



**THE HISTORY
OF
WHITE HOUSE CONFERENCES
ON
CHILDREN AND YOUTH**

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From 1909 to 1970, seven White House Conferences on Children and Youth took place in Washington, D.C. These Conferences were devoted to improving the lives of children across the Nation. Each Conference focused on issues relevant to the decade in which the conference was held. The 1909 White House Conference on the Care of Dependent Children opposed the institutionalization of dependent and neglected children. The 1919 White House Conference on Standards of Child Welfare produced the first significant report on child health and welfare standards. The next Conference, the 1929 White House Conference on Standards of Child Welfare created the most comprehensive report on the needs of children ever written. The 1939 Conference on Children in a Democracy highlighted the democratic values, services, and environment necessary for the welfare of children. The Mid-Century White House Conference held in 1950 focused on healthy personality development, and the Golden Anniversary White House Conference on Children and Youth expanded upon this theme to examine ways for children to explore their potential in order to discover creative freedom. The last Conference, the 1970 White House Conference on Children and Youth, strived to strengthen the individuality and identity of children through the support of healthy personality development.

1909 White House Conference on the Care of Dependent Children

The first White House Conference on Children and Youth convened in 1909 and was the product of James E. West. The Conference was designed to address children's issues applicable to the time period, as well as to raise public awareness.

The White House Conference on the Care of Dependent Children focused on the deleterious effects of the institutionalization of dependent and neglected children.

President Theodore Roosevelt, together with approximately two hundred conference attendees, offered nine proposals concerning the use of institutional care for dependent and neglected children. Members of the Conference emphasized the importance of family and home life and incorporated this ideology into their proposals, which included the establishment of the Foster Care Program, the formation of the Federal Children's Bureau, regular inspection of foster care homes by the state, and education and medical care for foster children. APPENDIX A. On February 15, 1909, President Roosevelt submitted a letter to Congress urging Congress to pass the pending legislation on the Federal Children's Bureau. APPENDIX B. The Conference proved successful, and in 1912, the Federal Children's Bureau was created. Other results of the Conference included the development of the widows' pension movement, the growth of adoption agencies, the establishment of boarding-out care for children who were not adopted, and the formation of the "cottage plan," which replaced the congregate institution.

The Child Welfare League of America can trace its history back to the 1909 Conference, when several child welfare agency executives decided to create the Bureau for Exchange of Information Among Child-Helping Agencies in order to support each other and share knowledge and ideas. In 1920, members of the Bureau for Exchange of Information Among Child-Helping Agencies converted their Bureau into the Child Welfare League of America.

1919 White House Conference on Standards of Child Welfare

The second Conference, the White House Conference on Standards of Child Welfare, took place in 1919. The year 1919 had been designated by President Wilson as the "Children's Year" (at the suggestion of the Federal Children's Bureau). APPENDIX

C. The 1919 Conference involved a series of meetings in both Washington D.C, and, subsequently, in eight cities throughout the United States. Committees of five to eight members were formed to determine minimum standards in the areas of child labor, health care for children and mothers, and aid for special needs children.

The 1919 Conference's Committee on Children Entering Employment stimulated improvements in state regulation of child labor. The Committee on Health Care for Children and Mothers drafted detailed statements on health standards for treating pregnant women, infants and preschool children, school children and adolescents. The committee prompted widespread awareness of the need for better standards for maternity and infancy protection. In 1921, the Sheppard-Towner Bill was passed, which gave the Federal Government the task of overseeing and helping to finance the development of facilities dedicated to improving the health of pregnant women and infant children.

The minimum standards determined by the Committee on Children with Special Needs were the most general of all the committee standards and mirrored the overall conclusions of the Conference. APPENDIX D.

1929 White House Conference on Child Health and Protection

Preparations for the White House Conference on Child Health and Protection began in July 1929 when President Hoover announced the purpose of the Conference: “to study the present status of the health and well-being of the children of the United States and its possessions; to report what is being done; to recommend what ought to be done and how to do it.”¹ From July 1929 to November 1930, a total of 1,200 experts in seventeen committees overseen by four departments – Medical Service, Public Health

¹ Folks, Homer. “Four Milestones of Progress.” Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science Nov. 1940: 15.

and Administration, Education and Training, and the Handicapped – worked to compile research and documents on their respective areas. The White House provided substantial funding of half a million dollars. The Washington Conference took place November 19th through 22nd. A 643 page volume was provided to each of nearly three thousand attendees. In 1931, a public volume was published, which contained Conference speeches, abstracts of the reports of the committees, lists of committee members, and a Children’s Charter. The Children’s Charter offered nineteen proposals on the requirements for a child’s education, health, welfare, and protection. The final reports from the Conference were published in thirty-two, 10,511 page volumes. The American Pediatric Society also emerged from this Conference. Although the Conference generated the most comprehensive report on the needs of children ever written, the overwhelming volume of reports and proposals impeded efforts to convert the recommendations of the 1,200 experts into action.

1939 Conference on Children in a Democracy

The 1939 Conference on Children in a Democracy was prepared by three committees: the Planning Committee, the Committee on Organization, and the Committee on Report. The 1939 Conference received significantly less funding than the 1929 Conference. The Report Committee determined the purpose of the Conference to be centered on accumulating research on children in the 1930s, as well as establishing a program of action designed to treat the needs of children in the 1940s. In creating the program, the Report Committee considered American family life, family income, family residence, education, child labor, child health care, special needs children, and finances. The committee produced an eighty-five page volume, which consisted of the research and

ninety-eight proposals. General recommendations included a proposal that change occur over the next ten years and that the program of action cover all aspects of a child's life. The program would be shaped from actual experiences of children and would take the country's financial situation into consideration. The Committee also sought to determine a balance among local, state, and federal governments and voluntary agencies' involvement in child welfare reform, while also emphasizing the importance of maintaining a strictly nonpartisan and nonpolitical agenda.

The Conference on Children in a Democracy focused on areas such as malnutrition and the elimination of discrimination on the basis of race or faith. An important product of the Conference was the establishment of the 1943 Emergency, Maternity, and Infant Care Program, the largest medical care program instituted by the United States up to that time. The program provided free medical, nursing, and hospital services for mothers during their prenatal and delivery periods, as well as 6 weeks postpartum. Complete care was also given to infants less than one year old.

The Mid-Century White House Conference on Children and Youth

For the first time, youth were invited to attend the Conference, and over four hundred young people arrived in Washington, D.C for the Mid-Century White House Conference on Youth and Children. The 1950 Conference was the best attended and had the strongest leadership of any Conference on Children and Youth thus far. Preparations began well in advance, starting at the state level, with the establishment of committees to assess the needs of children. The state committees created 1,000 local committees. Each state submitted a report to be incorporated into the proceedings of the White House Conference. In addition to federal, state, and local government preparations, more than

460 national organizations participated in the planning of the Conference. These organizations prepared by keeping their own members up to date on the progress of the Conference, organizing meetings between their members and state White House Conference Committee members, arranging and leading discussions on the effects of different aspects of community life on a child's personality, and conducting research. APPENDIX E. Many of these organizations also submitted reports to be integrated into the National Conference. As a result, prior to the Conference a *Chart Book* and a 170-page, *Fact-Finding Report* had already been published. The Conference was financed mostly by voluntary contributions from various national organizations and foundations, as well as \$150,000 worth of funding by Congress.

The Mid-Century Conference “base[d] its concern for children on the primacy of spiritual values, democratic practice, and the dignity and worth of every individual. Accordingly, the purpose of the Conference [was] to consider how we can develop in children the mental, emotional and spiritual qualities essential to individual happiness and responsible citizenship and what physical, economic and social conditions are deemed necessary to this development.”² The theme encompassed all facets of life – from public health, to theater, to religion, education, and recreation. In President Truman’s address to members of the National Committee (prior to the Conference), he articulated the need for a stronger educational program with more teachers and better funded schools.

APPENDIX F. Other goals of the Conference included documenting participants’ expertise on the physical, mental, emotional, and moral needs of children, providing suggestions for parents to foster healthy development for their children, and

² Roberts, Dean W. “Highlights of the Mid-Century Conference on Children and Youth.” *American Journal of Public Health* Jan. 1951: 98.

recommending means of improvement, and enhancing the quality of child services.

APPENDIX G. Minority racial groups were designed to represent the needs of their respective racial groups (numbers determined by the proportion of that race to the nation's population). APPENDIX H, APPENDIX I. Two hundred foreign delegates representing thirty nations also attended to observe the proceedings of the Conference.

At the beginning of the Conference, the delegates made a pledge to children, a statement which unified the attendees in their promise to help improve the quality of life for each child. APPENDIX J. In order to meet the varied interests of the Conference participants, attendees were divided into thirty-five work groups, which focused on individual areas such as nursing, the role of the arts, and racial discrimination. At the close of the Conference, the groups submitted their recommendations. Work Group No. 21, "The Significance of Aesthetic Experience and Artistic Expression for Healthy Personality Development," was very important to the Conference's theme – healthy personality growth. The group strived to increase children's participation and interest in the arts, which would hopefully lead to healthy personal development and creative freedom for children throughout the nation. APPENDIX K, APPENDIX L. The work groups were supplemented by major addresses to the entire Conference. The general sessions emphasized the importance of healthy personality development and the ways in which social, educational, health, recreational, and religious institutions help shape the personality of a child. APPENDIX M. Throughout the Conference President Truman delivered addresses which reinforced the themes and goals of the Conference. APPENDIX N, APPENDIX O. At the end of the Conference, attendees convened to compile a list of overall recommendations APPENDIX N.

1960 Golden Anniversary White House Conference on Children and Youth

Seven Thousand delegates attended the Golden Anniversary White House Conference on Children and Youth. The theme of the 1960 Conference was “to promote opportunities for children and youth to realize their full potential for a creative life in freedom and dignity.”³ More than six million citizens participated in preparatory activities: state and local committees were formed and reports drafted, such as “The States’ Report on Children and Youth.” President Eisenhower’s address to National Committee members focused on the importance of high quality and long term education for children. APPENDIX P. Committee members also determined a series of procedures for the Conference. APPENDIX Q. Young people were invited to attend this Conference, and their reports on the Conference were then published. APPENDIX R. The growth of the White House Conference necessitated the formation of 210 work groups, 175 more than the 1950 Conference.

At the beginning of the Conference, President Eisenhower delivered an address to attendees in which he highlighted the importance of the Conference and the work that would be produced by the delegates by the end of the Golden Anniversary White House Conference. APPENDIX S. The structure of the Conference remained the same – general sessions were held, work groups met to draft recommendations, approved recommendations were sent for continued discussion, and recommendations were voted on. Work group recommendations were specific to their fields. For example, the work group devoted to the arts drafted proposals for improvements in the areas of creative writing, visual art, music, theater, and dance. APPENDIX T. The pediatrics work group attested to the profound impact of past White House Conferences, which had reduced the

³ “Students Report on Youth Conference.” Music Educators Journal Nov.-Dec. 1960: 81.

death rate for infants under 1 year of age by 78% between 1910 and 1956. The death rate of preschool children (ages one to four) had decreased by 92%, and the death rate of youth ages fifteen to nineteen had dropped by almost 75%. After much debate, 670 final recommendations were presented and published by the White House Conference.

APPENDIX U, APPENDIX V, APPENDIX W, APPENDIX X.

1970 White House Conference on Children and Youth

The 1970 White House Conference on Children and Youth was divided into three stages – a conference devoted to children ages one to thirteen and a second conference, organized and led by youth, themselves, on children ages fourteen to twenty four. The first conference was further structured into two categories, children from birth to age five and children from six to thirteen. APPENDIX Y. Regional conferences that focused on children to thirteen years were also held in six cities across the Nation. The purpose of the 1970 Conference was “to enhance and cherish the individuality and identity of each American child through the recognition and encouragement of his or her own development, regardless of environmental conditions or circumstances of birth.”

APPENDIX Z. Participants in the preparatory process ranged from youth, to various professionals, to parents, and community workers. APPENDIX AA. The 4,000 conference attendees were divided into fora of fifteen members. These fora, led by a chairman and co-chairman gathered data, researched the current needs of children, and submitted recommendations. For example, Forum Fourteen, Changing Families in a Changing Society, focused on society’s pluralistic nature. APPENDIX BB. Forum Fifteen, Parents and Children – Together in the World, articulated the importance of a parent figure in a child’s life. APPENDIX CC (p. 201-204).

In addition to forum reports, delegates also participated in a ballot system in which they ranked sixteen statements of conference priorities in order of highest concerns. Concerns included “comprehensive child development programs that include health services; day care and early childhood education; programs that eliminate ‘the racism which cripples all children’ and a reordering of the nation’s priorities beginning with “a guaranteed basic family income adequate for the needs of children.”⁴ APPENDIX CC (p. 205-206).

The 1970 Conference stressed the importance of direct and immediate implementation. APPENDIX DD. In order to facilitate implementation, a series of regional conferences took place in five cities throughout the United States. These meetings concentrated on devising strategies to put into practice the recommendations proposed at the National Conference. Outcomes of the 1970 Conference included the establishment of a state council designed to monitor the status of children in the state, as well as the creation of a new Congressional Subcommittee on Children and Youth. APPENDIX CC (p. 201-202).

⁴ Chandler, Barbara A. “The White House Conference on Children: A 1970 Happening.” *The Family Coordinator* Jul. 1971: 198.