

Respect Life: A Constant Ethic

Today's Children: Do We Show Enough Care?

By MSGR. JAMES T. McHUGH

What do we think of children? What value does American society place on the child? Seemingly simple questions to which one might expect forthright answers. Yet clear answers seem to elude us.

• The American birthrate has fallen to its lowest recorded level — 1.7 children per family, and the child-bearing attitudes of young couples indicate that extremely few intend to have more than two children. At the same time, infertility clinics are crowded and the lists of childless couples awaiting *in vitro* fertilization and other new techniques continue to grow.

• Courts have rendered conflicting judgments in regard to withdrawing life-sustaining care from handicapped infants, and federal regulations requiring at least minimal safeguards have been criticized and rejected by various medical groups. At the same time, research goes on to find the causes and cures of genetic disease, and new techniques have been developed to save very tiny premature infants.

• Immigration laws are quickly adjusted to allow entry of children from war- or disaster-torn countries, and emergency relief supplies are rushed to nations suffering from drought and starvation. But prenatal care and infant and child nutrition programs are either cut for budgetary reasons or denied reasonable expansion.

• Massive efforts to improve public health and lengthen life — such as mandatory auto seatbelt requirements, campaigns against smoking, obesity, alcohol and drugs — are underway. But the U.S. infant mortality rate remains disproportionately high, and much of it is attributable to ignorance or carelessness on the part of parents, before as well as after birth.

Why is the evidence so confounding? Why the absence of clear answers?

Perhaps because there are at least two contrasting beliefs abroad in the land. The first sees humanity in terms of common concerns and commitments. The child is a member of the most basic of all human communities, the family, and is the embodiment of the history of the past and the hope for the future. Parents see a child as an extension of themselves, and they look forward to a new baby with anticipation and joy.

The other school, more in vogue today, focuses on the individual, isolated or estranged, responsible to and for nobody but him or herself. Such individualism is an expression of self-centeredness — it corrodes altruism, limits generosity, and induces the most selfish attitudes toward child-bearing and child-rearing.

But that residue of communitarian attitudes proper to the first viewpoint ought not to be overlooked, for it touches on the future of the human family. Jonathan Schell, in *The Fate of the Earth*, links preservation of the human species from nuclear annihilation with the generative love of parents. Schell argues that the will to save the human family includes a will

to let others come into existence rather than simply to save oneself, and this constitutes a form of love.

Schell touches on some profound and underlying truths of human community. He reminds us that we are bound to one another by our humanity and that our future destiny is a common enterprise. We must be convinced that life and the future of the species are values to be sustained and the responsibility of all. He reminds us, too, that a true appreciation of the preciousness of life necessarily leads to a generous acceptance of the child.

While Schell's observations are interesting and provocative, the preponderant evidence indicates that American attitudes toward children are at best ambivalent and at worst antagonistic. In a study of the trends in public expenditures over the past 20 years, Samuel Preston has shown that money allocated for the benefit of children — education, nutrition, health and child care — has either failed to keep pace with other items in the public budget or been seriously cut back. Preston attributes the diminishing concern for children to the fact that self-interest is at the base of political activity, and decisions are generally made on the basis of adversarial relations and competing claims. In such an environment there is little organized commitment to caring for other people's children. Furthermore, as contraception, sterilization and abortion have come to be regarded as private choices, the sense of social responsibility for parents and children has been eroded and public funding of family and child support programs has diminished.

As public funds are increasingly used to prevent or destroy life, and thus hold down public assistance costs, how does society provide for its long-range future? How do we show that we care about our collective future if we fail to provide the resources necessary for future generations?

While such questions are the concern of society itself, they are perhaps especially pertinent — and answerable — within the Christian community.

Christianity has always preserved a high appreciation of the value of the child. Moreover, against a cultural tradition that did not always recognize the independent nature and rights of children, Jesus gave children a new and high status. In his relationship with children, Jesus acknowledged their openness, humility and trust as the qualities that prepare one for the Kingdom. The child is not only the child of his or her parents. Every child is a child of God.

At the same time, children are the most vulnerable members of the human family because they are dependent upon adults for food, shelter, health care, education and opportunity. While in earlier times families struggled to meet the needs of children, we know today that many such needs require a commitment on the part of society and a corresponding allocation of societal resources. In recent years the concern about children's needs has led to worldwide discussions of children's rights.

Accordingly, much attention has been given to protecting children



(Photo by Barbara Hadley)

FUTURE INVESTMENT — In an age when great emphasis is placed on success and the individual, there is a greater need for society to ensure the care of its young. A declining birthrate is just one indicator that the human family no longer values children and their needs as before.

from harm and assuring them a full enjoyment of benefits and opportunities. The U.N. Declaration of the Rights of the Child provides the most comprehensive listing of children's rights. Activities during the International Year of the Child (1979) called attention to new challenges and needs, and the Holy See's Charter of the Rights of the Family gives special attention to the rights of children. Let's look briefly at some of these rights.

The right to life begins at conception and embraces the entire process of human growth and development. The constantly increasing incidence of abortion and the growing social and legal acceptance of terminating the lives of handicapped infants show that the child needs special protection, before as well as after birth. Furthermore, recent experiments with frozen embryos and other interventions in the genetic structure of the unborn signal a need for greater recognition of the humanity of the unborn and appropriate legal regulation of scientific experiments.

Every child has a right to a stable family environment in which he or she is accepted as a person and given the love, affection, human support and recognition necessary for human growth and development. Parental attention, support and encouragement are necessary for the child's social development, and nations should do all that is possible to enable parents to meet their responsibilities.

The child has a right to a secure environment even if parents will not or cannot provide it. Thus adoption, foster care, institutionalized care and programs of family assistance for children with special needs should be expanded.

Every child has the right to the means necessary for proper development. Recognition of the special needs of children and non-discrimination in meeting these needs is a global responsibility.

The child also has the right to education. The world's fund of information grows enormously day by day, and the opportunities for today's children to learn is basic to their development as well as to future scientific discovery and human progress. It is also fundamental to an appreciation of the cultural heritage and intellectual achievements of past ages which are the source of mutual understanding and unity among peoples.

The time has come for all of society to affirm its belief in the value and significance of children and the contributions they make to the human family.

This article is excerpted from "Children: Do We Care?" in *Respect Life*. Washington, D.C.: National Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1985. Msgr. McHugh is director of the Diocesan Development Program for Natural Family Planning, Seton Hall University, South Orange, NJ.