
TALKING ABOUT CHILDREN:

A Focus Group Report

**Prepared by Public Agenda for
The Advertising Council**
Commitment 2000: Raising a Better Tomorrow

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PUBLIC AGENDA

Founded in 1975 by public opinion analyst Daniel Yankelovich and former Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, Public Agenda works to help citizens better understand critical policy issues and to help the nation's leaders better understand the public's point of view. Public Agenda's research on how citizens think about policy forms the basis for its extensive citizen education work. Its citizen education materials -- used by the National Issues Forums and media outlets across the country -- have won praise for their credibility and fairness from elected officials from both political parties and from experts and decision-makers across the political spectrum.

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SECTION ONE: GOALS AND METHODOLOGY

Americans generally express great concern about the nation's children. Public Agenda studies of attitudes toward education, for example, document high levels of support for providing a high quality of education to children. People express deep concern about the problems of education both in their own and in other communities, and they also express concern about the children of other races. The support is equally broad across all demographic categories.

Yet, as a society, Americans tolerate a climate that is increasingly hostile to children's well-being. Children are experiencing declining amounts of time with parents and inadequate and often underfunded education. The indicators of children's well-being are shocking: large numbers of American children are living in poverty; many have inadequate prenatal care and suffer low birth-weight; and there are high levels of infant mortality. Despite these problems, there is strong political support for cutbacks in poverty programs for children.

What accounts for this gap between the public's values and the realities they are willing to live with? Is there anything that can or should be done to close this gap? There are at least two common responses to this problem:

- Some observers have suggested that people do not understand how many children are at risk, and believe that if people had a clearer picture of the situation they would be more motivated to action.
- Others hypothesize that the public's commitment to pro-child values is "a mile wide and an inch deep," such that while people say they care about children they are unwilling to stand behind their commitments.

Our research suggests that neither of the two explanations posed above is completely on target. Our findings indicate that people are sincerely concerned about children and that they think children are very much at risk. However, they define the problems that children face in a way that differs from the approach taken by many experts and children's advocates. The public's definition of the problem -- which focuses on broad moral and economic problems -- makes them feel that there is very little that can be done to help children. Their tolerance for the problems of children stems, in other words, not from indifference but from a feeling of helplessness.

Methodology

The Public Agenda conducted six focus groups in August and September of 1995. The groups involved in-depth questioning of cross-sections of residents in six cities. Participants for the focus groups were recruited by independent consumer research organizations in each city. All groups were recruited according to quotas based on gender, education, income, race and age. The respondents were also screened for whether or not they had children. By design, one of the groups consisted entirely of people over sixty-five and the rest of the groups had only people under sixty-five. We also chose to have one group with no minority group respondents and another group with no respondents with children. The groups were moderated by John Immerwahr.

The locations of the groups were:

Danbury, Connecticut, August 10
Portland, Maine, August 15
St. Louis, Missouri, August 21
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, August 24, all respondents over 65
Minneapolis, Minnesota, August 30, no respondents with children
Fort Lee, New Jersey, September 5, no minority respondents

As with all focus group reports, the following should be viewed as preliminary hypotheses rather than definitive findings.

SECTION TWO: GENERAL ATTITUDES TOWARD CHILDREN

Pessimism About the Future

We first asked our respondents to articulate their thoughts about the future of this country. People brought up many topics ranging from thoughts about evolving technologies to concerns about the environment, but over and over again the respondents evinced deep levels of pessimism about the future of the country. They based their pessimism on two main sources:

1. Economic distress. There is a widely shared perception that good jobs are increasingly unavailable and that families are severely pressed financially, with both parents forced to work, and with many people working two jobs. Some representative quotes:

It's tougher for a tradesman to get a job, it's easier for an employer to hire two part-time people. And if you don't keep up, they'll hire kids out of college who are cheaper.
Man, Minneapolis

In the last ten years, there's been a lot of restructuring of the corporate environment, and that means a lot of jobs have been lost. It's tough for people 35 to 40 to get back into the structure.
Man, St. Louis

I think a lot about jobs and the economy; I just don't know how people are going to continue to make it the way things are going.
Man, Portland

2. Moral decay. People also perceive a wide-ranging decay in the moral fabric of the country, characterized by irresponsibility, lack of concern for self or others, greed and materialism. Crime, drugs, teenage pregnancy and political corruption, are some of the most frequently cited symptoms of this decay. Indeed, many respondents see the country's economic problems as being caused by the moral failings of business leaders who maximize their profits by policies such as downsizing and off-shore production.

Drive down route 100, and people will just cut you off, they won't hesitate to step on your face. And it's the same in business. People want to get ahead, and they'll just step on your face.
Man, Minneapolis,

There's a moral and spiritual decay in this country, which leads to violence. There's violence everywhere, and a lack of respect for the authorities.

Man, Minneapolis

Everyone in this country is greedy. Everyone wants to outdo everyone else. They end up making more money, but they have less time to enjoy it.

Older Man, Philadelphia

The Impact on Children

There is no question that the respondents feel that both of these trends have impacted severely and tragically on the nation's children.

1. The economic impact. When people think in economic terms (a view taken most vociferously by parents talking about their own families) they stress that working people can no longer survive with one parent working. Usually both parents must work (whether they are married or not) and often the parents must work at more than one job. This means that younger kids are in day-care and older children left unsupervised. The result is that children just don't receive the time and attention their parents would like to give them: .

I go visit my nephew at school, and all these little kids cling to me because they're starved for affection, because they all come from divorced families and both their parents have to work.

Woman, St. Louis

A lot of the problem is that the wives have to go to work. It's hard for one person to keep up a home. This is why you've got crime, why teenagers are running wild -- there's nobody at home.

Older Woman, Philadelphia

2. The moral impact. Another view is that children are suffering because of moral failures in the society in general and on the part of their parents in particular. This view is held most emphatically by older people and by people without children, but is shared by many parents as well. This vision assumes that middle-class parents are caught up in greed and consumerism; as a result they are so busy working to buy things that they no longer have time for their own children. In the absence of parental input, the children are raised on TV images of sex, violence and consumerism. The children are unloved and undisciplined, spoiled with too many consumer goods but lacking traditional discipline and family values. The situation is further exacerbated by an

out-of-control legal system that makes it impossible for parents to discipline their own children with a smack or for another adult to comfort a child with a hug.

I go to visit my nieces, and each one of them has a TV in her own room. When I was a kid, if we watched TV we all watched together, and we watched whatever our father wanted to watch. It used to be that kids got hand-me-downs, now everybody gets a new bike.

Man, Portland

Little kids aren't kids anymore. There's all the pressure to keep up, to wear designer jeans.

Woman, Minneapolis

Kids have no respect for their parents. You can't discipline them now, they'll turn you in. The law has to change, so that parents can discipline their children.

Woman, Danbury

It's difficult to be a kid, maybe not to have a mother and father, and maybe to have stepparents. It was easier for me; I always had one set of rules, and society had the same rules my parents did. Now it's different, different kids are brought up according to different rules.

Man, Fort Lee

Welfare parents are perceived as especially irresponsible; they have babies they cannot afford and do not know how to raise, fathers are not part of the picture, and the infants often have prenatal drug or alcohol exposure.

How Serious Is the Problem for Children?

Although every one agrees that children are victims of these trends, young people are by no means perceived as the only victims. In several of the groups we asked the respondents to think about five different segments of the population -- older people, middle-aged people, young adults, students in school and college, and little children -- and to tell us which group seemed to be having the greatest problems. Many people mentioned older people, while others discussed the problems of middle-aged people who are hit by downsizing and economic dislocation, others stressed young adults looking for work. A few people talked about crime and drugs in the high schools, but virtually none of our respondents spontaneously identified little children as victims. One respondent tried to sum up the situation as inclusively as possible, but made no reference to children at all:

When you are a young adult, it is hard to get a job, but you can do it. When you are middle-aged, you are in a very fragile position -- if you get fired you're dogmeat. When you are older you are OK as long as your health is all right, but once you get sick, you're in trouble.

Man, St. Louis

A Different Definition of the Problem

There is a conventional wisdom among many of those who are most professionally involved in the welfare of children. They start with the observation that a shocking number of America's children live in poverty (over 25 percent), and then point out that America is at the bottom of the list of industrialized countries in many areas, such as prenatal-care, adequate day-care or immunizations for children. These professionals often point to the better track record of other industrialized countries in these areas, which they attribute to the existence of child-assistance programs, family leave, home visits by nurses, and universal health-care for children.

Although our respondents do express a concern about children, no one spontaneously defines the problem as the child advocates do. What concerns them most are quite different problems: crime, sex and drugs in the school, consumerist values in the society and lack of discipline in the home. As one woman said:

When I send my kid off to school, I feel like I am sending her off to war. I have to talk to her about crime, about drugs, about sex, tell her to stay out of the school bathrooms unless she is with a group of her friends. I don't think there is much time left for algebra; sometimes it feels like the only math they learn is 911.

Woman, Fort Lee.

How Do People React to the Statistics?

Since no one mentioned problems of poverty and children's health spontaneously, we presented our respondents with several statistics about children in poverty, low-birth weights and inadequate health-care. We asked people whether they believed the statistics and, if so, how they explained them.

In each group we found much the same pattern. Initially some people believed the statistics and some people questioned whether they could possibly be true. Of those who did believe them, some referred to the economic conditions of families with children. A woman in Fort Lee explained these statistics in terms of the number of people who don't have health insurance:

Those numbers sound right to me because there are so many people without insurance. If you watch what's happening to people without insurance you see that there aren't enough doctors. These people wait on line for days and days, and by the time they get to see a doctor, they could be dead.

Others explained the statistics by pointing out that these things must be true mostly for inner city children, and they saw the cause as lack of parental responsibility and motivation. Another woman in Fort Lee put it this way:

I know for a fact that there are Baby Keepwell stations all over the place, but if you have a fifteen year old girl who's just had a baby, and her boyfriend wants her to go down to the shore, or do drugs, she thinks, well, I can get the shots for the baby tomorrow. The shots are there, and the shots are free, but getting the kids who are having babies to put the baby's problems before their own is very difficult.

Although people initially approached this problem from different perspectives, the more they talked the more they tended to believe the statistics and agree that the real explanation was the irresponsibility, low motivation and lack of education of many parents (especially in the inner cities). The more people talk, the more they become convinced that the problem is an inability to take advantage of the existing services, rather than a lack of services. (We saw no difference on this question between African-American and white respondents.)

* * *

People do feel, in other words, that children are at risk. But they by no means identify children as the most severely troubled group in America. If anything, they tend to think of children's problems as symptomatic of the problems of their parents or of the society as a whole.

SECTION THREE: OBSTACLES

The views we have just reported help us understand why Americans may be less than enthusiastic about many proposals to improve the lives of the nation's children. The problem is not that they do not care about children, and not that they don't believe that children are having a hard time. The problem is that there are factors which prevent them from translating their beliefs and concerns into support for action to address the problem. In this section we outline some of those obstacles.

Obstacle 1: A Problem with No Easy Solutions

One of the most severe obstacles is that people think the obvious solutions to the problems affecting children are so global in nature as to be completely unrealistic. Americans are a pragmatic people, and they focus most clearly on problems that have a clear solution. If a problem seems unsolvable, people tend to focus on something else regardless of how serious the problem is. The things that people believe would most help children are so unworkable that they tend to withdraw from thinking about the problem.

Our respondents had a very clear idea about a solution to the economic problems that impact on children. What families need, they feel, is low-cost safe housing, affordable medical coverage and college tuitions and, above all else, high-wage jobs that allow middle-class families to support themselves on the income of a single job. The problem is that no one thinks that such jobs will be widely available anytime soon. Indeed, many people feel these conditions slipping even further out of the grasp of most people. As one Portland man said:

*I see a growing divide between the haves and the have-nots,
with a few people getting very wealthy and a lot of us doing
worse every year.*

But the problem does not look any more solvable when people define it in a moral way. In their view what would be required is a major shift in social values, so that large numbers of people reject selfishness and consumerism in favor of traditional "family values." We found nearly universal consensus, however, that "the toothpaste is out of the tube" and that we cannot go back to the old values, no matter how desirable they were. In brief: if the problem is defined as a shift to values of selfishness and consumerism, there is no practical solution.

The two most common ways of defining the problem, then, suggest large-scale economic or cultural solutions which seem to most people to be completely unobtainable. This rapidly blocks all productive thinking about the problem.

Obstacle 2: A Preoccupation with Irresponsible Parents

Our respondents are deeply disturbed by the perception that American society has developed a system where generations of people live on welfare. They feel that we have created a system that condemns many people to a cycle where children are born (often with prenatal drug and alcohol exposure) to uneducated, unemployed, and unmarried teenage mothers. The daughters grow up to have welfare babies of their own, while the boys, with depressing frequency, go on to a life of unemployment, drugs, gangs, violence, prison. They are convinced that this system destroys the life of many people (especially in the inner city), creates high taxes which drag the economy down and creates an epidemic of crime so that no one feels safe anymore.

Our respondents are also convinced that our existing system of welfare actually makes the problem worse by encouraging welfare mothers to have children. In effect, we have made it too easy for people on welfare to have children they are not ready to provide for.

Proposals to limit welfare to a few years or to refuse to give increased welfare support to women who have more children while on welfare are enormously popular. They were spontaneously mentioned in every group and strongly supported by many of our respondents.

People recognize that these policies will be hard on children, but they are attracted to them out of desperation. They feel that the situation is so out of hand that only drastic policies will be effective, even if the children are innocent victims. Here is a small sample of what people said about this topic:

The big plan being kicked around now by the Republicans is that we're going to force people off welfare. If people are old enough to have children, they should be old enough to get off the boat or swim to the shore. The kids are going to be the losers, but it's got to stop somewhere. It's not like they aren't forewarned.

Man, St. Louis

If a girl knows that she won't get any money, won't that encourage her not to have another child?

Older Woman, Philadelphia.

If you can just lay down and get welfare, you're going to have a whole slew of kids. Some of them live better than we do.

Woman, St. Louis

It's a question of responsibility. I don't have a lot of sympathy for people who wantonly reproduce themselves and then expect someone to bail them out.

Man, Minneapolis

Many of our respondents feel that irresponsible parents are using their own children as hostages to obtain even more money from society. The situation has become so bad, however, that many people are ready to sacrifice some hostages in order to prevent still more from being created in the future.

When thinking about the problems of the underclass, then, the respondents report a cruel dilemma. They feel that they are forced to choose between helping children and fighting welfare dependency. They are so frustrated and angry about welfare that they are reluctantly willing to turn children into pawns in a war against a system that is destroying the country. No one wants to see children suffer, but people see no other way to solve the problem.

Obstacle 3: A Fear that Efforts to Help At-risk Children Will Make Things Worse for the Children of Responsible Hard-working Parents

People's difficulty in conceptualizing solutions to the problems of children is made even worse by a fear that the steps designed to help the most at-risk children will actually hurt the families of those who most deserve our support. When people hear about programs designed to help children (AFDC, health-clinics, state-supported day care) they are, as we have already noted, fearful that these programs will encourage irresponsible parents to have more children. They also fear that the money from these programs will come from greater taxes on working people, whose own children will suffer as a result.

There is a strongly shared feeling, in other words, that society perversely rewards those who are irresponsible while making it harder for those who work hard and play by the rules. When the respondents hear about the need to help children, many of them assume that the help will go to the wrong people.

It's the irresponsible ones who get the money. The struggling ones have pride.

Woman, Portland

My son is paying taxes to support these young ladies who are having babies. They are not educated not to have children. If we gave them less help, they'd have to have fewer children.

Older Man, Philadelphia

The person who deserves help should be the one who is working and just need a little help on a temporary basis.

Woman, St. Louis.

* * *

The chart below describes these obstacles in a schematic fashion. There are really three different ways the public thinks about the concerns of the children: two of these perspectives suggest solutions that are so overwhelming as to be virtually impossible, the third suggests a simple solution that even the supporters agree will have negative impacts on children, at least in the near-term.

Public Perception of Problems Faced by Different Types of Children

Situation	Problem for Kids	Impact on Children	Solution
Comfortable middle-class families where both parents work to buy consumer goods	Too many consumer goods, and parents who are too busy making money to care for their children.	Spoiled, disrespectful and undisciplined, living lonely lives deprived of supervision.	No solution -- it is impossible to turn back the clock and return to traditional values.
Struggling poor or marginal middle-class families where both parents work to make ends meet	Too little time and attention from parents who need to depend on day care or "latch key" situations.	May not be spoiled but do run wild and are undisciplined and disrespectful. Starved for time and attention.	Obvious but unlikely solution -- bring back the days when one wage-earner could support a family.
Underclass	Deprived, due to irresponsible, unemployed and under-age parents, many of whom have kids just to get welfare.	Kids are condemned to cycle of poverty, teenage pregnancy, crime and drugs. Programs available, but parents too irresponsible to take advantage of them.	Draconian solution -- cut back on support for at-risk children to discourage parents from having kids until they are ready to provide for them.

SECTION FOUR: RECOMMENDATIONS

The Children's Initiative is discussing a variety of approaches designed to focus attention on the problems of children as part of a large-scale effort to improve the overall condition of children. We did not test these approaches specifically in our own focus groups, but we understand that they are being studied in another series of focus groups currently under way. Public Agenda's research does yield, however, some principles for thinking about the best ways to reach and engage the American public on this issue. Some approaches, in our view, are highly promising, others have both advantages and disadvantages, while still others could even be counter-productive.

Approaches That Have a Good Chance of Succeeding

- 1. Supporting self-reliance.** Our analysis suggests that the public is most receptive to the idea of helping people who help themselves, and of assisting hard-working parents who just want to do a better job for their own children. Our hypothesis is that the public will support and respond to programs that engage the value of reciprocity, earning and deserving. Hard-working parents is precisely those that the respondents feel are getting the short-end of the stick now, and precisely the ones who, in their eyes, deserve the most help.
- 2. Highlighting programs that work.** Our respondents are frustrated and despondent about the future of this country and its children. There is a drumbeat of negative reporting about crime, corruption and economic bad-news. The situation seems so bleak to them that they have disengaged from it. By contrast, highlighting success stories, celebrating parenting that does work, and focusing on individuals who are doing a good job may serve to increase the sense that solutions are possible.
- 3. Volunteerism.** Many of the proposals under consideration by the Children's Initiative involve volunteerism. Volunteerism evokes a lot of favorable responses from our respondents. People say that it is a good thing both for those who receive help and for those who give it, many said that they have volunteered at some point in the past (or are doing so now) and had a good experience with it. Volunteerism also evokes the positive images of an older America where individuals supposedly helped each other instead of appealing to government. People may also like volunteerism because they feel that help will more likely go to those who can benefit from it, rather than to those who can work the system to their own advantage. Since they are convinced that the problem is not financial, they are also attracted to a system that is not based on spending more money. Volunteerism is perceived as a good thing, even by those who do not necessarily share the same definition or sense of urgency about the problem.

Approaches that Have a Mixed Chance of Success

Focus on infants and early intervention. Another idea is to try to focus public attention on the condition of infants and extremely young children. There are two advantages here: young children and infants are seen as more vulnerable and innocent, and, in their own lives, people know that it is less expensive to prevent a problem than to cure it.

While this approach certainly strikes a chord, our sense is that the respondents are more concerned about who is helped and how they are helped, rather than when they are helped. While early intervention has both a moral and a practical appeal, there is also a fear that irresponsible parents will divert help from their children to themselves. (They will sell the baby's medicine, it is feared, to buy drugs for themselves).

The best programs for children of poverty -- in the view of our respondents -- are programs that get the children out of the home (such as Operation Head-start). These programs are more likely to be appropriate for older children rather than infants.

People are also not convinced by the argument that they should pay now or else pay more later. Our respondents tended to perceive this as a false dichotomy. They are convinced that they will pay now and later under any circumstances. The phrase "money down a rat hole" is quickly evoked in response to suggestions that we should provide more funding for early childhood programming.

Programs that May Be Counter-productive

Shock treatment or humiliation. One possible approach is to try to engage the public's values by shocking them or humiliating them with the seriousness of the problems that children face. In this mind set, people need to be "woken up," so that their values are engaged. While our research suggests that some people were surprised to hear statistics about the current state of children, our judgment is, however, this approach could be counter-productive or even harmful.

The problem is that it does not engage either of the dominant conceptions of the problem: from the economic point of view this approach may be perceived as insulting. Parents who perceive themselves as struggling want to do more for their children and feel frustrated by their limitations. Messages from corporate America about how bad a job parents are doing are more likely to evoke anger than to motivate action. This is especially true because corporate America is perceived to be a major part of the problem, both because of advertising that pushes people into "name brand" consumerism and because of the perceived harm created by layoffs, restructuring and off-shore production.

These messages have a different kind of impact on those who see the problem for children as a symptom of a moral crisis. Americans are, in our judgment, already overly pessimistic about the

future. They complain about rising crime even though crime rates are down, they are appalled by rising corruption in government even though -- by many measures -- government has never been cleaner. They already believe that the country is going to hell and that children are victims. Playing up what a bad job we are doing will have the effect of pumping up the frustration and anger without encouraging positive action.

APPENDIX: ENCOURAGING VOLUNTEERISM

There is no question that people think highly of volunteerism. A more difficult problem, however, is how to get them to actually volunteer. We did not study this latter question in detail. However, some comments did come up which may be suggestive. Our research indicates that while people think highly of the idea of volunteering, certain obstacles prevent them from doing so. Understanding these concerns may suggest different strategies for dealing with different groups.

1. Older People. Several of the older respondents we interviewed are already involved in volunteer projects with children or have done so in the past. While they looked favorably on the idea of volunteerism, they also raised a concern based on styles of child-raising. Several expressed the view that they could not be effective as volunteers because they felt that the children were undisciplined, and they were afraid of conflicts with the parents. As one older man in Philadelphia said:

I don't have the same standards as the parents. We don't have a common standard of discipline. I would feel I was letting a child down if I didn't discipline them for certain behaviors.

This suggests that older people may be most attracted to programs where others will take care of issues of discipline and control. Older people seemed most responsive to working in an institutional setting where they were not the sole person in charge of children.

2. Parents. Most parents said that they were already involved in a great deal of volunteer work with their own children (little league, girl scouts, etc.), and they did not seem the least bit receptive to devoting extra time to working with the children of strangers. A few of our respondents with teen-aged children mentioned, however, that they were supportive of the idea of having their children do volunteer work, and that they also would consider the idea of doing volunteer work with their children as a family activity. Many schools are now talking about community service for students, and many high school students also feel that community service will help them gain admittance to college. Volunteer opportunities for families and for teenagers thus may have an appeal to parents.

3. People without children. We also talked to a number of people who have not had children. Most typically they said that they might think of volunteering but that they were too busy. They also seemed to suggest that they did not know how to go about volunteering, or that they felt that volunteering would take a greater time commitment than they were prepared to offer. The idea of volunteering sounded like a lot of work, and the idea of finding a suitable placement also sounded like a lot of work. The two together seemed overwhelming.

This suggests that this group may be reachable by "one-stop shopping." We had the sense that what these mostly young people were looking for was a service that would find a placement for them at whatever level they were willing to commit.

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