



Children's Advocacy Institute

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SOMEBODY ELSE'S CHILDREN

Child abuse reports in California have increased from 200,000 in 1981, to over 650,000 today, paralleling a national rise. John Hubner and Jill Wolfson, two Pulitzer prize winning journalists, probe this national tragedy in Somebody Else's Children with a telling method: selected individual stories.

This book is a micro-study of case studies covering: molestation, drug babies, false accusations, failure to treat, foster care drift. The setting is often the cases of respected Santa Clara Juvenile Court Judge Len Edwards. It brilliantly reveals a world largely hidden by confidentiality - allegedly to protect the children involved, but most often allowing tragedy to flourish without external check.

A lot has gone wrong culturally and politically to create the case studies presented, and that is where we need to turn for preventive answers. Such root causes generally fall into one of two lists. The category A list is one of private failure: breakdown of the family, unwed births and absence of fathers, drug use, personal selfishness, state dependency, a culture which promotes sexual allure at every turn.

In category B is a different list: child poverty from unemployment and hopelessness, public disinvestment, the shredding of the safety net, media preoccupation with violence. Category B adherents argue that it "takes a village to raise a child," that "families take many different forms." Traditional liberals, B folk also argue facts: most welfare mothers are not 17, the median age is 29; that the average number of children per AFDC family is not 7 but 1.9; and that the single parents do work when given the chance, but receive little child support and need child care help for employment.

But overriding both lists is a fact of economic life: the annual median income of \$7,000 for a single mother with two or more children under six, compared to \$42,000 for a married couple with the same children. It is above \$40,000 for African-American married couples. An unwed birth rate of over 30% breeds serious and inevitable child poverty. And it turns out that fathers are as important to child rearing as claimed. Is it possible that liberals, in solicitude for the "poor" as a group, have failed to acknowledge the obligation the poor also have to prepare for their children, to save and wait, and to marry?

If our category B liberals had acknowledged these child rights, where would be the support to remove public help for those in trouble because of illness, divorce, lay-off, or misfortune (still the majority of those getting AFDC)?

If we want to stem the tide of child abuse, we need less arguing about which list is better, and to instead sign a real contract, one for our children. We can agree that children should come first in our private decisions, and also that some adults will fail. Although no set of social workers can replace a caring family (what village are they talking about?), mitigation is within the province of the state; last resort help cannot be the sole province of private charity happenstance - not when a child's life and future hang in the balance.

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The "state haters" need to get real as much as do the "everybody do their thing" believers. We have a state which has invested deeply in Europe in the 1940s, and since then in rural electrification and roads, military buildups, in massive water projects, and enormous continuing tax subsidies. We can afford the public investment of category B quite easily; we are among the wealthiest jurisdictions in the history of the world, and this is an investment in our own children.

Instead of following this advice, the Category A followers have now succeeded in "welfare reform", and are implementing it to stimulate Category A performance by cutting off Category B benefits en masse by 1999. There are almost 1 million AFDC mothers in California, with 330,000 new jobs predicted next year and 1 million non-welfare applicants seeking them. If 30% of AFDC mothers obtain jobs within two years it will be a miracle; and the cut-off for the children of the remainder will be devastating - from \$850 per month in AFDC and food stamp total support for a family of three to \$250 in food stamps - and homelessness for many.

It is an interesting commentary on the limits of feminist influence that male child support failure - over 80% of absent fathers pay 0 - remains secondary as an object of public approbation. How will the system - very accurately depicted in this book - deal with over 1 million children in a state of neglect? Will it even know about malnutrition of 0 to 5 year olds? Will it ameliorate likely child prostitution? What will the price be down the road? In 1977 we had 19,000 adult prisoners in our state; now we have over 150,000. How many in ten years and at what cost?

One key to this problem may be found in this book's title: "Other People's Children." We seem to have lost the feeling that the children of the poor are part of our tribe. The contract we need must be joined by the adherents of category A - who need to actually implement in this part of their lives the New Testament they are so fond of quoting, and of category B - who need to put the current and future children of the poor ahead of their sometimes irresponsible parents. Both need to wake up and smell the coffee.

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