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LET THE LITTLE CHILDREN COME TO ME

A Statement on
Early Childhood Care
and Education

UNITED STATES CATHOLIC CONFERENCE

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A Statement on Early Childhood Care and Education

I. American families live under many strong pressures today. These pressures arise from contemporary social and economic conditions and from the prevalence of secularistic values.

Family separation is commonplace and takes various forms. Young families often live far away from relatives. In a growing number of families father and mother both work outside the home and have little time to spend with their children at the end of the working day. There is a large number of single parents who must struggle to maintain both job and family. More than six million children of pre-school age have mothers who also work outside the home. Many young children spend most of their waking hours in day-care centers or under the supervision of baby sitters—or with virtually no supervision at all. Divorce has touched the life of one child in three. Other elements in the crisis of the American family include frequent relocation, unemployment, poverty and inadequate health care which afflict the deprived and disadvantaged.

Many things are needed for families to cope successfully with such conditions. Here we speak of the need for sound principles and effective programs to help parents raise and educate very young children. As matters stand, many American families find it difficult at best to be settings in which sound values are formed, personal growth occurs, and care is rendered. Yet without family stability, parental guidance, and the cooperation of a variety of institutions and agencies in the community, children cannot experience wholesome development—spiritual, physical, emotional and intellectual.

The foundations of attitudes about human relationships and of social and religious values are laid before a child reaches school age. It is therefore profoundly important that from concep-

tion to age seven, children have opportunities to grow in a healthy, loving family environment. This is necessary for the present well being of children, for the sake of the families they will form in the future, and for the present and future welfare of society itself.

In the past it was reasonable to assume that the extended family, closely knit neighborhood communities and the relationship between church and family would provide a satisfactory setting for early childhood care and education. This cannot be taken for granted today. In seeking to improve the conditions of family life, society and the Church must direct a major part of their concern and effort to very young children and their parents.

Though the environment in which people live in their early years is often a source of problems and conflicts in adulthood, society seems more interested in trying to correct adult problems than in adopting realistic measures to prevent them in early childhood. Remedies are certainly needed for the problems of adults. But assisting families with young children today would reduce the need for remedial and rehabilitative programs for adults tomorrow.

Such efforts should begin with programs for prospective parents. We have in mind programs to strengthen family life, inform future parents about child development, and provide means for proper child care and education. Community agencies are aware of the needs and problems, but up to now they have not been able to deliver meaningful assistance to more than a minority of families and children who need it. While continuing to support such efforts, therefore, the Church also must reaffirm its own commitment to early childhood care and learning and to education for parenthood.

II. It is a fundamental tenet of Christian faith that each individual is created by God and uniquely gifted with a multitude of capabilities which can be developed for his or her own happiness and the good of the community. A wholesome environment, including the family itself and a variety of enriching opportunities for education and formation from conception to adulthood, is essential for individuals to develop and use their capabilities.

Parents and families have the primary responsibility for fostering the growth and education of young children; “for the family is . . . the principal school of social virtues which are necessary to every society” (*Declaration on Christian Education*, 7). The relationships which parents establish with their children from the very first moments of their lives onward are crucial to the quality of life of their offspring—as infants, children and eventually as adults (*General Catechetical Directory*, 78). But parents need help in carrying out their responsibilities. Others in the family, the Church and the community at large have vital roles in the early growth and development of children. Older brothers and sisters, relatives, family friends, teachers, child-care professionals, parish and community leaders and all others in a position to influence the young should be aware that they share with parents the awesome duty of providing the best in care and education.

Thus the task essentially involves a sharing of responsibility. “As well as the rights of parents, and of those to whom parents entrust some share in their duty to educate, there are certain duties and rights vested in civil society inasmuch as it is its function to provide for the common good in temporal matters” (*Declaration on Christian Education*, 3). When resources for the proper care and education of young children are lacking in the family and cannot be provided there, or when a child has reached the point at which formal peer group experiences are desirable, there is an important role for publicly funded services provided through privately or publicly directed agencies in accord with parental needs and wishes. Such agencies should, however, acknowledge the prior rights of parents and families and give them a real voice in determining the values and attitudes they will seek to foster.

As the living community of the faithful, following the risen Christ, the Church is committed to integral human development. This requires it to “offer its assistance to all peoples for the promotion of a well balanced perfection of the human personality, for the good of society in this world and for the development of a world more worthy of humanity” (*ibid.*). As part of its contemporary witness to Christian values and moral education, the Church has a significant interest

—an interest we here reaffirm—in early childhood care and education.

As a community we are pledged to support the growth in faith of all who have been baptized into membership in the body of Christ. But living faith can only be nurtured in children through interaction with their parents and other members of the Christian community who seek to enrich the lives of the young by communicating the gospel message through programs of religious education and through the witness of their own dedicated lives which is of vital importance. Individuals have a responsibility to grow in the faith—and the faith community has a responsibility to help them. The Church thus joins parents and society in a mutual concern for quality care and education of the very young.

III. As their birthright in human society all children are entitled to the best efforts of us all in regard to their care and education. Much lip service is paid to this principle, but it is far from being realized in the United States today. Families, professionals in the field, and public and private agencies have made encouraging progress, but many needs in the area of early childhood care and education have not been addressed and satisfied.

Far more, for example, must be done to prepare men and women for parenthood. Programs should begin well before marriage and the birth of children. Beyond that, more resources, creativity and commitment must be expended in meeting the needs of families and children. Though all children and families have the same basic needs and rights in this regard, some require our particular attention. These include single parents and their children; children in families where both parents work outside the home; abused and neglected children and their parents; families which must relocate frequently and as a result may lack opportunity for participation in community life and continuity in educational and formational programs for their children; handicapped children and their families; educationally disadvantaged children and exceptional children; children of bilingual and bicultural families; children in hospitals and child-care institutions and their parents.

In light of the needs, we endorse efforts within the Church which have among their purposes:

To strengthen and support Christian family life as a high ideal and priority in the Church and society by recognizing the need for parents to grow in their relationship with each other, with their children, with the Church, and with the community at large;

To help parents lead their children to develop and appreciate Christian values and practice Christian virtues, through which they will reach the fullness of Christian maturity and to be active in their support of those agencies in the Church and society which contribute to the development of those values and virtues;

To help single parents, working mothers, and families where both parents work outside the home obtain for their children child care and education which reflect their own best values and ideals;

To make guidance concerning early childhood development and religious formation part of the preparation which parents receive before the baptism of their children, beginning, if possible, several months before the baptism is to take place and consistently thereafter;

To make early education for parenthood available to engaged couples and also to adolescents as part of their general education;

To meet the special needs for care and education which educationally disadvantaged, exceptional, handicapped, abused, orphaned or separated children have during their crucial early years;

To make adequately staffed and funded religious education programs, appropriate in purpose and design to their ages and needs, available to all children in parish communities;

To institute nursery school, pre-school and kindergarten programs and day care centers in Catholic parishes where community needs warrant them.

Beyond this, we encourage parents in their efforts "to create a family atmosphere, inspired by love and devotion to God and their neighbors, which will promote an integrated, personal and social education of their children" (*Declaration on Christian Education*, 3).

We ask that persons responsible for Christian education make special efforts to provide expectant parents, parents of young children and all who influence the young with programs to enrich their spiritual growth and better equip them for the demanding vocation of nurturing a new generation.

We encourage collaboration among diocesan agencies in establishing programs of early childhood care and education under Church auspices, as well as their cooperation in this area with other public and private agencies.

We point out the need for governmental solutions for the dilemma of young mothers who feel forced to choose between personally caring for their young children at home and going to join the labor force in order to provide economic necessities for these same children.

We urge that federal, state and local governments cooperate with families, with the Church, and with other concerned parties in meeting young children's need for care and education. In this regard we look to government for meaningful legislation, adequate funding, and competent and concerned administration.

Finally, we urge all members of the Church and society to support constructive efforts on behalf of families and family life; to contribute in whatever ways are open to them in the development of new programs and resources for quality child care and education; and to join us in prayer for the success of our collective efforts to enrich the quality of life of parents and their children.



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