

AMERICAN ACADEMY OF PEDIATRICS

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

THE 1960 WHITE HOUSE CONFERENCE ON CHILDREN AND YOUTH

Its Significance for Pediatricians in the 1960's

IN 1909 President Theodore Roosevelt personally wrote 200 notes in longhand inviting representative American citizens to attend a conference at the White House. His serious and far-reaching purpose was to assess and plan for the well-being of the country's young people. With this first presidential meeting on children and youth, a White House precedent was set, and, once in every decade since, a similar conference has been held. These "periodic examinations," so to speak, of the nation's young, have been distinguished over the years for major outcomes in the welfare of children and youth.

Last year, as you know, marked the Golden Anniversary of White House Conferences on Children and Youth. In contrast to the small group which convened in 1909, some 7,000 citizens assembled in Washington about a year ago. Among them were numerous pediatricians from various parts of the country whose leadership was clearly evident at the conference sessions. Their contributions to the discussions were aided by the preparation for this meeting that had been encouraged by the Academy's *Ad Hoc* Committee on the White House Conference under the leadership of Stewart Clifford.

Unquestionably this 1960 Conference brought into focus the extraordinary progress that has been made in improving the health of children during the last 50 years in this country. Remarkably large reductions have been effected in the mortality at younger ages. The death rate for infants under 1 year of age decreased 78% between 1910 and 1956—from 132.2 to 29.6 per 1,000. Even more rapid has been the downward

trend in mortality among children past infancy. At the preschool ages, 1 through 4 years, the death rate dropped from 14.0 to 1.1 per 1,000, or 92%. The relative decrease was almost as large at ages 5 through 9; even at ages 15 through 19 the mortality was reduced nearly 75%. According to the mortality prevailing at the time of the first White House Conference, newborn children had 50 years of life ahead of them; at present the figure is nearly 70 years.¹

However, progress made in advancing the health of American youngsters should not divert attention from the many problems in health and welfare that still exist. Fetal and neonatal wastage, accidents, diseases of the heart and respiratory system, orthopedic conditions, and visual and hearing impairments are some of the problems that concern pediatricians. Along with these is the ever-present, but less tangible, need to improve our understanding of the basic principles of children's physical, mental and emotional growth and development.

The continued leadership of pediatricians will be expected in the 1960's to move thinking forward in studying child health and behavior. Pediatricians will need an even broader understanding of the problems of children and youth through the next decade. Such an understanding has become inherently necessary in the practice of pediatrics, for, to quote Rustin McIntosh, "Pediatrics, as a clinical discipline, has undergone an almost revolutionary evolution in several of its aspects: in its concern for the child as an individual, rather than for an illness with which he is afflicted at the time when his parents seek professional advice; in its growing appreciation of the continuous in-

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terplay between a child's emotional state and his manifestations of signs of disturbed health; and in the increasing objectivity and reliability of the sorts of evidence which can be assembled to form the basis of a clinical decision."²

An exciting three-volume collection of observations on the conditions, problems and outlook of the nation's young people has been published by the White House Conference on Children and Youth, under the title "The Nation's Children." Thirty-four distinguished experts in a variety of fields contributed chapters to this work, which has been edited by Eli Ginzburg of Columbia University. The pediatrician who seeks to understand further the complex weave of social, economic, cultural and medical problems in the younger generations today, will find his time well rewarded by browsing through this collected work.

In the first volume, entitled "The Family and Social Change," topics such as "From Frontier to Suburbia," "The Changing Negro Family" and "The New Leisure" are covered in lively and engrossing styles. In a challenging introduction, Ginzburg relates a personal experience that underscored for him the order of change in the contemporary world: Upon Ginzburg's return from Princeton, where he had lectured, he told his 7-year-old son about Einstein, who had lived there. He set forth Einstein's theory of relativity as best he could, and then told his son that, curiously, Einstein had had difficulty with simple arithmetic—he counted and re-counted his change on a trolley car. The son's face clouded over. Although he had had no difficulty in following the explanation of the theory of relativity, the boy exploded with the question, "What's a trolley car?"

Volume two deals with "Development and Education" and presents a series of contributions from three vantage points that are focused on the analysis of the gap between our aspirations and our accomplishments in preparing young people for life. Among the contributors are James V. Neel, M.D., Professor of Human Genetics at the University

of Michigan Medical School; Ralph W. Tyler, Director of the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences; and Gardner Murphy and Lois Barclay Murphy of the Menninger Clinic.

"Problems and Prospects," the third volume, singles out such problem areas as rural youth, youth in minority groups and youth in difficulty with the law. It also reviews the voluntary and government mechanisms available which work to mitigate social malfunctioning and the extent to which we make use of these mechanisms. And finally, there are several contributions that assess the potential for adjustment in our basic institutions. Authors such as Eric Larabee, Executive Director of *American Heritage*, and Norman Cousins, Editor of the *Saturday Review*, are represented.

An equally fascinating story of the work to advance the well-being of the nation's young people is told in "Focus on Children and Youth," a joint report of 550 national voluntary organizations. (The American Academy of Pediatrics is a member of the Council of National Organizations on Children and Youth.) This publication is an informative and useful book revealing not only the problem and challenge of the 1960's but also the great and unique contributions of voluntary organizations in this country and their traditional cooperation with official agencies.

In anticipation of the 1960 White House Conference on Children and Youth, a good deal of stock-taking and planning was done on the grassroots level in each of the 50 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico and our island territories. These reports have been incorporated into a volume entitled "The States Report on Children and Youth." The great significance of this report lies in the fact that it represents the best thinking of large groups of concerned Americans.

Last, but certainly not least of the major contributions to the White House Conference on Children and Youth, is the collection of fundamental facts prepared by 34 agencies and departments in our federal

government. "Children in A Changing World" offers carefully analyzed statistics and easy-to-read graphs on all the major problems of children and youth and what is being done about them. This book provides an invaluable reference for community leaders seeking to advance the well-being of the young people in their areas.

The White House Conference on Children and Youth has grown in size, in scope and in stature. Now a tradition in this country, it is a fine example of our democracy at work. It has gained international recognition and served as a model for other nations which have adapted Conference programs, objectives and recommendations to their own uses and needs. Yet the real value of the Conference for us lies not in its size, or scope or influence, but in its stimulating challenge to the Academy as an organiza-

tion and to pediatricians as individuals for the continued pursuit of excellence in the world of children in the 60's.

George M. Loheath, Jr.

December 8, 1960.

REFERENCES*

1. White House Conference on Children and Youth. Statistical Bulletin, Vol. 40. Metropolitan Life Insurance Company, February, 1959, pp. 6-8.
2. 1959 Annual Report, Columbia-Presbyterian Medical Center, p. 139.

* Each of the publications mentioned can be obtained by writing to the Publications Division, White Conference on Children and Youth, 330 Independence Avenue, S.W., Washington 25, D.C.

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