

## What Children Really Need: Another Way to Look at Children's Rights

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The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, adopted as an international treaty in 1989, enjoys ratification by most nations on earth; the United States is the one notable exception. As the UNICEF web site explains, this convention “spells out the basic human rights that children everywhere . . . have: the right to survival; to develop to the fullest; to protection from harmful influences, abuse and exploitation; and to participate fully in family, cultural, and social life. . . . The Convention protects children’s rights by setting standards in healthcare, education and legal, civil, and social services.”

The architects of this convention hoped to protect children from exploitation in armed conflicts, from the abuses of child labor, and from sexual exploitation. These are worthy goals. They also wanted to reduce the disparities within societies, such as the gap often seen between urban and rural health systems. Again, this is a worthy goal.

All the same, prominent legal scholars have raised strong criticisms of the convention. Some point to passages, such as Article 13, which appear to undermine the ability of parents to protect their children from harmful outside influences. Others see language that threatens cultural diversity and religious liberty. Still others worry about the very nature of “rights” when applied to children—seeing this as implicitly granting excessive power over the young to governments relative to parents and other kin.

It is not my purpose this morning to weigh and evaluate these arguments. Instead, I want to take a few minutes and—as an American management consultant might say—“think outside the box” about *what children really need*.

Twenty-six years ago, I began work on my doctoral dissertation, which examined the origins of family and population policies in Sweden during the 1920s and 1930s. In the years since, I have given almost exclusive attention to two questions: 1) What modern movements, forces, and developments threaten families and children? 2) How can we strengthen families and protect children in our time?

My pursuit for answers has led me into research and writing that cuts across the academic disciplines into sociology, psychology, the biological sciences, medicine, child development, and history. One project, initiated fourteen years ago, was collecting and abstracting (for average readers) scholarly journal articles on child and family questions. These abstracts now number nearly *two thousand* entries in a fully searchable database, and they tell us a great deal about the real needs of children.

From this work comes my special problem. For when I read the convention and the Rights of the Child, I find it inadequate—not so much wrong, as poorly focused. It contains many fine sentiments and worthy ideas, but it misses larger truths about children and their needs. Too often, I think, the convention inappropriately presses adult issues and adult language onto children’s unique circumstances.

And so, I want to engage today in a small fantasy. I will assume that I have been asked by the nations of the world to draft a new and more appropriate Charter of Rights for children. It is to be called “What Children Really Need,” and it is to reflect the freshest and most compelling new research on this question. After much consideration, I have settled on Ten Articles:

### Article I

#### Each Child Has the Right to a Mother

Despite the best arguments for the view that differences between genders are insignificant, the modern sciences continue to reinforce what custom and common sense also teach: on issues of human reproduction, men and women are very different. Only women have the gift to carry the *conceptus* to birth. Only women can develop the unique hormonal bonds between mother and child mediated by that amazing organ, the placenta. And only women can provide that fountain of nurture giving human babies exactly the nutrition they need when they need it, namely, breast milk. As children grow, mothers play unique roles in guiding girls and boys into psychologically healthy development. As research reported in the *Journal of Genetic Psychology* explains, having “a recollection of the mother available and devoted predicted less loneliness, less depression, less anxiety, higher self-esteem, and more resiliency in dealing with life’s events.”<sup>1</sup> In these ways, mothers are vital to what economists call long-term human capital formation.

At times, modern society seems to conspire against motherhood. During the last one hundred years, mothers’ tasks have been devalued in the West, from the “Highest of Vocations” to a distraction or a kind of hobby. Some of the pressures come from the shortsighted-view of modern business. Commenting on the recent flow of married women into the labor market, the *Economist*—a business-friendly magazine also known for its frankness—wrote, “Women are proving a godsend to many employers. They usually cost less to employ than men and are more prepared to be flexible and less inclined to pick up a fuss if working conditions are poor.

decision making a key indicator and benchmark for measuring progress. As the primary caretakers of children, women are best able to grasp the concept of using resources to ensure and sustain human life and livelihood. As principle actors in the home and community, women realize the critical importance of maintaining a balance between production and consumption—of planting trees and not just chopping them down.

Many of you have heard about Porto Alegre's participatory budget, a portion of which the city's capital expenditure budget is decided each year by the poor living in previously disenfranchised neighborhoods. A more careful analysis shows that women play a crucial and important role in setting priorities, mobilizing additional resources, and ensuring proper monitoring and implementation. The results are nothing short of amazing, in terms of improved water and sanitation, waste management, health, and education. Not only has the city of Porto Alegre been transformed in a few short years, but the participatory budget has been transferred to over seventy cities in the Latin American region, introducing new levels and degrees of transparency and accountability to local institutions and governance.

Implementing the Habitat agenda is about improving life in all of its diverse dimensions. The basic units of society are the family and the local community. Thus, these units are the ultimate beneficiaries of our efforts to improve air and water quality, environmental health and sanitation, transport and mobility, basic infrastructure and services, safety, and social justice. However, we have to realize that the family, in most rapidly growing cities and metropolises of the world, does not usually fit its conventional image in everyday literature.

In many cities of the developing world, single, female-headed households are no longer an exception but a significant part of the population. Even as the guarantors of their urban households, they suffer from discrimination and hardship due to a lack of resources. Single women who head households are often victims of poverty and civil strife. Many of them are refugees or survivors of conflict. Many of them are rural migrants who have lost their land and homes. Many of them are victims of HIV/AIDS. They remain the guardians of their children and their communities, without the resources to look after them. These women need our support in their daily struggles to maintain their families.

In our efforts to improve the living conditions of the poor, we have much to learn from the men and women who live in urban poor neighborhoods. They ask us not to teach them, but to help them eliminate the numerous administrative and legislative barriers and preconceived ideas that hinder them in their daily endeavors to provide for themselves and to gain a rightful voice in decisions that affect them. If we are to make our cities and communities more healthy, safe, equitable, and sustainable, we must learn to work with them and

not against them, as we have done—despite the best of intentions—in the past.

The Habitat II conference held in Istanbul in 1996 was the first global conference to open its doors to civil society. We cannot begin to make a difference without working hand-in-hand with our partners. We must decide how best we can compliment each other in changing policies and practices, in designing and implementing projects, and in learning from each other's experience. We can do nothing less if we are to make our world and our cities safer for children.

... Employers like them because they . . . command lower pay, and because part-timers can be pushed harder while they are at work." This is not good for children.

To fulfill the Child's Right to a Mother, governments should take all reasonable steps to treat motherhood as the most important of vocations and to insure that the mother-child bond is given priority over short-term economic needs.

## Article II

### Each Child Has the Right to a Father

Evidence has accumulated here as well: fathers are not optional adornment in the household. Relatively new books by David Blankenhorn, David Popenoe, and Barbara Dafoe Whitehead summarize the vast body of research on this point. So does a recent article in *Demography*, written by scholars at the Universities of North Carolina and Pennsylvania. "Fathers matter," they write. A father's involvement in a child's life "significantly influences [three] outcomes: economic and educational attainment and delinquency." Fathers who are "both emotionally close and highly involved in joint activities" play a major role in a child's maturation. Adolescents who experience "increasing closeness" with their fathers are protected from "delinquency and psychological distress."<sup>2</sup>

Here again, though, the biases of modern life discourage fatherhood. Many governmental welfare programs encourage fatherless households with children, by creating financial incentives for out-of-wedlock births. Even for married fathers, work expectations and routines undermine their physical and psychological availability to their children. Popular Western media commonly portray fathers as fools.

To fulfill the Child's Right to a Father, governments should take all reasonable steps to protect and celebrate the father-guided family.

## Article III

### Each Child Has the Right to a Home Built on Marriage

Research evidence on family and children, accumulating for two decades, points to one overwhelming conclusion: children are most likely to be healthy, happy, well behaved, and responsible, most likely to succeed in school and life, and less likely to be promiscuous, delinquent, or users of alcohol and illegal drugs, if they live with their two natural parents, who, in turn, are lawfully married. Any willed variation from this model—due to cohabitation, legal separation, divorce, sole-parenting, or even remarriage—will predictably lead to more negative results for the children. Even first marriages that are troubled are predictably better for children than the alternatives (except in cases involving physical violence between husband and wife).

The good home for children is also a place rich in functions, where the young become both the center of daily life and participants in meaningful household work. The good home takes seriously the task of education, and parents

become the prime educators of their children, starting with moral training. The good home defends its autonomy and authority, for this again has positive effects on children.

It is the *union* of male and female through marriage that produces these results. Each partner brings gifts to the marital bond that are *complementary*. New research shows how this works. For example, a study reported in *Criminology* found that the active bonds between wives in a neighborhood—such as borrowing food or tools or having lunch at a neighbor's home—had a strong effect in reducing neighborhood rates of violent crime. Yet this result could not be found through the bonds of husbands in the neighborhood. On the other hand, the presence of "family-rooted men" in the same neighborhoods *did* reduce rates of out-of-wedlock births among neighborhood teenagers. According to the researchers, a single mother home, with teenage daughters present, was viewed by young neighborhood males as "an unprotected nest" because it lacked "a man, the figure the boys are prepared to respect . . . to keep them in line."<sup>3</sup> The lesson here is that a husband and a wife complement each other; each brings unique talents to the building of a home, so that it becomes greater than the sum of its parts.

To fulfill the Child's Right to a Home, responsible governments will use all prudent means to encourage lawful marriage, discourage divorce, and recognize the prior existence and autonomy of families.

## Article IV

### Each Child Has the Right to Siblings

The current trend, particularly strong in developed lands, is toward a one-child-family system. For example, if current trends in Europe continue for another fifty years, by the year 2050 a majority of European peoples will have no brothers or sisters, no aunts or uncles, no cousins. A range of anti-natalist impulses help explain this, including economic pressures to put work before family and children, and the heavy burden of taxation on household budgets.

This trend toward a one-child-family system portends great trouble and great loneliness. The relationship between brothers and sisters has long been understood to be critically important in shaping for good the moral and psychological character of children. In contrast, children without siblings disproportionately develop hostile, antisocial personalities. In China, for example, where the government has aggressively pursued a one-child-per-couple policy since 1997, researchers report in *School Psychology International* that a child without siblings is more likely to disrupt the school classroom than a child reared with brothers and sisters. When compared to the latter, "Only children display considerably more behavior problems, particularly in terms of learning, impulsivity, hyperactivity, and anxiety."<sup>4</sup>

Later in life, sibling bonds also remain strong. Indeed, this is the longest blood relationship that people normally have in

their lives, *longer* than relationships with parents, children, or spouse. Recent research shows that older adults commonly feel closer to their siblings than to anyone except their own children, attachments that grow with the passing of years.

Sometimes, of course, it is not possible for parents to have more than one child. But the main *cause* in this time is extreme voluntary child limitation. Such actions deliberately *diminish* the psychological prospects of sole children.

To Secure for Children the Right to Siblings, governments should welcome the birth of multiple children in a family through all prudent and proper means.

#### Article V

##### Each Child has the Right to Ancestors

Children know emotional wholeness and personal security if they see themselves as part of a great chain of family being, binding together ancestors, their living family, and their descendants. It is this that makes sense out of death, suffering, and sacrifice, which in turn supplies purpose or meaning to life. Indeed, children show a great hunger for stories about their families. Reporting in the *Journal of Marriage and Family* on a study of telling family stories, the researchers found it “a particular surprise” that the younger generation told just as many, if not more, family stories than the older generation.<sup>5</sup>

And yet, too often today, the young learn in schools or from the drumbeat of modernist propaganda in the media that their ancestors were ignorant, bigoted, and mean-spirited. As the great rhetorician Richard Weaver once remarked, “Those who have no concern for their ancestors will, by simple application of the same rule, have none for their descendants.” And this diminishes not only the lives of children, but of the global community as a whole.

To secure a Child’s Right to Ancestors, governments should insure that its schools and institutions appropriately honor the struggles and positive gifts of those generations that came before.

#### Article VI

##### Each Child Has the Right to a Posterity

Current myths hold that the population control movement represents a rational adaptation of family size to modern conditions. While this change began in the West, it gains strength in the developing nations because of its popularity.

New research shows these myths to be false. A careful history of fertility decline (by a leading advocate for population control), appearing in *Population and Development Review*, shows that neo-Malthusian “ideas, ideologies, and organized assistance”—or *propaganda* instead of steady conversion—was the key. The task for these propagandists was to attack the status of large families. Their key triumph, according to the author, was the “rolling back of religion’s grip on . . . sexuality,” urging persons to “*ignor[e]* the religious view.” These

*ideologies* then spread to the Third World through *colonial administrators* using “eugenic” arguments and—later—through private foundations such as The Population Council and the Ford Foundation.<sup>6</sup>

It is time to end this war on human fertility—for the sake of children. At the dawn of the twenty-first century, it is objectively clear that *depopulation* rather than *overpopulation* is the problem that looms before the world. The best evidence also shows that population growth actually *stimulates* economic growth, both absolutely and on a per-capita basis.

It is natural for each person to want to create progeny and to live into the future through them. This is each child’s destiny. Propaganda against the building of families is a direct assault on this destiny.

To secure a Child’s Right to a Posterity, governments should take all appropriate actions to affirm the value of fertility within marriage and to support and protect larger families.

#### Article VII

##### Each Child Has the Right to Religious Faith

Religious families better protect their children physically and psychologically when compared to families that reject religious faith. This finding flies in the face of the modernist bias that sees religion as resting on ignorance and repression. For example, a study on parenting styles reported in *American Sociological Review* found that “while it is true conservative Protestant parents are more likely to rely on [spanking than non-religious parents], it is also true that they are more likely than other parents to practice warm and expressive emotional work with their children.”<sup>7</sup>

Strong religious faith also protects youth from destructive practices such as premature sexual activity. The *Journal of Marriage and the Family* reported that while the percentage of all white female adolescents who were virgins fell from 51 percent in 1982 to 42 percent in 1988, the percent who were virgins among fundamentalist Protestants *rose* from 45 to 61 percent over the same six years. The authors credit this, in part, to the effect of “church sermons and Sunday School.”<sup>8</sup>

In short, children thrive best within families that recognize Divine authority and seek to apply this faith in their daily lives.

To secure a Child’s Right to Religious Faith, governments shall take all reasonable steps to protect families’ free exercise of religion.

#### Article VIII

##### Each Child Has the Right to Live in a Healthy Community

No good home stands alone. Extended family members—grandparents, aunts and uncles, cousins—properly take an interest in and help protect and rear children. In somewhat different ways, good neighbors also provide environments

that give special protection to children. It is common, as well, for religious co-believers to seek to live near each other. And the evidence shows that this is good for *all* children.

A recent article in the *Journal of Socio-Economics* explained the role of religiosity among neighbors in building a healthy community. Even in the highly secularized modern nation of Sweden, the researcher found the importance of religion to be strong. Specifically, "the higher the rate of Christians in a Swedish city, the lower the rates of divorce, abortion . . . and children born out of wedlock." Even *non-Christians* living among a relatively high number of believers found themselves behaving in ways more friendly to children: they too were much less likely to get divorced, have an abortion, or beget a child outside of marriage.<sup>9</sup>

To secure a Child's Right to Live in a Healthy Community, governments shall not unduly interfere with the spontaneous growth of neighborhoods and towns.

#### Article IX

##### Each Child Shall Have a Right to Innocence

The word *innocence* here means the opportunity to have a true childhood, the chance to mature normally in terms of physical, emotional, and moral development.

Many outside forces threaten childhood: war, employers greedy for child labor, the modern media, and ideologically-driven education. Research does show one consistent protector of childhood innocence: living in an intact, two-natural-parents family.

For instance, new articles in *Child Development* and the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* show the same amazing result, "Girls who were in single-mother homes at age five tend to experience earlier puberty." This premature onset of sexual maturity occurs because the "girls from paternally-deprived homes are more likely to become exposed to the pheromones of stepfathers and other unrelated adult males," which accelerates their physical development. Early puberty is worrisome because it is associated with poor health, emotional problems such as depression and anxiety, and problem behaviors such as alcohol consumption and sexual promiscuity.<sup>10</sup> Intact homes are also much more able to control the intrusions of the outside media—from television to the Internet—into the lives of children.

To secure a Child's Right to Innocence, governments shall honor and protect the institution of marriage and they shall respect and support parental control of outside media directed at children.

#### Article X

##### Each Child Has the Right to a Tradition

Children are born into families, immediate and extended; they are also born into villages or neighborhoods that help and support families; and they are born into traditions or cultures that give depth to their lives. G.K. Chesterton called

tradition "the democracy of the dead," where the living recognize the lessons of life learned often with great difficulty and sacrifice, by those who came before. Respect for tradition does not require blind obedience to the past. However, it does place the advocacy burden on those calling for change. Children find protection and meaning within the cloak of tradition, which gives them emotional stability and the means to survive even great tyranny.

The *Polish Sociological Review* carried a recent article on developments in Uzbekistan during the period of Soviet Communist rule. The author writes, "Only traditional relationships enabled the people to survive the particularly difficult conditions which prevailed throughout the Soviet period. . . . [W]hile the Sovietization of Central Asian society rocked the religious and cultural foundations of the family, its basic . . . features were preserved." In many cases, the task of preservation fell to women. The author again, "I know of families where the father was a teacher of scientific atheism, while the wife said her prayers five times a day and observed 'Ramadan,' so as to (as she put it) atone for her husband's sin." When the Communists fell, and Uzbekistan regained its freedom, these traditions were still there, so that the children and their parents could rebuild a nation.<sup>11</sup>

To secure a Child's Right to Tradition, governments shall respect the inherited beliefs and customs of peoples as parts of their informal or social constitutions.

And so I call on the nations of the world to secure each child's rights to a mother, a father, a home built on marriage, siblings, ancestors, posterity, religious faith, a healthy community, innocence, and tradition. The scientific evidence is overwhelming. These are the qualities that are best able to give children security, health, happiness, emotional stability, spiritual satisfaction, material abundance, and inner peace. *These are what children really need.*

#### NOTES

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