

The United States 2012 General Election: Making Children's Health and Well-Being a Priority for the Candidates

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IN THE FIRST half of the 20th century, perhaps the most vulnerable group in the United States was elderly constituents. More than one-third were living in poverty, and fewer than one-half had health insurance.^{1,2} Democratic and Republican presidents, including Theodore Roosevelt, Franklin Roosevelt, and Lyndon Johnson, convinced Americans that there was a moral imperative for our country to care for its elderly.^{3–5} Through Social Security (enacted in 1935) and Medicare (enacted in 1965), a transformational shift in the well-being of seniors occurred. The percentage of seniors living in poverty decreased from 35% in 1959 to 9% in 2010.¹

But for more than 40 years, the most vulnerable population in the United States has not been the elderly. It has been our children. The prevalence of poverty among children was 27% in 1959. In 2010, it was 22%, and 24% of children were living in households that were “food-insecure.”^{1,6,7} To date, there has been no call to arms, no nationally accepted moral imperative, no apparent sense of collective shame.

When children are supported by society, their potential is boundless. The evidence, however, that the United States does not fully support children is overwhelming.⁸ The childhood poverty prevalence is nearly twice as high as the average childhood poverty prevalence of 13% among developed countries. The United States ranks at the bottom of this group in public spending on early childhood, and is below average in the percentage of 15 to 19 year olds who are either in school or employed.⁹

Children's health and well-being are determined by a range of factors, including biological, behavioral, and environmental.¹⁰ There is a growing recognition of the importance of social and economic circumstances on child health and well-being.¹¹ Key factors in childhood, such as access to a safe home, healthy food, caring adults, and quality education, may influence health and well-being not only in childhood but throughout life. By investing in children, we can affect life trajectories, generations, and the long-term health of the nation.

In this climate of hyper-partisanship, it seems a fool's errand to search for agreement on how to improve the lives

of children in the United States. However, even at the extremes of our political spectrum, there should at least be consensus on this one core value—that every child in the United States should be afforded the foundations of health, including responsive caregiving, safe and secure environments, appropriate nutrition, and the opportunity to adopt health-promoting behaviors to achieve optimal health and well-being.¹²

Public and private policies, partnerships, and programs are needed to achieve these goals, but how they should be shaped and what policies should be implemented at the corporate, federal, state, and local levels are critical questions that remain unsettled. Unfortunately, a constructive discussion of these issues central to children has been largely absent from political discourse.¹³

Before voters go to the polls on November 6, 2012, they should know how candidates propose to tackle the major issues affecting health and well-being of children in the United States.

We propose a starting list of 6 questions for candidates to spur a constructive political dialogue aimed at improving children's lives:

CHILDHOOD POVERTY

Facts: 22% of children live in poverty in the United States, and 24% of children live in food-insecure households.^{6,7} Poverty is associated with reduced health; 42% of children in poor families are in excellent health, compared with 64% of children in families that are not poor.¹⁴

Question: No child deserves to live in poverty. What policies would you propose:

- 1) To reduce the number of children living in poverty, and
- 2) For those children who remain in poverty, to reduce poverty's effects on their health and well-being?

EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAMS

Facts: At the start of kindergarten, 48% of poor children meet school readiness standards, compared with 75% of children in middle-income families.¹⁵

Question: No child deserves to miss out on the opportunity to achieve his or her greatest potential in life. Considering the importance of the first 5 years of life in childhood development, what plans do you have to ensure that all children have access to responsive caregivers (eg, parents, childcare professionals, teachers) who will help children live, learn, and play?

K-12 EDUCATION

Facts: 40% of U.S. high school seniors have less than a basic level of achievement on national science exams.¹⁶ 66% of eighth graders test below proficiency level for math and 68% test below proficiency for reading.¹⁷

Question: No young adult deserves to enter the workforce without a fair opportunity to succeed. What will you do to improve our education system, so that all children can receive a high-quality education?

HEALTH CARE ACCESS AND QUALITY

Facts: 10% of U.S. children under age 18 and 27% of young adults ages 18 to 24 years are uninsured.¹⁸ A total of 34% of children with special health care needs have inadequate insurance to cover their health care needs, and 22% of these children have families that experience financial problems due to their health care needs.¹⁹

Question: No child deserves to be left out of our health care system. What steps should be taken to ensure that all children have access to high-quality health care for both physical and mental health services?

EQUITY FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTH

Facts: 38% of black children, 32% of Hispanic children, and 17% of white children live in poverty²⁰; 18% of Hispanic youth, 9% of black youth, and 5% of white youth drop out of high school²¹; and 14% of Hispanic children, 6% of black children, and 6% of white children are uninsured.¹⁴

Question: No child deserves to be treated less fairly than any other child. What policies do you propose to narrow the wide gaps among children and youth in education, health, and well-being?

POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT

Facts: Developing strong bonds with adults and involvement in positive activities promote healthy development among teens that elevates lifelong trajectories²²; however, 18% of youth ages 12 to 17 years do not participate in any organized activities outside of school, and 22% have not been involved in any type of community service or volunteer work in the past year.²³

Question: No child deserves to be denied the opportunity to experience a healthy, productive adolescence. What initiatives do you support to promote and ensure community connections for youth?

CONCLUSION

During the last 50 years, we've witnessed a transformational shift in the well-being of the elderly in the United States. During the next 50 years, if a similar transformation in the well-being of U.S. children has not occurred, it will not be because the wrong individuals were elected to office, or because the wrong party was in control. It will be because we—the nation's child health professionals, parents, and advocates—did not sufficiently raise the bar on expectations for what we as a country can and should do to promote the well-being of children. This fall, let us begin to do better.

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