

Foreword

There are many reasons why I chose to serve in Congress forty years ago, with the Vietnam War winding down and the Watergate scandal coming to a close. None was more important to me, though, and, in my opinion, to our country, than the health and well-being of our children. That remains true today.

I learned from my father, a powerful state senator, and from observing national lawmakers like Hubert Humphrey, Ted Kennedy, George McGovern, and Walter Mondale that public policy can be a force for good in the lives of children, and I was determined to add to their great work.

Over the course of these last four decades, we can certainly point to real improvements in the lives of poor and middle-class children and their families, especially with regard to increased access to affordable, quality health care; the assertion of rights of *all* children, including children with disabilities, to a free public education; and a reduction in teen smoking, for example. But not one of us who cares about the well-being of all of our children can say we are satisfied.

To the contrary, we have hard work to do still to end hunger and poverty among children, to fulfill the promise of equal educational opportunity for all children, to better protect children from gun violence and sexual abuse, and to ensure that working parents who need quality child care can find and afford it.

Fighting for the rights of all children is a long-term challenge. It takes stamina. And it takes strong leadership. The greatest Speaker of the House of Representatives during my career, and perhaps in American history, Representative Nancy Pelosi, set a powerful example for all of us when, on receiving the gavel for the first time in January 2007, she invited children in the House chamber to join her on the rostrum. During her years as Speaker she could often be heard listing her top three priorities in Congress. “The children, the children, the children,” she would say emphatically.

Our country needs to heed her simple yet compelling command.

When I arrived in Washington in January 1975, the alarm had already been rung over the plight of poor children in America. Marian Wright Edelman's Children's Defense Fund (CDF), not even two years old, was hard at work battling for official Washington's attention to the pressing priority of ensuring that all children—black, white, Hispanic, Native American, Asian, rich, and poor—had the opportunity to grow up healthy, safe, and well-educated, and to lead productive lives. Edelman and her talented staff had sounded the clarion call that in America it was, and remains, an unqualified disgrace for millions of children to live in poverty.

In 1974, CDF published its landmark report *Children Out of School in America*, documenting the enormous barriers our most vulnerable children face in attending school and persisting through to graduation. Congress responded by immediately passing several important pieces of legislation, such as the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, now known as IDEA. But many other problems identified then remain problems today. These are the issues that are so well discussed in the critically important volume that follows.

In 1983, together with several colleagues and in close consultation with CDF and other like-minded organizations and individuals, I convinced Speaker Thomas “Tip” O’Neill to found a committee in Congress devoted solely to children and their families. The Select Committee on Children, Youth, and Families, which I chaired for ten years, was formed in reaction to one of the greatest assaults on poor and middle-class families in America since the Great Depression: the election of President Ronald Reagan.

President Reagan and his allies in Congress and the private sector were determined to wipe out the social safety net that had been carefully constructed over the years by Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Lyndon Johnson. With his trademark slogan that “government is not the solution to our problem, government *is* the problem,” he proceeded to dismantle services that were documented to have helped protect the poor and the once-great American middle class.

The Select Committee and its allies responded to the attack on the safety net with a new defense for public policies that benefit children and families. We held hearing after hearing in Washington and across the country

and issued countless detailed reports. We documented how much taxpayers would save by investing in quality child care rather than cutting subsidies for it. Experts weighed in on the cognitive, social, and economic benefits of ensuring quality and comprehensive prenatal care. We made the case that neglecting children and families results in higher public costs for treating obesity; physical and psychological abuse; teen pregnancy; higher incarceration rates; alcohol, drug, and tobacco addiction; hunger; depression; and lost productivity. We enlisted an army of researchers, scientists, doctors, psychologists, psychiatrists, law enforcement officials, and social workers to show that America's failure to invest in its children was not only morally bankrupt but fiscally bankrupt as well. The evidence clearly demonstrated that it costs taxpayers more to ignore children and their families than it does to help them.

The result? On many issues from the 1970s through the early 2000s, we forged a bipartisan consensus, one that is sadly lacking today. We won bipartisan support to restore some of the Reagan-era cuts to the Women, Infants, and Children supplemental feeding program, for example, because we showed that it saved taxpayers three dollars for every one tax dollar invested. The Head Start early education program was similarly proven to save money in the long run, and it, too, won bipartisan support. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act, including Title I funding for low-income students and the requirement that schools ensure that all children, including subgroups of children, advance, was passed with bipartisan support, as was the Individuals with Disabilities Act. There was bipartisan support for a law to reform the decrepit foster care system and another to help reduce domestic violence. The Earned Income Tax Credit and the Child Tax Credit began with bipartisan support and have helped to keep millions of families out of poverty. Congress enacted or reauthorized many other policies during my time in Congress that have helped children directly or helped working families and the poor, some with bipartisan support and some, like the Affordable Care Act, enacted despite stiff opposition from the more radical brand of Republicanism that holds sway in Congress today.

Children's advocates always knew how hard the fight would be to challenge the most powerful and well-connected interests in our country: defense contractors, oil and gas corporations, and Wall Street firms. That

was as true then as it is today, as we see repeated efforts in Congress in recent years to take resources away from poor and middle-class children and families, like food stamps and tax credits and education funding and access to affordable health care, and give even more to the wealthy and powerful. Bipartisanship has taken a severe beating in recent years, as has the willingness of Congress to enact or support policies driven by evidence-based research that help children and families and our country as a whole.

This imbalance of power in Washington directly contributed to a sharp rise in income inequality, which remains the greatest scourge that our nation still tolerates; it threatens our status as a world economic leader, as a leader in innovation, and as a model in democracy and decency, and it threatens the immediate and long-term health and well-being of our children. Left unchanged, the debilitating impacts of our skewed budget priorities will be felt for generations, as the middle class shrinks further, the ranks of the poor grow, and the concentration of wealth in the hands of the few swells ever larger.

We know too much about what works to let it be this way.

Every nation makes choices about its priorities. We have done much for our children over the past half-century. But despite the wins, there have been too many losses and missed opportunities. The well-being of our children is the foundation on which all else follows. We know so much more today about the developmental and educational needs of children, and it is our responsibility to ensure that our public policies reflect this knowledge.

We would be wise to heed the roadmap laid out in the following chapters that advances some of the best research and thinking to date on how to achieve the goals that Marian Wright Edelman, Speaker Pelosi, and so many others have spent decades fighting for: to ensure that all of America's children have the opportunity to be raised in a healthy, safe, and educationally rewarding society and that taxpayers be protected by investing early in their lives.

—*Congressman George Miller*