

# *Introduction:* *Prospects for Children's Well-Being*

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As Americans, we are now facing major shifts in demographics and consequently a re-examination of our fundamental democratic values in relation to these shifts. Therefore, as we review the prospects for the well-being of today's children, we should consider social, political, and philosophical perspectives as well as economic ones.

Among these demographic shifts are those producing dramatic changes in American family life. Nearly all families, not only those receiving welfare benefits, are experiencing alteration of traditional values and functions. In turn, social institutions that interact with family members are encountering problems not envisioned in the past.

Today's families face increasing difficulties in fulfilling their child-rearing functions. For many families, these difficulties arise in part from the quickening pace of American life. Technological advances in society and the workplace seem to have accelerated the pace of our lives so that children of fast-track parents, as well as those from low-income families, are experiencing stress disorders (Brooks, 1989).

Another factor affecting child rearing is that a majority of mothers today work outside the home, creating a need to shift parenting roles and responsibilities. Many overburdened, working mothers, however, are not successfully making the shift (Scarr, Phillips, & McCartney, 1989).

A third factor is that many children now live with a single parent or a divorced parent at some time in their lives. In 1990, 28 percent of American families were maintained by one parent, a much higher rate than in other developed countries (Bureau of the Census, 1990a, 1990b). For these families, additional strains have

been placed on the parent-child relationship and on the fulfillment of parental responsibilities.

Finally, the poverty rate of children has risen dramatically during the past decade. During the 1980s, the poverty rate of children under age 18 averaged approximately 20 percent and hit higher levels for younger children (Bureau of the Census, 1990c). The poverty rate of children is now higher than that of any other age group. And although legal rights and legislated entitlement programs for American children have gained new ground in recent decades, America's children still experience the effects of poverty more often than do children in other countries with similar living standards (Bureau of the Census, 1990a). As David Hamburg (1985) makes clear, the common effects of poverty on children are profound:

While many causes underlie developmental problems of the young, the most profound and pervasive exacerbating factor is poverty. Poverty does not harm all children, but it does put them at greater developmental risk, through the direct physical consequences of deprivation, the indirect consequences of severe stress on the parent-child relationship, and the overhanging pall of having a depreciated status in the social environment. (p. 4)

The implications of widespread childhood poverty for the future of our society are indeed troubling (Katz, 1990).

Ironically, as the poverty rate of children has grown, the economic and social expectations of many Americans seem to have shifted toward a consumption ethos. Although seemingly preoccupied with consumption, the American public, however, occasionally voices positive opinions about increases in governmental taxes, corporate spending and private giving in order to support family child-rearing functions (e.g., programs for child care, parent education, nutrition, prenatal care, and child health care) and to ensure that the basic needs of children in our society are adequately met. Nevertheless, the predilection toward immediate gratification, self-interest, and capitalistic individualism retards development of progressive economic and social family policies by corrupting the more generous impulses of American life and eroding a sense of public responsibility for children (Grubb & Lazerson, 1982). Consequently, policymakers have been slow to provide support to help meet changing family needs.

Undoubtedly, greater attention to our values with respect to children needs to occur at family, community, state, and national levels. As Marian Wright Edelman (1989) points out: "If it is to save itself, America must save its children. Millions of children are not safe physically, educationally, economically, or spiritually" (p. 27). Looking beyond collective self-interest in the future of its economy and government, a just, prosperous and caring society ought to value and protect dependent group members, such as children, by meeting their basic needs.

To address children's basic needs in today's world, we will need to consider social and demographic trends at various levels of our society as we seek to establish social and economic goals which balance the interests of children, families and society. We will also need to continue to confront the political issue of public-private partnership and an appropriate balance of public and private responsibility. Expert advice stemming from child development research will no longer suffice in the examination of needed social policy or social programs. We must collectively examine our values at family, community, state, and national levels. Public education and networking of people concerned about the quality of life of young children will be a critical part of this process. Furthermore, to enhance the possibilities for collaborative action, we will need to generate what LeVine and White (1986) describe as "distinctive and coherent images of well-being, public virtue and personal maturity that guide the education of children and motivate the activities of adults" (p. 12).

As we collectively examine our values, Featherstone (1974) suggests: "It may be a fact of some political consequence that family values are more deeply rooted in American life than entrepreneurial, economic values. In the coming battles over national priorities and a new social policy, children and their families may be more important as symbols than ever" (p. 363). The validity of this statement is readily apparent when we observe the feelings sparked by 1992 presidential campaign rhetoric about family values and their influence on the social ills of American society. Yet, if we are to meet the challenges of the next century, then we will need to move the discussion beyond allusions to children and family values as symbols, to a thoughtful examination of our basic societal values and commitment to visions, policies, and programs that will transform these shared values into realities.

As part of a re-examination of our societal values and obligations, this book focuses on illuminating the concept and issues of *entitlement* in relation to the needs of young children in our society. The term *entitlements* is commonly understood as federal, state, and local services or benefits aimed at promoting and protecting the general welfare of society. Such support programs include health care, housing, food, prenatal care, child care, education, cultural activities, and income insurance. In this sense, *entitlement* is an external opportunity or social system support for the child. Another view of *entitlement* addresses fundamental rights of the individual in our society, including legal and welfare rights such as freedom of speech and free public education. In the context of children's rights, the issue of relationship of the state with the child is complicated by children's immaturity and the added dimension of family or parental rights. The child, however, is viewed here as a rights holder, not just a beneficiary (Wringe, 1981). A third view examines *entitlement* from a psychological and social perspective as a set of expectations or dispositions inside the child's head. Coles (1977) describes this form of *entitlement* as a manner of response toward life associated with a continuous and insistent emphasis on the possibilities, cultivation, and development of the "self." Thus, *entitlement* is not just a feeling, but is acting upon that feeling. Such a manner of response, according to Coles, is most commonly observed among children from well-to-do, privileged families.

This volume is intended to examine not only these various meanings of entitlement in relation to meeting the basic needs of young children in our society, but also the impact that proposed social and economic goals and policies may have on children and their families. The authors whose papers appear in this book represent a variety of disciplines and have been involved in advising, developing, or implementing child and family policies.

This book is organized in three sections that offer various perspectives on the entitlements of young children, as well as insights into how American society has dealt and should deal with the vulnerabilities and differences among American children and their families. Part 1 broadly addresses different frameworks for understanding the concept of entitlement. Part 2 turns to consideration of issues involved in assuring that America's children receive their rightful entitlements. Part 3 shifts to consideration of family and cultural contexts for the provision of entitlements for young chil-

dren. Finally, in the epilogue, we reflect on the limitations of utilitarian views of children's welfare and entitlements, and suggest the necessity of a primary moral commitment in policies and programs for children and families. Thus, we hope this book will provide valuable information and insights for readers who seek to improve the nurture and education of America's children.

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