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**“For the Children”: America’s Dedication to the  
Health of Children and Youth, 1890-1940**

Concerns about the health of children and demands for federal legislation to address them punctuate 1990s political discourse. The significant roles that local communities and voluntary organizations once performed in this regard have been forgotten - or ignored. Apparently also forgotten is the message with which John Locke opened *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (1693): *mens sana en corpore sano*. Endorsed by a significant number of Enlightenment physicians and educational reformers, these sentiments resurfaced in the 1830s when publications like the *Boston Medical Intelligence* and the

American Journal of Education proclaimed the importance of out-of-door amusements and regular exercise in the physical, mental, and moral development of children and youth. Was it intention or neglect that led authors of a recent article in Public Health Reports (journal of the U. S. Public Health Service) open with the words: "Society is slowly coming to the realization that the health status of children and their educational development are inextricably linked"? (This was a view widely espoused by late nineteenth and early twentieth century commentators.) The recommendations in "Guidelines for School and Community Programs to Promote Lifelong Physical Activity Among Young People," issued by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in 1997, are strikingly similar to those that appeared in the Report of the 1930 White House Conference on Child Health and Protection and reports and proceedings of scores of agencies (private and governmental) in the first four decades of the twentieth century.

This paper examines American efforts to improve children's health from the late 1890s to 1940, with particular emphasis upon those in which physical activity was a major component. Reporting upon recent growth studies and commenting upon the relationship of physical development to mental capacity, William T. Porter, M. D. asserted in 1896 that "a revolution in educational method" was about to be launched and gave as the reason the recognition that: "the physical strength of the child and his power to do school work go hand in hand." Scores of organizations took up the cause. While much of the effort focused on such things as hot school lunches and the prevention of communicable diseases, the importance of the playground, physical education, and summer camps for boys and girls comprised a major part of many undertakings. Two excerpts from The Public Health News of Alameda County, California reflect sentiments that swept the country: "The Health Education Department of the Oakland Y.W.C.A. has become a most valuable and popular asset to the community" (December 1928); "Mere idleness has no place in a camp day; when leisure is wisely spent, it promotes the development of mind and body" (May 1930). The San Francisco Recreation Commission in 1938 reported that 5,607,471 children and youth had used its city playgrounds; several hundred more attended one of the summer vacation camps that the city or one of its volunteer agencies conducted. New York

University's School of Education Summer Camp for Teachers, Administrators, and Club Leaders and the summer programs of the Sargent School of Physical Education were but two of many that contributed by training teachers, playground leaders, and other professionals. Participants lived in rustic cabins, communed with nature, and attended "core" courses like educational psychology, biology, physiology, and hygiene. The curriculum included activities like canoeing, camping, and nature observation as well as the ubiquitous football, basketball, tennis, etc. This paper is informed by a variety of contemporary sources that include reports of a wide array of organizations, journal articles, the archival holdings of selected colleges and universities.

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