

An Update on the Alliance for Childhood

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The Alliance, which works with a broad group of partners on a growing number of childhood issues, has had a busy fall. We were fortunate to receive some gifts that have helped us move from the slow track of development to the middle range. We would love to raise more funds and move to a faster track, for it seems that the world is more open than we had expected to the message of the Alliance. The tragedy at Columbine High School has raised many fundamental questions as to what has gone wrong in the lives of our children. There is now talk of Congressional hearings on the subject of what cultural changes are needed to create a healthier environment for children and youth.

Coincidental to this awakening in Congress, we prepared a letter for each member of the House and Senate asking for hearings on a number of childhood issues such as the impact of computers and electronic media in the lives of children. Through the services of a volunteer courier, these packets were hand-delivered on Michaelmas at the end of September. We hope they will help give Congress the courage to tackle the difficult issues facing children.

Another focus of activity is the State of the World Forum, a very progressive gathering in San Francisco. Alliance partners Claire Garrison and Cathie Dahlstrom worked hard to organize the Whole Child Round Table at the Forum, and I and another partner, Dr. Marilyn Benoit, President Elect of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, took part. The Forum provided a good opportunity to meet with a number of key people who are concerned about the fate of children today. Among them was Dr. Stuart Brown of the Play Institute in Carmel, California. His research into the lives of killers in Texas showed that they had very little history of play in their childhood or adulthood. Conversely, his research into the lives of winners of the MacArthur genius awards showed that they had a strong history of play.

Stuart Brown's research, along with that of Sara Smilansky and others, points to the critical nature of play in the lives of children. Yet, like so much else of value to children, play is disappearing from the world of childhood. At a recent Alliance meeting the decision was made to prepare for a major project on the importance of play. We hope to launch such a project next year and will let you know more about it. It should also serve to support the play-oriented approach of the Waldorf kindergarten in the eyes of the public, for we will be focusing on the research that shows how crucial open-ended creative play is in the lives of children. We are now working with the Forum on next year's round tables. The Forum will take place in early September in New York in conjunction with the United Nations millennial celebration.

A third focus is our project on the impact of computers in the lives of children today. There is growing research about the harm that is occurring as computers become a major force in the lives of children. One example is the growing incidence of carpal tunnel syndrome of a strong and even crippling nature in children. At the same time that the problems are growing, there is little evidence that computers are helping children academically or socially. We hope to spotlight the use of computers by children in a number of ways to help people reassess when computers are appropriate - or inappropriate - in the lives of young and elementary age children. As part of this focus we have been working with Alison Armstrong, co-author of *The Child and the Machine*, a well-written book about children and computers. Her book is published in Canada and hard to obtain in the U.S. We helped her find a publishing house in the U.S., and the book will appear May 1 in a revised and updated form. In cooperation with the publisher, the Alliance is organizing a series of workshops and lectures with Alison in May across the U.S. More information can be found in the Calendar of Events.

There are many doors opening to the Alliance as people gradually awaken to the problems facing children today. The latest alarming statistic is that California has recorded a 237 percent increase in autism over

the past ten years. No one is certain of the reasons, although there is growing concern that some of the increase is linked to reactions to immunization, especially Measles, Mumps, Rubella (MMR). There are probably other factors as well, such as the long hours children spend in social isolation in front of screens, be they television, video or computer. Another grave concern is the early separations that occur between infants and parents, and the time children spend in inadequate child care. There is often a rapid turnover of staff that makes it hard for infants and children to find a care giver they can bond to. Much research is needed before one can be certain why we are seeing such an increase in autism, but I sometimes think that if we wanted to design a culture for cultivating autistic-like behavior in children, it would be hard to improve on the one we have inadvertently created.

It will take many individuals and organizations working together to reverse the growing trends of autism, hyperactive disorders, depression, and other illnesses in children, but that is the purpose of the Alliance: to bring people together locally, nationally and internationally to spotlight the problems, bring forth creative solutions and support a healthier culture for children.

If you would like more information about the Alliance, you may contact it as follows: Alliance for Childhood, P.O. Box 444, College Park, MD 20741. Tel. 888-878-2772 or 301-699-9058; Fax 301-7793272. Email: info@allianceforchildhood.net or ja1mon@erols.com. A new website will soon be up and running at <http://www.allianceforchildhood.net>