LESSONS FROM HISTORY

Building a Movement for America's Children

A MONOGRAPH BY

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Lessons from History: Building a Movement for America's Children

A Monograph by

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Foreward

Dear Reader:

The Children's Partnership is pleased to bring you this monograph by Dr. Theda Skocpol, "Lessons from History: Building a Movement for America's Children." This is one in a series of publications produced by The Children's Partnership to bring provocative thinkers and useful strategies to the attention of leaders for children.

The genesis of this essay was a presentation made at a small gathering at the Wingspread Conference Center in Racine, Wisconsin. The proceedings from that conference "Building a Constituency for Children, Community and National Strategies" are available in a report from The Children's Partnership. As the conference participants found the presentation valuable, The Children's Partnership asked Dr. Skocpol to make it available to a wider audience.

This monograph represents solely the views of Dr. Skocpol. The Children's Partnership and the funders of this publication are pleased to make her ideas on this subject available, although they may not necessarily share all of Dr. Skocpol's views.

We thank and acknowledge our partners in creating the original Wingspread Conference, The Coalition of Community Foundations for Youth and The Johnson Foundation. And we thank its funders, The Ford Foundation, W.K. Kellogg Foundation, The David and Lucile Packard Foundation and the Foundation for Child Development.

We hope this monograph offers fresh perspectives that help inform your work for children, youth and families. We welcome your comments.

Wendy Lazarus and Laurie Lipper
Directors
The Children's Partnership
January 1997

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Introduction

The process of constituency building requires innovative thinking and strategic direction. But we must also learn from the history of other social movements in America. We do not want to re-invent the wheel, nor do we want to repeat the misfortunes of the past. Why have some movements succeeded in changing the nature of pubic policy, while others have failed? What policies have drawn majority support, and why? American history holds many examples of such successes and failures.

For help in understanding how history can help guide our efforts, we turned to one of the nation's foremost scholars on American social movements, Professor Theda Skocpol of Harvard University. Professor Skocpol is the author of numerous books and articles on social movements in America. Her award-winning works span political science, history and sociology. She combines a profound knowledge of history with a deep interest in contemporary social policy. (Her most recent book is on the failure of the Clinton health care plan.)

Professor Skocpol's book **Protecting Soldiers and Mothers**, which won numerous national awards, explores the formation of major social programs in America. Her research is filled with fascinating insights into the building of constituencies for social policy and highlights the great importance of membership organizations in the development of movements. Professor Skocpol's work is highly relevant to our task today. Her insights not only provide immediate help in our effort to develop a constituency for children, they also point us in the direction of long-term strategy.

Dr. Raphael Sonenshein
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Social Movements and Policy Milestones

As America approaches a new millennium, many of us are deeply concerned about the plight of the nation's families and children. We aspire to create a broad and morally compelling movement, concentrating on endeavors in the present. But as we proceed with the vital tasks at hand, history may have some useful lessons to teach us. We can learn about the kinds of social movements that have worked best in U.S. democracy. A backwards look can also reveal fruitful alternatives that may have faded from view, offering inspiration for the future.

Repeatedly in the past, groups of American citizens have taken up the cause of making life better for large numbers of families. Each time, the movement has been moral and social, not just political. Things have been done through local communities, businesses and private associations, as well as through governments. Yet recognizable "social policy milestones" — government programs to address social needs — have been achieved along the way. Sometimes the broad movement grew up first and then pushed for favorable policies; at other times, policy milestones fueled movements that pushed for further policy development. It is important to realize that successful social movements and helpful government policies can reinforce one another, building up a beneficial momentum over time. The result looks like a "benign circle" between social policy and a broad social constituency. A successful social movement should always aspire to develop this kind of benign circle:

The following are some major U.S. social policy milestones that developed in relation to larger social movements. Let me introduce each briefly, and then talk about characteristics they shared across time:

— Starting before the Civil War, educators, reformers and locally mobilized groups of citizens in most U.S. communities and states worked successfully to establish common public schools. By 1880 the United States had become the world's leader in offering basic education to most of its children.

— After the Civil War, groups of veterans and northern citizens persuaded governments at all levels to offer generous pensions, job opportunities and medical care to former Union soldiers and to the widows and children of soldiers who had died. By 1910 over a quarter of all elderly American men (over one-third of them in the North), along with many widows and orphans, were receiving generous pensions from Washington, D.C. The most important piece of legislation for Civil War benefits was the Dependent Pension Act of 1890, which made pensions available to all who had served honorably in the war for 90 days or more.

— During the 1910s and early 1920s, women's clubs all across the country successfully persuaded the federal government and most states to set up programs to help mothers and children. Forty-four states passed laws to protect female workers and funded mothers' pensions to enable poor widows to care for their children at home. Congress established the Children's Bureau in 1912; and in 1921, the federal Sheppard-Towner Act authorized the Children's Bureau to give moneys to states and localities to establish health education programs open to all pregnant women and mothers of newborns in America.

— During the Depression and the New Deal, workers' movements, especially those involving the elderly, called upon Congress and President Roosevelt to help the old, the poor and the unemployed. The Social Security Act of 1935 was one governmental response to this agitation. After 1935, Old Age Insurance under Social Security became the most popular component of the program, eventually expanding to cover virtually all retired employees while providing disability, survivors' and Medicare coverage along with retirement pensions. We now use "Social Security" (and Medicare) to refer to all of these protections for the elderly.

— During World War II, veterans' groups and citizens called for the federal government to plan for the postwar care of military personnel serving in the armed forces. The GI Bill of 1944 offered a comprehensive set of disability services, employment benefits, educational loans, family allowances, and subsidized loans

for homes, businesses and farms. Half of all returning American veterans received further training or higher education through the GI Bill. And GI benefits of all kinds helped to get millions of men and their families off to a secure and prosperous start in the postwar economy.

The milestones I have just mentioned shared the following three key features — which we can see as a kind of formula for success in American democracy. I will introduce each ingredient in turn, and describe how it applies across the previously listed movements and policy milestones.

1. In Return for Service

Social policy milestones and the movements supporting them have aimed to give social benefits to large categories of citizens in return for service to the community, or else as a way to help people prepare to serve the community.

The most enduring and popularly accepted social benefits in America have not been understood either as relief for the poor or as mere individual entitlements. From public schools through Social Security, they have been morally justified as rewards (or supports) for individual service to the community. The many citizens who serve the community should not, Americans believed, be dependent on charity. The rationale of social support in return for service has been a characteristic way for Americans to combine their deep respect for individual freedom and initiative with due regard for the obligations of all members of the national community to one another and to the national good.

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Unmistakably, a rationale of return for service was invoked for justification of expansion of veterans' benefits in the wake of the Civil War and again following World War II. During the later decades of the nineteenth century, many local, state and national enactments were celebrated as rewards for those who had sacrificed to "Save the Union." In the words of the 1888 Republican Party platform, social benefits for Union veterans "should be so enlarged and extended as to provide against the possibility that any man who honorably wore the Federal uniform shall be the inmate of an almshouse, or dependent upon private charity.... [I]t would be a public scandal to do less for those whose valorous service preserved the government."

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In a slightly different twist, the GI Bill of 1944 and other benefits for soldiers returning from World War II were justified not only as a response to soldiers' sacrifice but also to ensure the future capacity of surviving veterans to contribute to society. As President Franklin Roosevelt explained, those at home "owe a special and continuing obligation to these men and women in the armed services.... Every day that the war continues interrupts the schooling and training of more men and women, and deprives them of the education and skills which they would otherwise acquire for use in later life. Not only the individual welfare of our troops, but the welfare of the Nation itself, requires that we reverse this trend.... We must replenish our supply of persons qualified to discharge the heavy responsibilities of the postwar world."

Maybe it seems obvious that benefits for military veterans and their survivors would be justified as a return for service to the nation. Less obvious, but equally true, has been the invocation of service as the rationale for other major U.S. social programs. Americans of the late twentieth century tend to think of schools as mechanisms for teaching skills and ensuring a bright economic future for individuals. But the educational reformers and local community activists who originally established America's public common schools argued for them most fervently as ways to prepare children for democratic citizenship. They believed that common schools would give all pupils the disciplined character traits necessary for virtuous civic participation as well as for responsible contributions to workplaces and families.

In the wake of the feminist movements of the 1960s and 1970s, late-twentieth-century Americans often downplay the value of domestic work and unpaid motherhood. But back in the early 1900s, when maternalist programs includ-

ing Sheppard-Towner were enacted, they were justified as a support and equitable return for the services of good mothers. Just like soldiers, reformers argued back then, mothers sacrificed for the community and the nation. In an era when childbirth often led to death, women risked their very lives to become mothers; and those who lived contributed years of effort by raising healthy and well socialized children to become the citizens and workers of tomorrow. As Mrs. G. Harris Robertson explained in a 1911 speech to the National Congress of Mothers, we "cannot afford to let a mother, one who has divided her body by creating other lives for the good of the state, one who has contributed to citizenship, be classed as a pauper, a dependent. She must be given value received by her nation, and stand as one honored."

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Today's Social Security system likewise has a profound moral underpinning in the eyes of most Americans. Of course, employees along with their employers channel regular payroll taxes into the Social Security (and Medicare) trust funds. Consequently, retired beneficiaries tend to believe that they have "earned" their pensions or medical care by virtue of financial contributions over their working lifetimes. But the exchange that Americans perceive is not just a narrowly economic swap of individual taxes for individual benefits. Rather, Americans understand Social Security and Medicare as just returns from society for the lifetimes of work they have given to sustain families, communities and the nation. Each generation is supposed to make such contributions, and then enjoy in return a decent retirement and old age. The dignity of work, even humble work for modest wages, is central here.

2. Broad Constituencies

Successful social policy milestones have built bridges between more and less privileged Americans, bringing people together as worthy beneficiaries and contributing citizens across lines of class, race and region.

Even if a U.S. social policy milestone started out small compared to what it became, it included more and less privileged Americans from the start, and was therefore not considered or labeled a "welfare policy." Public schools, for example, have always been in principle open to all children, not just the offspring of privileged families as was originally the case with schools in other nations.

Civil War benefits and the GI Bill were available to all eligible veterans and survivors of the war in question. Each of these milestone veterans' programs ended up delivering aid to millions of Americans from humble economic backgrounds, including members of racial and ethnic minorities with little political leverage at the time. Among the recipients of Civil War benefits were some 180,000 African-American Union soldiers or their survivors, including many former slaves. And the GI Bill of 1944 is credited with opening the doors of even the top American colleges and universities to thousands of young men from humble backgrounds or large families who previously would never have dreamed of such opportunities for higher education.

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Certain social policies in the era of efforts for mothers and children were restricted to the needy: mothers' pensions, for example, were supposed to aid widowed mothers who became impoverished after the death of a husband and father who was the family's breadwinner. But around 1900, virtually any American mother who lost a breadwinner husband could suddenly find herself in dire economic need. What is more, maternalist policies at the national level were universal in their intended scope; they built bridges across lines of class, race and ethnicity, and between urban and rural areas. The Children's Bureau was established in 1912 to "investigate and report... upon all matters pertaining to the welfare of children and child life among all classes of our people." Similarly, the Sheppard-Towner Act of 1921 was deliberately tailored by Children's Bureau chief Julia Lathrop to be open to all American mothers, not just the neediest. The "act is not a charity," declared an explanatory clause written during the congressional debate

The inclusive and populist thrust that made the GI Bill so helpful for millions of young men and their families came from the American Legion, a nationwide voluntary federation with clubs in every U.S. community.

on Sheppard-Towner. Julia Lathrop reasoned that "[i]f the services of the [Sheppard-Towner] bill were not open to all, the services would degenerate into poor relief."

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Social Security (including Medicare) is today's best instance of a U.S. social program with a huge cross-class constituency. True, back in 1935 the contributory retirement insurance provisions of Social Security actually left out many of America's poor, especially African-Americans, because domestic workers and agricultural laborers were initially not covered. Social Security originally covered only about a third of U.S. employees, mostly those in industrial and selected white collar jobs. By the 1950s, however, Social Security had expanded to incorporate service and agricultural employees. And crucially, from the start, more and less privileged employee groups were brought together in this system. It was not just "workingmen's insurance"; still less was it a program for the poor alone. Over time, more and more groups of employees were added, both very low-wage groups and more privileged sets of white collar employees, until Social Security became virtually universal for employed Americans.

By the 1970s, Social Security had evolved into this country's most effective program for pulling people out of poverty. This happened, interestingly enough, even though Social Security is not popularly regarded as a "poverty program." Social Security has a broad constituency crossing class lines, and its benefits are understood by Americans as honorable for all citizens to receive.

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3. Popularly Rooted Voluntary Associations

Social policy milestones have been nutured by partnerships of government and popularly rooted voluntary associations.

This final feature is, I think, especially interesting for today's child advocates and community activists to contemplate. All of the social policy milestones identified herein were nurtured (if not always originated) through cooperation between government agencies and elected politicians on the one hand, and voluntary associations on the other hand. And not just any kind of voluntary associations were involved, for I am not referring merely to non-profit agencies. The associations that have nurtured major American social programs have usually had strong roots in local communities, and have had state affiliates as well as national offices. They have been three-tiered associations, paralleling the three levels of U.S. government — local, state and federal — and spanning thousands of localities. At their base, they have involved individual citizens as members.

If we were to go back to the decades prior to the Civil War, when public schools were founded in communities across most of America outside the deep South, we would see traveling reformers, often members of regional or national associations, who linked up with leading local citizens, churches and voluntary groups. Regional networks of reformers and mobilized community volunteers worked together to found, shape and sustain schools, usually one-room schools at first, in virtually every village, town and city neighborhood. Shared ideals and models communicated by traveling reformers gave public schools a certain similarity across America, but not because of any bureaucratic impositions from above. As historians of education David Tyack and Elisabeth Hansot sum up, the "mainstream of American public schooling during most of the nineteenth century was rural, chiefly unbureaucratic in structure, exhibiting only rudimentary professionalism, and dependent on the actions of hundreds of thousands of lay promoters and school trustees."

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Civil War benefits ended up both reinforcing and being nurtured by the Grand Army of the Republic (GAR) and other voluntary associations of veterans and their

supporters. The GAR was a classic three-tiered voluntary civic association, with tens of thousands of local "posts" that met regularly, plus state and national affiliates that held big annual conventions. The GAR was open to Union veterans of all economic and ethnic backgrounds, including African-Americans (who even attended the same posts as whites in some states, such as Massachusetts). The growth of the GAR was originally encouraged by the nascent Civil War benefits legislated between the 1860s and the early 1880s. In turn, the GAR spread the word about social programs, encouraging veterans to apply. The GAR monitored services and benefits for veterans and their survivors to make sure these programs actually did what they were supposed to do. Of course the GAR pushed Congress to expand federal Civil War pensions; and GAR clout in northern congressional districts helped assure that pension generosity would be sustained, even after fiscal conservatives started demanding cut-backs in this profligate (as they saw it) form of social spending.

Very shortly, I am going to have more to say about the voluntary women's associations involved with the development of social policies for mothers and children in the early twentieth century. So let me leave this story aside right now.

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Social Security is a bit of an exception when it comes to talking about partnerships between government and locally rooted voluntary associations — and the exception is interesting, because it may help to explain why Social Security could be politically vulnerable in the near future. Back during the Great Depression, when Social Security was launched, there was a militant social movement and voluntary federation of older Americans. The Townsend Movement, founded by a retired physician in Long Beach, California, spread across the country in the early 1930s, with thousands of local clubs and dozens of state organizations. Townsend clubs demanded that Congress pass a law allocating $200 a month (a huge sum of money at that time) to every older person, provided that he or she pledged to retire and spend the money right away to stimulate economic growth and employment. This munificent plan horrified business leaders and most politicians. It certainly was not adopted; but it did help to spur Congress into creating the Social Security system of contributory retirement pensions.

The Townsend movement fell apart by the late 1940s. Today we have other seniors' organizations, above all the huge American Association of Retired Persons (AARP), with a membership of approximately 35 million Americans age 50 and older. The AARP's growth over recent decades has been encouraged by generous federal social programs like Social Security and Medicare, programs that the AARP monitors and strongly supports in Congress. The AARP, however, does not have very many of the local membership clubs that I have stressed as characteristic of the most successful U.S. voluntary associations. If you talk to people in the AARP, they will tell you they recognize this absence of local organizational roots as a vulnerability. As federal expenditures on benefits for the elderly come under greater and greater criticism, senior citizens are certainly politically aware citizens, because the newsletters and magazines of the AARP play a role in keeping elderly voters up to date on developments in Washington, D.C. But local clubs could do much more to promote discussion among the elderly, and between them and other citizens in communities and legislative districts across America. And if the AARP were based in local membership groups, rather than reaching individuals mainly via mailings, the AARP leadership would have an easier time understanding the needs and values of its grass-roots constituents.

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Let's glance, finally, at the crucial role played by a huge voluntary association, the American Legion, in the story of the GI Bill of 1944. We should realize that the GI Bill became an extraordinary U.S. social program. Because so many young men fought in, and returned from, World War II, the GI Bill developed into a major family policy. It helped young adults get a good start in the labor market, thereby encouraging earlier marriages (reversing the trend of the 1930s) and it enabled many young families to buy homes.

How did this happen — given that, prior to World War II, veterans' benefits usually did not become generous until the cohort of warriors in question became elderly and disabled? Well, the GI Bill was not simply a New Deal priority, for President Franklin Roosevelt and his policy planners were more interested in building a general welfare state open to veterans and non-veterans alike. Conservatives in Congress liked military veterans, but did not want to subsidize

millions of men just so they could go to college and study with what one southern congressman colorfully called "red sociology professors." Nor did the university leaders of the day necessarily want millions of returning soldiers to descend upon their campuses, turning them into what the president of the University of Chicago feared would be "hobo jungles."

Left to their own devices, the elites of the 1940s — congressmen, New Dealers and university leaders — would have enacted a much more modest GI Bill offering four years of educational benefits only to a minority of veterans who could prove their skills in advance. The inclusive and populist thrust that made the GI Bill so helpful for millions of young men and their families came from the American Legion, a nationwide voluntary federation with clubs in every U.S. community. Because the Legion was a three-tiered federation with strong local roots, it could pressure Congress very effectively as the GI Bill was being devised. The Legion drafted a bill with generous benefits of all kinds, open to all returning soldiers; and it intervened to overcome roadblocks as the bill made its way through Congress. In the end, millions of World War II veterans benefited from the Legion's efforts; and in turn the Legion swelled after the mid-1940s, as young veterans joined in huge numbers. The Legion continued to work closely with the Veterans' Administration, with state governments, and with local communities on the administration of social programs for veterans, as well as on broader civic projects.

The forerunner of the PTA, the National Congress was a federation of national, state and local clubs launched in 1897 for the purpose of carrying "mother-love and mother-thought into all that concerns or touches childhood in Home, School, Church, State or Legislation."

Milestone U.S. social policies, in sum, have not only been justified as rewards for service and made available to broad categories of Americans; they have also been nurtured by vibrant voluntary associations that have built bridges between state and national governments and millions of average citizens.

From A Mother's Movement to Child Advocacy Today

How did modern U.S. child advocacy get to where it is today, and what possibilities have been lost along the way? I would like to go back to the movement I skipped over in the last part of the previous section, the crusade for mothers' and children's programs that flourished back in the early 1900s. I trust that male readers will not be upset if I point out that modern U.S. child advocacy was born as a widespread citizens' movement through the efforts of female reformist professionals and grass-roots women's clubs.

Early U.S. social policies for mothers and children were championed by nationwide networks of women's voluntary associations, which also got involved in carrying through the programs once legislation was passed. Launched in the 1870s, the Women's Christian Temperance Union had some 7,000 locals in every U.S. state by the turn of the century; it became a pioneer in advocating not just laws prohibiting the sale of liquor but also many governmental and volunteer programs to aid mothers and children. The General Federation of Women's Clubs was founded as a national organization in 1890, and by 1912 it boasted more than a million members spread across thousands of towns and cities in all 50 states and territories. Federation groups agitated for the creation of the Children's Bureau and the Sheppard-Towner program, and they pressured dozens of state legislatures to pass protective labor laws for women, compulsory schooling laws, mothers' pensions, and many other measures for families and communities.

The National Congress of Mothers was also a leading force in nationwide campaigns for the Children's Bureau and mothers' pensions. The forerunner of the PTA, the National Congress was a federation of national, state and local clubs launched in 1897 for the purpose of carrying "mother-love and mother-thought into all that concerns or touches childhood in Home, School, Church, State or Legislation." Groups in the Mothers' Congress also joined local

women's clubs of the General Federation in implementing programs of the Children's Bureau, including efforts to collect statistics on infant mortality during the 1910s and to set up local health clinics under Sheppard-Towner in the 1920s. The entire "maternalist era" in U.S. social policy making — as I have called this period of programs for mothers and children — was marked by a remarkable partnership between female professionals working in the Children's Bureau in Washington, D.C. and voluntary associations of married ladies who were civicly active in every community.

The most interesting thing about these women's associations active early in our century is that they were membership-based but not just local. Local groups, and indeed the different federations themselves, were connected to one another in a remarkable communication network with nationwide reach. Consequently, the women of these associations had the ability to set statewide and nationwide agendas of public debate. They mounted vivid moral arguments about the needs of mothers and children and the stake the nation had in helping them. By creating a sense of common agenda, and by persuading communities and states that they should compete with one another to pass good social programs, the women's federations countered — at least for a time — the usual tendency of state and local governments to engage in a "race to the bottom," that is, to compete with one another to do less and less in the area of social programs. The women's groups of the early twentieth century could convincingly claim to speak to and for many local communities at once, and this made their messages convincing to politicians.

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The Mothers' Congress and the General Federation worked closely with nationally prominent professional women based in staff-led advocacy organizations. The National Consumers' League led by Florence Kelley is a good example, and so are many of the social settlement houses that existed in U.S. cities, each of which was staffed by reformist professionals and social workers who wanted governments to support new social programs for vulnerable groups. I find it very interesting, though, that the women professionals who created and used staff-led advocacy groups in the 1910s understood that they should not just talk with one another, and not just pressure the government in Washington, D.C. or state capitols. (The early women reformist professionals apparently understood this better than did their male counterparts.) Women professionals who advocated for mothers and children through private groups such as the Consumers' League and the social settlement houses, and also those who staffed the federal Children's Bureau, made it a point to participate actively in the nationwide women's federations. They attended national, state and local meetings with women who were married homemakers. And they sought to involve local groups of married women in civic projects and in crusades for new social legislation. In short, Progressive Era reformers like Jane Addams and Julia Lathrop did not simply talk to their fellow professionals in Washington, D.C. or New York City. They were also at work in these grass-roots federations, part of a national communication network that could set priorities for simultaneous action.

By creating a sense of common agenda, and by persuading communities and states that they should compete with one another to pass good social programs, the women's federations countered — at least for a time — the usual tendency of state and local governments to engage in a "race to the bottom," that is, to compete with one another to do less and less in the area of social programs.

Sadly, the remarkable alliance of female professional advocates and grass-roots women's federations that achieved so many social policy milestones in the early 1900s ceased to be a major force after the mid-1920s. After American women won the right to vote with the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920, it only took a few years for politicians to realize that women would not vote as a bloc. Conservatives opposed to social programs subsequently began attacking the women's federations, accusing them of having "communist" tendencies because of their support for social programs. Simultaneously, as government programs for mothers and children were established, there was a tendency for some of them to become bureaucratized and dominated by professionals. The leaders of women's voluntary federations were tempted to deal only with social service professionals and with Con-

gress, without turning to grass-roots mobilization as much as they had in the 1910s.

After the mid-1920s, the federations retreated from social and political activism. The National Congress of Mothers became like the present-day Parent-Teacher Association (PTA), devoting its energies to working with local school boards and no longer seeking to carry "mother thought" into all spheres of life and legislation. Many of the groups making up the General Federation of Women's Clubs turned away from broad civic concerns toward purely literary and cultural activities. The grand era of married women's political activism in U.S. democracy came to an end, or at least a pause.

With the coming of the New Deal and its Social Security legislation, some of the particular social policies of the mothers' and children's era were revived. But these programs got less federal funding than the major New Deal initiatives for unemployed workers and the elderly. And women reformers, let alone women's clubs, did not regain the moral and political leadership role they earlier enjoyed. Instead, programs for mothers and children that were partially subsidized by the federal government tended to get defined as poverty programs within the New Deal framework. This is certainly what happened both with a new version of the Sheppard-Towner public health program and with Aid to Dependent Children (ADC), which was a federally subsidized version of the mothers' pension laws passed at the urging of the vast women's federations during the 1910s. By the time ADC was set up in the 1930s as a federal-state public assistance program, it was no longer understood as a way to honor the services of mothers to the nation. Far from it! ADC was seen as a welfare program of last resort for the very poor.

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Between the early twentieth century and the era of the New Deal, a series of changes in U.S. society and politics undercut civic partnerships between government and women's voluntary associations. Some policy milestones originally achieved through such partnerships were abandoned. Others evolved into welfare programs for the poor, and lost their rationale as compensation for the service of mothers to the community. When the next great phase of U.S. social policy expansion occurred, during the War on Poverty and the Great Society, there was not much of a constituency for broad family programs in America. The new energies released by the Civil Rights movement and the liberal upsurge of the mid-1960s got channeled into the further expansion of existing federal welfare benefits, and into the creation of new efforts to combat poverty. Unfortunately, however, poverty programs do not benefit or inspire broad constituencies; and they are not justified as offering benefits to citizens who have served the community.

Because of this history, when many Americans today hear advocates talk about programs to help children, they think they are hearing about proposals to spend more on welfare programs for only the poor. For some Americans that is a morally appealing idea, because they believe that the privileged should help the needy. Most Americans, however, are skeptical about poverty programs because their benefits are not directly tied to contributions. In the eyes of such skeptics, poverty programs appear to use taxes collected from "working Americans" to give benefits to barely deserving people who have not earned them.

The contemporary child advocacy movement finds itself limited by negative perceptions of anti-poverty policy in general. And, in truth, modern child advocates often are professional social-service providers who are trying to expand funding and staffing for existing federal, state or local efforts to help the poor. The agenda of the Children's Defense Fund, for example, has been perceived as advocating the extension of Great Society-type anti-poverty programs during Democratic administrations, and fighting to defend such programs during periods of Republican or conservative ascendancy.

I find it very interesting, though, that the women professionals who created and used staff-led advocacy groups in the 1910s understood that they should not just talk with one another, and not just pressure the government in Washington, D.C. or state capitols.

What is missing is any sort of broad, popularly rooted effort of the sort that the nationwide women's associations of the early twentieth century were able to mobilize. Child advocates find themselves relegated to lobbying in Congress while writing detailed informational reports and trying to attract media attention. All of these were tactics that the early twentieth-century women's movement also used. But, in addition, that movement activated community groups across the entire nation and plausibly claimed to speak for the well-being of all American families, not only the poor.

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A final historical point needs to be made. During the same period when movements for women's and children's programs were narrowing into efforts led by professional advocates on behalf of the poor, the U.S. developed a generationally lopsided system of national social provision. Right after World War II, social policies did a fair amount to help both older and younger Americans: Social Security helped retired employees and their families, while the GI Bill delivered loans and benefits to many young American families. But by the 1970s, the GI Bill was fading away as cohorts of veterans shrank or got older. Meanwhile, Social Security became more generous, with Medicare being added in 1965. Leaving aside means-tested poverty programs, which delivered at best modest aid to some very poor families headed by mothers, by the 1970s little remained in U.S. social provision benefiting young families. The elderly benefited from generous, honorable, universal social insurance programs, but working-age adults and their children had little stake in federal social programs, except as taxpayers.

This context of generational imbalance in U.S. social provision is important for today's child welfare advocates to understand, because it heightens the political tensions surrounding poverty programs. In a period of federal budget stringency, programs for the poor, including poor children, are more likely than ever to be resented by average working families. When child welfare advocates call for America to do more for "our children," working-age adults with modest incomes might respond positively if they thought it would include them and their children. But they don't think so. If they hear what these children's advocacy groups have to say at all, average Americans may perceive yet another call to tax "working Americans" — that is, them — to pay for more spending on the very poor.

Given the national drive to cut federal expenditures, average Americans suspect that any new or expanded social program for the poor would have to come out of public moneys otherwise devoted to Medicare and Social Security, programs which at least benefit their parents and grandparents. In the eyes of many working adults of modest means, schemes to put more into anti-poverty programs and less into Social Security and Medicare violate the fundamental normative rule of good U.S. social policy — that the people who benefit should also be the people who serve or contribute.

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We Americans now talk about social policy as if it consists only of "welfare" on the one hand and "Social Security and Medicare" on the other hand. The social insurance programs for the elderly are clearly the broadest programs, with positive imagery and strong political constituencies cutting across class lines, while welfare programs often seem to be championed only by social service professionals and a few national advocacy groups without strong roots in local communities.

Children's advocates find themselves identified by the media and the American public with the welfare policies and the anti-poverty advocates. Implicitly, then, advocacy for children can be seen as a threat to the only remaining broadly popular parts of U.S. social provision, Social Security and Medicare. In the 1990s, advocacy for children is unfortunately not identified with social policy achievements or goals that enjoy broad constituencies and are justified as rewards for service.

Inspiration for the Future: Parents First

What can we learn from the past about challenges and opportunities for the future? This is a pressing question, because the current situation is full of dire challenges for anti-poverty warriors and advocates for child welfare in America. Politicians and interest groups aiming to cut government programs are appealing to voters with proposals for big tax cuts, taking advantage of the fact that many working-age Americans see themselves as payers of taxes and not (until they retire) as beneficiaries of broad social programs. In the past few years, wholesale political assaults have been successfully waged on federal spending for welfare and other means-tested programs for the poor. The current temptation for child advocates is to move into a purely defensive mode, trying to persuade state and local governments to take up the slack as federal funding is cut.

The desire to defend existing programs and services is understandable, because many poor families and children really are going to suffer from the current restructuring and cut-backs. But a purely defensive posture is not good enough. Child advocates today must also look to the future. We must figure out a way to build a broad social movement with strong popular roots in communities — and legislative districts — all across America.

Is there a way for child advocates today to redefine policy goals and build constituencies reminiscent of the broad women's movement on behalf of social policies for mothers and children that flourished in the early twentieth century? We should first consider all the ways in which the situation has fundamentally changed. Obviously, the role of women is now very different from what it was then. In the early 1900s, "mothers and children" were routinely discussed in one phrase. Many Americans presumed that their interests were virtually identical. But now, in the aftermath of feminist movements, few Americans would presume that. The advantage a women's movement had back in the early 1900s, however, was that a crusade to help children could be portrayed simultaneously as a movement to benefit mothers. An adult constituency was automatically invoked — including all mothers, potential mothers, past mothers, and other Americans who cared about motherhood — and who would say they didn't? Today, child advocates in the United States do not automatically have a constituency of adult citizens to identify with their efforts, or to participate in them.

The adult constituency of early twentieth-century women's efforts was, as it happened, a very resourceful one. Turn-of-the-century American women were highly educated compared to their counterparts in other nations. Besides, as homemakers who were not in the paid labor force, upper and middle-class women often had some time on their hands. They could actually do the work of civic engagement. The women who conducted the social policy campaigns sponsored by the General Federation of Women's Clubs and the National Congress of Mothers were, for the most part, full-time homemakers — or else unmarried schoolteachers — scattered across every local community in the country. In the era before the Xerox machine, these women were uniquely able to write millions of letters, hold meetings, conduct petition drives, and keep up unremitting pressure on community leaders and elected legislators.

A citizens' movement -- of, as well as for, parents -- is the best route toward effective advocacy for children in the United States today

Consider the contrasting conditions that any new civic movement will have to take into account today. Most adult Americans are likely to be in the paid labor force, at least part- time. Paid work, domestic work and childbearing are shared by both genders to a historically unprecedented degree. And men and women do not have completely separate spheres, so the energy for grass-roots activism will have to come from everyone, not just from female homemakers. How can a broadened movement on behalf of all of America's children work with, and around, these realities? Here are some suggestions.

Instead of talking about mothers as the ones who serve the community, why not feature parents — and indeed all citizens who support the efforts of parents — as worthy Americans who

are doing things vital for the community and the nation? We can argue that all parents deserve respect, public benefits, and societal support and encouragement. Without their responsible efforts to combine paid work and the nurturance of children, the future of America would be in jeopardy. Instead of talking just about children as the objects of our concern, let's talk about creating a parent-friendly society. Let's strive to make parents — and all Americans who care about parents — the direct constituents and agents of much of what we try to do in communities and through government.

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You may think that talking about parents as people who serve the nation by doing their job well is rather trivial. But I think this formulation has a real cutting edge. Although Americans today engage in a lot of rhetoric about families and children, our economy and political arrangements are making it harder and harder for parents to do their jobs effectively. If a family of modest (let alone impoverished) economic means needs two or three jobs to survive, then how will the father and mother (assuming there are two parents involved) find the time and energy to be with their children and connect with other parents in the community? If the jobs that are available come without basic social supports like health insurance for the entire family, paid family leave, or flex-time possibilities, how can parents be expected to juggle work and child nurturance in a sustainable way? If local institutions such as schools and playgrounds are not safe, or do not operate on schedules that complement parental work commitments, how can children be protected and continuously supervised?

These are the kinds of questions that a "Parents First" approach would lead us to ask. Many American adults would find these questions very relevant to problems they face on a day-to-day basis. The poor would not be left out, because they deal with the same issues, only more so. But there would be a basis for a broad movement appealing to virtually all American parents — and to all citizens who want to support parents.

To create a parent-friendly society, all employers will have to be required to play by rules that allow employees to raise families and connect to their communities. Politicians of both parties can be asked to work toward conditions that make it possible for parents to do their job — a job in which the whole country has a vital stake. The theme of "Parents First" can be invoked to set standards for partnerships between employers and employees, between schools and families, and between governments and families.

Some people may object to a new movement emphasizing the value of parental work in American society. Such a theme, they may argue, could be interpreted in a divisive way. It could be read as implying just two-parent families, thus further stigmatizing mother-led families. Or it could be discriminatory against non-biological caregivers, including (for example) homosexuals who want to adopt children. Some people will think that every detail of what is meant, or not meant, by a "Parents First" approach would have to be worked out in advance. I strongly disagree with that view. Let the theme mean different things to different groups. It is potentially a very broad rubric. All that should be necessary is a belief, likely to be shared by most Americans, that the work of parents and supportive communities in nurturing children constitutes vital service to the nation.

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Now, of course, "Parents First" has to be more than a theme. It is important for a social movement to have a clear, broadly understandable and appealing message. A theme and supportive stories have to exist so that they can be communicated through the media. All of the big social movements and voluntary associations that were successful in influencing U.S. social policy met this criterion: They were very effective at working with the media of their day. The founders of the National Congress of Mothers, for example, were friendly with the family that ran the Hearst newspaper chain; and all the women's groups of the early 1900s regularly got their campaigns written up in community newspapers and national women's magazines like Good Housekeeping and the Ladies Home Journal. The American Legion, to give another example, was all over the media — as you can see for yourself if you look at old issues of Life Magazine, The Reader's Digest, and so forth. So, getting a "Parents First" message out through the media would be very important today.

One final ingredient needs to come into play if a successful new civic movement for parents is to be built. A theme and a national media presence are important, but they are not enough. In addition, there must be an organi-

zational network that is simultaneously operative across three levels:

(1) nationally, both in the media and in regular national meetings in which people talk and set priorities;

(2) at the state level in all fifty states, where efforts can be mounted to influence state legislation and appeal to public concerns about issues in that region; and

(3) most important of all — in every local community, not just big cities, where efforts should include not only civic leaders and social service providers but also regular gatherings of parents, grandparents and other citizens concerned with the community's care of all its children.

Including millions of parents (current, prospective and former) as members of the new movement is vital, for we cannot think of our civic effort primarily as professionally led advocacy. More must be involved than staff-led efforts to lobby legislators or disseminate reports to the media. When we look back at the successful work of Jane Addams and Julia Lathrop, we see that, of course, these reformist professionals had facts and policy ideas that they wanted to communicate to ordinary citizens. But they communicated their ideas through participation in three-tiered women's associations, meeting with members in local clubs and state conventions as well as at annual or biannual national conventions. Consequently, reform leaders like Addams and Lathrop got a chance to hear concerns from the grass-roots at the same time as they shared their policy analyses with many fellow citizens. Sometimes such information allowed early leaders like Addams and Lathrop to change their priorities, selecting themes and policy campaigns that would make more sense in communities across America.

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Today, as the United States approaches the turn of another century, it has become vitally important for child advocates to once again find ways to participate as partners in a broad civic movement. We American child advocates should knit groups together into a movement that spans all three levels of society and governance in America, stretching from local communities through the states to the national level. We have to be sure that the base of this movement consists of groups of parents and other concerned citizens who have regular chances to meet and talk with one another about what it will take to make America more"parent friendly."

If a new nationwide network of groups can come together into such a "Parents' First" movement, then child welfare advocates who work primarily in state capitals or in Washington, D.C., will have millions of citizen partners in the endeavor to improve life for all of America's children. At the same time, millions of Americans who are endeavoring to combine work and responsible parenthood will gain a direct voice in debates about the future shape of our nation's social policies. A citizens' movement — of, as well as for, parents — is the best route toward effective advocacy for children in the United States today.

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About the Sponsors

About The Coalition of Community Foundations for Youth

The Coalition's mission is to strengthen the capability of community foundations and their partners to raise community awareness of children's needs and to develop greater advocacy on their behalf. Its activities increase the effectiveness of existing voices, while adding new ones such as business, neighborhood leaders, and the general public.

The Coalition of Community Foundations for Youth has local partnerships in communities across the nation. The Coalition offers technical assistance and capacity-building resources to its members to help these local partnerships move along a continuum from conceptualization to implementation of a community action plan to realization of improved conditions for children and their families.

About The Johnson Foundation

The Johnson Foundation is an exempt operating foundation that uses its resources to support action-oriented conferences on issues of public interest at Wingspread, a Frank Lloyd Wright-designed facility. The Foundation's mission is to help ideas have consequences on behalf of the common good, in the case of the conference reported on in this document, on behalf of children and youth.

About The Children's Partnership

The Children's Partnership is a national nonprofit, nonpartisan organization whose mission is to inform leaders and the public about the needs of America's 70 million children, and to engage them in ways that benefit children. The Partnership undertakes research and policy analysis, publishes reports and materials, develops multimedia campaigns, and forges new alliances among parents, policymakers, and the private sector to achieve tangible gains for children.

The Partnership focuses particular attention on identifying new trends and emerging issues that will affect large numbers of America's children and on providing early analysis and strategies for action. In this way, it functions as a research and development (R&D) arm for the children's movement.

The Children's Partnership's work is supported by private foundations, corporations, the entertainment community, interested individuals, and others with whom it partners on projects, including the AT&T Foundation, the California Community Foundation, The California Wellness Foundation, the Carnegie Corporation of New York, the Joseph Drown Foundation, the Favrot Fund, Foundation for Child Development, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, The Mattel Foundation, The David and Lucile Packard Foundation, Pacific Bell, and the Streisand Foundation. The Children's Partnership has offices in Los Angeles and Washington, D.C.

Current Programs

America's Children and the Information Superhighway: A multi-year project exploring how the information superhighway and related technologies can best serve children.

Next Generation Strategies to Build the American Children's Movement: A multi-year project designed to provide community leaders, activists, foundations, and concerned citizens with innovative tools to advance and sustain a children's agenda.

Children and Health Care Reform: A multi-year project to monitor changes in health policy and identify openings to improve health insurance coverage of and services for children.

Publishing Ventures

Next Generation Reports: A national information service for national and local community leaders which provides useful information and new tools in a manner designed to involve broader constituencies in decisionmaking for children and families.

Strategic Audits: The Children's Partnership researches and writes strategic analyses on selected issues. For example, the Partnership has published "Community Organizing and Advancing a Children's Agenda," in conjunction with The Coalition of Community Foundations for Youth, and "America's Uninsured Children in the Changing Policy Environment: A Strategic Audit of Activities and Opportunities."

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