

# Collier's

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**By Mrs. Franklin D. Roosevelt**

Happy living conditions and equal educational facilities must be available to all children if our democracy is to survive. This idea became nationally significant when President Theodore Roosevelt called the first White House Conference for children. Eleanor Roosevelt tells what's being done

**I** DO not think that I am a natural-born mother. I had dolls as a little girl, but I cannot remember being concerned about them, and even though I was some years older than my little brothers, and of necessity had to take a certain amount of responsibility about them, I do not think I ever did it with the maternal affection which is seen in some small girls.

I did have a sense of duty and of obligation and that was fostered in me by my mother and then by my grandmother. If I ever wanted to mother anyone, it was my father and not my baby brothers. That sense of obligation to smaller and weaker children remained with me through my school years and gained great impetus through my first year of teaching some classes of small girls in a New York City settlement house. There I saw with my own eyes some of the disadvantages of conditions brought about by economic insecurity.

I think I approached my own motherhood with a keen sense of responsibility but very little sense of the joy which should come with having babies. It was a long time before I gained enough confidence in my own judgment really to enjoy a child. I do not know that even today I have it, but the old sense of responsibility is still with me. I never felt, even as a young woman when I did nothing outside and put all my energies into having children and keeping house, that I was right about my plans for bringing up my children. I often wonder today why I have been so fortunate to have some of the children develop a sense

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of respect and friendship for me, because I administered discipline not because I wanted to, but because of the convictions of others, and my love was always overshadowed by my duty. I enforced certain rules, I lived up to certain habits in the family and only rarely departed from the strict supervision and suggestion of others.

I remember that it took all of my courage, and the fact that everybody else in the house had the flu, to trust myself to move the youngest of our five children into my own bedroom and take complete responsibility for him when he had an attack of bronchial pneumonia. I could get only one trained nurse and she had complete care of one of the other children who had double pneumonia. Practically everybody in the city and in the house was laid low, and so I had to rise to the occasion, otherwise I doubt if I would have felt like trusting myself to carrying that amount of responsibility without direction from others close at hand all the time!

But all children, it seems to me, have a right to food, shelter, an equal opportunity for education and an equal chance to come into the world healthy and get the care they need through their early years to keep them well and happy. And though one may not trust oneself to direct their lives, every mother should encourage them to self-confidence and should give them the feeling that whatever happens in life, there is a place where they can turn for understanding and help.

If you have this feeling about your own children, you should have it about all children, and for that reason I have always been interested in the problems of the children in our communities. Under the standards which we have set to guide us in the upbringing of our children, we used to be very individualistic, with, however, certain strongly marked influences such as those of the church, and group traditions in which we had grown up. For instance, in New England the customs of the Pilgrims shaped the child's education, just as later the Quakers had a great deal to do with the character and upbringing of the young Philadelphians.

### To Make Better Citizens

Thirty years ago the President of the United States felt that we needed to bring together, to formulate standards for our guidance, the people who had

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some influence on the general thought of what should be done for the children of the nation. This became the first White House Conference on Children under President Theodore Roosevelt. Since then there have been three others—1919, 1930 and 1940.

As Miss Katharine Lenroot, of the Children's Bureau in the Department of Labor, says: "The 1909 conference called by President Theodore Roosevelt stated a principle that is now recognized in all parts of the country: that the home is the place for children and that no child should be deprived of his home for reasons of poverty alone. The stimulus of this conference led to the creation of the Federal Children's Bureau in 1912, a national center of research to serve the growing child-welfare movement.

"The 1919 conference called under President Woodrow Wilson's auspices formulated a set of child-welfare standards that have guided and still guide the programs of public and private children's agencies and state and federal legislation affecting children.

"The 1930 White House Conference on Child Health and Protection called by President Herbert Hoover brought together an outstanding series of reports describing the content and character of care and protection needed for children and revealed the limited extent to which such services were available for many children. The findings on medical care raised to a new level the recognition of the care needed for the health of mothers and children in the United States. The committee reports on hazardous occupations for minors laid the groundwork for the later regulation of the employment of minors in hazardous occupations under the Fair Labor Standard Act of 1938. The discussion throughout the country of the Children's Charter and other conference recommendations helped to pave the way for the inclusion in the Social Security Act of 1935 of the federal-state programs for aid to dependent children, for maternal and child-health services, for services for crippled children and for child-welfare services, and for the subsequent development of these programs in our states and territories."

The standards set up in these conferences are very much the same standards that any able and intelligent parent will set for himself in contemplating the upbringing of his own family. First we consider the health program, which brings us to the question of maternity and infancy care. As a result of the conference in 1919, the Sheppard-

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Towner Act was passed in August, 1921. It brought before the people statistics on the shocking loss of mothers and of infants during the first year after birth. The right of children to normal family life received recognition, and today mothers' pensions keep families together even in the face of economic disaster through the loss of fathers or the impairment of their earning capacity. In turn, we came to consider education and recreation. Today we are considering the more difficult question of the right of youth to work, and last and most difficult of all, though most important, we are considering the moral values which our children must acquire if they are to feel a sense of responsibility for themselves and their neighbors, and so develop the type of democracy which they have inherited into a more perfect instrument of self-government.

Again in Miss Lenroot's words: "The 1940 conference has counted the gains made for children even during the years of economic depression and has planned, for the coming ten years, that we seek to provide for children in every community in the United States the essential services and benefits for the preparation of responsible citizens of a democracy. The conference emphasized the fact that the family has the primary opportunity and responsibility for the care of children and for introducing them to the experiences that lead to a full personal life and to successful community life. The report recognized the economic and social factors that condition family and community life. It points out the gains that can be made for children through joint planning and effort on the part of individuals and groups in each community, through the leadership of state agencies, and through federal action that provides for nation-wide programs."

## **Making the Most of Their Dollars**

The people who attended the conference and who listened to the President's speech can go back to their own communities, influence public opinion and demand:

1. Some kind of a medical program.
2. That all our citizens take an active part in shaping the policies in the public schools; that all of us know our public-school teachers and give them any help and assistance that they desire.
3. That all of us take an interest in recreation programs designed not only to be of value to children in school, but to help our young people who are unfortunate enough not to find suitable

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jobs immediately.

4. That in every community we set up, in conjunction with the nearest employment service, an auxiliary to help young people to obtain the most suitable jobs.

This last year we have come to realize that instead of thinking only of what should be done for the mother in pregnancy and at the birth of her child, we should find out what economic situation forced the mother and child at these crucial moments to be a burden on the community. Instead of being concerned with obtaining proper diets for small children through charitable agencies, we should be concerned with the education of the average girl and boy so they will make the most of their dollars, and to learn through practical experience how to make use of food in order to keep well.

If we relate the immediate problems of the child to the problems of the family as a whole, we will find ourselves concerned with housing, medical and dental care, education and recreation. We will be interested in wages and hours for labor, and we will try to figure out an adequate family income.

We are beginning to realize that what the family can do must be supplemented by what the community can do for its children. Population and income studies show that in many cases the ability of a community to supplement the family income and to contribute to a child's well-being is particularly low in the areas where we have the greatest number of children.

Where the local income falls short I think the state or even the nation should be called upon to make this equality of basic rights applicable to every child.

## A Menace to All Workers

We are learning that rural slums may be quite as bad as city slums. We are learning that it is not because of the adult members of the family alone that we must do away with these slums. The children born and brought up in them are apt to be conditioned for the future by their earliest environment. What happens to our children is the concern of the whole nation because a democracy requires a standard of citizenship which no other form of government finds necessary. To be a citizen in a democracy a human being must be given a healthy start. He must have adequate food for physical growth and proper surroundings for mental and spiritual development. Under a dictatorship it may be sufficient to learn to read and write and to do cer-

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tain things by rote, but in a democracy we must learn to reason and to think for ourselves. We must make our decisions on the basis of knowledge and reasoning power. In a democracy we must be able to visualize the life of the whole nation. When we vote for candidates for public office to be our representatives, we must decide on the qualities to be required of the men and women who are to hold public offices.

These men will not only decide what shall be done for us in the present day, but they will be laying the foundations on which our children will have to build.

Poor schools in our communities to-day mean poor citizens in these communities in a few years—men and women ill-prepared to earn their living, or to participate in government. A three-months school year in certain communities certainly does not give a child the same advantage he would have with a nine-months school year in another community.

One minority group of American children that I feel deserves particular attention are about five million Negroes, Indians, Mexicans and Orientals under sixteen years of age. They have all the handicaps of other children with the addition of a number of special handicaps of their own. Their families are usually in the lowest income groups and the restrictions put upon the opportunities offered them for health, for education, for recreation and later for employment, are very great because of prejudice and lack of understanding or appreciation of their needs and capabilities. This conference should set the example and perhaps start our thinking in a new way—in America good standards apply to all children regardless of race or creed or color.

Child labor has frequently flourished in underprivileged groups. Child labor, of course, is a menace not only to other young people but to all workers. We have been handicapped by the fact that many people have thought that the regulation of child labor would mean interference in the home and prevention of ordinary home training in work habits. This, of course, is not child labor, and there is much child labor in this country which we should make every effort to control. We are concerned about the children before they are born, but we should follow them through every step of their development until the children are firmly on their feet and started in life as citizens of a democracy.

Our particular task in this conference has been to emphasize the fact that children in a democracy are all-important

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and that in leaving unsolved many economic and social problems, which touch the lives of children, we have jeopardized the future of democracy. We feel we are more advanced than many other nations in this respect, but after looking at some pictures of the health work in schools for German children I think we are not as intelligent in this field as the German people have been for years past. Long before the present regime, scientists in Germany paid special attention not only to the physical health of the child but to a completely rounded-out development which took into account all the new knowledge to be obtained in the field of medicine and psychology.

I have often heard people say they would rather have a democracy, even if it had to be inefficient, than regimented efficiency. We love our freedom, but must we of necessity have freedom coupled with stupidity? Is it not possible to face our situation and recognize the inequalities in the economic background of America's children, inequalities in educational opportunities, in health protection, in recreation and leisure-time activities and in opportunities for employment?

I began by telling you how inadequate I felt when I was bringing up my children. I feel the mistakes I made serve to give me a little more wisdom and understanding in helping people who are trying today to preserve our democracy. We cannot direct youth altogether, but we can give courage to the next generation and stand back of them so that they will feel our protection and good will.

I think we may find in 1950 that we have made strides far beyond our expectations.

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