

COOPERATION WILL MAKE IT HAPPEN: A Proposed Alliance On Behalf of Children And Families

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The prospects for the future well-being of the United States have been seriously weakened by a steady decline in both the quality of family life and the lives of children and adolescents. Within the last fifty years, empirical evidence of this decline has appeared in many research domains. Recent studies have documented the existence of significant numbers of children, under three years of age, who show by their behavior toward their mother and/or father that they have been living emotionally insecure lives with their own parents. Research published within the last decade has revealed a dramatic increase in the number of adolescents who commit suicide. Homicide has been a leading cause of death among teenagers and young adults. The number of teenagers suffering from depression has also risen sharply in the past thirty years.¹ Studies have also revealed drug use, substance abuse and acts of social violence committed by teenagers. There are many studies that document a steady decline in the academic achievement by youth of all ages in the United States. There is also evidence of an increase in the number of younger teenagers who become pregnant. These are only a few samples from extensive bodies of research in the social and behavioral sciences. Together, they paint a disturbing picture of the lives of many children and families from all social and economic classes in the United States.

This deterioration in the quality of psychosocial life in the United States has taken place even though the amount and quality of information about human development has greatly increased during this century. Research studies have added to our knowledge about the needs of children and adolescents and the child-rearing it takes to meet those needs properly. The behavioral and social sciences have also documented the long-term damage to individuals and to society that is caused by deleterious child/adolescent rearing.

A number of national organizations devoted to conducting research on or to providing services to families, young children and adolescents in this country have each added greatly to our knowledge about children, adolescents and parenting. However, the creation of this knowledge has not brought about an improvement in child or adolescent rearing. Over the years, coalitions of a few of these organizations have temporarily been formed to address specific parts of this growing problem.

This article will present a rationale for the creation of an ongoing alliance of these organizations. The purpose for this alliance will be to influence organizations within each sector of society so that when these organizations make decisions, their decisions improve child-rearing and family life throughout the United State.

In early America, three institutions were responsible for the education of children and adolescents. From early colonial times until the latter part of the 19th century, the child and adolescent were educated primarily by the family. The family taught "the 3 Rs" and also imbued its children with the cultural values of their community. Those same values were pronounced and reinforced throughout the entire community. The second educational institution was the church. It was responsible for cultural transmission to the community at large. Religious

practices taught not only a belief system but, because of their influence, guided the day-to-day behavior of young and old alike. The third educational institution, the apprenticeship system, was common from colonial times until the latter 19th century. Males, for the most part, often began their apprenticeship training at nine or ten years of age. In addition to teaching a trade, the “master” actively reinforced the values of the community and also encouraged the apprentice to practice reading, writing and arithmetic. Community values and “the three Rs” became integral parts of an adolescent’s daily life. Preindustrial life in America was a cohesive fabric of interconnected ideas and experiences.^{2,3,4,5}

The people of the colonies, for the most part, ascribed to the same set of values and customs that they brought with them from Europe. This was characteristic of each of the early American settlements. The cultural unity of the colonies was actively reinforced by the various social institutions (family, church, businesses, etc.) and continued throughout the first century of US, history.

People, young and old, lived tough and frequently harsh lives before the industrial revolution. However, the personal and group problems that are apparent in youth and adults in the United States today did not exist with nearly as much frequency in 18th and 19th century America. Though daily living in early America was much more demanding than it has been for the last two generations, the serious social problems of today did not exist because the values of the community, which had been inculcated from the earliest years of life, gave each individual’s existence a steadfastness of meaning and purpose. These religious values served another very important function. Values, pronounced and reinforced by each sector of society, were a source of personal strength when times were good and served as anchors and guides during the inevitable storms experienced in a lifetime.

The social service and behavioral science organizations in the United States have provided a large body of meaningful information on child/adolescent development and parenting. Unfortunately this high quality information remains, for the most part, sequestered in journals housed on the shelves of college and university libraries.

This valuable information does not find its way into the daily lives of American families. What has been learned is not, therefore, systematically woven into the fabric of communities and social life. Families, the essential building blocks of our society, suffer as a result. As the development of children and adolescents, and the compromised quality of their adult life deteriorates, the inevitable consequences become numerous individual and social problems.

Disseminating empirically demonstrated information about child and adolescent development and parenting to a wider audience has had a very low priority in this country. As a result popular understanding and views on this subject are often based on myth or outdated and unreliable information. Parents, professionals and all those concerned with the well-being of children must be provided child-rearing information in a form which is 1) understandable, 2) interesting, 3) useful and 4) presented in a variety of modalities i.e., print, film, television, radio and other electronic media.

Although behavioral science and social service organizations must continue their

important endeavors, they must also envision the broader significance of their work: ensuring the future well-being of our democracy. Cooperative efforts to influence labor, business, governments, schools, the media, the legal profession and each of the other dynamic sectors of American society must be made on behalf of children and their families.

An alliance of behavioral science and social service organizations must be created. The purpose of the alliance will be to influence each sector of society to make decisions that strengthen family life and improve the quality of child-rearing.

The value-based, cultural communities with extended families that characterized the 17th and 18th centuries in the United States began to wane in the latter 19th century. In the 20th century, communities are no longer culturally homogenous. The extended family, for the vast majority of Americans, has been extinct for generations. Currently there exists a vacuum of pronounced, humane secular values that are articulated and reinforced by our major social institutions. Alongside this vacuum also exists the single parent family; media that pronounce violence, sex and the instant gratification of needs; and an inadequately educated population.

In 1997, most citizens are not consistently influenced by secular humane values set forth in various ways by organizations and institutions in the United States. For most of this century, humane individual and social values have not been taught to Americans in public schools, through the media or in the work place. As a result, there are very many people living in the United States today who have weak keels that fail to steady their personal or familial ships when they are tossed by rough waves or blown off course by the strong winds of life.

The ongoing alliance of behavioral science and social service organizations would work with the various sectors of society to improve conditions for the parenting of children and adolescents. The first meeting of this alliance will take place on July 2nd, 1997 in Washington, D.C..

The alliance will be composed of national organizations that have demonstrated a commitment to social programs or to research that focuses on family life, child and adolescent development and parenting. The members of the alliance, in subcommittees will work in partnership with selected, recognized leaders in business, labor, the media and each of the other social sectors. Some of these sector leaders may have indicated an interest in child or adolescent rearing and family life. Others may have created innovative programs in their sector that benefited and strengthened parenting and family life.

Participation by sector leaders in creating realistic ideas and initiating strategies that contribute to the strengthening and improvement of family life and quality child-rearing will foster a personal sense of ownership of these ideas. Leaders will, therefore, be more likely to take an active role in disseminating their strategies to other members in their social sector.

In addition to creating and implementing family support strategies, another very important function performed by sector leaders in their alliance subcommittees will be to develop effective ways that will influence others in their social sector to value the welfare of family life and child-rearing when they make decisions. Whether the sector of the alliance

represents business, the media, the legal profession, public education, government or labor, the sector leaders in each of the alliance's subcommittees should design and implement ways to encourage other key people in their sector to pronounce the value of family life and child-rearing. They should also influence fellow sector members to incorporate those values in what they produce and how they produce it.

No task is more difficult or more important than raising a child correctly from infancy through the adolescent years. Yet in 1997, there is no systematic teaching of parent education. A parent education curriculum for all students should begin in the sixth grade and continue through high school. Opportunities to care for a baby should be part of this curriculum. In addition to teaching how to raise a child, a parent education curriculum can lead to a significant reduction in the number of teenage pregnancies.

A new profession is needed to provide resources, education and consultation to parents and parents-to-be. Now, most parents turn to their pediatrician for child/adolescent advice and information. However most pediatricians are not adequately trained in the psychosocial development of children, adolescents and parents. Frequently pediatricians are also not taught how properly to assess and answer a question asked by a parent about a child/adolescent rearing problem.

As this journal issue has shown, there are centers devoted to improving parenting in many areas of this nation. These centers should be publicized, better financed and expanded in number.

Mediators and lawyers who handle custody cases, especially those that involve young children, should be trained to understand the special needs of these youngsters. All children suffer when a family dissolves in separation or divorce. It is especially important for judges, lawyers and mediators to know the recent research on young children. These professionals must make it a priority to render decisions that are sensitive to the emotional needs of the young child during separation or divorce.

The apprenticeship system should be revived. Many of today's youth think schooling is unimportant and irrelevant. An apprenticeship experience, tied into academic course work, can demonstrate to students the relationship between the real world and their education.

Public schools and public school districts should also creatively instill secular, humane values throughout their curriculum.

Harmful child-rearing practices throughout history have been carefully reported in *The Journal of Psychohistory*⁶ and in *The History of Childhood*.⁷ However, the efforts made by local organizations in each social sector of society to improve parenting and the lives of young people should regularly be reported to the American public at large. The media can play an important role in this endeavor. Television, popular magazines, radio and books must begin to disseminate to the public descriptions of the efforts made by organizations in each social sector to strengthen family life and improve opportunities to rear children. National radio and television stations, for example, should broadcast information about good employer-supported, on-site daycare centers

for the infants and toddlers of working parents. Research has demonstrated that on-site daycare benefits the company as well as the infant, toddler and parent. These successful employer-supported, on-site daycare centers are not familiar to most Americans because they have not been widely reported. As a regular feature of their news programs, television and radio stations should broadcast research-based child-rearing advice or interview parents who have used developmentally appropriate child/adolescent rearing strategies. The national media should also highlight a local newspaper that publishes a daily section with information about child and adolescent development and parenting. A local public school that weaves the teaching of values into its curriculum or produces educational competence in its students should be made known to the public at large. These are a few examples of how local efforts, made in a couple of sectors of society, could be broadcast nationally to inform the American public. Information like this about efforts in the various social sectors, regularly disseminated through a variety of media, stimulates and encourages other members of each social sector to make similar changes. These changes will improve the quality of child and adolescent rearing and, therefore, help to insure the well-being of our democracy.

The United States has, over the past century, reduced sexism and, to some extent, racism. We have created a nation rich in its diversity of races and cultures. We have broadened opportunities for all people and created a powerful, materially wealthy nation. We have created an abundance of new knowledge in almost every area of life. For example, advances in physical medicine keep children from becoming as sick or dying as they did just a century ago. Despite this and other similar improvements, severe social and emotional problems have developed within communities and individuals. These problems are growing in scope and intensity. They threaten our survival as a free society.

Webster's dictionary defines utopia and utopian as an "imaginary" "impractical scheme for social improvement" or "proposing or advocating impractical ideal social and political schemes". The examples of strategies proposed in this article for improving child/adolescent rearing are *not* impractical or ideal. They have all been tried in our country with success. The real utopian ideas are the formation and purpose of the ongoing alliance. This alliance will be composed of representatives from various social and behavioral science organizations that, in one way or another, have been devoted to the study and improvement of child/adolescent development and parenting. People who are members of these organizations have, over the years, been collecting data which demonstrate that many of the major institutions in our society have been neglecting or negatively influencing the rearing of children in the United States. Their evidence strongly indicates that the actions or inactions of these social institutions have been contributing to a clear and significant deterioration in the constructive, healthy psychosocial development of the nation's children. The purpose of the ongoing alliance of behavioral and social science organizations would be, therefore, to influence each of the various sectors of our society so that, individually and collectively, they enhance and contribute to strengthening family life and the healthy intellectual, social, emotional and moral development of children and adolescents.

Notes:

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2. Wish, Harvey, *Society and Thought in America: Vol. I and II, (2nd Edition)*. David McKay Co., Inc., New York. 1962,
3. Butts, R. Freeman and Lawrence A. Cremin, *A History of Education in American Culture*. Holt, Rinehart and Winston, New York. 1953.
4. Wright, Louis B., *The Cultural Life of the American Colonies: 1607-1763*. Harper and Row, New York. 1957.
5. Nye, Russel Blaine, *The Cultural Life of the New Nation: 1776-1830*. Harper and Row, New York. 1960.
6. deMause, Lloyd, (ed), *The Journal of Psychohistory*, 140 Riverside Drive, Suite 14H, New York, New York, 10024.
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