Children's Advocacy Institute

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Caring for Our Kids Should Be the Bottom Line

It's a disgrace that children suffer most under the selfish, wrongheaded state budget. It is a shame and a disgrace.

By Robert C. Fellmeth

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The long labor now done, the California Legislature has given birth to a monster that will eat away our public investment in children, child programs and education for decades to come.

It will leave many poor children, who don't have the Social Security safety net of the elderly, bereft. And it raises profound questions about our commitment to the children who are our common legacy.

How might these cuts have been avoided, given our state budget deficit?

Perhaps our big-time campaign-donor prison guards should not be able to retire at age 50 with as much as 90% of their top pay for life. Perhaps the $5.7 billion in state tax deductions and credits for business and the elderly enacted since 1999 should be reexamined.

Instead, California's lawmakers have cut public investment in children more than the members of any other Legislature in the nation since the Great Depression--not the $7 billion that Gov. Gray Davis has contended but more than $13 billion.

The cuts are everywhere: job investment in impoverished parents facing an imminent loss of the federal safety net; basic K-12 education investment (once again, California is about to slip to last place in the nation in class size); investment in higher education (slots for youth needing post-high school training will decrease in relation to population).

The 100,000 foster children--kids so abused that the state has removed them and taken parental jurisdiction--will continue to suffer neglect, substantially being abandoned at the age of 18, despite the $350 million solemnly promised to them by the Assembly Democratic caucus at the start of the year.

That is only the start. Virtually every penny of new federal money going to California for children is being diverted to general fund relief. Federal dollars will not supplement state efforts but supplant them.

The Healthy Families program has signed up some new children for medical coverage, but hundreds of millions in federal money will be returned to Washington for distribution to other states because California cannot come up with its 33% match. These cuts will occur along with a 6% gain in personal income projected for 2003.

If we adults paid the same percentage of our income in public investment in children as our parents did in 1979, we would be investing $15 billion more than the sum provided in the current state budget. Yet in the eyes of lawmakers, all that matters is that we have avoided a tax increase.

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Our values and biases are revealed not so much by what we say as by what we choose to talk about. Tax levels are on the media-public policy table. But tax spending is not. Children are not, unless one happens to be abducted. Yet abductions actually are down markedly, while massive negative trends in youth employment, teacher quality, classroom size, child health coverage and child hunger get no media coverage. And if we do discuss them, it is rarely in relation to public investment.

News anchor and writer Tom Brokaw calls those who matured during the Depression and World War II "the Greatest Generation" for their courage and generosity. Yet their remarkable sacrifice was not that atypical.

The United States long has stood for investment in its children above all else, from the communities in the pioneer West selling crops to build schoolhouses to immigrant families committing their savings so children could go to college or own homes.

It is the current group of baby boomers--self-indulgent and shameless takers--who are the anomalous generation.