

“Training Youth to Litter”

By nature, Iowans are basically “neat and clean” people – not prone to littering. Our upbringing and cultural heritage tend to discourage littering behavior patterns. This heritage is changing. During the past couple of decades, there has been a negative change in the litter behavior patterns of the younger generations.

There is often a danger in overgeneralizing as there are a large number of young, responsible individuals who still carry the “neat and clean” behavior pattern. The perceived problem, however, is the growing number of younger individuals who tend to have “it’s not my problem and someone else will clean it up” attitudes. Where does this behavior pattern originate?

There probably is not one single factor – it tends to be multiple elements:

- Two parents who are both working,
- Schools that are financially limited and unable to provide needed supervision and training,
- School administrators and educators who are not motivated or encouraged to take corrective actions for infractions of the rules such as “no littering,”
- Focusing on the “big issues” in schools while the “little issues” such as littering are ignored.
- Concerns by school officials over potential parental actions in terms of law suits or other actions for school rule enforcement that may be administered,
- Teachers who have heavy burdens to both teach and provide moral guidance,
- School athletic events in which litter prevention is not encouraged – in fact, both the student and the adult are generally encouraged to throw the litter down, and
- A developed attitude that it is someone else’s job or that we pay a janitor to clean up after us.

Dealing with small issues can often lead to resolution of larger issues. As an example – if you allow small lies, won’t they simply grow into the telling of larger lies? Letting students know there are approved behavior patterns and the impacts for violation of those approved behaviors is important. It lets students know where they stand and it starts the building of pride and respect if dealt with properly.

Laying ground rules for litter-free schools needs to be reestablished in our schools. This is truly a case where “An ounce of prevention is a pound of cure.” In this case the “pound of cure” is the \$3.5 million that it costs schools to clean up litter each year. A small investment of time and policy can provide large financial savings to the schools along with a major step in improving the character of students.

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See you in the next column.

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