CASEY FAMILY SERVICES

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Raymond L. Torres
Director

August 4, 1995

Carol H. Rasco
Assistant to the President for Domestic Policy
Office of Policy Development
The White House
Washington, D.C. 20500

Dear Ms. Rasco:

Doug Nelson has informed us that he spoke to you and that you have agreed to join us as a luncheon speaker for the Casey Family Services Post-Adoption Services Conference. We are delighted that you will be attending. Your presence at the conference will greatly enhance our program.

The conference is being held on December 7 and 8, 1995 at the Boston Marriott, Copley Place, Boston, Massachusetts.

The purpose of this conference:

- to bring together professionals of various disciplines including social services, education and mental health to increase their understanding of the needs and issues faced by adoptive families and to identify various strategies and interventions that have proven to be successful in assisting adoptive families,

- to raise the awareness of policymakers and administrators about the ongoing needs of adoptive families and types of services and assistance that best support and preserve adoptive families.

Casey Family Services, as part of its five year plan, committed to taking a leadership role in sponsoring activities that would promote discussion, dialogue, and sharing of information in the child welfare field. The Post-Adoption Services Conference will provide such a forum, in which experts and pioneers in this field of practice can share their experiences, as well as discuss with other professionals their question, concerns, challenges and successes.

Casey Family Services currently operates Post-Adoption Service programs in Vermont and Connecticut. Social service administrators in the other New England states have expressed their strong interest in developing Post-Adoption Services. Funding issues present major challenges to policymakers and administrators who understand the importance of this service, but who must deal with competing priorities.

It would be very helpful if in your remarks you might assist us in exploring how Post-Adoption Services can be promoted in conjunction with the changes in federal funding for services being debated in Congress.

We would like to include your picture in our brochure. If possible, could you send us a photo?

If you have any questions about the conference, or if we can be helpful in any way with your travel plans, please feel free to call me.

We look forward to meeting you in Boston.

Sincerely,

Raymond Torres
Director

RT/cb

cc: Doug Nelson

E X E C U T I V E   O F F I C E   O F   T H E   P R E S I D E N T

12-Sep-1995 12:34pm

TO: Gaynor R. McCown

FROM: Carol H. Rasco
Economic and Domestic Policy

CC: Julie E. Demeo
CC: Patricia E. Romani
CC: Jeremy D. Benami

SUBJECT: December speech/workshop

In December I will be speaking to a Casey Foundation meeting on Adoption Assistance. You are the assigned lead for this event for me.

As always I want to use the preparation period for this speech as a time to really learn something about the issue beyond what I now know. I would like to do the following:

a. Have a meeting in mid to late October with people from HHS who work in this area to learn everything they want to share with me in this area. Please work with Pat to set up this briefing which should be set up for about one hour...Pat, as always please don't schedule me to race out at the end of that hour however.

b. Do a letter by the end of September to friends / others I can learn about who have adopted or are in the adoption business asking them to share their thoughts with me on post adoption services. After you have a chance to read the letter sent me thus far on this event and establish contact with organizer please draft a letter I might send and I'll be putting together a list...you may think of persons/groups I should write.

c. Draft speech should be in to me by November 21 so we can allow for time out for Thanksgiving.

d. Julie will need to have full briefing book compiled by close of business Dec. 4.

Only real outstanding question is what they want me to do if anything specific in addition to speech...otherwise I will probably try to sit in on other sessions as an observer.

Thanks.

E X E C U T I V E   O F F I C E   O F   T H E   P R E S I D E N T

09-Aug-1995 04:31pm

TO: Patricia E. Romani

FROM: Carol H. Rasco
Economic and Domestic Policy

CC: Julie E. Demeo

SUBJECT: RE: Casey Family Services Speech in December

I will be happy to take q and a from this group. Also, my hope is to go up the afternoon before and then stay through the afternoon of my speech if at all possible. We won't tell them this at this time but I might stay for even more of the conference depending on how things go.

Thanks.

E X E C U T I V E   O F F I C E   O F   T H E   P R E S I D E N T

09-Aug-1995 04:20pm

TO: Carol H. Rasco

FROM: Patricia E. Romani
Domestic Policy Council

CC: Julie E. Demeo

SUBJECT: Casey Family Services Speech in December

Carol,

Per your request I spoke with folks at Casey Services, Joy Duva.

Joy is Raymond Torres assistant.

They wish you to speak on December 7 (Thursday) for Keynote luncheon speaker. Joy said they are thinking of having a group discussion around 2:00 pm in the afternoon. They have not fleshed out details yet but if your schedule allowed they would be most happy if you could participate in that also. They understand any time/scheduling constraints you have.

Your speech would be after lunch for approximaty 20 - 30 minutes. They wondered if you would be open to maybe 5 minutes of Q & A's following speech. Lunch would begin around noon; they are estimating the time of your speech to begin at 1:00 p.m.

We sent them your photo yesterday per their request.

In the course of conversation they offered to pay for airfare and lodging. I explained we would need a letter from them stating same.

They are especially happy you are speaking to their group!

I have given them Julie's name and said she would be talking with them, too.

Pat

late October

CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

Promoting Fatherhood

Continued from page 3

Parenting skills—Fathers need to learn how to care for, play with, and discipline children in order to gain confidence in their parenting abilities.

Education and training—To make long-term contributions to the welfare of their children, fathers need to improve their employment prospects.

Recruitment—Outreach workers familiar with a community should find fathers who need assistance by knocking on doors and organizing meetings, as well as by involving schools, community and health agencies, preschool programs, and social service agencies.

Creative payment alternatives—Efforts should be made to arrange a flexible child support payment plan so fathers can pay what they are able, and as their income rises, proportionately increase financial support.

Paternity establishment—Legally establishing the father-child bond gives children access to child support, social security, and workers' compensation benefits.

Parental mediation—Mothers should be consulted on any activity that involves their children, have input into designing better solutions for visitation and payment arrangements, and attend support sessions with fathers, if possible.

Certain states have already begun initiatives that reflect these strategies and facilitate paternal involvement.

■ **California** recently sponsored a Fathers Summit in which public, private, and community leaders were convened to focus public attention on the societal impacts of father absence on child rearing and to galvanize support for solutions.

■ **Indiana** has promoted an "alternative currency" approach to child support that permits unemployed fathers to participate in job training or babysit their children in exchange for a temporary deferment of financial support payments.

■ **Kansas** requires both parents to register for work or participate in the Job Opportunities and Basic Skills Training program.

■ **Maine** has established a process to revoke drivers' licenses to discourage default on child support payments.

■ **New Jersey** exempts the income of the new spouse when a custodial parent marries while receiving public assistance, a strategy that encourages marriage.

An *Issue Brief* on this subject titled, "Toward Responsible Fatherhood," is available from NGA by calling 202/624-5330. The *Issue Brief* was written by Jordan Meranus, an NGA intern and co-founder of Jumpstart for Children, Inc., which serves preschoolers at serious risk of school failure in Boston, Mass., and New Haven, Conn. ■

HEALTH CARE

Many States Focus Reforms on Medical Saving Accounts

Continued from page 2

considering MSA implementation. Eight states (Hawaii, Kansas, Maine, Montana, Nebraska, Oregon, South Carolina, and Vermont) considered MSAs in 1995 but did not enact legislation.

Designed to give consumers a direct incentive to wisely spend their health care dollars, MSAs can have an effect on traditional third-party insurance practices. Although there are differences among states in areas such as withdrawal penalties and the amounts that may be deposited in any given year, in all states the accounts are set up using the same guidelines. Employers purchase low-priced, high-deductible insurance, usually a catastrophic policy that pays all expenses over a set limit, then open accounts in individual employees' names and deposit the difference between the old and new premium amounts.

Copies of "Update: State Progress in Health Care Reform, September 1995" are available from NGA by calling 202/624-5330. ■

GOVERNORS BULLETIN
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Ms Carol Rasco
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GOVERNORS BULLETIN

September 18, 1995

Published by the NATIONAL GOVERNORS' ASSOCIATION

HEALTH CARE

States Focus Reform Efforts on Four Areas

States are continuing to implement health care reforms, though the focus is now targeted changes to health care financing and delivery rather than statewide efforts to achieve universal insurance coverage.

A new NGA *StateLine* focuses on four areas in which states have been active in health care reform over the past six months: the enactment of state-based reform initiatives, the use of Medicaid Section 1115 waivers, the integration of special populations into Medicaid managed care programs, and the consideration of medical savings accounts.

State-Based Reform Initiatives

Some states are implementing statewide health care reform initiatives, while the reform efforts of other states reflect a shift to more incremental changes. The lack of congressional action to amend the federal Employee Retirement Income Security Act (ERISA) has curtailed the universal coverage aspirations of a few reform plans. Although the Supreme Court ruling in *New York State Conference of Blue Cross & Blue Shield Plans v. Travelers Insurance Co.* may stop the erosion in state regulatory authority over insurance plans, it does not remove the key obstacles to comprehensive state health care reform.

Colorado is continuing its plan of incremental changes, particularly in the area of insurance market reforms. The state's department of health care policy and financing has begun implementation of 1994 legislation that authorizes the creation of health care coverage cooperatives. The cooperatives are private nonprofit organizations formed by groups of employers that offer a variety of fully insured insurance products and administrative services to their member employers. Open on a voluntary basis to small employers with between two and fifty employees within a designated geographic area, the cooperatives may also elect to open their membership to large employers and individuals.

Minnesota is continuing to implement MinnesotaCare, with the majority of reforms taking effect according to schedule. Provider groups started to incorporate as community integrated service networks (CISNs) in July 1994 and offered services beginning in January 1995. The larger integrated service networks (ISNs) started licensing procedures in July 1995 and will begin providing services in January 1996. The final planned

Continued on page 2

Las Vegas Chosen for 1997 Governors' Meeting

NGA Chairman Gov. Tommy G. Thompson of Wisconsin announced that the NGA Executive Committee has selected Las Vegas, Nevada, as the site for the association's 89th annual meeting.

"The NGA annual meeting is one of the nation's premier public policy forums, and it's an honor for Las Vegas to be chosen as the host city for 1997," said Nevada Gov. and NGA Vice Chairman Bob Miller. "I'm extremely pleased that NGA recognizes Las Vegas as a community well-suited to support the important work of America's governors."

The 1997 annual meeting will be held Sunday, July 27, through Wednesday, July 30. The site selection is the culmination of a lengthy competitive process; potential sites were considered for meeting and housing accommodations, access to transportation, and other related issues.

The meeting is one of the association's two yearly official business meetings. NGA's 1996 winter meeting is set for February 3-6 in Washington, D.C.; the 1996 annual meeting will be held July 13-16 in Fajardo, Puerto Rico.

WELFARE REFORM

Governors Urge More Child Care Funding

In letters sent to Sens. Robert Dole (R-Kan.) and Thomas Daschle (D-S.D.), NGA Chairman Gov. Tommy G. Thompson of Wisconsin and NGA Vice Chairman Gov. Bob Miller of Nevada identified issues that are critical to NGA in the welfare reform debate and called for additional funding for child care.

"We are concerned that unless adequate child care funding continues to be provided at the federal level, the work requirements in [S. 1120/H.R. 4] could represent a significant unfunded mandate on the states." The letter, dated Sept. 13, was sent in the midst of Senate floor debate on the Senate Republican leadership welfare bill, H.R. 4/S. 1120. The bill would require states to place a significantly higher percentage of welfare

Continued on page 3

In this issue . . .

The Health Care Financing Administration has approved waivers in seven more states—Delaware, Florida, Kentucky, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Ohio, and Vermont.

HEALTH CARE

State Efforts in Four Areas

Continued from page 1

MinnesotaCare expansion is slated to take effect Oct. 1, 1995, when single individuals with incomes up to 135 percent of the federal poverty level will become eligible to enroll in the program. However, not wanting to raise the 2 percent provider tax that has been funding MinnesotaCare's expansion, Gov. Arne H. Carlson has given the commissioner of health the authority to stop this final eligibility expansion at any time if the Health Care Access Fund reserve becomes too unstable. Effective July 1, 1995, all MinnesotaCare enrollees are being charged a minimum premium of $4 per month.

Section 1115 Waiver Activity

As of August 1995, five states are operating programs under Section 1115 waivers—Arizona, Hawaii, Oregon, Rhode Island, and Tennessee. These states are addressing critical financing and implementation challenges. Cost overruns are hampering some implementation efforts because of problems such as higher than expected enrollment as a result of eligibility expansions and nonpayment of premiums and/or copayments.

The Health Care Financing Administration (HCFA) has approved waivers in seven more states—Delaware, Florida, Kentucky, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Ohio, and Vermont.

Although some states will implement programs next year, other states will delay implementation because of uncertainty about the fiscal impact of Medicaid program changes at the federal level.

Eight other states (Illinois, Kansas, Louisiana, Missouri, New Hampshire, New York, Oklahoma, and Texas) have submitted proposals that are currently being reviewed by HCFA. Five additional states (Connecticut, Maryland, New Jersey, Utah, and Washington) are initiating discussions among various agencies to formulate proposals.

HCFA approved the Massachusetts plan, MassHealth, in April 1995. The Medicaid population will shift to a managed care program, and the state has contracted with Value Health Management to administer the program. MassHealth will expand eligibility by using resources from the uncompensated care fund to subsidize insurance premiums on a sliding scale for the working poor and will give tax credits and rebates to employers when they pay 50 percent of premium coverage costs. To meet the implementation date of Jan. 1, 1996, MassHealth must be passed by the legislature before it adjourns in November.

Vermont Gov. Howard Dean, M.D., signed into law the Vermont Health Security Plan in April and it was approved by HCFA in July. The plan calls for current Medicaid beneficiaries to be phased into managed care plans in stages; all future Medicaid recipients will also be enrolled into managed care plans.

Each Medicaid recipient will need to be recertified every six months. Buy-in programs will be considered for individuals whose incomes are too high for subsidization but who are not eligible for an employer-sponsored or other government-sponsored health plan. The plan also extends pharmacy benefits to low-income elderly and disabled individuals, which will help expenditures for institutionalized services. Revenues from a cigarette tax will pay for start-up costs.

Integration of Special Populations

For a number of years, states have been using Section 1915(b) and Section 1115 waiver authority to require large segments of their medical assistance populations to shift to managed care systems in order to improve efficiency at both the financing and program levels. In most cases, however, populations with special health care needs have been "carved out" or exempted from the requirement.

States have had concerns about an adequate continuum of care being in place to address the myriad and complex needs of populations such as the mentally ill, substance abusers, and the developmentally and/or physically disabled.

Now that managed care systems have been in operation for a number of years, some states are exploring the possibilities and ramifications of moving these special populations into a managed care network. A few states are implementing such initiatives.

On March 1, 1995, Iowa implemented the Mental Health Access Plan under a Section 1915(b) waiver. Approximately 175,000 Medicaid recipients will have access to mental health services on a capitated basis. All recipients of Aid to Families with Dependent Children and Supplemental Security Income, as well as those in health maintenance organizations (HMOs), are covered, with carve-outs for those currently institutionalized and those above age sixty-five.

The state has contracted for two years with MBC of Iowa, with a projected savings of 14 percent for the period. There are no annual deductibles, coinsurance, or copayments for the services, which must be available in all parts of the state. In addition, Iowa has applied for a Section 1915(b) waiver to move the substance abuse population into managed care.

A plan is being developed by Missouri state officials under which psychiatrists and rehabilitative medicine specialists will be considered part of the primary care team, because specialized care is such an important factor for these populations. Although it is still in the development phase, an integral part of the plan will ensure that these services are available in rural areas, traditionally a difficult sector in which to operate managed care systems.

Medical Savings Accounts

Over the past year, a fair amount of health care reform activity has centered around medical savings accounts (MSAs). Of the 15 states that have enacted MSA legislation, eight were enacted in the 1995 legislative session. Three states (California, New Jersey, and Ohio) are

Continued on page 4

Gaynor

It is estimated that 75 percent of American children living in single-parent families will experience poverty before they are 11 years old, compared with 20 percent of children in two-parent families.

CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

States Initiate Programs to Promote Responsible Fatherhood

As lawmakers on Capitol Hill make responsible parenting a prominent issue in the welfare reform debate, states and localities are developing strategies to promote unwed fathers' involvement in their children's lives.

The development of these strategies is prompted by a growing recognition of a connection between the deterioration of the well-being of the nation's children and the increase in the number of children living apart from their fathers. In all major categories of well-being—violent crime, neglect and abuse, test scores, and poverty—there is evidence that children are worse off now than they were 30 years ago. Within this same timeframe, the number of children living with only one parent has risen dramatically, from 5.8 million to approximately 18 million; most of these children live apart from their fathers. Fatherlessness has both economic and developmental implications for children. It is estimated that 75 percent of American children living in single-parent families will experience poverty before they are 11 years old, compared with 20 percent of children in two-parent families. Beyond these financial implications, a child's development of a sense of attachment and trust can be hindered when deprived of the attention, guidance, or love of one or both parents.

This trend of fatherlessness can be addressed on two levels. First, community-based programs must reach out to low-income fathers and provide them with opportunities to become employed and to learn how to care for their children.

Second, to achieve long-term results, such outreach efforts must be supported by a commitment to economic development to improve the education, skills, and employment prospects of young men in disadvantaged communities. This includes school reform, welfare reform that rewards both custodial and noncustodial parents for working, and ongoing initiatives to generate meaningful jobs in impoverished areas. In addition, efforts should be made to develop strategies to encourage divorced fathers to continue to support their children, both emotionally and financially.

Successful initiatives to address paternal disinvestment all incorporate the following elements.

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September 18, 1995 Vol. 29, No. 19

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Wisconsin Gov. Tommy G. Thompson, Chairman
Raymond C. Scheppach, Executive Director
Rosemary Lally, Managing Editor
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WELFARE REFORM

Governors Weigh In on Welfare Reform Legislation

Continued from page 1

recipients in work activities, but would not provide any new funding to states for child care.

The letters did not suggest a specific level for child care dollars, but said that "states will need substantially more funding than is currently in [Senator Dole's] bill." The Congressional Budget Office has estimated that it would cost states an additional $3.8 billion over five years to meet the child care needs that would result from implementing the work requirements in the bill. The governors also urged Congress to provide child care funds to the states in a flexible manner without prescriptive requirements or set-asides, and to give states the option of limiting to 20 hours a week the number of hours parents with children below age six are required to work.

The governors also called for the establishment of a contingency grant fund that could provide additional funds to states during periods of economic recessions. "Economic downturns can derail welfare reform by sapping state revenues just when need for assistance is rising," the letter stated. Under the NGA proposal, a state would have access to a limited amount of matching federal dollars if that state's unemployment rate had increased substantially. Both Sen. Mike DeWine (R-Ohio) and Sen. Thomas Daschle (D-S.D.) had drafted amendments establishing contingency funds.

Late last week, the Senate Republican and Democratic leadership negotiated changes to the welfare bill, adding $3 billion for child care and $1 billion for a contingency fund. The bipartisan agreement was needed to break a deadlock and to ensure the support of moderate Republicans and some Democrats. The vote on final passage is expected Sept. 19.

In the letter, the governors also stated their opposition to federally mandated eligibility restrictions that would prohibit states from aiding such groups as legal aliens, teen parents, or additional children born to welfare recipients. "These decisions are most appropriately made at the state level," the governors wrote.

In a separate letter to all senators, also sent Sept. 13, Govs. Thompson and Miller listed specific amendments to the welfare bill that are supported by NGA. The list includes amendments that would give states additional flexibility, remove restrictions on the provision of assistance to legal immigrants, and ease some of the burden of the penalties and data-reporting requirements. ■

COVERING CHILDREN'S WELFARE

A Report On A Conference On Protecting The Welfare Of Children

Sponsored by the Casey Journalism Center for Children and Families

Photograph by Stephen Shames/Matrix

Casey Journalism Center for Children and Families

Cathy Trost
Director

September 6, 1995

Dear Colleague:

We wanted to share with you the enclosed report, "Covering Children's Welfare," a report on the Casey Journalism Center's conference on "Protecting the Welfare of Children" held in June at the University of Maryland.

The report will appear as a special insert in the September issue of the national monthly magazine, *American Journalism Review*. Special features include a Q & A with First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton and a list of sources for data on children and families.

Please keep us posted on your continuing work in this area.

Best regards,

Cathy Trost

Cathy Trost, Director

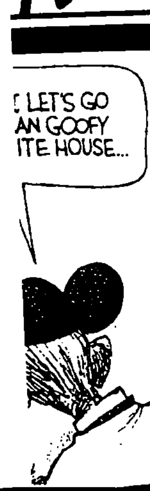
P.S. Don't forget about the national teleconference on children's issues to be carried by satellite on November 16, 1995. Journalists will be able to phone questions to panels of experts during the special four-hour televised program. The free teleconference is sponsored by the Knight Center for Specialized Journalism and the Casey Journalism Center for Children and Families. Call us for details.

8701-B Adelphi Road • Adelphi, Md. 20783-1716 • (301) 445-4971 • Fax: (301) 445-9659

To —

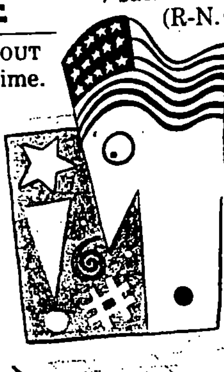
File in Dec. Adoption Speech file

Up Front



TECH TALK

TAKE THAT, YOU LUGARING DOLE

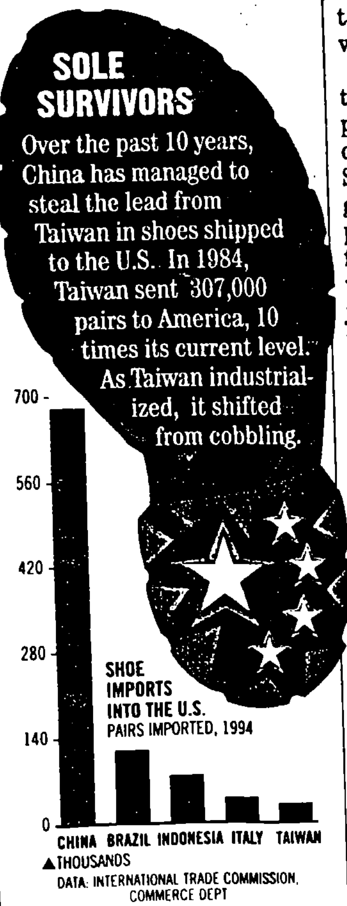


AMERICANS CURSE OUT politicians all the time. Now comes a new computer program allowing them to substitute a politician's name for a dirty word—and circumvent possible federal curbs on cybersmut. Say you want to avoid prosecution for a message describing sexual climax. It would read: "Oh my gosh, I'm Clinton!" Or you can observe: "Life Gores." (Translation: "Life sucks.") The harshest—and most unprintable—sobriquets in the lexicon go to lav ers who back outl: naughty words on the such as Senator Jesse I (R-N.C.) and Senat jority L Bob Dole Kan.).

In the sion of telecom r bill, pass the Senate erything from posting porn images on the Net to using "indecent" language in E-mail could bring fines or jail. The issue will surface next in the Senate-House conference committee. The stealth smut program was designed by cyber-rights activist Robert Carr. He dubs it "HexOn Exon," after the measure's chief sponsor, Senator James Exon (D-Neb.), called an anatomical term in the program, who won't comment.

HexOn Exon, available on the Internet, runs on the Apple Macintosh and can be ordered for free by contacting SmurfBoy@aol.com. The program uses a search-and-replace routine to sub the officeholders' names as code words for dirty words. You just run your X-rated text through the HexOn program before sending it, and the recipient can decode it with the same program. *Amy Cortese*

THE BIG PICTURE



ADULT EDUCATION

MOTOROLA'S SCHOOL FOR PARENTS

MAKING EMPLOYEES BETTER parents is Motorola's latest crusade. The company, where 44% of the workforce have kids under 18, just started a spate of courses teaching the difficult art of rearing kids. Subjects range from early childhood development to raising teens. In the next year, Motorola will roll out courses for such things as "blended" families (two parents bringing their families together) and "sandwich" families (parents caring for kids and aging parents).

Motorola requires every employee to take 40 hours of job-related training yearly, and to foster a better-educated workforce, it helps local schools. But out of concern with how family problems affected its workers, it enlisted consultants to design the new parenting classes, which count toward the 40 hours. It has mailed a booklet to every employee, *The Role of the Adult in the Life of a Child*, decorated with Motorola kids' drawings. One is shown here.

FAMILY: *Kid's-eye view*

The object: to offer practical advice, using a group-discussion format. In the single-parent class, for instance, ideas fly on how to unwind with only a little time to yourself. Example: rock out to loud music in the car before picking up your kid from day care. *Kevin Kelly*

TAXES AT WORK

QUICKER MARCH AT THE PENTAGON

PENTAGON CONTRACTING, notorious for its agonizingly slow pace, may finally start double-timing. We're not talking about megabuck weapons systems, which take years and years to produce. At issue are Defense Dept. purchases costing $100,000 or less—98% of all its procurement transactions.

By dint of its vast needs, the Pentagon itself will be the biggest beneficiary of new governmentwide rules encouraging standardized online purchasing. Expected turnaround time from request for bids to award of a contract: as little as 24 hours, vs. the previous minimum of 45 days. Agencies post notices of pending procurements and copies of solicitations on electronic bulletin boards. Contractors in turn use electronic-data exchange to submit bids and receive awards.

Deputy Defense Under Secretary Colleen Preston, who spearheaded the shift, knows firsthand how bad the old system was: She waited four months to buy a $40 dictation machine. *Stan Crock*

FOOTNOTES Average yearly income for U.S. households with access to the Internet: $67,000; for all U.S. households: $42,000

(CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT) ILLUSTRATION BY ROBERT DE MICHIELL; CARTOON BY JEFF MACNELLY/CHICAGO TRIBUNE/TRIBUNE MEDIA SERVICES; ILLUSTRATION COURTESY ...; PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY ROB DOYLE (TURTLE BY LEONARD LEE III/ANIMALS ANIMALS; PENTAGON BY DENNIS BRACK/BLACK STAR); GRAPHIC BY RAY VELLA/BW

Bridges

BY DOTTIE ENRICO

Dottie Enrico as a preschooler in California during the early 1960s

How I learned I wasn't Caucasian

Born in Korea, I thought I was as American as the kids next door—until the first day of school

Many of us have painful memories of our first day of school. We recall the tears we shed watching Mommy wave goodbye or hearing the taunts of classmates ridiculing us about a pair of thick glasses or a funny haircut. But for me, the first day of kindergarten was the day I realized I was not Caucasian.

When I was a few days old, I was abandoned by my Asian birth mother on the steps of a city government building in Seoul, South Korea. Like thousands of other Korean children, I was adopted by an American family and brought to the United States before I was six months old. I spent most of my childhood in California, then moved, at age 11, to a small Indiana town.

My parents felt the best way for me and my adopted brother, who is also Korean, to assimilate into American culture was not to dwell on our foreignness.

My parents weren't trying to pretend we weren't adopted; they just never discussed our identities as Asians. To them, I was their daughter—the child of an Italian engineer and his German American wife. Korea was simply the place where I was born, and maybe my parents naively believed that being an Asian in America wasn't any different than coming from another faraway place like Oslo or Vienna.

But even though prejudice didn't exist in our home, it was unfair of my parents not to prepare me for the small-mindedness of others. In retrospect, I think they owed me some information about my Korean heritage so that when I was faced with racism, I would have a firm, positive feeling about being Asian. On the other hand, it is also easy to understand why they felt uncomfortable about supplying me with a Korean identity. First-generation Americans of various races have immersed their biological children in U.S. culture at the expense of foreign legacies—but these parents had the luxury of sharing the same eyes, hair and genes as their children. Perhaps years of rocking me to sleep and answering my cries in the night had truly blinded my parents to our racial differences. Outsiders, however, were always eager to point them out.

As my brother and I stood alongside three or four neighborhood kids waiting to start our first day of kindergarten, a busload of older students passed, and many hung out the window pointing to our group and yelling, "Chinese cherries! Look at the Chinese cherries!" Several boys pulled the corners of their eyes toward their temples to form "Chink eyes." They laughed and asked us what we had in our lunch boxes, chop suey?

I looked at the children around me. They were the same kids I had played hide-and-seek with ever since I had learned to walk. I didn't see any Chinese people. I craned my neck, and asked my playmates where the Chinese people were. As they began to snicker, my brother's face twisted in painful awareness. "Dottie, they're talking about us," he said. "We're the Chinese people."

I looked back at him in disbelief. We were not Chinese. We were Italians born in Korea, living in California. I vowed to ask my mother all about this when I got home. When the bus came, I purposely sat in the front so I could see my face in the driver's mirror. Relieved, I saw the same features that had stared back at me when I brushed my teeth that morning. When school was over, I came home and asked my mother what those kids had been talking about.

Her response was unsettling. She breathed a long sigh and said gently, "Well, honey, you and your brother do have sort of an Asian look, like many Chinese and Japanese people. This is something people are going to say to you for a very long time."

Mother never told me whether it was good or bad to be Asian; she didn't have to. The mocking voices of the kids on the bus had told me that many people thought Asians were second-rate and not as good as whites. A wave of regret washed over my mother's face when she saw the tears streaming down my cheeks. She looked away quickly, said nothing.

That first day of school taught me that not everyone would see me as I saw myself—a little American girl who liked to show off by dancing to the Beatles. To many, I would simply be "the Asian girl"—my whole identity reduced to "someone who isn't white."

Today, I'm often asked by friends and acquaintances who've adopted nonwhite children whether I think it's important to address their child's racial identity. I tell them yes, that no matter how strongly they wish to ignore the color difference, the child must also be ready to meet the world beyond the family—and for that they will need a strong, positive feeling about being Asian, Latino, Indian. It has taken me years of hard work to understand what it means to be Korean. There have been moments of great joy, but it has also been, at times, a lonely journey—a journey I wish my family had been willing to take with me when I was still a little girl.

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