

Doctrinal Battle Ruins Friendships, Family

by Erik Deckers

To the outside world, it's a spring morning just like any other. Garbage trucks clang down sleepy streets. Commuters battle rush hour traffic. And lines of coffee fanatics wait to get their morning fix at their favorite coffee houses. But at Little Lamb Day Care, a storm is brewing that threatens to end its long and illustrious history. Recently, the school was rocked by a controversy that has shaken the very foundations of early childhood education. Not since Martin Luther nailed his Ninety-Five Theses to the Wittenberg Door has there been such an upheaval. The issue is one that has caused many sleepless nights, wet beds, and nightmares for both children and parents. It's a simple question, but one that has many answers: Is it "Itsy Bitsy Spider" or "Eensy Weensy Spider?" While the controversy may seem trivial to some, it has torn apart this small school that had previously preached tolerance and acceptance of everyone. "We thought everything was going great," said Stacey Hostetler, father of Britney, age four. "Then one day, Britney came home singing 'Eensy Weensy Spider.' I asked her where she learned it, and she said Mrs. Matthews taught them. Eensy Weensy Spider?! We're an 'Itsy Bitsy' family. It's in Mother Goose, for God's sake!" Darlene Matthews, longtime teacher at Little Lamb, said, "I cannot believe the unwillingness of some of these parents to accept the truth. The song is 'Eensy Weensy Spider.' It has always been 'Eensy Weensy Spider.' And no screaming or gnashing of teeth will change that." Matthews recently left her job -- one she has held for 23 years -- over the dispute. She dispels the rumors that she was terminated for her views, saying instead that she left over "educational differences." "I did not agree with the school or its views on the teaching of that song," Matthews said. "I can't be a part of an organization that would dismiss the beliefs of others out of hand like that." The battle was indeed bloody. Teacher fought with teacher. Parents who were once friends no longer speak to one another. Even families have suffered the backlash of the spider song squabble. Whitney Humphries, mother of five-year-old Jonathan, said, "I used to sing 'Itsy Bitsy Spider' to him when he was a baby. Now he refuses to call it anything but 'Eensy Weensy Spider.' He wears t-shirts that say 'Free the Eensy Weensy Five,' and has shaved his head in protest. He even quit watching Sesame Street, because they sing 'Itsy Bitsy.'" "I don't know what's -- I'm sorry," Humphries choked back a sob. "I don't know what's happened to my little boy." She was unable to continue the interview. "I don't need some heavy-handed autocrat dictating my worldview," shouted Jonathan during a recent protest. "I'm a big boy! I can choose my own form of musical expression!" The Eensy Weensy-Itsy Bitsy debate has caused such a stir in the community that the mayor was even asked to intervene. While there has not been an official position on the matter, one anonymous source inside the mayor's office told this reporter, "No way are we going to touch this thing with a ten foot pole. We've got a reelection campaign to think about in two years. Memories live long and hard around here, and an emotional issue like this could spell the end of this administration." So what's on the horizon for Little Lamb Day Care? One possibility is that teachers like Matthews and students like Jonathan Humphries may start their own school. Other members of the Eensy Weensy camp have threatened a lawsuit. Local attorney R. Bob Robertson feels so strongly about the issue that he has agreed to work on their case at no cost. "This is a country that was built on the free expression of ideas," said Robertson. "My clients have been harassed, and even received death threats, simply for expressing themselves." But not everyone takes the issue this seriously. "Frankly, we don't see what all the fuss is about," said Ernest Tolliver, Little Lamb's executive director. Helen Byrne agreed. "Not at all. It's a silly issue when you think about it. This doesn't really change lives or affect the world." "Too right," Tolliver laughed -- a sound that has been sorely missed these last few weeks. "I mean, what's next? A hunger strike over 'Hush Little Baby' about whether Poppa bought a billy goat or a cart and bull?" "What did you just say?!" demanded Byrne. "Everyone knows it's a #&*%! goat."

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