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Subject: Conference Proceedings: Give Kids a Chance

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Proceedings prepared at the request of the NPA by Phyllis Bengtson, Debbie Fravel and Marian Heinricks.

A town meeting for Minnesota parents, called "Give Kids a Chance," was held in Minneapolis on October 6. The one-day conference featured choices from concurrent sessions during the morning, followed by a luncheon which featured a keynote address by Sylvia Hewlett. Hewlett is founder of author of "When the Bough Breaks: The Cost of Neglecting Our Children." The afternoon session included a performance by SKITSOS, a traveling teen theater group dedicated to offering help and hope to their generation and to proving that youth are the nation's most valuable natural resource. Following are summaries of the morning sessions.

"Public Policy and Community Values"
Dale Blyth, Director, Search Institute
Roberta Megard, St. Paul City Council Member
James Gambone, Coordinator of "Together for Tomorrow" conference

At present, the United States does not have a national policy on families and children. However, the proverb that it takes a whole village (community/city/state) to raise a child is especially true today when the vast majority of families have a single parent or two parents who work outside the home. Children need to be surrounded by a network which supplies both nurturance (care and support) and discipline (control and monitoring). One of the most valuable assets a child can have is a connection with a caring adult. The caring adult can be a family member, but it can also be a non-relative. Unfortunately, as our society has aged, it has tended to institute a series of public and private policies that segregate generations. We need public policy that promotes respect, caring, and cooperation among generations, and we need an intergenerational grassroots movement that promotes the best interests of children. As it stands today, the future generation is also our most vulnerable population, with no voice and little representation in public policy.

"Profits Before Values"
Dr. David Walsh, Twin cities psychologist and author of "Selling Out America's Children" and "Designer Kids"
Moderator: Taslima Khaled

Overall crime in the United States is decreasing, but crime among youth is rising rapidly--with

a 264% rise in violent crime in the past four years. Statistics show that youth are in crisis. For example, the United States has the highest rate of teenage pregnancy in the industrialized world, and a high school dropout rate of 25%. Suicide is the third leading cause of death in children under the age of 18. At least a fourth of all teens are sexually active by the age of 15, and it is estimated that 35% of all wine coolers manufactured are consumed (illegally) by high school students.

These frightening statistics reflect what Walsh identifies as a breakdown in values. Often, professionals view child development through what is called an ecological model. In this model, a developing child is seen as living in several contexts. If one thinks of the contexts as increasingly larger circles around the child, the first circle (closest to the child) would be his or her family. The next circle out would be the child's community, which probably includes church, school, and clubs. The third circle would represent society. In each of these contexts, the child is receiving messages about values. When Walsh talks with parents, they tend to acknowledge that it is their responsibility to provide for their child's needs, and to teach their child right and wrong. Parents and teachers tend to be motivated to act in ways that are good for children. In greater society, however, values may be different.

Activity at many levels of society is motivated by money: if something makes money, then it will continue to be produced. An example of this occurs in electronic media. In spite of stern warnings to television networks, some studies show that there is more violence on television now than there was two years ago. In addition, some people estimate that 8% of video games are violent. Research shows that there is a high correlation between violent "entertainment" and violent behavior in children. Yet the shows and video games continue to be produced because they are earning profits for producers and manufacturers. In this example, society's value for money and profit is clearly stronger than its value for the well being of children.

Parents are encouraged to be active and vocal in calling for nonviolent entertainment for children, and in monitoring the type of entertainment their children engaged in by their children.

"Family and the Workplace"
Sharon Klun , Work and Family Coordinator for IDS
Marcie Brooke, Working Parent Resource Center
Katie Dorn, author of "Briefcase to Diaperbag"

A session entitled "Family and the Workplace" addressed ways that advocates can broach family issues on the job. Speakers encouraged the participants to educate themselves to better understand the employer's perspective. One of the primary ways this emerges is in the attitude that family matters are often considered "soft" issues--that is, issues that involve people and relationships rather than profit earned. An educated family advocate is empowered to approach the corporation, armed with information reflecting the cost to the corporation when its employees are distracted due to family problems, or unable to work at all (for example: it costs 75% to 150% of a yearly salary to replace an employee who has to resign for some reason; children under 6 years of age are sick about 1-7 days a year--how can our company prepare itself for this?). Being prepared means networking ahead of time, knowing in the community and in the

workplace which people may be responsive to suggestions that are family-centered. An employee will gain more ground if he or she demonstrates awareness that the place of business must earn a profit to stay in business.

Another strategy is to identify the issues and the obstacles. The issues may center around fear (productivity will drop if we have flex time), control (I will never be sure of having a full work force here when I need help), tradition (we have always done it this way, and it has always worked). In addressing these issues, it is helpful to create a "win/win" situation to use language that makes the suggestion less threatening. For example, suggest a "pilot" period of flex time, rather than a radical, abrupt change. Then, during the pilot period, be sure to create safety nets. Safety nets are intentional opportunities to review trials and revisit issues during the pilot period, to identify smoldering ashes before they become flames. Be flexible, willing to compromise, and perhaps most important of all, be ready with a solution that involves you. Be aware of community resources which may be available to support the corporation's efforts.

In general, participants were encouraged to work with the corporation to expand the concept of productivity to be a holistic one that embraces both work and family.

"Parent Education"
Helen Wells, Director of Early Childhood Family Education,
Minneapolis
Ron Pitzer, University of Minnesota Extension Service
Barb Hutchinson, Parent Involvement Coordinator
Nancy Kristenson
Patti Kester, Ramsey Action Head Start

There are over 60 languages spoken in the state of Minnesota alone. Tremendous ethnic and cultural diversity, coupled with high mobility and great income disparity, make parent education programming in an urban setting very challenging. However, whether the setting is urban or rural, people who work with families agree that a focus on family strengths and successes (as opposed to viewing families through a deficit model) is extremely helpful.

A number of suggestions may help this endeavor. First, educators may need to help parents learn to take care of themselves, or reparent themselves. Second, parent educators may help provide a safe place for parents to share their concerns. Third, a very major component of a parent education program involves a commitment to serving parents over a period of time (2 years or more).

Recently, increased attention has been given to the needs of parents of pre-teens and adolescents, father's roles, divorce, single parenthood, and teen moms and dads. Connectedness, or the lack of it, between families, between children and adults, and between families or individuals and the community are recognized as playing an important role in parent education. The need for parent education and support is ongoing--that is, it does not end at some predetermined point, like when children reach public school age.

"Creating a Safe World for Children"
Katia Stavrou Petersen
Joe Nathan, Director of Center for School Change, Humphrey Institute

Most parents believe that it is important for their child to learn writing and math, and they see that this gets done by teaching them, often using repetition for learning. Unfortunately, many parents do not realize that life skills must be taught and repeated in the same manner. Ms. Petersen called for parents to strive for balance between academic endeavors and emotional aspects of child-raising. Many children do not seem to be learning appropriate life skills, on top of which they do not feel articularly safe in their schools. Studies show that thousands of children stay away from school because of fear. The fear they experience is well-grounded in reality: some 3 million students report either being assaulted or threatened in a given year, with many children carrying weapons.

Petersen encouraged adults to model the behavior they desire from children. Children want to belong and to be accepted; if they don't have adults to guide them, they will be guided more by their peers. Children can learn empathy; they can learn how to weigh alternatives and make informed decisions. Parents can give children increasingly greater responsibility, coupled with guidance, to help them form a foundation for making appropriate choices in adolescence and later life. In addition, parents can teach children that conflict is all right, violence is NOT, and there is a difference.

Petersen also encourage parents to take a firm stand for ZERO TOLERANCE OF VIOLENCE of any kind--physical, emotional, racial, or sexual. This means that school policies about violence should be clearly stated, including expectations and consequences if the standards are violated. There must be active supervision during breaks (recess, lunch, etc.), and there must be active efforts to "catch" children being GOOD. In addition, the following factors are important for creating a non-violent culture in schools: - Help staff and students feel connected, capable, and active participants.
- Avoid didactic teaching. There must be mutual respect and listening on the part of both adults and children.
- All routine activities should have inclusion activities built in. Staff need to know how to get all the children invited to participate. This means incorporating other cultures into all activities, perhaps through stories or puppetry, so the student is always surrounded by various aspects of culture.
- Model the behavior you want to encourage.
- Create a school that is a community, not a building.
- Actively examine beliefs and attitudes about violence.

Following are 10 suggestions for preparing children to become resilient and positive thinkers:
1. Teach them to think positively about their abilities and strengths.
2. Teach them to look for strength and positive attitudes in others.
3. Help them identify, understand, and express their feelings appropriately.
4. Show them the connection between feelings and actions.
5. Help them distinguish between good and bad touch, good and bad talk.

6. Teach them to set goals and then help them meet their goals.
7. Help them believe in themselves.
8. Teach them assertiveness skills.
9. Help them understand that they are responsible for their actions.
10. Teach them to make healthy decisions and solve problems peacefully.

"Male Responsibilities of Parenthood"

Panel:
Neil Tift, Father's Resource Center
John Sullivan, Fathers Program with Episcopal Community Services
Dwane Sims, MELD for Young Dads

Panel members addressed some issues surrounding fatherhood in the United States. Their comments included some pointed questions concerning our society's attitudes about parenting. For example, upon hearing the words "to mother," many people think of nurturing, or an extreme of mothering, which has to do with overprotection. However, upon hearing the words "to father," many people think of a man impregnating a woman. Additionally, most people associate "child support" with money rather than with emotional needs. Father's rights are often interpreted in an adversarial light, with fathers pitted against mothers. Our society sends messages about fathers in other ways, as well. For example, media tend to portray fathers as buffoons. Another example occurs in scout groups, when Boy Scouts cannot get a merit badge for child care even though Girls Scouts can earn a service bar for child care. These are strong social messages to children about values and expectations.

Speakers addressed the circumstances brought on by social change in the U.S. For example, in bygone days, a father tended to work with the same company most of his life, and his family got job benefits even after his death. Today, there aren't the same kind of job opportunities available, but the assumption is still there that fathers will somehow manage to provide those same securities for families. and these contributions from fathers are still the ones that are valued more than emotional ones.

A number of other needs were identified. For example, speakers voiced a need for family life education courses taught by men, for men; the need for teaching ways to resolve conflict without violence; for education about being a non-residential co-parent; for teaching men how to father, with or without marriage. One audience member noted that fathering issues span class, that there are issues in the middle and upper class.

Audience members posed thoughtful questions about how to get women to "let go" and "let" fathers father. This question was followed with some discussion about social issues related to this from both men's and women's perspectives. If a woman has been socialized to believe that parenting is her responsibility, she may feel guilt if she "lets go" of her responsibility. Several men spoke of the need to recognize that there are multiple ways to parent. Another audience member noted that adolescent parents are encouraged to get a job, rather than being encouraged to be good parents to the child they brought into the world. Again, thoughtful discussion

revealed the hard choices involved in this situation: having a job is valued, and having an income is seen as a way out of welfare and self-esteem traps, yet good parenting is invaluable in other ways.