

Healthy start: An interview with Marian Wright Edelman

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Marian Wright Edelman is founder and president of the Children's Defense Fund, a national child advocacy organization. CDF monitors federal and state policies concerning children and provides information and assistance to state and local child advocates and to providers of services to children. The organization will mark its 25th anniversary with a November celebration in Washington, D.C.

Edelman was the first black woman admitted to the Mississippi bar and in the mid-1960s directed the NAACP's Legal Defense and Educational Fund office in Jackson, Mississippi. Before founding the CDF she served for two years as the director of the Center for Law and Education at Harvard University. She has received the Albert Schweitzer Humanitarian Prize and is the author of several books, including: Children in Peril: An Agenda for Social Change and The Measure of Our Success: A Letter to My Children and Yours. Her most recent book is Guide My Feet: Meditations and Prayers on Loving and Working for Children. We spoke with her recently about the work of the CDF and the politics of the family.

Over the years you and the Children's Defense Fund have pressed for reforms on a number of issues that affect children, from child health care and development to improved education and youth employment. Lately you've been pushing for improvements in child day care. Tell us about the day care situation.

We need to make sure that every child whose parent has to work has safe, high-quality, affordable care. That is not being provided now. I should say immediately that we are not interested in mommy wars. Some on the right have accused us of advocating child care to the point of diminishing parents' role in rearing children. I would love to live in a country in which parents could choose to stay at home and not have to risk poverty.

Our nation is now insisting that all poor mothers should go out to work, and that there be time limits on safety nets. Obviously, the best thing for children is parents who can afford to stay at home. But most of the parents who are out in the labor force are working because they would be in poverty if they didn't.

Two minimum-wage workers now make about \$21,000 together. It is hard for a family to make ends meet on that amount of money. And 29 percent of children are being raised by single parents who earn even less. Over 70 percent of mothers of school-aged children are working; nearly 60 percent of mothers with preschool children are working. Day care has become a necessity. The question is, then, what is the quality of care that those children get? In 32 states you can open up a child center and take in children without a day or even an hour of training. By contrast, your hairdresser or your barber and manicurist have to have 1,500 hours worth of training to open up shop.

Why are there no federal laws regulating day care?

A significant number of religious providers of day care, as well as many, probably most, for-profit providers, have resisted standards. The more caregivers a day-care center has to employ and the more training it has to pay for, the more costs go up and the profit margin goes down. I should add that churches are the largest deliverers of group child care. The figure I have seen is that for every child in church on Sunday eight are there for day care during the week.

What improvements do you want in child care?

The CDF wants four things this year. We want at least \$20 billion in new money. Since children have been targeted by cigarette companies, we think that \$20 billion from any tobacco settlement or any tobacco tax should be funneled to the states for child care. Communities can best decide how to spend the funds, although we think there should be money targeted for infant and toddler care, since we now know the importance of brain development in the first years of life.

I would also like to see that money put into the child-care block grant to make care more affordable for many parents. Good child care costs about as much per year as a year at a public university. If you are earning only \$14,000 to \$20,000 annually, you cannot afford that amount of money.

Second, we want to talk about the quality of day care. Scientists and educators know about the importance of brain development in children before the age of three. We need to make sure that children's development during those crucial years is not ignored. If children aren't ready for school, we are not going to meet other educational goals we set for them.

Third, we want to stress the importance of training care givers. Child-care workers make about \$12,000 a year, without benefits, so there is a lot of turnover in the field. That's less than we pay our dogcatchers and parking lot attendants. It says a lot about what we value.

Fourth, we are trying to get at least a billion dollars for after-school care and summer programs, because we know that most youth crime, teenage pregnancy, smoking and drug and alcohol addiction begin between three and seven in the afternoon when children return to empty homes. Community institutions, including religious congregations, ought to be able to run these programs. Drug dealers are available to do business 24 hours a day, seven days a week, but our congregations and community institutions are often unavailable to children. After-school programs are key.

How helpful has the Clinton administration been on these matters?

We had a profound disagreement with the administration on welfare legislation--the eradication and dismantling of the safety net for poor mothers and children that President Roosevelt put into place. The new welfare legislation cut \$54 billion from a range of safety net programs--food stamps, child nutrition--and we haven't put anything better in place. The president signed it and he negotiated it all along, so I give him full responsibility with the Congress for this extraordinary backward step. He understands these issues profoundly and could have put forth a better alternative. He and the Congress cut child and family nutrition programs and supports for legal immigrants without touching a dime in corporate welfare and without touching a dime of Pentagon welfare. It was unfair and unnecessary. I'm not trying to defend the former welfare system. But I'm for ending child poverty as we know it, not for just ending welfare as we know it.

What are you and your organization doing to counter what you view as the ill effects of the new welfare legislation?

We have tried to make sure that mothers and fathers who have to go to work get health care. In the past many people have gone on welfare in order to get Medicaid coverage for their children. I hope that public and private agencies will inform people who are being cut off from welfare that they are still eligible for Medicaid. With the new \$40 billion state child health insurance program that CDF helped push through Congress last August, they're still covered.

We also have developed a community volunteer program to begin to document what is happening in the aftermath of changes in welfare. The administration and others simply say the reforms are working. It's true that people are leaving the rolls, but we don't know where they are going. We don't know whether they have jobs. We do know that a lot of them don't have adequate child care. So we are setting up a quiet effort in local communities to monitor the impact of this welfare legislation. I'd love for my pessimism and suspicion about the effects of the legislation to be totally wrong.

How does the U.S. compare with Western European countries on child care?

We are an underdeveloped nation. All the European countries--including the Scandinavian countries--as well as Canada and Japan do much better. These societies have committed themselves to focusing on children. Not long ago I took a group of black leaders to Denmark, where we visited hospitals, schools and work places. Every public school in Denmark has a dental clinic. These countries make sure that the kids get health care. In Norway whole train cars are regularly turned into playgrounds for families who are traveling. Norway makes a concerted effort to figure out how to bring parents and children together and make them comfortable and better able to function as families--both in the workplace and in public areas.

The U.S. ranks 18th in infant mortality. And no one in Europe believes our gun statistics. That we let a child get killed every hour and a half by a gun is incomprehensible to people overseas. We have 200 million guns in circulation and don't take steps to control them. The Australian prime minister said last year after there had been a shooting in an Australian public park, "We are not going to go down the American road." They had a huge gun buy-back with over 600,000 guns collected. Somehow we, the leading superpower, are unable even to keep our kids safe from gunfire, let alone get them ready for school and provide for their most basic needs, including health care.

State by state we are having to fight for every benefit--for eyeglasses, for wheelchairs. And because employers keep dropping employee health coverage, we have 11 million children without health coverage. The numbers keep growing. There is a mean-spiritedness here, a lack of stewardship for children that we have to come to grips with. And the religious community ought to lead the way in changing our attitude. The Lord didn't tell us to take care of only every other child. I think he really did mean for every child to have a fair shake. We have our job cut out for us. Why should we still be arguing about something so self-evident as that children should have immunization or dental care?

Why do you think this country has such a different attitude toward children from that of, say, Norway?

It's a complicated issue. Partly there's a perception, which our politicians fuel, that by and large poor people are unworthy. And certainly race is a factor. I think in the public's mind most poor people are black or brown, when in fact the majority of poor people and poor children are white. The majority of pregnant teenagers are white, the majority of those without health care are white. The majority in these categories are also working poor people.

This slogan of ending welfare as we know it is not going to help the more than 70 percent of the poor who work every day. Wages have not kept pace with inflation and with changes in the structure of our economy. There are almost 38 million poor Americans, most of whom work, most of whom are white. So the way we play the race issue in these matters keeps a lot of folk of all colors in poverty.

Second, citizens of this country have always distrusted government interference in family life, although in fact the government interferes all the time in negative ways. In Japan or France it is assumed that the government is a partner in making sure that there is a support network for families and children, but we have a very privatistic and individualistic view of things. We assume that families ought to be able to take care of their kids on their own. But this laissez-faire anti-interference argument only seems to apply when people are poor. We are pretty generous when it comes to helping the nonpoor. We subsidize housing mortgages for those who can afford to buy houses, yet we don't want to put the same level of investment into public housing for the poor.

When my children were growing up I could deduct from my taxes part of my child-care expenses. Poor parents who don't have any liability for child care--who make \$20,000 a year--can't do that. Since they can't afford child care they don't get child care, and they don't get the tax break. This country won't make a tax refundable for people in that income bracket to help them afford child care. We don't mind subsidizing the rich through interventionist government policies, but we do mind subsidizing the poor.

You spoke earlier about “mommy wars.” Organization’s like James Dobson’s Focus on the Family tend to argue that child care, child welfare, is a family-first enterprise, whereas CDF wants to place child rearing in the hands of the government. How do you respond to those kinds of criticisms?

I wish they would do their homework. I wish they would read my book *The Measure of Our Success*. In these matters I believe in family above all. I believe in parents. I believe that most parents will do the best job they can. At CDF we always say that the most important thing we can do is support parenting and parents. But most of our public policies and private-sector policies make it harder rather than easier for parents to do their job. I favor parental choice. I was opposed to changes in the welfare system that would demand that mothers go out to work.

The conservatives need to be more consistent. They insist that every poor mother go out to work, but they want every middle-class mother to stay at home and take care of her children. Conservatives have to think about the logic of their position. What do conservatives say about working parents whose companies do not provide basic health care? On such issues they are silent. Parenting would be a lot easier for people who have to work if they didn't have to worry about whether their kids were immunized, or whether they could get hospital care.

If conservatives wanted to see parents work and not be dependant on welfare, they would try to figure out how we can make it easier to do so. Think about clinic hours. We blame parents for not getting their kids immunized, but how many clinics are open after five o'clock or on weekends? In terms of our private-sector policies, how many conservatives try to make it easier for parents to balance work and family? Why do they oppose parental leave when children are born or are sick? I certainly am for paid parental leave so people can stay at home at crucial times in their families' lives.

I've never been for government raising anybody. I think that the Catholic bishops have stated it very well: no government can love or take care of a child, but governmental policies and private-sector policies affect the ability of parents to do their parenting. We should not have a double standard: this country should be willing to do for poor parents what it is willing to do for those who happen to be more fortunate. I don't understand how you can say you are for parenting and not also be for increasing jobs and wages and for making sure there is safe, high-quality child care.

I've always been for family first. The Religious Right didn't invent that language. And the whole notion of government-run child care is a myth. We have never taken a dime of government money at the Children's Defense Fund. We don't believe in government control. We call for families to take charge of their responsibilities, but then we try to help them assume those responsibilities.

A variety of community institutions can help make parenting easier rather than harder. In this regard, I feel very strongly about the role of faith-based congregations. I grew up in a church that was at the center of my life and that was like an extended family network. At the CDF we talk about a seamless web of support between parents, religious congregations, schools and other institutions--with employers and the government doing their fair share. All of it should come together. We always have to ask: Is what we are doing making it easier or harder for parents to do what they need to do to give their kids a healthy and a moral start in life?