

**OUR NATIONS KIDS: IS SOMETHING WRONG?
NATIONAL ISSUES FORUM
CHARLOTTESVILLE, VIRGINIA
NOVEMBER 2, 2002**

“Raising children is a community issue... We all must work together.”

Sixty-eight percent of participants were somewhat or very concerned that “government programs are expected to do the family’s job”.

A slight decrease (4%) in the proportion of forum participants who were very concerned (33% pre; 29% post) occurred after the forum. A quarter of participants were not at all concerned before the forum, rising 4% to 29% after the forum.

“It’s expensive to take care of children as an individual or a society.”

On a Saturday morning, November 2, 2002, approximately one hundred residents -- including parents and grandparents, educators, human service providers, young people, residents, and civic leaders gathered for a two-hour meeting to address: “*Our Nation’s Kids: Is Something Wrong?*” at the Albemarle County Office Building in Charlottesville, Virginia. Informed by national research and local statistics on child and family conditions, they deliberated in small groups. Participants considered three choices for addressing the needs of troubled children. Following the deliberations, participants were invited to visit a community resource fair of 20 local non-profit, public, and civic agencies.

The forum was co-sponsored by the Charlottesville/Albemarle Civic Engagement Initiative of the UVA Weldon Cooper Center and the Charlottesville/Albemarle Commission on Children and Families, in partnership with 11 community public and non-profit agencies including Albemarle County Department of Social Services, UVA School of Professional and Continuing Studies, Monticello Area Community Action Agency, Quality Community Council, Jefferson Area Board of Aging, and others.

What follows are the impressions, hard choices, and reflections that participants shared as they sought to weigh the choices put before them and balance them with their personal beliefs and experiences.

1. THE GOVERNMENT’S ROLE IN MAINTAINING HEALTHY FAMILIES

THE GOVERNMENT SHOULD ENACT POLICIES THAT FAVOR THE FAMILY

Many participants felt that an appropriate role for government was providing financial assistance to needy families. “We need to review the tax code to better favor the family,” said one participant. “Taxes need review to better support low-income families in this wealthy of a community,” said another, reflecting the relatively high median income in Charlottesville/Albemarle. Others spoke of the necessary financial commitment needed from local and national governments to support prevention programs for children.

“Parents should have choices, and we as a society should help support those choices.”

Before the forum, just under half of the participants (49%) favored the statement: “Parents should put their children’s needs first, EVEN IF this means one parent has to give up a career to stay at home”. Only 38% agreed with this statement *after* the forum,

There was no change in the proportion of forum participants who felt that “encouraging one parent to stay at home to raise children, especially during the first few years” was very important (20% agreed with this statement before the forum.)

Approximately 1/3 felt it was “somewhat important” (34%) and slightly more said it was “not at all important” (37%).

“Parents need to be identified as the key ingredient.”

GOVERNMENT SHOULD PROVIDE GUIDANCE, NOT LEGISLATE PARENTHOOD

Some participants cautioned against too active a role for government, not so much in its funding capacity, but in a potential role that leans toward prescribing values or forms of community. “I want less government—We don’t want state and national leaders setting the standard for how much time parents spend with children”, said one resident. Another speculated that advocacy for more government was hiding something deeper, “We’re afraid to talk to each other—so we go to government instead.”

Many participants believed that both government and parents should share a role in preventing children and families from getting into trouble in the first place. Participants were also willing to take personal responsibility for caring for troubled children and taking political or community action.

2. PARENTS

PARENTS NEED SUPPORT IN MAKING POSITIVE CHOICES

Participants stated often that parents need support to make choices that allow them to provide for their children. Residents generated ideas for support that included better information on childhood developmental stages, access to quality child care, and sufficient flexibility and wages to allow a parent to stay at home should she or he desire.

Many of the participants felt strongly that few parents had a choice as to whether they could stay home, and believed that drawing down two incomes was a necessity for most. “It’s not always an option to stay home,” said one participant. “This choice may work for the ‘haves’, but not necessarily for the middle and lower classes.” Single parent participants stated the impossibility of this option for them.

QUALITY TIME WITH CHILDREN MATTERS

Participants reflected on the importance of the parent – some stating that a parent was the most importance presence in a child’s life. Others noted that it was often the quality of time spent with a child that is important, not the amount of time. One middle school student said, “Anyone can love you when you are two or three, yet when you come home from middle school to a note saying ‘there’s pizza in the fridge,’ that’s hard.”

PARENTS ARE UNSUNG HEROES

Some participants felt that good parents are often unappreciated and deserve recognition. Several participants believed that having a parent at home helps “teach responsibility to both the parent and the child, and forms an important bond with the child.” Another parent stated that it “was fun to be at home.” Yet others noted that the ideal of a traditional two-parent home indirectly penalizes single parents. In one discussion, a single parent expressed concern that when she did go to seek support

“We need to empower schools to have clear rules, expectations and boundaries.”

Just under half of the participants were very concerned about "parents who place self-satisfaction before their children's", compared to 68% nationally.

After the forum, participants who were very concerned about parent self-satisfaction decreased by 12 points from 49% to 37%.

65% of local participants were very concerned about "children growing up without moral standards", compared to a national average of 84%. After the forum, the percentage of participants who were "very concerned" dropped 14-points to 51%.

from local community agencies to help support her children, she felt she was looked down upon for her unmarried status.

NOT ALL PARENTS ARE PREPARED FOR THE RESPONSIBILITY

Participants emphasized that, in general, all parents want the “best for their children,” yet some desired to “hold parents more accountable.” Others countered that parents shouldn’t have to handle the whole burden of child-rearing themselves. While it was often stated that all parents need support, many participants stated that this was particularly the case with teen mothers and fathers. “Some parents are also children themselves,” said one participant. Still others spoke of the shared responsibilities of both parents, and a need to support strong roles for fathers in their children’s lives.

While there was concern in many of the deliberations about a lack of funding for existing social services, many cited parents – and the choices they make – as part of the problem. “Absent parents are to blame for lacking morality much of the time,” said one participant. Another noted that it was not “universally good” to promote quality time with kids. She stated, “Parents of troubled kids may have problems—so more time [with their children] won’t help.” Others noted that parents might take advantage of or abuse additional support, such as child care and extended leave.

3. CHILDREN

While the deliberations initially focused on care of very young children and parents’ role in the early years, participants also spoke of the responsibilities of parents as children get older and are more likely to fall into risky behavior.

ONGOING COMMUNICATION WITH YOUNG PEOPLE IS ESSENTIAL

Parents, teachers and others shared their observations and involvement with troubled children and spoke of their challenges as parents. Participants emphasized the need to communicate with children. Said one parent, “You need to know what’s going on first hand to know what’s going on with ‘Our Nation’s Kids.’” There was consensus on the importance of checking in with one’s own children often, “Dialogue is key,” said one parent, “Engage your children so that you have a sense of their concern and fears.” Others, including several young people participating in the session, cited the importance of knowing that adults and parents care and are available.

TROUBLED CHILDREN FACE ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL OBSTACLES

While there was agreement that the majority of local children are not “in trouble,” several pre-school teachers, service providers and elementary teachers in the deliberations expressed concern that “many students fall through the cracks despite our best effort to help them in trouble or in

“Parents are the 1st teachers.”

Prior to the forum a large majority of participants (66%) felt that “teaching children the difference between right and wrong at school as well as at home” was very important.

After the forum, 15% fewer (51%) participants identified this as “very important”.

Forum participants who felt that “improving and expanding daycare centers” was very important increased from 69% to 73 % after the forum, compared to a U.S. average of 55 and 57% respectively.

After the forum, more participants felt that current policy somewhat strongly reflects “improving and expanding daycare centers” (44% pre; 50% post).

“Our culture needs child development education. We need to know what kids need at different stages so we can meet those needs.”

need.” Some shared stories of taking children under their wing for a temporary period, only to be troubled when having to return them to family situations and economic circumstances where the children faced significant obstacles to success.

Some participants were in favor of making children more accountable, and moving away from a notion of making children “the center” of a community’s life. “As kids test limits,” one parent said, “we must push back and hold them accountable.”

4. SCHOOLS AND MORAL EDUCATION

SCHOOLS ARE INFLUENTIAL IN STUDENTS’ MORAL EDUCATION...

Activity within local public schools became a focus of discussion, particularly with regard to the educators’ role in teaching character and values to young people. Most felt schools had a role in setting standards – behavioral and otherwise – yet there was a range of opinions as to the degree to which schools can and should reinforce the parenting role. Some teachers present described how they are working hard at this, with one teacher using the enforcement of a dress code as an example. Others expressed limitations of time and school rules in letting them go the extra mile to help guide children. “We can only *reinforce* the values of home...we are concentrating on our teaching responsibilities,” said one educator. Some participants who favored giving schools an increased role in moral education believed that standards and rules could be set without violating free speech and civil rights.

...YET TEACHERS ARE NOT SUBSTITUTES FOR PARENTS AND CARETAKERS

There was appreciation of teachers as good role models with some role in teaching correct behavior, yet many in the forum expressed discomfort with teaching morals, stating that no one can say what is moral for every family. Said one participant, “Whose standards of morality should we enforce? They are different for every family.” Another stated that morality education has taken precedence over basic civility training, and that primary education has taken a back seat. There was agreement that schools alone could not be a source of morality, and that greater community involvement was necessary to teach children right from wrong.

5. CHILD AND FAMILY PROGRAMS

FOR PROGRAMS TO WORK, THEY NEED TO BE PROVEN EFFECTIVE

Considerable discussion centered on the importance of quality child care and the availability of good information to parents on raising children. Participants were clear that this was not solely a governmental responsibility. Many also noted that the quality of the child care and service programs was a critical piece. “We need to carefully evaluate

“We may never come to an agreement with our government; we need to act as individuals.”

The vast majority of forum participants felt that "ensuring that all children are covered by health insurance" was very important (87% pre; 83% post, compared with 76 and 73% nationally.)

While over 40% of forum participants were very concerned "that in today's economy, both parents must work," there was no appreciable change after the forum (47% pre-forum; 44% post-forum.)

Before and after the forum, the overwhelming majority of participants (72% pre; 61% post) felt that current policy DOES NOT reflect efforts to "reduce violence and sex in the entertainment media." After the forum, 11% fewer held this view.

“It comes back to parental responsibility in educating the children, guiding them through the waves and waves of media produced.”

programs," said one participant, "Some government programs are ineffective." Others urged participants to "get away" from state and federally funded programs and "have the community fund the programs." Participants commented that residents rely on a broad range of community resources for parenting assistance, from traditional community agencies, to doctors and churches. Some suggested locating services in one spot; yet others countered with concern that a community would not be able to find "one program of 'help' that everyone can agree on."

OUR COMMUNITY SHOULD FOSTER OPEN COMMUNICATION AND BETTER ACCESS TO SERVICES

Impressions on the extent and accessibility of local non-profit and public services to Charlottesville and Albemarle families were varied, with some stating that services were plenty, and others feeling that they were insufficient. One provider stated, "Intervention and services are simply not available to lower income families," and noted that current communication with at-risk families is not effective. Another spoke of the extensive financial resources already dedicated to local City schools.

6. CIVIC RESPONSIBILITY AND COMMUNITY

CHANGE BEGINS WITH PERSONAL ACTION

Participants stated their own personal role in helping troubled children through supporting good local programs through volunteerism and donations. One resident stated, "It's up to each one of us to be more active within the community. We shouldn't necessarily rely on the government to intervene." Noting the expense of taking care of children, one participant said, "we should extend personally if nothing else." Other participants emphasized the importance of volunteering and recommended that community service should be included as part of employment so that everyone could be in the position to volunteer – "not just those with means."

COMMUNITY MEMBERS HAVE A RESPONSIBILITY FOR ALL KIDS

Participants expressed a longing for more communal caring of children, and some harkened back to a time when raising children was more of a community concern. "We need more of a community environment," said one resident, "there's value in having people around at home keeping an eye on things." There was general agreement on the notion of a "shared responsibility," where parents have choices and a community to support them. One participant envisioned putting "kids in the center of the community and providing central place for the community to come." Discussions progressed to brainstorming ideas for building a stronger sense of community in local neighborhoods as well as "educating citizens on the costs of not getting involved." Another participant urged fellow citizens to broaden the definition of families and community by emphasizing that elder members of society need avenues to share the wisdom of experience.

*“Don’t blame
Hollywood.
Parents need to
take a more
active role in
protecting, not
just banning.”*

After the forum those very concerned about “the effect of TV shows, movies and pop song on children’s values decreased” by 7% from 43% to 36%, as compared to 58% nationally pre and post forum.

As a result of the forum, some participants had a clearer idea of what is needed to help kids.

There was a decline of 6% in those who had “a general idea of what is needed” and a 7% increase in those who had “a clear, definite view of what is needed, for a total of 43%, and 52% with a “general idea.”

*“Pop culture is
being shoved
down our throats.
We can’t avoid it,
and it teaches
children lack of
morals.”*

RAISING KIDS WELL TAKES MORE THEN GOOD INTENTIONS

Some thought that the choices faced by families were limited, not only by lack of financial support, but also by parents’ ability to earn a “living wage” and afford basic necessities such as health care. Some participants expressed concern that, without looking at inequities in the society, deliberations were not getting at the “root of the problem.”

There was considerable discussion about the need to revise tax structures so that government could play a positive role early. “Tax dollars should be spent to assist kids—preventatively,” said one participant. Another noted the challenge in engaging a community on broad improvement initiatives in a community with such economic disparity as Charlottesville/Albemarle.

NATIONAL CULTURE DOES NOT VALUE CHILDREN

Many participants believed that United States’ society in general was to blame for troubled children and families. Residents referred to prevalent values toward childrearing, and the lack of basic supports for families in local communities. “Society needs to establish a way to satisfy the basic needs for families—day care, health care, etc.” said one resident. Another parent said, “Our society does not acknowledge the value of work done by the stay at home mom or parent... Money gets the response.” Another cited the need to change the “greedy ways” of U.S. society, and the pressure to get ahead, and urged a re-focus on supporting and valuing families.

MEDIA IS A FACTOR IN SHAPING CHILDREN’S LIVES

Participants agreed on the potential negative influences of media on young people, but had differing perspectives on the solution, and the extent to which censorship should be a part of the strategy. Participants cited the importance of communicating with young people about the media, both at home and through media literacy classes in schools. Most concurred that parents could take a stand within their own homes regarding television deciding what or whether kids watch. Suggestions surfaced such as simplifying the rating process for parents, and encouraging producers to show better role models, rather than those which some participants felt glorified destructive behavior.

7. NEXT STEPS

BEGIN EARLY, BEGIN TODAY

Towards the end of the deliberation, participants were asked what personal action they would be willing to take as a result of the forum, and whether their thinking had changed. Many stated that they would like to be active on the “grassroots” level as volunteers and advocates for

“This is a free country and what keeps us free are choices”.

After the forum, fewer participants favored Approach 1: Parents should put their children's needs first, EVEN IF this means one parent has to give up a career to stay at home – an 11-point decrease (49% pre; 38% post). Those opposing this option increased a dramatic 17%.

Prior to the forum an overwhelming majority -- 93% of participants-- favored Approach 2: We should spend as much on our children as we do on the elderly, EVEN IF this means raising taxes to pay for better health, education and recreation. Support for this approach decreased by 13% (80% post).

After the forum, many fewer participants, 37% pre; 27% post, favored Approach 3: We should do what we can to clean up the media, EVEN IF this risks limiting our rights to free speech - a 14% decrease. Those opposed to this choice increased by 10%.

children. Others shared their increased sense of the importance of beginning to work early with children.

Specific policy recommendations generated from the deliberations include: putting a priority on public pre-school; getting information about resources out to parents and schools; improving coordination among schools and community agencies; making health care affordable; and improving access to existing services.

At the community level, several participants spoke of how they would like to increase understanding and involvement between residents in the City and County's economically and ethnically diverse communities. "We need to empower, encourage, [and] help parents and concerned citizens be or become effective, responsible, caregivers." At the political level, the role of an advocate was frequently cited as critical. "We must voice our concerns to local governments and the legislature."

DIALOGUE IS VALUABLE

Asked to reflect upon the value of deliberation and the forum itself, participants tended to appreciate the opportunity to talk to each other about an important issue. "Bringing people together to talk is a great service," said one parent, "the dialogue must continue." Participants had varying views on the format, some finding it refreshingly honest and direct, and others seeking more concrete action and next steps as a result. Many cited the importance of involving youth in future deliberations.

A COMBINATION OF APPROCHES IS NEEDED

The choices framed by the Kettering Foundation generated deliberation among participants, and many appreciated the opportunity to probe different perspectives. One resident mentioned that she came away having "refocused my thoughts to prevention and looking at issues differently." Another spoke of the forum as "an opportunity to expand your thinking." Some residents came away with more specific knowledge, such as a social service staff person who had "learned from a single parent about how she feels she is viewed." In final comments, participants continued to pose serious questions to each other, such as "How do we invest in children's future with more than lip service?"

Reflecting on the three approaches presented by the Kettering Foundation, many felt constrained with having to choose one way to address the nation's, and the local community's, children. Said one participant, "A combination of approaches is required, as this is a complex problem. There is no magic solution."

--Compiled from Recorder's notes by the Charlottesville/Albemarle Commission on Children and Families, December 9, 2002

“We have the potential to impact on decisions made locally”.