

The Alliance for Childhood and State of the World Forum on Childhood

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The spring issue of the *Research Bulletin* reported on the founding of the Alliance for Childhood, and we would now like to share an update of our activities. When the Alliance was founded last February, Colleen Cordes, one of the founding partners, promised to write an article about the Alliance for this *Bulletin* and then further promised to get the article into the hands of every member of the U.S. Congress! When the article appeared in the *Bulletin* we were suddenly faced with the question of how to fulfill that promise. Mailing costs alone were beyond our means.

It became clear that something higher was at work when the next day we received a call from a volunteer who wanted to help the Alliance in some way. At the time he was a courier for a law firm in Washington. When told about the mailing to Congress, his immediate response was, "I'll take two days off from work and deliver them all by hand." And so it happened on Michaelmas and the day after with the help of added volunteers.

The cover letter to Congress pointed out the problems facing children today and requested hearings in areas such as the impact of media and computers in the lives of children. During the year we will follow up with a number of men and women in Congress whose committees deal with such matters.

Meanwhile, we are focusing on the question of computers in the lives of children. There is a strong assumption in the United States-and increasingly in other countries-that computers are of great importance to children. Few people question this assumption, yet research indicates that there are very small gains, if any, from teaching subjects with computers. Furthermore, their use is increasingly linked with medical problems in children and adults, such as carpal tunnel syndrome from repetitive action with keyboard or mouse. There is also concern that computer games, which are frequently quite violent, are desensitizing children and making them more prone to violent behavior. A new book, *Stop Teaching Kids to Kill* by Dave Grossman (Crown Books, 1999) is written by an expert in the field of "killology," the study of how human beings kill others.

According to Grossman, who teaches at West Point and serves as a military consultant on the subject of killing, human beings do not naturally kill one another. They must be desensitized and taught to do so. The army has developed much skill in this training, but does so within the bounds of discipline and obedience to hierarchy. He then shows that the same techniques for desensitization are being used on children through violent media and computer games, with the result that children are much more prone to violence than before, and without the military's safeguards. In this regard, it was shocking to hear recently that the military was joining forces with Hollywood to produce new material for training soldiers, and that this material would then be used for media programs and computer games. As Grossman says, it is time to stop teaching children to kill, not a time to increase the killing.

One step towards turning the tide on computers is to highlight the difficulties and awaken people to a more critical stance. The Alliance for Childhood is focusing on this issue this year and is sponsoring a book tour for Alison Armstrong who co-authored the very effective book, *The Child and Machine* (Key Porter Books, 1998). Originally published in Canada, she and her co-author, Charles Casement, are updating the research and including new anecdotal examples for a May 1 publication in the U.S. Alison will do weekend workshops at Columbia University in New York on April 29, in Mann County, California, on May 6 and in Los Angeles on May 13. In between she will do a series of talks, book signings and media presentations in a variety of locations. In the new year the Alliance will have a full schedule available by post or email (www.allianceforchildhood.net).

A high point of the fall was being able to participate in the State of the World Forum in San Francisco. This remarkable conference, spearheaded by Jim Garrison, began five years ago in conjunction with Mikhail Gorbachev and others who were deeply concerned about global issues such as disarmament, environmental concerns, women's issues and, more recently, problems of childhood. The Whole Child Initiative within the Forum is headed by Claire Ryle Garrison who was assisted by Cathie Dahlstrom. Both are Alliance partners. This year's focus was on the development from infant brain to human mind, with special attention to the role of play in the development of primates and humans. Jane Goodall, well known for her 40 years of research with chimpanzees in Tanzania, spoke eloquently about the role of play in the healthy development of chimps. The theme was further elaborated by Stuart Brown, a physician who is not practicing medicine at the moment but focusing on the importance of play through his organization, The Institute for Play, in Carmel, California.

Stuart became convinced of the importance of play as a young doctor in Austin, Texas, when he was asked to investigate the life of a young man who climbed the tower at the University and shot and killed 19 people, wounding many others. What he found was a biography without history of play in childhood or adulthood. He went on to study the lives of other killers in Texas and found the same pattern. He then did a study of highly creative individuals who had won MacArthur genius awards and found that nearly all had a strong history of play in childhood, youth and adulthood. He came to see that play is critical for the healthy development of the individual and that it has strong societal implications, as well. (See his article, "Through the Lens of Play," *Re Vision*, Vol. 17, No. 4, Spring 1995.)

Dr. Marilyn Benoit, a child and youth psychiatrist and a founding partner of the Alliance, also took part in the round table and spoke of dot.com kids, children so adapted to computers that the usual relations to life no longer seem to apply. From a young age such children learn that computers can give instant gratification in the form of pictures, sounds, stories, etc. They frequently have trouble developing patience and become frustrated easily. She sees a link between technology, instant gratification, poor frustration tolerance, lack of empathy, and aggression. When the reliance on technology is coupled with too little relationship to family, as is often the case today for children in a busy household, then the socialization of the child is undermined. When frustration tolerance is also not acquired, the child is much more likely to lash out when frustrated. This, she feels, is linked to the increased violent behavior which psychiatrists are seeing in children who are frequently labeled as "explosive." They are children who cannot cope with frustration and lash out aggressively.

Another participant in the round table was Susan McConnell, professor of Biological Sciences at Stanford University. She is an expert on the new brain research that focuses on the first three years of life, and she shared findings regarding the importance of these years. At the same time she stressed that research suggests a more conservative view than the one often promoted by groups claiming that extra stimulation is needed in these years to ensure active brain development. Her own conclusion is that "...efforts should be focused on ensuring that infants and toddlers obtain the basic necessities such as loving care, proper nutrition, and necessary experiences and interactions (such as reading, singing or talking to and playing with the child.)" (Informal paper prepared for the round table.)

A final presentation was made by Waheed Hassan, director of early childhood activities for UNICEF. He helped build a bridge between the Forum's concerns for young children and that of UNICEF. The Forum hopes to strengthen that bridge by planning its fall conference for next year in New York as part of the United Nation's millennium celebration. The U.N. is inviting heads of state from all member countries to convene in New York and has urged the Forum to meet nearby at the same time. It is hoped that there will be an active dialogue between the Forum and the U.N. on a variety of issues, including the well-being of children in the new millennium.

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