

Pep-rally protest: Constructive nonconformity

by [Kyle Childress](#) in the [October 6, 2009](#) issue

One day in the early 1990s when the news was filled with the story of the Menendez brothers, my wife, Jane, was driving with our three-year-old daughter, Callie. A reporter said something about the Menendez brothers killing their parents and Callie asked, “Did they say ‘kill their parents’?” to which Jane quickly replied, “Yes, they were bad boys, weren’t they? We don’t kill our parents.”

A lot of parenting is covering the basics: don’t eat the dog food, don’t bite, don’t put your feet on the table, don’t kill your parents. Like parenting, much of pastoring is teaching the basics: love God, love your neighbor as yourself, love your enemies, forgive those who hurt you, serve the needy, pray always.

We should never take the basics of being a Christian for granted. Lurid news reports suggest that we parents and pastors have overlooked one of the basics: don’t torture. As ludicrous as it seems, the debate continues over CIA waterboarding and whether or not it is torture and whether or not it is effective and “successful.” As I read the news I keep telling myself, “When these people were kids they missed out on the basics.”

A couple of years ago in the Century (“Expect a call,” January 9, 2007), I mentioned Mollie, a seventh-grade girl in our church who chose her commitment to Sunday worship over her required presence at a track meet. Our small church, which is highly relational even across generational lines, works hard on the basic practices of the Christian life, including some that go against the prevailing culture of our part of the world. When Mollie was in the fifth grade and the war in Iraq was building up, members of the youth group asked if they could put up a sign in front of the church that said, “War Is Not the Answer.” We put up the sign and then spent a lot of time teaching (and arguing) the basics of how Christians have dealt with war and what Jesus and the New Testament had to say about it. The young people got a crash course in swimming against the stream as phone calls came in about the sign. Our

nearest neighbor lined the property boundary with American flags.

Mollie recently graduated from Nacogdoches High School. One Friday morning at the beginning of her senior year, she attended a football pep rally in the gym along with thousands of other Texas high school kids. At one point the cheerleaders started their weekly skit about how the Dragons were going to defeat their opponent that night. Several kids came in dressed in the school colors of the opposing team. Our cheerleaders went behind each of the opposition kids, tied that kid's hands behind her back and had her kneel down on the floor. Then our cheerleaders took out toy pistols and acted out walking behind the kids and executing them. When the cheerleaders dragged the mock-executed kids to a pile and threw money up into the air, the crowd of students, teachers and parents hollered and screamed and clapped their approval.

Mollie came home upset and told her mom, who became upset too and sent a concerned e-mail to the high school principal. Then she and Mollie went to see the principal, who dismissed their concerns by saying, "You and your daughter are the only ones complaining. No one else thinks anything was wrong with the skit." Mollie turned red in the face and went to work.

She rounded up four or five friends and circulated a petition in the school against the use of guns—even toy guns—in the pep rally. Mollie discovered explicit language in the official handbook prohibiting guns, including toy guns, on the school grounds. Then she and another girl wrote a column in the school newspaper. The principal censored the column because it questioned the cheerleaders' sponsors as well as the school administration for giving the go-ahead for the skit. The principal continued to say that it was all much ado about nothing.

Then the local newspaper ran the story on the front page. By the next day, national news services were calling Mollie asking for interviews. The next week the school administration issued an apology on the front page of the paper, saying that the administrators were wrong and that Mollie and the others had done the right thing in raising the issue. They said it would not happen again.

We pastors know we can no longer assume that our people, much less our kids, get the basics of behavior from the wider culture. That's old news. But in training people in discipleship, it is not enough to teach them to say yes to God; they also have to learn how to say no to many things around them. It seems to be a long way from a high school pep rally to torture. But it's not as long as it used to be.