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## Family Life 1st: Activating a Grass-Roots Parents' Movement

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with Harry Boyte

**I**ncreasingly, parents find themselves competing for time with their  
twee children in an over-busy, over-commercialized society. Most  
educational, economic, and recreational activities are aimed at indi-  
viduals, thereby pulling families apart rather than bringing them together.  
Doherty contends that the principal momentum for competent parenting  
must come from diverse parents working together in powerful, nonpartisan  
ways. What is needed is not a top-down state or federal initiative, but a  
public, grass-roots movement generated and sustained by parents them-  
selves. State and federal governments can serve as a catalyst for a national  
movement to make family life a priority.

Recent federal policy initiatives for parents have focused on helping parents have more time at home with their children after a birth and when a child is ill, and on encouraging voluntary television and movie rating systems.

While these policies are helpful and needed, they do not seriously tackle the underlying erosion of parents' ability to steer the development of their children in a world increasingly dominated by the consumer culture, the media, and over-scheduled family hyperactivity. In homes across the country, parents are fighting—and often losing—the battle for influence over their children against powerful forces far stronger than most individual parents.

### How Has Consumerism Eroded the Influence of Parents?

A case in point for how the culture has undermined family life is the declining influence of parents on the clothing decisions of young children. It's not that pre-teen children are becoming more truly independent in choosing what to wear. Instead, their tastes for increasingly sexier and more expensive clothes are driven by clothing marketers.

According to the Wall Street Journal, children's clothing manufacturers have concluded that parents now have little influence over their pre-teen daughters' clothing choices. Brands are now marketing and selling sexualized names and styles such as Streetwalkers™. Advertising is going around the parents and directly to the children who are the decision-makers, if not yet the purchasers.

It is difficult for most parents to compete with a multi-billion dollar industry marketing directly to young children with well-researched and captivating images of pseudo-mature teen sexuality. One Target manager in Minnesota ruefully reported that, while his store does not carry the Streetwalkers™ brand, it has just one remaining line of traditional children's clothes that are "designed for 7-and -8 year olds whose mothers are still impacting the purchase decision."

**Parents are fighting for influence over their children against forces more powerful than most individual parents.**

### **What Other Forces Have Invaded Family Life?**

The exaggerated emphasis on athletics is another argument for social change. One mother in a Minnesota public discussion on putting families first reported that she feels “terrorized” by coaches who insist on practicing on Mother’s Day and Thanksgiving Day. Another participant was told by the soccer coach that her family could take vacation only during a two-week period in August.

In fact, most social, educational, and religious programs in America today are aimed at individuals who are pulled out of their families. In one town, the coaches and clergy met in a “summit meeting” to divide up families’ times so as to avoid competition between church and sports.

Ironically, despite the over-abundance of community activities currently available on the consumer menu (in one community, there are 14 organized activities for three-year-olds), there are few chances for whole families to participate in common, intergenerational activities, and even fewer opportunities for families to engage in citizenship activities that build the commonwealth. We are increasingly a hyper-individualistic, consumer-oriented society that values family life as a political icon and marketing target, but not as a place for nurturing active, productive citizens.

### **What is Needed to Counter These Attacks on Family Life?**

We need a movement of families to take back our kids and make family life the first priority. “Family Life 1st” is a group of citizens in suburban Minneapolis who are committed to building a community in which family life has first priority in an over-scheduled world. The group is committed to reversing the deleterious effects of the consumer culture of childhood, in which parents see themselves as competitive providers of services to children, and children are overscheduled in a frantic pursuit of experiences and opportunities for personal enrichment and advantage over peers.

Family Life 1st was created out of a town meeting in Wayzata, Minnesota, attended by parents and community leaders concerned with this nameless social problem. It consists of parents, community activists, clergy, teachers, and other professionals.

The democratic theory underlying this effort is that the family can only be a seedbed for current and future citizens if it achieves a balance between internal bonds and external activities. This balance has become gravely out of whack for families of all social classes. What is sorely needed to retrieve family life is a public, grass roots movement generated and sustained by families themselves.

### **What Can a Parents’ Movement Accomplish?**

Thus far, Family Life 1st has generated a vision of a desired future for families in our community, and begun a series of stakeholder interviews to better understand the problem and solicit allies. We want to inspire a broad community discussion, and we are committed to a “no villains” approach that does not blame parents, coaches, clergy or any other group. A specific task will be to develop, along with community activity groups, youth, and families, a set of working policies that acknowledge, support, and respect families’ decisions to make family time a priority.

***The family can only be a seedbed for future citizens if it balances internal bonds and external activities.***

## What Can the State and Federal Governments Do to Help?

Clearly, top-down state or federal initiatives will not be successful or well-received. In fact, beginning with government programs or policies—without widespread citizen deliberation and input—contradicts the basic democratic theory underlying families' civic work. The principal momentum must come from diverse families working together in powerful but non-partisan ways.

Government, however, can serve an important role as a catalyst for such a national movement. Here is a proposal for state or federal action:

- ❖ Create and fund a national network of community circles, family coalitions, or public discussion forums, consisting of demographically representative groups of parents and grandparents. (Grandparents are very worried, and have a big stake in this discussion about the welfare of their grandchildren.)
- ❖ Give this national initiative a striking name. One possibility: Taking Back Our Kids and Making Family Life 1st.
- ❖ These groups will explore and define, via their own experience, reading, and the testimony of experts on childhood and family life, the central challenges that parents face in raising children in today's culture.
- ❖ The groups will make recommendations for action in four areas: what individual families can do, what families collectively can do in their local communities and nationally, what private organizations such as faith communities and non-profits can do, and what government at different levels can do.
- ❖ Publicize widely the activities and conclusions of these family forums.
- ❖ Call a White House Conference to address the findings and recommendations from the forums.
- ❖ Catalyze a national, non-partisan movement of families that would take on civic projects to strengthen families and promote a sense of common purpose among families. After being launched, this movement would operate autonomously and without further direct federal or state support.

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## Summary

We aim to stimulate a national movement of families taking back their lives through democratic public work. We are committed to reversing the encroachment of the consumer culture on what has been called the world's smallest democracy—the family.

Today's "triple threat" to children and families—consumerism, media saturation, and family hyperactivity—calls for national leadership to create a civic space for families to join in common purpose to recapture their influence over the development of the next generation of citizens and, in the process, to rebuild the commonwealth.

## References

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