

WHOSE CHILDREN ARE THEY ANYWAY?

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Whose Children Are They Anyway?

When I was first asked to join you today and speak about infant mortality and child health, my inclination was to decline.

Like some of my colleagues, I have been fairly active and outspoken on public policy issues during the past several years. Most of my work, though, has been related to issues with which I have some familiarity: public education for example, and issues of the economy and workforce of the future.

Infant mortality and child health, on the other hand, are not subjects on which I am regarded as a knowledgeable observer, much less an expert.

But then I realized you did not invite me here as an expert on infant mortality. You invited me, I suspect, because your concern about child health and my concern about public education reflect a shared concern about the health, growth and development of all children in this country; because you want to build a broader coalition in support of child-centered issues; and specifically because you want to involve the private sector in those efforts.

I think you are right on target.

In recent years, I have become increasingly convinced that education, for example, must be seen within the wider context of social, economic and even political issues that have a profound influence on the lives of children in this country.

The fact of the matter is that the children coming into our public school systems today are increasingly poorer, more ethnically and linguistically diverse, and have more disabilities that affect their learning than any group of children in our history.

Many of these problems, quite frankly, cannot be solved until we look beyond the traditional boundaries of the classroom and begin to focus on the impact that non-classroom events and settings have on children and the educational process.

We need to be concerned not just about what happens between 9 a.m. and 3 p.m. on Monday through Friday. We need to be concerned about the pre-natal care which the child's mother receives, the nutritional support both mother and child receive

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during and after the pregnancy, day care availability, and the educational opportunities available to children.

When we think of infant mortality and child health in this way -in terms of physical and mental growth and development -- we begin to see the limitations of a compartmentalized response that looks only at education, only at infant mortality, only at day care, only at Head Start.

All these programs are worthy and deserve support. But their effectiveness will be severely limited if they continue to be viewed in isolation. They must instead be seen as part of a continuum of a much broader and comprehensive effort to improve the lives of children in this country, particularly those growing millions whose chances for success seem to be decreasing.

What about the private sector? Will it participate in this effort? And if so, how extensively?

I won't gloss over the facts on this one.

Involving the private sector is a tougher task today than it was five years ago.

Back then corporations themselves often took the initiative in finding areas of public policy and public concern where they could play an active role.

Some did so because they were encouraged by an Administration that wanted to scale down its own involvement in social issues. Some became involved because local institutions, needing help from anyone prepared to give it, lobbied hard, sometimes desperately, for corporate assistance in areas ranging from consulting to actual program funds and management.

Nevertheless, a lot of corporate involvement occurred because corporations sensed they had important ties to local communities, ties worth building, ties worth maintaining. After all, these were the communities where they were located, where many of their employees lived; these were the cities and towns to which their long-range future was connected.

Today, those bonds between the corporation and the community are showing the signs of strain. Instead of seeking out new opportunities or deciding how to improve upon existing

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relationships, the American corporation is turning inward once again, withdrawing from involvement in social issues and focusing on only one bottom line -- its own.

Corporations once deeply involved in social issues now seem to be saying: We did our job for five years; now leave us alone so we can get back to giving our own businesses our full attention.

Some aspects of this change are understandable. The stock market volatility and the drop in profits has created economic uncertainty for thousands of companies.

But something else also is at work here.

The growth of conglomerates, mergers, acquisitions and absentee ownership are making it difficult for many corporations to sustain ties that once existed between themselves and local communities.

How do you convince a company that its own self-interest lies in well-fed and well-educated kids in its own back yard when corporate headquarters now is 1,000 miles away? How do you convince a company to keep its eye on the workforce of the year 2000 when its vision of the future increasingly is seen in 90 day cycles? How do you involve a company that feels no connection with some social issue when they won't even become involved in an issue that has a direct economic impact on its own future?

The sad fact of the matter is that infant mortality rates could double in this country and it would not have an iota of impact on the corporate bottom line. Infant morbidity rates could increase profoundly and the attendant social costs would not be noticeable in corporate America. As for the future labor force issues, the year 2000 or 2006 (when today's child turns eighteen) looks far away to corporate executives preoccupied with quarterly profit statements.

None of this is said to discourage your efforts. It is said because we need to understand, as clearly as possible, the environment in which we are working. Otherwise, we may act on some assumptions that may be irrelevant or invalid.

It is also said because the nature of public private relationships is changing. Any public official who wants to seriously involve the private sector in new efforts to reduce

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infant mortality rates is going to have to instigate the process. Don't expect many corporate executives to knock on your doors to volunteer their assistance. In fact, be prepared to be increasingly persistent and insistent in mobilizing corporate support for the kinds of public private partnerships that were so popular just a few years ago.

That's a difficult job, but not an insurmountable job.

Let me suggest three areas of activity.

First, keep telling your story.

I know how frustrating it can be to describe conditions you feel are deplorable and correctable only to wonder if anybody out there is listening.

But there really is no choice but to keep repeating the fact that five babies die every hour, that the majority of these deaths are preventable, and that our infant mortality rates in some areas are equal to those found in third world countries.

That's only the tip of the iceberg. Some sixty years after this nation identified nutrition, prenatal care and preventive child health care as ways to reduce infant mortality, we continue to find increases in the number of mothers who receive no prenatal care; we continue to turn away most women who qualify for the Women, Infants and Children special feeding program; and the door of Medicaid remains closed to far too many.

Those facts must be repeated until the message takes hold.

Second, establish some corporate councils on children in your own states and chair those councils personally.

When a governor personally and actively commits to chairing such a Council, it is hard for any corporate chairman to decline an invitation to serve and participate. Corporate executives may not generally be social activists, but they are not fools either. Once you get the commitment of a corporate chairman's time, use it strategically. In education, for example, I found that some of our strongest advocates are people who couldn't have cared less about the public schools until they spent some time in them and saw for themselves the problems the schools and the children who attended them were facing.

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Try a similar approach with infant mortality and child health. Invite corporate leaders to visit a neonatal unit, to spend time with children who are hungry, to see the impact poor nutrition and lack of medical care produces later on in life. Present these problems in real life terms, not as intellectual abstractions. And then invite your Council to analyze your state's programs for helping children, and recommend ways they should be improved.

Third, seek a major initiative on behalf of children at the national level.

Don't just ask for a White House conference to review the problems and tell us the status of children in America. We already know that. Demand a program of action that starts out with an agenda and then proceeds to set specific goals for each item on that agenda.

The agenda could include such topics as:

- Ending childhood hunger in America.
- Full participation in the WIC program and similar state programs.
- Access to prenatal care.
- Expanding Head Start and Chapter One to all eligible children.
- Making day care accessible to children of parents who must work.
- Immunizing every child against infectious diseases.

Not a radical proposal in the bunch, but a package of proposals that, if implemented, would represent a major national commitment to improve the lives of children. And if the lives of children are improved, they will have a much better chance to succeed as adults.

This nation has struggled with the relationship between the child and the political system for a long time. It's time to set the record straight. The child is not supposed to serve the political system. The political system is supposed to serve the child.