall are transitional seasons. The weather is not much alike from start to finish.

By now you should have the idea that this whole solar calendar thing is suspect. The sun dates mark specific events, but you can't gauge the seasons by them.

Astronomers may be counting the days, but Mother Nature most assuredly is not. If she feels like snow, she sends snow. And if she feels like sun, it'll be warm out.

We could talk about surface heating, degree days, jet streams, global weather patterns and such, but the bottom line is, winter begins when it begins. There's nothing "official" about it.

We'll know when we stick our heads out and it's cold.

And last week, it was winter on the plains. This week, it's more like spring, I admit.

But just wait. Some idiot is going to tell us when winter officially begins. I say we buy him a ticket to Minnesota.

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