

Childhood

Defending America's Children

To become a truly developed nation, America must protect its children and families.

Willingness to protect children is a characteristic of any decent and compassionate society and of any intelligent nation seeking to preserve itself. Recently, 225 corporate executive officers and university presidents explained why investing in children serves the national interest. "This nation cannot continue to compete and prosper in the global arena when more than one-fifth of our children live in poverty and one-third grow up in ignorance. And if the nation cannot compete, it cannot lead" (Committee for Economic Development 1987). For imperative moral and practical reasons, then, our commitment to the young must go beyond political rhetoric; it must produce a well-planned continuum of programs for children beginning before birth and sustained until adulthood.

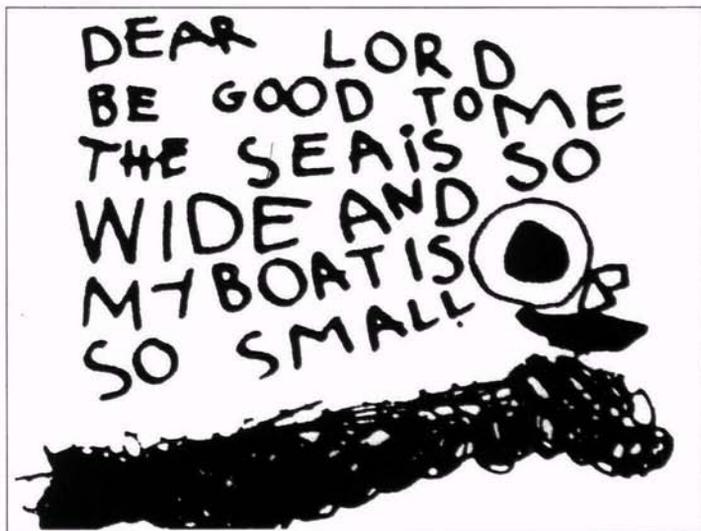
Unpleasant Truths

The first high school graduating class of the 21st century entered 1st grade in September. Many of them are off to a healthy start. But millions are not.

Every day in America

- 1,849 children are abused
- 1,375 teenagers drop out of school
- 2,407 children are born out of wedlock

- 6 teenagers commit suicide
- 9 children die from gunshot wounds
- 107 babies die before their first birthday (National Center for Health Statistics 1989).





Along with physical, emotional, and economic safety, our children need spiritual safety. The rising rates of suicide, drug and alcohol abuse, and out-of-wedlock births among youths of all races and income groups reflect a moral drift that cries out for correction.

Every day in America, 1,849 children are abused and 1,375 teenagers drop out of school.

Despite stereotypes, it is not just the 13 million poor children or the millions more in moderate-income families who are unsure about their futures. A growing number of privileged youths suffer from spiritual poverty—boredom, low self-esteem, and lack of motivation—stemming from “the family wealth that insulates children from challenge, risk, and consequence.” Psychologists are finding growing parallels between children of the urban rich and the urban poor. Both, they say, suffer from broken homes and absentee parents; both have easy access to drugs, alcohol, and sex (Friedman 1986).

Grave economic consequences compound this waste of potential. The Social Security system, for example, cannot function given a debilitated work force. Our society is aging; the

number of children and youths relative to other age groups in the population is declining. If current trends continue, a disproportionate number of our young will grow up undereducated, untrained, and unmotivated at the very time that our society will need all of them to be healthy, educated, and productive.

What Our Children Must Have

Before we suffer the consequences of inaction, we must improve health care, child care, schooling, housing, and employment opportunities for the young children and newborns of today. We must address all of the following needs.

Our children need defenses against preventable infant mortality. A black baby born in certain Boston neighborhoods or in our nation’s capital is less likely to live to the first birthday than a baby born in Jamaica (Children’s Defense Fund 1988a).

Our children need defenses against preventable childhood diseases. We must ensure that our medical technology reaches the children who need it. For example, the decline in immunization rates among very young children (0-2 years of age) is bad health policy and bad budget policy. Every \$1.00 invested in immunization saves \$10.00 (Office of Technology Assessment 1988).

Our children need defenses against homelessness. No child should have to lead a rootless life like Shamal Jackson’s. During his short life, Shamal

never slept in an apartment or house. He slept in shelters, in hospitals, in welfare hotels, in the welfare office, and in the subways that he and his mother rode at night when there was nowhere else to go. Shamal’s death at eight months was caused by poverty complicated by low birthweight, poor nutrition, viral infection, and homelessness. On any given night, at least 100,000 children in the United States are homeless, not counting runaways (National Academy of Sciences 1988).

Our children need protection against unsafe child care when their parents must work. Millions of Americans watched Jessica McClure’s rescue from an open well shaft in Texas last year. Jessica was in an unregulated family day care home where 9 young children were tended by one adult. Millions of Americans must tell Congress this year to enact the Act for Better Child Care Services (ABC) to prevent other such injuries. This bill requires that child care providers who receive subsidies allocated by the states for children of low- and moderate-income working parents provide minimum health and safety protections. In addition, the bill provides for recruitment and training of new day care providers and for consumer education programs to help parents make wise child care choices.

Our children need help in preventing early sexual activity, pregnancy, and parenthood. Each year 1 million American teens get pregnant, and two-thirds of these teens are *not* black, *not*

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poor, and *not* in inner cities. The economic consequences are staggering. One out of two children in a female-headed household is poor. Three out of four children from households headed by a mother under 25 are poor. Even when teen pregnancy results in marriage, these young two-parent families are almost three times as likely to be poor as

those with parents over 25. The links between teen pregnancy and poverty are not solely related to age and single parenthood, but also to the poor skills and limited employment experience that these young parents bring to the workforce and to the relatively lower wages America pays to young workers (Children's Defense Fund 1987).

The Houston "Lighthouse" for Unattended Children

Sarah Smith

No principal ever wants to hear that a child is sleeping all night on the school grounds, but if that child has no home to go to and if the principal hears this on a day when freezing temperatures are forecast for the coming night, somebody has to do something. In Houston, Superintendent Joan Raymond responded quickly to this and similar reports of students living on the streets: she immediately set up Schoolhouse Shelters at Gregory-Lincoln Elementary and Middle School and at Jefferson Davis High School. With the assistance of the American Red Cross, school officials sought volunteers, set up cots in unused rooms, and spread the word that shelter was available, at least for a few days.

On the first night, eight people showed up at the shelters; not all of them were students, and only two stayed all night. But Joyce Moss, just-named coordinator for the effort, was not discouraged. She said, "As long as there is a need and we can let the young people know we're here, that's fine. We'll wait for them."

In the meantime, Superintendent Raymond presented a proposal to the board, detailing options—shelters, after-school care, and community involvement—a network of support from community agencies, and a modest budget. The proposal began:

Every analysis of homelessness in Houston indicates that children constitute a large portion of the homeless population. . . . The concern of the school district goes beyond the unaccompanied homeless student to the unattended student. Children who are unattended and uncared for after school hours have long been a concern of school personnel. The concern has escalated as teachers and principals report more incidences of students who are unattended and on the streets until bedtime.

All of us—schools, agencies, community—must cooperatively take whatever steps are necessary to assist these children. . . . We are proposing a Lighthouse on the campus of Gregory-Lincoln School which will extend the security, safety, and care traditionally provided during the school day beyond 3 o'clock.

Subsequent approval of the proposal committed board support through the end of June 1989, when the program will be reviewed. In the meantime, the pilot phase of the After-School Enrichment Program at Gregory-Lincoln has attracted about 25 students, who participate in recreational and educational activities from 4:00 to 6:30 p.m. Monday through Friday. With a site coordinator funded by the district now at work, school officials can accommodate up to 60 children; and we have already had requests to continue the program through the summer.

Extending district responsibilities in this manner has generated differing opinions, of course. But for now Raymond is firm in her commitment to explore the added duties, saying "Success is not a measure of numbers, but a measure of the willingness of the district to be sure children are cared for." All those teachers who have given their students books and clothes over the years, all those principals who have arranged for baths, haircuts, laundry, clothing vouchers, and shoe tickets may be pleased that a superintendent and board are reflecting the same kind of hands-on and heartfelt approach to children in need.

Sarah Smith is Media Coordinator for Houston Independent School District, 3830 Richmond Ave., Houston, TX 77027.

Each year 1 million American teens get pregnant, and two-thirds of these teens are *not* black, *not* poor, and *not* in inner cities.

Our children and young families need economic safety. Families whose heads are over 30 are doing well; their median income rose between 1973 and 1986. Families with heads under 30, however, are sliding backwards; their median income declined by 13.4 percent. The median income of families of all races headed by 20- to 24-year-olds fell 27 percent (50 percent for black males) during this period. The former is equivalent to the per capita income loss during the worst years of the Depression (Children's Defense Fund and Center for Labor Market Studies 1988). Dramatically declining wages have been a principal cause of declining marriage rates and the rising rates of out-of-wedlock births among teen and adult women in all income and racial groups, but especially in the black community (Wilson 1986).

Our children need spiritual safety. There is a hollowness at the core of our society. We share no mutual goals or joint vision—nothing to believe in except self-aggrandizement. The poor black youths who shoot up drugs on street corners and the rich white youths who sniff cocaine in wealthy suburbs share a common disconnectedness from any larger hope or purpose. The rising rates of suicide, drug and alcohol abuse, and out-of-wedlock births among youths of all races and income groups reflect a moral drift that cries out for correction.

The overarching task of leadership today in every segment of American society is to show our children that they can engage in enterprises that lend meaning to life, that they can make a

difference individually and collectively in building a decent, safe nation and world. A BMW with a vanity license plate is a shallow goal, but our society offers too few better alternatives. This is the real tragedy of our era.

What We Can Do

What decision makers in Washington perceive mostly through statistics, reports, and testimony, educators confront daily as reality. We are in the front lines of the struggle for social change. So it is extremely important that we ask ourselves, "What can I do?" Some answers follow.

- Resist despair. Meeting these challenges will take time, energy, leadership, and a sustained investment of private sector and public resources. We must husband our energy and our hopes.

- Speak out against the misguided national priorities of this decade, which have placed missiles and bombs before mothers, babies, and families. Since 1980, America has increased spending on the military by 37 percent and on the national debt by 81 percent, but has decreased spending on all programs for low-income families and children by 2 percent. Yet we let politicians blame the deficit on programs for the poor (Children's Defense Fund 1988b).

- Struggle to inform ourselves regarding what our political leaders do, rather than what they say, and hold them accountable. Convenient igno-

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rance absolves us of the responsibility to act and feeds the politics of illusion and cheap redemption. We must guard against quick fixes or cosmetic solutions to complex problems that we can solve only with patience and effort. There is no cheap grace.

- Understand and be confident that each of us can make a difference by caring and acting in small as well as big ways. In the face of increasing suffering among children and families, political timidity, and private sector indifference and corruption, don't ask why somebody doesn't do something. Ask, "Why don't I do something?"

Fighting for Justice

Sojourner Truth, a black slave who could neither read nor write, pointed the way for us. Once a heckler told Sojourner that he cared no more for her anti-slavery talk "than for an old fleabite." "Maybe not," was her answer, "but the Lord willing, I'll keep you scratching."

Through your votes, your voices, your service for the poor and young, and your membership in a profession of which so much is asked, you can be a flea for justice. Enough fleas biting strategically can make even the biggest dog uncomfortable. We must keep "biting" until we have a comprehensive policy that supports our children. We must push our public and private institutions to help America become a truly developed nation—one that pro-

TECTS its children and families—as it moves into the next century. □

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Marian Wright Edelman is President of the Children's Defense Fund, a national nonprofit, nonpartisan organization that provides a voice for the children of America, who cannot vote, lobby, or speak for themselves. She is the author of *A Call for Action to Make Our Nation Safe for Children: A Briefing Book on the Status of American Children in 1988*. She can be reached at 122 C St., N.W., Washington, DC 20001.

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