

Children's Issues in North America - 1997

Just as God nurtured us, God's children, to good health before giving us the Torah, so too, should we ensure the good health of our nation's children so that they will be fit vessels for learning and growth. (Religious Action Center Release on Child Health, 5/13/97)

Issue

In view of recent welfare reforms, new revelations about child development and the growth of divorce, new concerns for children and their rights have become important.

Background

Women of Reform Judaism has responded over the years to the needs of children with calls for an end to hunger and homelessness and for provision of health care services and basic education. We have stated our belief that children's economic security should be insured so that children can develop with dignity and confidence. WRJ concerns about children were most recently addressed in "Insuring the Future for Children" (1991) and "Welfare Reform" (1995).

In 1991 the National Commission on Children pointed to the declining quality of life for many American children. It was noted that children were (and are) the poorest group in the United States. On November 24, 1989 the Canadian Parliament passed a resolution supported by all parties to eliminate child poverty by the year 2000. Since that time the rate of child poverty climbed from 14.5% to 19.5% between 1989 and 1994.

The welfare law enacted in August 1996, the U.S. Federal Personal Responsibility Act, has major implications for low-income families and especially children of these families. The act requires millions more low-income families to work, but it does not include adequate funds to help these families or other low-income families with child care costs. The governmental investment in child care amounts to fewer dollars for far more children. The result can be a system of low-quality care that undermines children's development. Most child care in the United States is consistently rated mediocre to poor. However, the welfare bill, with one single child care block grant, gives the states the opportunity to create strong child care programs with uniform policies for all families. Because new studies have shown that spoken language has an astonishing impact on an infant's brain development, but only when coming from an involved and caring person, the importance of good child-care programs with strong training for caregivers is immeasurable. Parenting training should also be provided for new parents.

In the United States, according to 1997 estimates, 10 million children (1 in 7) have no health insurance. Ninety percent of uninsured children have parents who work, and only 3 in 5 live in two-parent families. Employer coverage is eroding twice as quickly for children as for adults. Uninsured children are at risk of preventable illness and children with untreated illness are less able to learn. Nearly 1 in 4 of our children do not get the shots they need before the age of two. Every day, 466 babies are born to mothers who receive little or no pre-natal care. Every other developed country provides all its people with health insurance.

Furthermore, across the United States, there are threats to the economic security of one specific sector of our population—children of divorced families. In some state legislatures and in some state courts, decisions which would amend the laws concerning the non-custodial parent's obligation for child support are being made. Some of the proposed laws would restrict or more narrowly define the conditions under which child support is

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determined, especially as it pertains to expenses for a college education. Women of Reform Judaism has long supported the protection of children and had already called upon its United States affiliates to seek enforcement of child support by non-custodial parents ("Children and the Family," 1983).

Resolution

Women of Reform Judaism reaffirms its commitment to the health and well-being of children and calls upon its affiliates to support federal, state or provincial legislation to:

1. Improve child-care as follows:
 1. Develop standards for child-care, including training of all care-givers with special emphasis on assistance to low-income households.
 2. Furnish care-givers with training and incentives, such as pay commensurate with the responsibility entrusted to them and funding for necessary materials, to stimulate an increase in the availability of quality child care providers.
 3. Develop minimum federal standards to accompany block grants which fund child-care providers.
 4. Ensure thorough background checks on all care-givers.
 5. Urge the promotion of licensed and/or registered child-care facilities that have specified inspected health and safety standards.
 6. Provide enriching and safe before and after school child-care programs for elementary and middle school-aged children.
 7. Encourage employers to offer quality child-care as an employee benefit.
2. Improve the health care system for children as follows:
 1. Make wellness training and information available to parents and caregivers.
 2. Guarantee affordable insurance for children whose families are unable to provide health insurance.
 3. Support legislation in the U.S. Congress that will provide funding for health care for uninsured children.
3. Improve the treatment accorded children of divorced families as follows:
 1. Seek child support in accordance with the income and financial resource levels of both the custodial and non-custodial parents, requiring full financial disclosure by both parents.
 2. Assure the highest education level achievable in accordance with the child's skill, with respect to either parent's ability to pay.
 3. Allow the judiciary to maintain authority to order a parent to pay for post-secondary education or training.
 4. Establish a system for payment of child support through payroll withholding.