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## Executive Summary

**P**olitical interest in children and families ebbs and flows, but now may be at its highest peak in the last 20 years. When the American public is asked what is important, families top the list (Legato, 1999). When policy-makers are asked, the leaders of state legislatures across the country have called child and family issues a “sure-fire vote winner.” Importantly, this concern for families is not Republican or Democratic, liberal or conservative, but is so universal that it is simply American.

Parenting matters. That’s the conclusion of the first chapter of the briefing report written by Dave Riley and Karen Bogenschneider, professors at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Almost every year, best-selling books gain momentary fame with proclamations that parents matter little to children’s development, usually suggesting that children grow according to a fixed genetic script or sometimes that peer and other influences matter more. Hundreds of studies in the last couple decades conclude, however, that the family is the first and foremost influence on most child development outcomes. Children who experience secure attachment relationships and authoritative parenting do better than other children. They are less resistant with parents as two-year-olds, more cooperative with peers as preschoolers, and get better grades and get drunk less as teenagers.

Can we mount effective programs to improve parenting? The short answer is “yes.” The briefing report describes three effective programs: educational newsletters for parents of infants and adolescents, home visiting, and parent training programs that reduce antisocial behavior among children who are already aggressive or in trouble with the law.

A legitimate question from policymakers is whether parenting is a proper issue for public policy or whether it is strictly a personal matter. Most Americans would agree that raising the child is the family’s responsibility, not the government’s. Yet public policies play a strong role in creating the conditions for parents to do their best. Policies that support parents deal with such issues as schools, libraries, parks, public health, child care, workplace law, employment programs, family resource centers, and training for foster parents. It takes only a moment of reflection to realize that most legislation has some impact on family life, just as they often have an economic and an environmental impact. Policymakers do not have a choice about whether to affect family life or not; they already do.

Yet, just because government can do something to help parents, doesn’t mean it can do everything. Because it is difficult to mandate parents to spend more time with children or to legislate a greater cultural valuing of parenting, some of the actions needed to promote good parenting must come from parents themselves. The chapter closes by identifying several specific government policies and personal actions that can promote good parenting.

Because Wisconsin's rate of juvenile arrests is the highest in the nation and because of the escalating costs of correctional institutions, interest has grown in alternatives to institutional care for troubled youth. In the second chapter, Patricia Chamberlain of the Oregon Social Learning Center, focuses on whether treatment foster care is safe and effective for chronic, repeat juvenile offenders who have been taken out of their homes.

Chamberlain's treatment foster care program was selected as one of the National Blueprint Programs for violence prevention by the U.S. Department of Justice. Treatment foster care was more effective in reducing delinquent acts and serious crimes among chronic juvenile offenders than traditional group care. One year later, the youth in treatment foster care spent, on average, fewer than half as many days in detention and about a third less time locked up in state training schools than youth in group care. The program worked for hard-to-reach older offenders and also for youth with such severe mental illness (e.g., schizophrenia and borderline personality) that they would typically be placed in psychiatric hospitals. What remains to be seen, however, is whether these results will extend to youth in large metropolitan areas and to minority or female delinquents.

The linchpin of treatment foster care is the foster parent who is carefully selected, supported, and trained for 20 hours in parent management skills. Not only were the youth taught to be responsible members of the family, but the treatment foster parents also used parent management skills to encourage youth to attend school regularly, to improve their relationships with teachers and peers, and to do their homework. A key aspect of the program is isolating teens from contact with other delinquents and promoting activities that will bring them into relationships with less troubled youth.

According to estimates by the Washington State Public Policy group, the program is cost effective. For every \$1 spent on treatment foster care, taxpayers have saved more than \$17 in criminal justice and victim costs by the time the youth is 25. For youth with severe mental illness, Chamberlain estimates that placement in treatment foster care saves an estimated \$10,280 per child in hospital costs. Also, parent training, support, and an extra \$70 monthly stipend resulted in a foster parent drop-out rate two-thirds less than in the control group.

In the final chapter of the briefing report, William Doherty, President of the National Council of Family Relations, contends that parents find it increasingly difficult to be engaged in childrearing. Increasingly, parents find themselves competing for time with their own children in an over-busy, over-scheduled, over-commercialized society. As examples, active marketing of clothing to preteens has preempted parent influence on the clothing choices of children as young as 7 and 8. The exaggerated emphasis on athletics at the expense of family time is another example. Most educational, economic, recreational, and religious activities are aimed at individuals, thereby pulling families apart rather than bringing them together.

Doherty argues that the principal momentum for competent parenting must come, not from a top-down state or federal initiative, but rather from diverse families working together in powerful, but non-partisan ways. What is needed is

a public, grass roots movement generated and sustained by parents themselves to make family life a priority.

Doherty describes “Family Life 1st,” a group of parents and community leaders in suburban Minneapolis who are committed to supporting parent’s attempts to create a better balance between time for relationships inside the family and activities outside the family. The chapter concludes with several specific suggestions about how families can engage in citizenship activities to build the commonwealth and how state and federal governments can serve as a catalyst for such a national movement.