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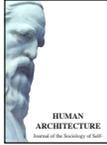
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Children: The Unheard Society

Aaron Witkowski

This essay exhibits concerns that I have about social policies regarding children in our society. While taking this course on social welfare, I was able to examine and relate to many of the topics covered. The course did open my eyes to my own feelings on how society regards people on welfare. In doing so, I realized the injustices that occur everyday in our policies towards such a large part of our society. Because of recent events related to September 11th, I believe the American public is becoming emotionally more sympathetic. Hopefully, we as a society can carry these sympathetic emotions into our policy-making processes. And that we as a society strive to correct what we have unjustly done. We cannot erase the past but we have an opportunity to change the future.

I talk about reality checks in this paper. I would like the reader to think of my opinions as just that, opinions. But, we have to realize that opinions are how we start changes. And without opinions, individual thought is lost. We as a society have to encourage individual thought if we are going to evolve into a society that accepts everyone as they are. People can change, but is it fair to expect people to give up so much to be able to conform?

A large part of our society involves children. We say that we are helping them; but are we helping them? Or are we just

simply saying this so we can sleep better at night? I encourage you, when reading this paper, to open your eyes and realize that what is discussed is about reality. And that there is nothing more true than reality. Think about how compassionate and forgiving our children are. We have often little control over our own lives. We do not know what is in store for us in our future.

As a society entering a new century and millennium, we are finding that the voices so important to our future are not being heard. In fact, the voices we do not pay attention to are those of future leaders and proprietors of our society and world. What does the future hold for our sons and daughters? Who is going to make sure that they have the opportunities that we have? Are these children going to be able to function as adults if we do not help them in growing up?

These are a few questions that I am striving to find answers to. The future is an unpredictable web, which is woven through the daily activities in which we participate in everyday life. Our actions, as difficult to fathom, change the future moment to moment as we live it. Adults are always trying to find answers to questions presented by other adults. But, I believe the questions we should be listening to are those of children—children that have been born into our society without any choice of their own. These children have not yet had a chance to make their own lives—let alone the chance to live. Their voices are often ignored and the questions they ask often go unanswered. Who are we to decide whether or not these children can make decisions or ask questions?

As adults we do not have sole control over our own lives. We do not know what is in store for us in our future. But, I can assure that the children of our society have less control than we as adults have. As adults we make choices, often out of ignorance and irrational decisions. The adults in

our society often do not ask questions about their distant future, but rather they try to solve problems with limited resources for the quick fix. This is fine if all you have to do is worry about yourself. But, throw a child into the equation and our thought process has to change.

Children do not always know what is right. So, they do not question actions that adults take. Children can only ask about what they know. Where are we going to sleep? Can I have some food? Can I have some clothes to stay warm? These questions seem trivial. But, for many youngsters in our society these are the questions that matter. These questions are not always asked, since they have been ignored all too often.

In this paper, I am going to look into the services that are offered to our children. It is important to look at how our society is helping the adults that are parents to these children. In doing so, many questions will be explored. How can parents have a good environment for their child while trying to find a job? For parents with low paying jobs, how can they afford to feed and cloth their children along with paying the bills that allow them to have a roof over their heads?

Let us start by looking at the different choices people have been offered before a child is conceived or even born. Many people within our society know Planned Parenthood. This organization was started to educate people on sex. This group was to provide services, which enabled poorer people within our society the chance to be educated on the effects and consequences of their sexual practices. They allow counseling to those young people in our society who do not get the answers they are looking for. Planned Parenthood works with people in discussing safe sex and prenatal care. At Planned Parenthood a person can meet with a counselor and discuss the options that they have in regards to sex. Planned Parenthood gives out condoms

and other apparatuses that are forms of birth control. But, before they give these items out, the person has to listen to what the potential consequences of their choices are. Planned Parenthood also allows the young females of our society who cannot afford exams the ability to have health check-ups.

With a counselor, a person, if pregnant, can talk about her choices. The choices are: have the child or have an abortion. Having a child can have a huge impact on a person's life, especially if the person is not ready to have a child. Planned Parenthood allows people these choices while making sure that their concerns are answered. If the choice is to keep the baby then they counsel young adults on the responsibilities that they are going to have in making this choice. They still have other options such as giving up the child for adoption or raising the child themselves.

Planned Parenthood is also known for giving abortions. Planned Parenthood and the National Abortion Rights Action League are considered to be pro-choice groups (DiNitto 376). Abortions are a huge topic within our society. Depending on religious or social status one holds, one chooses to take different sides. Abortions were rarely permitted in any state before the 1960's (DiNitto 374). The only time an abortion was permitted was if the mother's life was in danger. In the 1970s New York, Alaska, Hawaii, and Washington were the four states that allowed the mother to have an abortion with the agreement of a physician (DiNitto 374).

In 1973, the U.S. Supreme Court made decisions that changed abortion laws. They ruled that "the Fifth and Fourteenth Amendments to the Constitution, which granted people, 'life, liberty and property,' did not include the life of an unborn fetus" (DiNitto 374). This, I believe was the start of an unjust interpretation of our constitution to promote the views of the few which guide our country.

The battle carried on throughout the upcoming years with many different changes and rulings on abortion. It is still unclear from state to state what the exact laws are. The federal government turned the control of this decision over to the states. Most states have laws that state if a pregnancy was acquired through the act of a rape then the victim has the right to have an abortion. Also, if the mother is in danger of losing her own life due to the pregnancy then an abortion is allowed. Other than those two facts it is entirely up to the state. The battle continues on with the question of when the decision of having an abortion is "legal."

Now that we have briefly looked at what the laws are on abortion, it is time to give ourselves a reality check. Our society was born for the reason that people wanted freedoms, and that a strict rule on how people live their lives was wrong. Maybe we should look at the consequences of our own actions through the eyes of a child. Is it fair to bring a child into this world if we cannot support ourselves? I believe that many people do not think of this as an appropriate question. Most of the decisions that have been made on abortions, I believe, have been made by those who only claim to represent people within our own society. But, as we look at this as an option, is this really the case? People who make their livelihood through working in the offices of our government do not listen to everyone.

Let me ask this, If you have to make a decision on something and five people want you to do it a certain way, but one other person is willing to give you one thousand dollars to do the exact opposite of what the first five people were asking, what are you going to do? This, I believe is the reality check that the people in our government have to make everyday. In fact, I believe that most of our lawmakers have a conscience, but they are persuaded by people and money to go against their better judgment. And as sad as it seems, this mon-

ey is what makes the lives of people a living hell.

Let us think about that unborn child. Scenario one: the mother is a teenager still in school. Her family is on welfare and all it can do is to keep a roof over their heads. Scenario two: the teenage pregnancy of a well to do family. Scenario three: a woman who is a drug addict for over six years and has AIDS becomes pregnant. Scenario four: your own daughter becomes pregnant at the age of 16. All of these scenarios happen everyday and the laws that our government has instilled upon our land are the only decisions that you can make. Fair, not really, but who am I to say otherwise? I am just a common person that is talking about the rights or shall I say the rules that the children of our society have to live with.

Everyone has his or her own opinions on what is right and wrong. Is it right to bring a child into this world if they are already suffering from an incurable disease? Is it right to bring a child into the world if the parent is not mature enough to take care of the child? Is it right to bring a child into this world if the mother cannot support herself? These are all moral question that cannot be answered with a simple yes or no. But, the people that this unborn child is going to affect should have the right to make the decision, since in turn the decision that they make will affect them for the rest of their lives. If the decision is to have the child, then we should look at the consequences that this child will have to endure for the rest of his or her life.

Suffering goes on within our society everyday. Adults suffer and children suffer. Depending on what the cause of the suffering is, do we choose to be compassionate towards them or not? More often than not, people have a warm heart when they hear the horror stories about the abused children of our society and those of the world. But, there are many unheard stories that we never hear about. And in an informational society, people do not always look for the

problems; they wait for the problems to come to them. Maybe we as a society should look at ourselves before we make judgment about others.

Walking through a mall a person can see a lot. For instance, one day I was in the mall and I saw a family with a young baby. It was cold outside and the baby was not really dressed appropriately for the weather. I heard one lady say, "that poor baby, she must be freezing!" But after saying that the lady walked away. This is the problem with our society, we see the evidence of a problem but we are hesitant to do anything to remedy the problem. Adults do not hear other adults, so what chance does a child have in being heard?

How can we take care of our children if we cannot take care of ourselves? Well, this is a question a person should ask before having a child. But, more often than not this question is not asked until the person has delivered the new born. Well, the answer is to get public assistance. Let's start with nutrition.

Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC), is a federally supported nutrition program. "Children up to the age of five who are certified to be at 'nutritional risk' according to federal guidelines..." (DiNitto 229) are eligible for benefits. These "risks" are defined as "priority medical conditions such as anemia or a history of pregnancy complications; they may also include inadequate diet... Participants must also... receive AFDC, food stamps, or Medicaid, or meet other state-determined income limitations...." (DiNitto 231). This is comforting to know that parents can get help with a new child. That is if they can receive other benefits. WIC provides a booming extra "\$31 to its recipients" (DiNitto 231). This hardly seems enough to feed an extra mouth, especially when it is common knowledge that feeding a newborn child is really expensive. Also, child nutrition is linked to "normal development and in pre-

venting life-threatening illnesses and problems that may affect health throughout a life cycle" (DiNitto 230). WIC has been complimented for promoting "a 21% decrease in low birth weight infants ... and a 45% reduction in the number of women with inadequate or no prenatal care" (DiNitto 230).

This seems to be a good solution to a problem that many parents have in raising a child. But, what happens to the people that do not meet the criteria for these programs? Are they simply left out in the cold? Well, the answer is simple, just look around. There are many people in need of help in raising their children. It is apparent that more has to be done to help the parents in our society raise their children. After all, are we comfortable with the 21% in low birth weight infants and 45% reduction of inadequate or no prenatal care? Granted some of these effects are due to nature and no matter how hard we try to change nature it is impossible to do so. But, a person cannot ascribe the other 79% of poor birth conditions to nature. What about the other 55% of inadequate or no prenatal care? Sure some people out of their own ignorance do not seek out these programs that are designed to help them but some of these come about through not being qualified to receive assistance from these programs. Our government tells people that you do not qualify for help because you make too much money. Well, who are they to say what too much money is? These people dictating these laws do not have to worry about where their next meal is coming from or even where they are going to sleep at night. Probably more often than not these questions have never been an issue to them ever in their life. So, I am wondering as to how they can make these decisions with a clear conscience.

We have just discussed the youngest of children. Remember, WIC only helps up to the age of five. What happens after the age of five? Well, hopefully by this time the

child has entered some type of schooling. This allows for the child to get at least one nutritious meal during school. Also, after this, if the family is on public assistance, then they are allowed more money for the new child. But, who really knows if the child is receiving a nutritious meal at home. That is why the school environment is so important to children that live in these conditions.

“In 1946, The National School Lunch Act ... to provide children from low-income families free or low cost hot lunches” (DiNitto 225) was passed. This is good assurance that the children of our society at the school age are receiving at least one hot nutritious meal during the week. Almost all public schools participate in this program. “In 1996, 49% of children received free lunches and 8% at reduced price” (DiNitto 227). There are about “26 million” (DiNitto 227) that participate in the program on a daily basis. This is comforting to know that one meal a day is accessible to these children. After school it is entirely up to the parents to feed and nourish their children. If this actually happens no one really knows, but there is nothing that can be done after the parents have received the money. Stricter regulation has been placed to make sure that these allocated funds are used correctly. There is no way to make sure, but we are told by the leaders of our society that these people have been taken care of. I cannot believe it but if our government tells us that this is the case then it must be true.

For a little more reassurance, in 1966 there was an act passed called the Child Nutrition Act. This act is much like the 1946 bill passed, except that this Act allows children to get breakfast. This is not as widespread as the lunch act but it is out there and it is good to know that schools are using these funds to provide their students with nutritional breakfasts. These programs are not the answers to all the problems with child nutrition, but it is good to

see that there is something out there for the children of our society. The only point that seems to be really sad is the fact that these programs are almost half a century old and no one has come up with any better ideas.

Maybe like many other problems in our society the remedy is working; so why bother fixing it? I believe that our government makes more problems for themselves by not taking care of the problems when they arise. They allow a problem to manifest and grow into a gigantic problem before anyone even blinks an eye. Perhaps child nutrition is one of those slow growing monsters that is about to erupt. You cannot expect a program that is started in the sixties to be able to accommodate the problems of today. Maybe we should try to revamp the system rather than keep on fixing it as its parts one by one start to break off!

I have just discussed the issues of nutrition and with nutrition we must discuss housing. After all, what is the sense of eating properly if you have nothing to protect you from the environment? Once again, as with nutrition, children have nothing they can do about their living conditions, i.e. housing.

Can everyone afford his or her own house? Not even a chance. Houses are expensive and the price varies on the market at the time of the sale. Can everyone afford an apartment? No, this is a repeated answer to many questions for people who do not have a place to live. There are a series of programs that are out there to help people find an affordable place to live; however like many government programs the lines are long and still get longer.

Let us start with the most severe cases and work into a positive direction. The Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act in 1987 provides emergency housing for people (DiNitto 88). These places are not glamorous in any way, but they serve the purpose of temporary shelter. YMCA is an example of such housing. These places

provide support for many people. The support include “nutrition assistance, health and mental care, job training, education for homeless children, and other social services” (DiNitto 89). This is the smallest of the services provided. However, like many of the services, YMCAs have limited room and often have to turn people away.

People are always looking for affordable housing. How does a person define affordable housing? I’m sure if you asked a group of people you would get several different answers. However, I guarantee that the people you asked would all agree that there is no such thing as affordable housing. Housing is not cheap, considering the fact that with housing comes many other bills. Electric, gas, and land taxes are just a few of the hidden charges behind any form of housing. These are not luxuries; these items are essential for living in a home.

The Housing Act of 1949 was passed by congress to find decent homes and living environments for every American family. In a study in 1992, it was found that housing needs in metropolitan areas exceed “the entire grant then received by AFDC families” (DiNitto 89). This simply means that even with the help of government, housing is still unaffordable for many families. When applying for such help the government looks at the annual income of a household. Sounds fair, but in all actuality the money needed to be able to survive after this help diminishes quickly when paying for the rest of the rent. And the families are struggling to pay other bills, such as utilities and food.

As sad as this is, it is true. There is more than one study showing this, so why is the government not doing anything? I do not know of anyone with the answer to this question. However, I believe that there are answers to these questions. They just have to be sought out. But, for the government to find such answers they spend millions of dollars that could be used to help these people. The government is the biggest com-

pany that wastes money. If the government was like a company within the private sector they would have gone bankrupt a long time ago. But, if this is apparent to me—a small voice in our society—then why haven’t they figured it out yet? Is it that they, the government officials, are stupid? I do not think this is the case. It all comes back to what I said earlier — money. Officials are not worried about the public as much as their own re-elections. Sure the numbers are in the millions for people who need help but there are much larger numbers of people who do not need this assistance. The voices of the public majority are what interests the politicians. If the majority of the public are not crying out for help then the few that need the help will never be heard.

Who is losing more? The children are the ones suffering. Their dreams are being broken before they even realize what dreams are. When they grow up then, they develop discriminating views against the American government. Trust—that is what it all comes down to. How can you gain trust in someone that has let you down for so long? If politicians could live forever and hold an office for a very long time then they would see the effects of what they have caused. Through their own unjust acts they would end up begging for forgiveness just so that they could keep their jobs. Then we would find out who the “bigger” people are. Chances are, the bigger people are those that had the injustices done to them. These people are the ones that have the big hearts and willingness to forgive. Then and only then these politicians will realize what humanity actually is. But, since this can never happen politicians will never hear the few amongst the mass. They will continue their practices and the issue of the homeless will never go away. Also, the issue of decent homes will never be obtained by everyone.

Now that we have looked at feeding and sheltering the youth of America, let us take a look at how we are protecting our

children from the other harsh realities that they are faced with. This applies to every child in America. Children, no matter what the social status that their parents hold, need protection. Abused children come from all walks of life. This to me is an unthinkable injustice. Children are not heard and often their opinions do not matter, but when it comes to abuse, people listen.

Children are heard when it comes to abuse: ... physical abuse, 12 percent; sexual abuse, 6 percent; emotional abuse, 3 percent; medical neglect, 16 percent (DiNitto 342). These figures have remained consistent over time and are not declining. This war on child abuse has to be fought, and fought hard. These abusive situations are often caught by family physicians and schoolteachers (DiNitto 342). If it was not for doctors or teachers the abuse could often would go unseen. Children are especially vulnerable to this type of abuse for many reasons: 1) Children cannot always protect themselves from this abuse; 2) Households often have more than one child and if one child is suffering from abuse then chances are that the other children are suffering as well; 3) Often people think of child abuse as physical abuse, but, verbal abuse can affect a child just as much as the physical abuse.

Knowing how a child acts, one can find indications of what is going on in a child's life. For instance, take a child who lives in a home with a single unemployed parent. This particular environment might have an impact on how the child is being treated. Stressful environments can produce results that might not occur if the environment is changed. A parent that has to worry about finding a job and paying bills might have little patience for a child that keeps asking for an expensive toy or article of clothing. This could lead to a potential abusive situation.

There are many situations that can lead to potential abuse from the parent(s). Alcoholic, stressed out, abused parents, and

many more can all lead to potential child abuse situations. However, just because these parents might have these problems does not mean that they are being abusive. This is an important point to make.

Children are easy targets for abuse, for many reasons. One is that they are less likely to fight back or report on the adult. Secondly, the child might not even know that what they are experiencing is abuse, it might just be the way of life for them. Third of all the child might be aware of the abuse and with a particular child taking the abuse they might feel that they are protecting the other children within the household.

It is important for children to be protected from these situations. An abusive situation could have a prolonged psychological effect on the child. Along with this effect, the child might also become severely beaten. Which could in turn result in the child from shutting him/herself off from the world—always being on edge and not being able to get close to people.

The school environment is important for many children. As I indicated previously regarding the nutritional services children are receiving from the government, this environment provides structure to the life of many children. The school environment is predictive of what certain consequences are for certain behaviors, unlike that of an abusive environment. In an abusive environment children might not know what is going to happen from moment to moment. The school environment also teaches children what the moral standards of our society are. Learning these moral standards, children might then be able to see that what they are experiencing is wrong and then in turn they might be able to talk to a trusted teacher.

Children might not know what they are experiencing is wrong and unfair to their development. Also, in education, teachers can explain what abuse is exactly. In doing so, the teacher will enable children to see what the signs of abuse are. Parents

or guardians are not the sole potential sources of child abuse. This is important for children to understand. The abuse can be by anyone—a friend of the family, aunt/uncle, or even a baby-sitter. This also has to be made apparent to children.

As stated before, child abuse can take many forms. Sexual abuse can be demonstrated in many ways. The way that most people think of this sexual abuse is the actual act of intercourse. But, this is often the least likely to occur. The inappropriate touching and feeling is what happens most of the time. This is often just a prelude to the actual act of intercourse. Children have to realize that the “inappropriate” touches should be told to someone that the child could trust. Of course, these actions are often done by people that the child already has established trust in. Children have to realize the line between appropriate and inappropriate touches. This should be discussed in the classroom. Many day care now are showing videos that exhibit these behaviors. The first time I saw these videos was at Head Start. I was shocked at what was portrayed in these videos. The children were guided through a discussion by the teacher and the children really seemed to respond. But, the message was clear that this was wrong and that there are people who can help. What an important message to send to children! That people can help them and that they do not go unheard when they ask for help.

Child abuse affects more than just the abused. It has to be made apparent that this abuse is wrong and that there is help as long as people know about it. Hiding a situation or life-style can lead to detrimental effects. This abuse should not be tolerated and that help must be easily provided to both the abused and the abuser. Teachers play an important role in our society; they allow the young eyes of our society to see the rights and wrongs. And in teaching these rights and wrongs, teachers have the ability to help our society rid itself of such

sickness and disease.

What are some services that are being offered to help in these situations? “Child welfare services originally included under Title V of the Social Security Act were expanded under Title IV-B in 1967. In 1974 Congress passed the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act and established the National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect” (DiNitto 344). These amendments are to protect our children, along with many of the other amendments that I have already discussed. Then why are our children still suffering so much?

I believe, that the reason why our children are still suffering so much is the cut-backs in our social welfare policies. The government is constantly redirecting funds to other causes—causes that might seem to be needed for our society. Military, private industry, and environmental control are just a few of the places that funds get reallocated to. Granted that all of the above are needed, but why do the funds have to be taken from these public programs. I am sure that there are plenty of other places that these funds can be taken from. That’s right! Our government officials cannot take these funds from these organizations; since these are the organizations that got our public officials elected.

In this paper I explored the choices people make everyday with regards to our children. Our children are a large part of society, but for some reason they are still not being fully heard. In comparison to the total population, our children are 72.3 million strong (www.kidscount.com 1). This number represents one quarter of the entire population. It is sad that 25% of our population really has no voice. Is it not far fetched that we do not see our children as prominent members of our society?

Surely it is sad, but it is true. As adults, we fight against prejudices and other unjust acts everyday. But, for the most part, what we are fighting for is often to benefit ourselves. We as a society have to give our-

selves a reality check. How will prejudices subside if we are constantly instilling prejudices in the youth of America?

Simply, prejudices will never truly die if we continue to neglect the part of our society that is being affected by our “adult” decisions. How can we expect our children to have hope within our society if we keep squeezing the hope of a better life from them everyday? Why are we as adults afraid to listen to the part of the population that is going to carry on the future dreams of our society?

A basic concept of nature is that the strong will survive. How can we as a species survive if we do not allow our children to grow and become strong? Animals nourish and protect their young until they are able to fend for themselves. We as a species on the other hand are more concerned about ourselves as adults. We continue to take care of ourselves and neglect our youngster’s everyday. We talk about ourselves as the dominant species. Is this true? I would have to answer, “No it is not.” I believe that we as a species have far to go before our evolution is even close to be completed. Perhaps, we should learn from the animal kingdom in nurturing our children. Perhaps, we should learn how to eradicate our own barbarisms before we criticize the barbarisms of others.

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