

Review of It Takes a Village and Other Lessons Children Teach Us  
by Hillary Rodham Clinton

Reviewed by Carolyn Moore Newberger

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These are terrible times for children. One out of four American children live in poverty. Over two million children suffer abuse or neglect each year. Children in our inner cities are shot on their way to school. Parents' wages are eroding steadily against rising costs, leaving millions of families without money for health care if they put food on their tables and a roof over their children's heads. As school budgets tighten, children lose art, music, and athletics in their lives, while the quality of what remains declines.

Yet programs for children and their families are under ever fiercer attack, victims of a rhetoric that blames them for their failings and an ideology that blames government for the problems of the day. In this stark climate Hillary Rodham Clinton has written *It Takes a Village*, a book that she describes as a "continuing meditation on children."

The central argument of this book is that children's welfare — which includes their physical, emotional, cognitive, and spiritual lives — is of paramount importance to our nation's future. Furthermore, children's welfare is nourished by a "village" that we all comprise and that is our collective responsibility. As Ms. Clinton states:

"The village can no longer be defined as a place on a map, or a list of people or organizations, but its essence remains the same: it is the network of values and relationships that support and affect our lives."  
(p. 13)

Ms. Clinton locates pieces of that network in family, community, schools, churches, health-care providers, the media, business, and government. Each chapter focuses on an aspect of the child or the village, using autobiographical vignettes and research findings to define problems and realities affecting children, and personal examples and model programs to suggest solutions.

Ms. Clinton is at her best when she connects politics to social policy, and policy choices to the realities of children's lives, as in her discussion of improved IQ scores in children that participate in early childhood education programs:

"Bear this research in mind when you listen to those who argue that our nation cannot afford to implement comprehensive early education programs for disadvantaged children and their families. If we as a village decide not to help families develop their children's brains, then at least let us admit that we are acting not on the evidence but according to a different agenda. And let us acknowledge that we are not using all the tools at our disposal to better the lives of our children." (p.61)

There is no escaping that this is a book written by the First Lady of the United States. Her historical role as an advocate for children appears to be constrained by the need for consistency with her husband's political agenda and the obligation to present a favorable image. Perhaps inevitably, the book serves as a vehicle for Ms. Clinton to talk about herself and her husband's accomplishments and values, not just about America's children.

Ms Clinton writes in a folksy parent-to-parent tone, sharing personal details from her and her husband's lives, offering parental advice, and using their and their mothers' caregiving as models of exemplary parenting. Although personal accounts can bring an author and a subject to life, I found myself longing for the voices of other parents with differing experiences and solutions, and for a deeper acknowledgment of their risks than is expressed in treacly homilies about baby showers with safety themes and telling children to say "Sticks and stones may break my bones..."

Ms. Clinton writes that she hopes this book will stimulate "an honest conversation among us." This conversation would have been more compellingly served if Ms. Clinton

had written a better detailed and appropriately documented book. All too often, researchers are not named, her and experts' opinions are not distinguished from data, and programs are insufficiently described. End-notes with sources and references are lacking. These would have equipped readers to check the facts, seek further information, and more effectively to evaluate Ms. Clinton's arguments.

I found many of Ms. Clinton's views surprising from a former president of the Children's Defense Fund. For example, she argues that "states might also consider making public welfare or medical benefits contingent on agreement to allow home visits or to allow other forms of parent education." (P. 81). Such rhetoric is inconsistent with her professed views on health care, and appears to support a punitive and disempowering approach to families in poverty, perhaps in support of her husband's efforts to position himself further toward the right in the national debate on welfare reform.

Further, as First Lady, Ms. Clinton's views carry disproportionate weight, endowing her with a special responsibility to consider her words and their meanings very carefully. In a passage where Ms. Clinton discusses violence on television, she decries the extent to which "we are saturated with stories about priests who molest children, gangs of young thugs who vandalize and victimize indiscriminately, and families that are nightmares of abuse and neglect. The lurid accounts tend to eclipse positive stories..." (p. 274).

Few experts on children would dispute the extent to which violence in the media is a serious problem. By calling these accounts "lurid," however, and suggesting that they should be replaced by "positive stories," Ms. Clinton trivializes to millions of Americans the meaning of sexual and physical violence against children. Until quite recently, these abuses were denied, and their victims and those who would help them were stigmatized. The media have played an essential role in increasing public awareness, enabling victims to get help and developing support for the programs that help them.

Although this book is flawed and disappointing, it makes a useful contribution to discourse on children and families. It offers considerable information on the state of children in America and the state of America as a place for children. As First Lady, Ms. Clinton may command a vast readership: In making the book personal and accessible, she invites a broad range of families to join in the conversation about the rights and needs of children. And there are moments, as in her closing comments, when Ms. Clinton argues forcefully and effectively for our collective responsibility to children:

"At a time when the collective well-being of children is under unprecedented threat, the balance of power is weighted heavily against them. Government has to do its part to reverse the crisis affecting our children, and to do so it cannot retreat from its historic obligations to the poor and vulnerable....[Children] do not deserve to inherit our debts, but neither should they be denied a fair chance at a standard of living that includes health care, good education, a protected environment, safe streets, and economic opportunity. Children, after all, are citizens, too."

To which this reader can say, "Amen".