

# Focus on the Child Advocate

HENRY H. WORK, M.D.\*

**T**HE word "advocacy" first became current following the 1970 report of the Joint Commission on the Mental Health of Children. It has subsequently become a catchword for professionals concerned about children, only to be succeeded more recently by a spate of material on the "rights" of children. When first the concept became widespread, it expressed a very real feeling that the children of the United States, despite all the attention given them during this century, had been shortchanged.

During a period of time beginning around 1800, new concepts of care for children began to be elaborated. Although there was then, and possibly is even now, a greater concern about animals than children, a host of disparate services, many of them designed to assist children in trouble, took form toward the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century. Unfortunately these services were not only poorly organized but at times they failed to assist the very children for whom they were designed.

Elsewhere the history of the evolution of childhood has been described. Prior to 1500 in Western society, children were considered to be little adults and only subsequent

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to that did they gain their own clothes, their own toys, and their own ways of life.

## Controls Are More Oppressive

The 20th century was labeled the Century of the Child. At its very beginning a notable form of advocacy for children, the juvenile court system, was conceived and elaborated. Despite its good intentions it has not fulfilled its promise. A host of competing forces in the legal system have recently served to modify the juvenile court system and at present the advocates of a tighter legal system seem to be prevailing. On the one hand this is based on the fact that a child should have the same rights as an adult before the law, including the concept of a trial and perhaps even a jury. On the other

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hand, the advocates of the juvenile court system have felt that by avoiding the entanglements of the law, the rights of children could better be preserved. These two systems are at the moment in conflict. Those professionals whose interest is in the health and welfare of children feel that the controls that legally bind children have become more oppressive.

Some of the newer controls on children which seem to represent counter-advocacy, derive from a general feeling of concern for law-and-order. Others result from the fact that children these days are seen to be openly antagonistic to adults and, therefore, powerful. The Joint Commission, however, made a very strong point of the powerlessness of children. Although in anyone's home a child may seem to have great power in affecting the dynamics and attitudes of parents, it is equally obvious that in the political system the effect of this power on legislative and economic situations has been minimal.

The idea, therefore, of someone who could be an advocate for children seemed highly rational. Someone was needed to speak for, plan for, organize for, and pay for services and functions designed to enhance growth, modify pathology, and increase the wholesome and healthy functions of the child. This included, most importantly, the

educational needs of children who were handicapped in a variety of ways.

## Use of the Class Action Suit

Recently, there has been a host of class action suits involving patients in mental hospitals and children in schools. The most notable of these involving children concerns the right to education for handicapped children in the state of Pennsylvania. The verdict in the suit—Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Children *v* The Commonwealth of Pennsylvania—insisted that school facilities must be provided for retarded children. Such rights of children would seem to be most obvious, yet court action appeared to be the only route that the beleaguered parents could take in trying to provide services for their homebound youth. This ruling has been supported in a variety of other states and the District of Columbia, and new class action suits are underway.

Such a class action suit is a form of advocacy for children—in some ways more impressive than the clamorings of parents, the urgings of professionals, and the seeming compliance of politicians. The latter often leads to a lack of activity.

More recently, professional concern about infants has led to a variety of experimental activities in the field of the education of the child under six. Combined with efforts to inculcate parents with child-rearing practices, such advocacy has been demonstrated in Head Start, Parent-Child Centers, and other activities, both federal and local.

The model of a Parent-Child Center derived from medical and psychological knowledge of a lack of care and stimulation for children. The design was planned to involve the parents in the educational and stimulatory aspects of child-rearing and to demonstrate a planned approach to better child-rearing practices. As such this model was an advocate for children who were deprived, understimulated, and disorganized in their patterns of development. Unfortunately this approach to better patterns of child-rearing has served to stir up antagonism on the part of right-wing groups who feel that no outside agency should be involved in

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See page 667 of this issue for a list of themes for the 1974-75 publication year.

assisting the development of a child. The potency of this particular form of advocacy is, therefore, great. It also stirs up resistance.

### Use of Advocate Agents

Most recently, various offices of HEW, including the Office of Education, have offered grants to states and to other national agencies to develop plans for broad advocacy within their jurisdictions. Models of case finding and treatment have been paralleled by an experimental model suggesting advocate agents, not unlike the county farm agent, in many subdivisions of a state.

It is curious that we need advocacy for children. Their very helplessness and dependence, along with the reward of their growth and independence would seem to be adequate to force us continually to do things for them. The continuation of childhood disabilities in learning, in behavior, and in activity, suggests that we are either ignorant or we are applying our knowledge poorly.

One facet of advocacy suggests the need for coordination of knowledge and its application. This has bred in the past few years a variety of coalitions, consortia, and other systems embracing various organizations concerned with the needs and hopes of children. In such conglomerates may lie new hope for the child himself.

As adults take on the responsibility of advocacy to do something for the rights of children, we must remember that the child as an individual may not like to be dissected and categorized. He or she may need a more concerted plan of approach. The hopes of many for a better system of child-rearing can only be realized as actions toward cooperative activity and advocacy are as potent as the size of the needs.

Good pediatricians in the 1920's and 30's talked about services for the "whole child." A focus on advocacy may make it possible to obtain such services. If the advocates of the nation, concerned about children, can coordinate their activities we may be able to surmount our avoidances, our denials, and our seeming rejection of the child in our midst. □

## The Future of Education—where are we headed?

- Will students learn from textbooks or be taught more outside of the classroom?
- Can schools change to accommodate new societal needs?
- Are students becoming more and more disenchanted with an educational system that has been called "obsolete"?

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