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COMMENTARY

FUTURE OUTLOOK FOR CHILD PROTECTION POLICIES IN EUROPE

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ANY ATTEMPT TO predict the future of child protection policies in Europe is intrinsically related to understanding the past and evaluating the present. The major historical, political, economic, ideological, and cultural differences need to be considered, but also the similarities among the 15 countries which are united through an economic treaty in which children play a minimal role, if not an invisible one.

This European puzzle, many pieces of which are missing or misplaced, needs to be put together if the quality of life of children in the future is to be predicted. Child protection cannot, therefore, be studied in isolation, but only within the complex system in which it is embedded.

A second issue to be mentioned is one of semantics. The term ''child protection'' does not mean the same throughout Europe. In some countries such as the UK and Ireland ''child protection work'' means work in ''child abuse,'' whereas in the South, as in Greece, child protection is equivalent to child welfare, that is, all measures and policies which promote the child's wellbeing whether within or outside the family. Similarly, there must be a consensus in regard to the definition of child abuse and neglect, which in the last 35 years, from a medically oriented ''battered child syndrome'' has now become wide enough to include any violation of a child's right as well as types of social exclusion. As the scope in medicine has shifted through the years from dealing with ill health to promoting health, a parallel evolution has been in the social sciences whose scope has shifted from dealing with social problems to promoting the quality of life.

A third basic issue which needs to be considered as Europe moves from the past into the future is the value of children, historically and culturally. Children may be no longer found in the mines of Central Europe but they are being exploited in the streets by their parents or other adults, they are homeless, they use and/or deal in drugs, are sold to local men or tourists, and they are exploited via the pornography of the Internet.

On the other hand, the falling birth rate in Europe is raising the social valuation of children,

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which is in turn diminished by the rising life expectancy of adults. In today's Europe, fewer children are valued as labor or as insurance for their parents' old age, as agriculture is diminishing while pension schemes are established for all. The absence of war in Europe results in fewer children being valued as the nation's future. Children now are valued mainly for fulfilling the emotional needs of the parent for self perpetuation, for love, and for power, while contemporary society, with its emphasis on materialism, values children as consumers, either directly or through adults (Agathonos-Georgopoulou, 1992).

The Past

During the last 50 years following World War II, massive changes in family life have had serious implications for children (Hess, 1995), including family disruption, rise in illegitimacy rates, increase in maternal employment outside the home and consequently various day care solutions for young children, smaller families, and marked increase in life expectancy. These changes have resulted in a serious rise of psychosocial disorders in young people (Smith & Rutter, 1995): Crime rates, suicide and attempted suicide, abuse of licit and illicit drugs have increased, while depression and eating disorders have become more common.

Another trend linked with the overall wellbeing of children is our failure to combat and to eradicate poverty. Data suggest not only that poverty is increasing but also that for a growing number of poor people it gets harder and harder to get out of poverty (Wilson, 1987). Furthermore, the relationship between poverty and ill health is being acknowledged, as is the need for our commitment to a social model of health. Today not only the links between poverty and social exclusion of many types are recognized, but also their contribution to child maltreatment and the subsequent heavy burden on the child welfare system.

The last 50 years have seen political and economic changes which have affected children themselves and have also had an impact on the politics of childhood.

Depending on the culture and political situation of each country, the influence of the state on the family and on the child has varied. It has ranged from a tendency of the state to mistrust the family, as was the example in former Eastern Europe where the state assumed responsibility for children, or in the Israeli kibbutz where child rearing was mainly the responsibility of the group, to a tendency of the state to rely on the family for the welfare of children as has been the case in most European countries.

Fortunately, the balance of power between the state and the family with regard to the responsibility for children is a dynamic process and is subject to change as a result of new research evidence and following political and ideological changes which can influence this relationship.

In the field of social policy, considerable advances have been made although development has been quite uneven and in some instances failed. The gap has grown between what is the best and what is not good enough in both attitudes and service provision in Europe, while the limits to resources of all types are very evident (Kurtz, 1990). This is true in many spheres such as children's position in society which is defined by the relationship between the generations, and by the institutional arrangements made by society (Qvortrup, 1993).

This has been evident in the fields of legislation, child welfare, education, health, and leisure activities, where children's views have never been sought or even considered. Furthermore, because children have been regarded as the property of their parents, there has been a great lack of information and data about children.

The Present

Today, European children and youth live in the midst of a transitory stage on a continent which is striving for its identity while each individual country tries to preserve its precious cultural and historical self. The demographic and social changes of the past have had an impact on the present

situation, while the political changes in Eastern European countries with their economic and social consequences are creating serious welfare problems for children, youth, and their families.

The decline in fertility has been described as a result of a structural change in the relationship between the family and the broader society (Sgritta, 1996). In the traditional family "mutual dependence between generations consists principally of two stages: Children depend on their parents to provide nurturing and education while parents, in their old age, depend on their adult children" (Coleman, 1990). This mutual dependence, according to Coleman, has been curtailed by the rise of pension funds and retirement insurance. Thus, society is taking away from the family the responsibility for the aged. Today, adults increasingly plan their lives in terms of themselves rather than their children. The family's capacity to keep people of different ages together has been weakened and as a result the authority of parents over their children has been weakened as well. Social institutions such as school, pensions, and social security have placed the different generations in their own separate worlds (Davis & Van Den Oever, 1981).

As a result, the times of the "king-child" are over. The child is occupying a lesser and lesser role while the third and fourth generations attract the state's interests. There are counter arguments to this proposition, suggesting that the more scarce children are, the higher are their value and appreciation by society.

The decline in fertility has been accompanied by a growing difficulty of parents to parent, in the absence of a corresponding increase of support from outside sources. Society's role is one of negligence of family and children's needs but, at the same time, it regards children as a profitable investment while it often leads to their exploitation such as in advertising and in the commercialization of childhood. The economic importance of childhood for society counteracts the family's shift in viewpoint from seeing childhood as a utility to regarding childhood as important in the affective domain (Zelizer, 1985).

Social changes in Europe have resulted in new family forms which have had serious impact on children. The dual earner family means less time of parents for children, less time for each other, less time for leisure (Schor, 1991). "Time–poverty" in parenting has resulted in children experiencing an affective and social vacuum which encourages the establishment of parasocial relationships such as that with television.

There is evidence that children also are at risk when their families are incomplete. Divorce, once a luxury of the wealthy who could afford it, is now more common among the working class. Divorce rates in Sweden have increased significantly. In Greece, although divorce rates are much lower, they have increased by 50% since the mid eighties. In 1992, out of wedlock births in Greece were 2.6%, the lowest in Europe (Gibson, 1994), while in Sweden half the births took place out of wedlock (Statistical Yearbook of Sweden, 1994). The difference between these two countries is that a child born out of wedlock in Sweden very often enters a family of two parents living in a consensual union, whereas a Greek child is most likely to have a young single mother, unsupported by her family and stigmatized by her social milieu.

The striking differences between European countries stresses the importance of local variations in custom, in history, in the influence of religion, and in economics.

Against a background of multiple social changes resulting in the increase of individualism and the gradual erosion of the community, child protection has taken on a meaning of protecting from harm rather than of promoting children's wellbeing. This should be the framework of national policy: strengthening parental rights, roles, and responsibilities and through this, safeguarding the rights of the child. At present, education for parenting is presented as secondary rather than as primary prevention; as correction rather than as preparation. Most official programs focus on the prevention of social pathology (e.g., child abuse, drug addiction) and not on facilitating family relationships and promoting the quality of life of its members (Jacobson et al., 1994; Olds, 1986). This focus disregards the recognition among professionals that the prevalence of emotional and behavioral disorders among children and adolescents is one in five (Rae Grant, 1991), and that a

good quality of nurturing by parents helps children develop into physically and mentally healthy adults.

The new waves of migration into and within Europe have created or brought to light a variety of problems affecting children of all ages and their families. The EU hosts more than 8 million emigrants from non-member states — from North Africa, the Middle East, Latin America, and the Indian Subcontinent (Black, 1989). An estimated 2–3 million of these lack legal residence permits and work in the unofficial clandestine economic sector, often moving from country to country. They live peripheral to medical, educational, and social welfare services in the host countries. Even if they acquire legal status, their strong ethnic identity, their language barrier, religion, and the need to preserve their culture often keep them outside the service sector, living in conditions of social exclusion. Economic refugees have neither the public sympathy nor the services provided to political refugees.

The opening up of the boundaries between European countries has created a new type of migrant, the medical migrant, including children whose families are seeking special services outside of the home country (Trakas & Vall, 1996). Since many health problems are related to socioeconomic conditions, economic, political, and medical migration share many similarities: For example, diseases which may be linked to poor socioeconomic conditions are respiratory and gastrointestinal infections; emotional problems, communication problems are related to overcrowding and bad housing. We need much more data on the health and social problems of children who belong to the various types of new migration groups.

A serious health problem of today which has psychosocial implications for children calling for innovative welfare approaches is AIDS. Children have little or no influence on the family, on the community, or on society concerning the way in which AIDS is handled, although they are the most defenseless victims (Matsaniotis, 1996). AIDS influences greatly the length and the quality of life of child victims, while the loss of parents from the disease most often leads to their stigmatization and to social exclusion. In both cases, at present, Europe is not prepared to face the emerging new needs for child welfare and protection.

The technological revolution of the two last decades, in conjunction with the social changes, is having a considerable impact on children's lives.

Television, with its continuous presence in almost all European households, in combination with parental time poverty, care deficit, and the deteriorating community and kinship networks, has been acting as a substitute for children who suffer from a scarcity of meaningful social relations. TV is encouraging para-social relationships which distort the meaning of real relationships to children (Gunter & McAleer, 1990).

Most of the data on children and families' present conditions in Europe have been based on adults inquiring information from other adults, in the absence of children and youth, as a special social category. Thus, the voice of children as society's key social actors is not heard.

During a conference organized by the Council of Europe in Leipzig, Germany in May 1996 on the occasion of the completion of the Childhood Policies Program, children and youth from European countries were given full participation.

The following priorities were proposed by their groups (Council of Europe, 1996):

1. The promotion of a democratic conscience within the family.
2. The distribution of responsibilities within the family.
3. The promotion of beliefs and values among the generations.
4. Transcultural education.
5. Participation of children, youth, and of their families in society.
6. Information to children and families.
7. Qualitative control of the mass media — movies — internet.

European children and youth rank the value of the family high in their priorities. They value a family which promotes respect, equality, dialogue, and feelings of "belongingness" among its members and across the generations. They stress the importance of citizenship for them and for their families. They ask for protection against the ills of information technology. In today's European multicultural society, European children and youth need to understand each other better so as to promote a true European citizenship for all. The situation of European children calls for a renegotiation of the interplay between state and family and their effects on the everyday life of children and youth.

Ilona Kickbusch, WHO director of Lifestyles and Health, has made a relevant remark about today's situation in connection with the WHO Healthy Cities Movement: "The modern state has become too small for the big problems of life and too big for the small problems of life."

The Future

In view of today's situation in Europe, two questions are emerging:

1. How can we use the present to predict the future?
2. How can we translate predictions into actions?

A quick answer comes from the words of Sir Winston Churchill, in 1944: "The longer you can look back, the further you can look forward" or, as found in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*: "What's past is prologue."

Forecasts often fail to be realized as their open discussion may stimulate preventive initiatives.

A demographic scenario outlined by Eurostat (1991) predicts a further decrease in the average number of children per family to around 1.5 for recently born generations, a slight increase in life expectancy, and a steady European population of about 348 million up to year 2010. If current low fertility rates persist, the population after 2010 will tend to diminish. This scenario brings with it expected consequences such as an increase in individualism, more voluntary childlessness, later motherhood, more children born out of wedlock, more cohabitation or living alone, longer education for women, and rapidly increasing female labor force participation (Sgritta, 1996).

Considering the links of these social changes with the rise of psychosocial disorders in children and adolescents, an increase in these disorders in the future can be predicted. Nevertheless, it is necessary on one hand to avoid thinking in linear terms, while on the other, to place these trends in a longer term perspective.

There is no doubt that future parents need to be prepared for the role of parenting as early as possible, and within the formal education system addressed to all. Tomorrow's children will have fewer opportunities to learn how to be parents by watching and by doing because of the expected changes in family size. One of the ways that this life experience deficit can be repaired is by giving opportunities to children over 12 years to have contact with kindergarten children within the school curriculum, as has been organized in some countries such as Canada, through the "big brother–big sister" programs.

The positive predictions of the foreseeable social changes should not be underestimated. The expected rise in the number of smaller families will mean a reduction in the number of unwanted children and an increase in the number of planned pregnancies. A small family implies that there will be more adults available to care for children. Voluntary childlessness is predicted to lead to more people being available to adopt and/or foster children and the expectation that such homes will be of a higher quality (Finkelhor, 1991).

Another positive trend is the delay in age of the first child-bearing experience, which will alleviate one of the risk factors for child maltreatment. Later childbearing is associated with a higher education, personal maturity, better economic situation, and therefore, a higher quality of parenting.

The dissemination of knowledge in the future is predicted to have beneficial effects in the field of parenting, as information will be able to reach everyone in a wide range of venues. Health education may acquire a central role if social policy gives it a priority.

In the sphere of child abuse, better information processing is predicted to result in systems which can track clients better. At the European level, higher effectiveness in tracing offenders moving across countries and in coordinating services can be expected. For example, in Wales, UK, everyone who applies to work with children is undergoing not only an investigation of his police record, but also a thorough police search.

Lastly, physician oversupply in Europe, in association with the advance of medical technology, is predicted to lead to a rising interest in community medicine and in social pediatrics, which will contribute to the prevention and early detection of child abuse and neglect among other phenomena.

Secondary prevention of child maltreatment is expected to be developed further in the future. The early detection through comprehensive screening programs addressed to all newborns, of parents with risk characteristics for child abuse and neglect and their support throughout their child's first 2 years of life, is expected to prevent abuse from occurring. This approach, applied in the UK in 1993, successfully identified potentially maltreated cases (Browne & Saqi, 1988).

Similarly, in Greece, a checklist of risk characteristics for physical abuse and neglect has been developed for use as a tool in the early detection of cases (Agathonos & Browne, 1997). Family stress and socioeconomic factors alone are not sufficient explanations for child abuse. Both UK and Greek studies have shown the need for work at the level of family relations in order to prevent the physical abuse and neglect of children.

One major change on the European continent which had not been predicted in the past was the political change in the Eastern part of Europe. Today, with a great degree of certainty, it can be predicted that in the near to not so distant future, all countries on the European continent will be equal members of the European Union. A "return to Europe" means a return to the sociodemographic sphere which implies giving back to the family its traditional role and restoration of its historical importance and dignity (Dunovsky, 1996). Nevertheless, it is predicted that the route to be followed will continue to be difficult for children and youth. A recent survey carried out in the Czech Republic revealed that almost one-third of the population has problems related to the quality of life, ranging from reduction in shared family time and the amount of free time to the standard of living and to health (Smolka, 1994). Eastern European countries should not necessarily follow the example of the rest of Europe, but search for their own ways of enabling the family to create the most favorable conditions for its members and especially for its children (Dunovsky, 1996).

A final area for future predictions is that of the technological revolution, its effects on children yet to be born and on those already born.

The reproductive high-tech revolution has resulted in a vast increase in the number of multiple births, mainly twins and triplets. While as many as 5% of couples seek high-tech help to have a baby, little has been done to cope with consequences of technology such as parental — mainly maternal — fatigue, depression, financial problems, and high levels of family stress (Time, 1997). Genetic engineering, in spite the ethical dilemmas involved, is expected to reach proportions which will call for a parallel innovation in family and child welfare.

The technological revolution may exert some very positive influences on children if used in ways which will be beneficial to children's mental, emotional, and social development and to their overall wellbeing. Television will develop into telecomputer systems, allowing any parent or small group of parents to summon the best teachers in the world to their living rooms for interactive courses far superior to anything that can be offered by an existing local school (Gilder, 1992). Technological progress already means that for the first time children and youth know more, compared with their parents.

A very clear example of the adverse effects of technology on young children should alert us to the future dangers. Its name is "Tamagotchi" and it is a virtual reality pet manufactured by the

Japanese firm which produced *Power Rangers* (TO VIMA, 1997). This mini-electronic device in the form of a key ring, offers children the possibility to take care of little "dependent" creatures: to feed them, put them to sleep, nurture them, and care for their health. If one child cannot "parent" well, the little pet dies. The invention of this virtual pet is based on the development of feelings of tenderness and affection. Technology creates a whole range of emotions in children who cannot process them: anxiety, tension, fear, guilt, and feelings of loss. In the case of children who experience a parental quality deficit or even a time — deficit, such access to technology's inventions may have serious consequences for the child's mental health. Because of technological speed of development, such inventions may involve serious problems for young children in the future and need to be prevented.

The question that remains to be answered is how predictions can be transformed into actions. Central to the pursuit of any answer to this question is the issue of children's rights which presupposes:

- (a) Renegotiation of the partnership between government and families.
- (b) Achievement of the right of balance of power between professionals, parents, and children and promotion of a sensitive and informed professional-client relationship.
- (c) Consideration of the values representing the society offered to children. A society which bases its value system on "what you own" rather than "what you are" creates serious social inequalities among children.
- (d) Consideration of the implications for children of every law passed in national parliaments and in the European Parliament. Like the Hopi Indians in the US, before every piece of legislation goes through Parliament, the question should be asked: "Is it good for the children?"
- (e) A welfare system which values not only children but also childhood.
- (f) Governments which listen to children and act on what they hear.
- (g) An ombudsman for children in every European country. The European Commission has called on all member states to appoint a Minister for Children.
- (h) Promotion of dialogue between the state and the private nonprofit sector for children's health, education, welfare, and protection.
- (i) Enhancement of children's quality of life.

Child advocacy needs data. This should be one of the highest priorities at present; to guarantee a child-centered future. It is currently impossible to provide accurate data for the EU as a whole regarding (Ruxton, 1996):

- How many children live in poverty or suffer various types of social exclusion.
- How many homeless children live in the EU.
- How many children are victims of physical and sexual assault, cruelty, and abduction.
- How many children enter and leave residential care, foster families, and similar environments.

The search for data about children's conditions should use adult venues, as no policies are entirely "child-neutral." Unemployment of fathers is one such venue, as there is abundant evidence of the links between paternal unemployment and children's problems. Studies from the Netherlands (Grotenhuis, 1990) and Norway (Christoffersen, 1990) report that long-term paternal unemployment is correlated with children's unsuccessful school careers including dropping out. In parallel, a Swedish study confirmed the effects of paternal unemployment on the wellbeing and self-esteem of children and on reduced aspirations and expectations (De Vylder, 1996). A natural question which is emerging is "*Who is going to do the job?*" Child welfare reformers have been a small group of people, and even with a united effort, they have been relatively weak in the larger social equation (Finkelhor, 1991). Child welfare and the protection of children are fields which need advocates with high professional status and training who have the support of their organizations and governments.

A last question is addressed to our politicians at national level: Since we know most causes of children's problems and most of the solutions, why is it that we don't create and build on changes at a political level?

Large European bodies such as the Council of Europe and the European Commission and international organizations such as UNICEF have been addressing this issue in regards to children in Europe. The outcomes of the Childhood Policies Program of the Council of Europe stress the importance of four main issues:

(a) Children's participation in family and social life.
(b) Children in institutions — Examples of good practice — Guidelines for action.
(c) Children in day care.
(d) Application of children's rights, especially in the new member states.

In 1996, the European Council issued a European Convention on the Exercise of the Rights of the Child. This was followed by a plan of action drafted by the 40 heads of states in October 1997. This plan of action adopted children as a priority, expressed by the strengthening of national and international documents for their legal protection as well as by the promotion of programs for the interests of children.

The European Commission has been showing a considerable interest for children and young people. New budget lines for children are separate from those on the family, while research lines are being planned on children's quality of life, the assessment of children's reality situation, and children's wellbeing.

It is very important that the participation of children and youth would be an in-built element in this research. As most research on children and young people has focused on problem areas and behaviors (i.e., delinquency, suicide, drugs) it is important that children and youth would be *subjects* and not *objects* of research.

The European Commission has also been shown a growing interest in promoting policies and programs against the use of physical punishment to children. This issue is expected to attain a priority during the Austrian presidency, July to December 1997.

UNICEF has embarked on a new mission for children's causes in Europe. The project, operating since 1992 in former Eastern European countries on the transitions and their effects on children, is to be followed by one on children's access to education and on ensuring special protection of children living in poverty, social exclusion, and conditions of exploitation. UNICEF's expressed interest for children in the "Fourth World" is highly welcomed by European professionals dedicated to the cause of children in their respective countries and in the Union.

A pan-European strategy must be developed which would be based on the harmonization of child protection policy and practice and which would encourage all countries to meet minimally acceptable standards. European cooperation between services needs to be encouraged and facilitated. Problems of coordination, solidarity, cooperation, or even communication between professionals directly involved with children and their families may result in confusion, antagonism, ineffectiveness, inaccessibility, and inappropriateness of programs supposedly designed for children. This systemic abuse replicates pathological patterns of malfunctioning families for which intervention is needed. The breaking of boundaries between European countries should not be associated only with tracing offenders of child crimes but also with the promotion of exchange and cooperation among professionals so that ideological and professional boundaries can be broached in the best interests of Europe's children.

The central challenge of this pan-European policy movement should be first the decision on "what European childhood should be." Then, at the micro level, Europe must be able to face the challenge of acknowledging the uniqueness of every child, of safeguarding and promoting the rights of each individual child, and of guaranteeing that while the adult professionals confer around

the table, they should be able to respond to a simple question asked by a child-recipient of their interventions — ***SO WHAT?***

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