CONTENTS

List of Illustrations, vii
Acknowledgments, ix
Introduction, 1
1 White House Conferences on Children and Youth:
   The Public Discussion, 12
2 Education at Midcentury, 48
3 The Delinquent, the Dependent, and the Orphaned, 82
4 A Healthier Generation, 117
   Conclusion, 147
Appendix, 165
Notes, 167
Bibliography, 191
Index, 203
ILLUSTRATIONS

Members of the Advisory Council for Youth Participation at the White House Conference on Children and Youth, 1950, 14
“We Stay in Safe Places,” a reminder of what to do in the event of a nuclear attack, 25
In the early 1950s, television was a novelty in American homes, 28
An aerial view of Levittown, Pennsylvania, one of the famous postwar housing developments, 35
Danny Kaye, a popular entertainer and dedicated UNICEF spokesperson, led youth forums at the 1960 White House Conference on Children and Youth, 44
California classroom in May 1950 shows the overcrowding that plagued the nation’s schools during the postwar years, 50
The State Street School was the first elementary school in Topeka, Kansas, to desegregate after the Supreme Court’s decision in Brown v. Board of Education, 68
Students are escorted into Little Rock’s Central High School, 71
Children of migrant workers being weighed and measured at a New Jersey school, 75
A 1913 exhibit on factors leading to juvenile delinquency demonstrates delinquency to be a long-term national problem, 84
A sports and summer camp in Pennsylvania, 91
Two girls at the Nebraska Children’s Home Society decorate a birthday cake, 97
Children wait for a meal at a camp for war refugees, 106
Youngsters at a displaced persons camp pose with Edwin W. Pauley, President Truman’s personal representative on the Allied Commission on Reparations, 108
“He knows where home is!” A Korean boy and the U.S. serviceman who was adopting him, 111
Truman visits the Twin City Shrine Hospital in Minneapolis, 121
Discovery of the polio vaccine was celebrated at a Rose Garden ceremony, 125
David Eisenhower, grandson of the president, is next in line for his polio vaccination, 127
An archery class at a park in Topeka, Kansas, 132
A dental checkup, 136
The Barry Farms Housing Development in Washington, D.C., in the mid-1940s, 156
Children gather around Sister Kathryn DeMarrais at Tekakwitha Orphanage in South Dakota, 1955, 159
“Help Young America Grow in Freedom,” poster from 1960 White House Conference on Children and Youth, 162
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

For their invaluable assistance and many helpful suggestions, I offer sincere thanks to the archivists and photoarchivists at the Eisenhower Presidential Library and the Truman Presidential Library. Particularly, I want to thank Mark Corriston (now retired from the National Archives Central Plains Region) for pointing me toward an important set of records and David Haight (now retired from the Eisenhower Presidential Library) for his enthusiastic support for my use of the White House Conference on Children and Youth collection. I also want to thank staff at the Library of Congress, Kansas State Historical Society, Marquette University, and Nebraska Children’s Home Society for their help in locating and providing images for this publication. Lastly, a special thank you to readers of this manuscript; their comments and suggestions were greatly appreciated.
Introduction

In 1909, President Theodore Roosevelt sponsored the first national conference concerned with America’s youth, bringing together the country’s most prominent leaders in social reform and child welfare. Such an event seems unremarkable today. After all, in present-day America, it is generally assumed that political leaders and presidential administrations will take an interest in issues related to children and teenagers. It is taken for granted that any number of federal agencies and programs will affect youngsters’ lives. This, however, has not always been the case. In the not-so-distant past, presidents and lawmakers paid scant attention to any issue related to children and childhood, and with the exception of a few programs for specific child populations, federal agencies and bureaus were not in the business of evaluating childhood experiences or responding to the needs of children.

That began to change early in the twentieth century when Roosevelt’s White House conference led to creation of the U.S. Children’s Bureau in 1912. The bureau, which conducted studies used to support proposed legislation and which developed health-care programs for mothers and children, was the federal government’s first recognition of “not merely the rights of children, but also the need to create a permanent agency to at least study, if not protect them.”

Child welfare was an accepted function of the state. In the years that followed, other presidents held White House conferences on children while Congress took unprecedented steps to enact a handful of laws that addressed child labor, provided grants-in-aid to dependent children, and funded health-care services for the poor and marginalized. In each case, legislation was narrowly structured to include only particular segments of the population deemed to be the most socially and economically dependent. These incremental policy developments only affected specifically defined groups. Middle-
upper-class children may have benefited by the very fact that the government recognized children as a presence, but they were not the intended targets.

This approach continued into the postwar years, but it was joined, and sometimes pushed aside, when monumental events such as introduction of the Salk vaccine or the Soviet launch of Sputnik produced a federal response that included all children. Reaction to a periodic crisis or issue did not open a floodgate of sweeping mandates or rapidly enlarge the federal government’s role. Nonetheless, the mid-twentieth century was a turning point in state-to-federal relations and in increased federal action directly affecting children and teenagers. This set the postwar era apart from earlier decades, making the immediate years after World War II a distinct period in the history of children.

Nevertheless, in studies of children and childhood after World War II, the late 1940s and the decade of the 1950s receive short shrift. Scholars skim past those years on their way to the 1960s and beyond. While some policy analysis appears in such volumes as Reinventing American Childhood after World War II and in Children, Families, and Government, the immediate postwar years are not the focus. Studies of childhood history have approached the subject of government policies from various angles. Judith Seelander’s The Failed Century of the Child, for instance, studies specific examples of state programs and their failure to deliver on their promises, while Kriste Lindenmeyer’s “A Right to Childhood” considers government involvement from the federal side, examining the shortcomings and achievements of the U.S. Children’s Bureau. These volumes—like broader narratives such as Steven Mintz’s history of American childhood and Julia Mickenberg’s analysis of the Left’s influence on children’s literature—present the postwar period as a small part of a larger story. The dearth of in-depth study and analysis is largely a result of the perception that the late 1940s and the 1950s were, in the words of one writer, a time of “stagnation.” From that point of view, the time was simply an unremarkable era, bracketed between the Progressive/New Deal programs before World War II and the explosion of federal mandates that began in the 1960s under President Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society.  

This characterization is misleading. A closer look reveals a pivotal period in which the federal government’s role in issues related to America’s
youth was hotly debated, periodically challenged, sometimes championed, and slowly expanded. By definition, politics is the act of influencing or guiding government policies, and those components of political action are readily apparent in the postwar era. Activism in the forms of national conferences sponsored by the White House and federal agencies, rigorous congressional debates and hearings, and presidents’ active involvement contributed to a national discourse. Politicians, policymakers, and the public talked about a myriad of topics that ranged from the benefits of physical fitness to foodstuffs contaminated by radioactivity to the dangers of comic books. Some of these discussions produced tangible legislative action or social policies. These, in turn, impacted the growing-up experiences of millions of youngsters. At other times, lawmakers considered and then rejected any course of action, providing instructive blueprints for limiting government’s reach into childhood.

The political narrative and public discussion were driven by many forces. Television, urbanization, divorce, working women, and social integration were just a few. Some pressing issues, such as the immediate postwar housing crisis and its impact on families, reflected temporary problems and then faded into the background with time, but most of the issues affecting children were long-lived. Desegregation was a drawn-out process, and there was simply no easy fix for poverty or delinquency or child dependency. In that context, readers will find many of the topics as relevant today as they were almost fifty years ago. Some of the language and debates for or against certain courses of action sound eerily familiar, particularly when lawmakers and the public voiced opinions and offered solutions regarding aid to education, health care, and juvenile delinquency.

This volume examines the ways in which governmental entities and the postwar administrations of Presidents Truman and Eisenhower reacted to special problems and needs associated with children and teenagers. It considers the ways in which the federal government, against the backdrop of a Cold War mentality, became more involved in aspects of health, education, and welfare. And it looks at the baby boom as a phenomenon that shaped American thought and a societal acceptance of the argument that all children, not just the poorest and neediest, deserved their government’s attention.
This study begins with the 1950 and 1960 White House Conferences on Children and Youth as a framework for discussing childhood policy and children’s experience in relation to population shifts, suburbia, divorce and family stability, working mothers, and the influence of television. The chapters that follow provide an in-depth look at education, at the government policies and congressional actions affecting the child/teenage population of orphans, foster children, and juvenile delinquents, and at the multifaceted issues of health care. In conclusion, the final chapter considers the levels at which the federal government was involved in child-related issues and programs by the end of the 1950s and how that informed later legislation.

In order to talk about the postwar period, defined here as the years from 1945 to 1960, it must be said that despite the nostalgia often attached to those years, it was a time of tensions and conflicts. These were the years of the Korean War, the Berlin Airlift, the Soviet Union’s iron-fisted control of Eastern Europe, the partition of Palestine and the creation of Israel, and the economic revitalization of war-ravaged Europe under the Marshall Plan. Americans worried about foreign instabilities and the international spread of communism. At home, they sought domestic tranquility and prosperity, and minority groups, most visibly African Americans, felt that their wartime service on the home front and in the military had earned them the right to better treatment and an end to segregation.

With the Great Depression behind them and World War II finished and won, Americans talked about returning to routines of everyday life. Although periods of economic recession and inflation occurred after the war, there was a sense of great possibilities. The shift from wartime industry to a consumer economy brought more material goods to market, and a new prosperity meant that more families could afford the bounty. Between 1940 and 1960 real wages increased by about 30 percent. The median family income rose from $3,083 to $5,657. Although the spread of prosperity did not touch everyone or every household, the middle class expanded. Surveys showed that the majority of Americans, across lines of race and ethnicity, considered themselves to be members of the middle class, if not in actual income, in outlook and self-confidence.3

More buying power and access to a larger quantity of material com-
forts were proof that personal finances and the national economy were on the upswing. Nevertheless, a fundamental element in a return to normal was marriage and parenthood. Observers of the time and scholars of today have drawn a correlation between the out-of-the-depression, post-war climate and Americans’ enthusiasm for marriage and children. Americans began to marry at an earlier age, have more children per household, and equate stability with home and family.

The return to peacetime and normalcy on the home front impacted children, too. Just as returning servicemen and women had to readjust to civilian life, children had to adapt. Youngsters growing up during the war years fell into two categories—those who were old enough to remember a time when the country was not at war and younger children for whom war was the norm and peace was a new experience. During the war, children and teenagers did their “bit” on the home front. They took part in scrap drives, saved money for Bond drives, planted Victory Gardens, and signed on with the U.S. Crop Corps as Victory Farm Volunteers. They took jobs vacated by adults; they looked after younger siblings and shouldered a larger amount of home chores; they stepped in as leaders for Girl and Boy Scout troops, 4-H Clubs, and other youth organizations. Summing up the result, one girl wrote that the war turned “our life from Kids to ‘Mini-Adults’ with much responsibility.”

By war’s end, 183,000 American children had lost fathers; untold others were without brothers or other close relatives. There were no concrete numbers for how many youngsters were placed into the care of relatives or orphanages while fathers were away and mothers worked, but there was data to show that juvenile delinquency was on the rise and that the substantial increase in employment of teenagers between the ages of fourteen and seventeen was enabled by lax enforcement of school attendance and child labor laws. The signs were troubling, but there was a general feeling that all would be righted with peacetime.

As for war’s impact on children, the adult world acknowledged that children were affected, but it preferred to emphasize the everyday, normal experiences of childhood and adolescence. In 1945, for example, *Life* magazine took this line during the months that the German war machine was collapsing and battles in the Pacific were at their most desperate. But, at home, *Life* portrayed kids as if they remained untouched by war
news. One photographic essay pictured “Teen-Age Ballet,” while another set out to prove that “Teen-age Boys Are Just the Same as They’ve Always Been,” and seven covers that year (with accompanying articles inside) pictured children or older teenagers doing what kids were supposed to do—play basketball, attend school, romp with friends at a pajama party, or join a social club.6

America’s national birth rate, which showed signs of an increase in the late 1930s, reversed to a downward trend during the war. Then, in May 1947, the U.S. Public Health Service reported a slight change. Although barely noticeable, there was an increase between August 1946 and May 1947. In the short term the numbers could be explained as the natural result of veterans returning home, reuniting with spouses, or getting married and starting families. Having children was an affirmation of life after the terrible destruction and loss of life during the war. Domestic life, including the addition of children to the home, suggested a desire for stability, anchored by the nuclear family. For the long term, however, the Public Health Service was not sure how to interpret its data, cautioning that there was “no way of telling whether the increase will continue.”7

The increase not only continued, but multiplied the population beyond all predictions and expectations in the postwar years. Between 1946 and 1960, almost 60 million children were born in the United States. These baby boomers, as well as the adolescents and teenagers who were children during World War II, made up the first television generation. They were first to grow up in the atomic age. This group of youngsters witnessed the first orbiting satellite in space, and they were the first to not only see but experience the beginning of school desegregation in the nation’s schools. And, family mobility meant that an increasing number of the boomer generation grew up in the suburbs.

The country was not prepared for the ways in which the astounding boom in babies, as well as the existing population of teenagers and younger children, strained the educational, welfare, and social systems of the country. It was against this backdrop of the baby boom and a society that regarded the teen years as a special phase of life with its own distinct culture and social problems that political discourse debated what role the federal government would take in the lives of children. Should it continue, as in the past, to narrowly confine its responses? Or, did changing
circumstances demand more action? Congress, Presidents Truman and Eisenhower, federal agencies, and White House conferences and committees became part of the national discussion. In one way or another each entity examined the state of American childhood and adolescence as the country returned to a normal rhythm of peacetime and an anticipated era of prosperity.

The American Dream—the belief that social, educational, and financial advancement was possible for anyone—seemed within the grasp of more people. Not only parents, but society in general, expected a greater portion of American promise for young people. This meant modern schools and an adequate number of qualified teachers, nicer homes and neighborhoods, better and more accessible health care, and the chance for youngsters to explore and develop their personal interests and talents. Parents were primarily responsible for their children’s daily lives and shaping their futures, but there seemed to be a general agreement that other adults in the local civic, educational, and church communities played supporting roles. And, as expectations rose for America’s youth, parents and the public in general wondered if everything they wanted and imagined for children could be accomplished without the federal government taking a larger part to support their hopes. Were existing programs enough, or did circumstances call for additional legislation and funding?

It was a prickly question. On the one hand, some issues such as providing quality education or controlling juvenile delinquency often seemed too overwhelming and complex for communities or states to tackle on their own. Conversely, no one wanted the government to become a nursemaid to the country’s children, either overstepping the bounds of parents’ rights to rear children as they saw fit or treading on states’ rights to control welfare and health-care programs, public education, and laws concerning such things as juvenile crime.

Before the war years, both the private sector and federal programs focused on the needs of the poor, the marginalized, and the dependent. They were the “luckless” children who most needed society’s protection. In the postwar era, that focus remained. Aid to widows with children, health-care clinics for minority populations, and new education initiatives for the children of migrant workers were just a few of the projects. Nevertheless, a number of problems seemed so enormous and affected so
many youngsters of all economic or social backgrounds, policymakers often began to consider America’s youth as one collective group. 

Every child had the right to a childhood that included enough to eat, health care, classroom instruction, protection under child labor laws, and a stable family life. This concept, first articulated in the late nineteenth century, was reinforced during the Progressive Era and post–World War I and New Deal years. Woodrow Wilson, for instance, talked about the rights of children; Herbert Hoover produced a “Child’s Bill of Rights”; and well-known reformer Florence Kelley proclaimed that “a right to childhood follows from the existence of the Republic and must be guarded in order to guard its life.” By the late 1940s, the idea of child rights was inculcated into the public psyche. While it went without saying that the poor and dependent needed society’s help, there was a growing acceptance of the argument that children of the middle and upper social and economic classes should be added to the equation. They, too, deserved notice and support in a number of areas. The point was emphasized by planners for the 1950 White House Conference on Children and Youth. As the conference’s executive committee struggled to find the right wording for its mission statement, it agreed to emphasize that the conference was about “the dignity and worth of every individual [child].”

American society—not just the white mainstream society that traditionally drove the discussion, but the broad spectrum of ethnic and racial groups—believed that it had a stake in seeing that children and teenagers were intellectually, emotionally, and physically equipped for their personal futures and for their later roles as responsible citizens. They should be able to pursue individual talents and interests, while also being prepared to confront a very uncertain world that included nuclear weapons and the specter of spreading Communist ideology. The country’s youth had the right to expect society to act on their behalf. As a result, the growing-up years of the baby boomers and teenagers of the era were influenced in innumerable ways by public discourse, political ideology, Cold War rhetoric, and the policies of presidential administrations.

Yet, anyone hoping to find extensive studies of domestic policies in the many available biographies and autobiographies of presidents and members of Congress will be disappointed. David McCullough’s massive
biography of Truman, for instance, devotes only eight of its over one thousand pages to the president’s domestic agenda, referencing the post-war housing crisis, unemployment, and a national health insurance program. The same holds true for seemingly comprehensive Eisenhower biographies. In his work on the Eisenhower presidency, Stephen Ambrose considered only two domestic problems, the desegregation of Little Rock Central High School and the administration’s reaction to Sputnik. This line of discussion is also found in more recent biographies such as the one by Jim Newton, which barely acknowledges Eisenhower’s domestic challenges. An exception to the lack of in-depth domestic investigation, although it is not a full-scale study of the Eisenhower presidency, is David Nichols’s volume on Eisenhower and civil rights. Given the volatility of world events, it is perhaps understandable that historians and biographers have said comparatively little about domestic agendas and policies, including those that concerned children and teenagers. After all, it was a turbulent and uncertain time in foreign relations as one dangerous crisis after another erupted.

As for the postwar era in general, published works abound in the form of scholarly books, popular nonfiction, presidential studies, biographies, and memoirs. Among the diverse topics are the era’s popular culture, the growth of suburbia, the Cold War, family life, and the status and roles of women. Elaine Tyler May’s Homeward Bound, for example, connects postwar family life to the containment policies of the Cold War, while Not June Cleaver, edited by Joanne Meyerowitz, expounds on the diversity of postwar women. Lary May’s edited collection of essays in Recasting America offers a perspective on the many influences that transformed American culture. Lizabeth Cohen’s A Consumers’ Republic considers the premise that mass consumption promoted prosperity and a more egalitarian society, and John Bradley’s anthology, Learning to Glow: A Nuclear Reader, delves into first-person accounts of experiences and fears associated with the atomic age. These are, of course, just a sampling from among many publications that seek to describe, analyze, and better understand American culture and society immediately after World War II.

Certainly, these volumes and studies include references to children and childhood experiences, particularly when the subject is family relationships, domesticity, and the roles of women, but the children are sec-
ondary to the primary thrust. A few volumes have concentrated on the baby boomers themselves, but the context has been either personal experiences or boomers’ later impact on American culture. Among these are Tom Brokaw’s *Boom!*, Victor D. Brooks’s *Boomers*, Steve Gillon’s *Boomer Nation*, and Landon Jones’s *Great Expectations: America and the Baby Boom Generation*.  

This volume uses some of the voices of boomers and their older teenage counterparts. Ethnic, racial, economic, and geographical diversity is considered, as is the shared popular culture. This, however, is not intended as a study of reminiscences or an analysis of a generation and its later influences on American society. Rather, the narrative is an exploration of the relationship between the political landscape, cultural views of childhood, and the impact these had on the country’s young. It uses the words of the presidents, congressional debates and investigations, the viewpoints of various members of Congress, studies and reports issued by the White House Conferences on Children and Youth, the White House Conference on Education, and presidential commissions dedicated to juvenile delinquency, physical fitness, and migratory labor. Included in the archival material consulted for this study are records that have not been used to any extent, if at all, by researchers. The Orphan Correspondence Files, for example, are in the holdings of the National Archives and Records Administration, but required a Freedom of Information Act review and release from the U.S. Department of State because the documents pertain to the adoption of European war orphans by American couples. And, while the extensive records for the White House Conferences on Children and Youth have been opened for years to researchers at the Eisenhower Presidential Library, the material has largely been overlooked.

Many and varied sources were used to construct the narrative. They provide a multifaceted view of the interplay between the private sector, social change, state initiatives, and the federal government. This is the story of what people said they wanted for their children. It is a study of society’s expectations and how those were expressed and played out in the political arena. Whether lawmakers and presidents were prepared or wished it, this study argues that this period was a turning point for greater government involvement. When federal legislation and action are
considered collectively, rather than as stand-alone events, they illustrate increased federal action in all aspects of childhood issues. Politics and public policies affected children’s lives and their growing-up years. What was said about youngsters and what was done, or not done, on their behalf influenced what Americans at midcentury believed about childhood and about the part government at the federal level should play in the lives of children and teenagers.
White House Conferences on Children and Youth: The Public Discussion

“It is particularly important in today’s troubled times that we continue to move ahead toward our basic objective—improving the well-being of our children.”

—President Harry S. Truman, June 20, 1950

Truman was speaking to the men and women planning the 1950 White House Conference on Children and Youth, also known as the Midcentury Conference. Seven months later, in early December 1950, 6,000 conference participants crowded into the Armory in Washington, D.C. They came as representatives from all forty-eight states and the U.S. territories. They came from rural and urban backgrounds, from federal agencies and Congress, and as representatives of 460 national organizations that covered the gamut of religious, medical, educational, recreational, and industrial interests. Somewhat overwhelmed by the numbers, national committee chair and Federal Security Agency administrator Oscar R. Ewing wondered if, instead of this throng, more might be accomplished with fewer delegates concentrating on “one or more specific problems.” At the same time, he realized that every state and territorial entity expected to be heard and that no organization wanted their particular constituencies or interests ignored. Participants came to Washington for the purpose of initiating a “detailed examination of all problems relating to children.”

The increasing child population, as well as a new emphasis on considering children of diverse social-economic backgrounds, gave participants more to talk about. They met in small groups according to their special expertise and interests. Some concentrated on research projects devoted
to health care, education, and the influence of the mass media. Others studied laws affecting adoption, divorce, employment, institutionalization, and juvenile justice. A number of groups looked at community resources, as well as the subjects of discrimination, youth organizations, recreational outlets, social work methodologies, religious instruction, and church youth groups. As the topics explored in this chapter will show, discussions delved into such areas as adequate housing, the impact of television, family life and divorce, and working women.

Behind the scenes, months of preparations had gone into gathering information for the delegates’ use. Data collected by state, territorial, and local organizations and agencies was submitted in reports that offered a picture of local and regional needs, effective programs, levels of funding, special local circumstances, and conditions among groups such as migrant workers and Native Americans. The U.S. Children’s Bureau provided statistical data collected nationally, and the Interdepartmental Committee, established in 1948 to promote better communication between federal agencies and departments administering programs affecting children, contributed information.

The number and reach of these federal entities was somewhat surprising. The Department of Agriculture, for example, had allocated funds for 4-H youth programs since 1928 and ran the National School Lunch Program, which began in 1946. The Bureau of Indian Affairs was in charge of Indian-only schools and medical services; the Department of Defense was responsible for military dependents, both overseas and on stateside military bases; the Veterans Administration provided survivor benefits to widowed women and their children; and the Social Security Administration oversaw Aid to Dependent Children (ADC, later renamed Aid to Families with Dependent Children, AFDC). Obvious leaders of the Interdepartmental Committee were the U.S. Children’s Bureau and the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW), established in 1953 as a cabinet-level agency to assume the functions of the Department of Education and most of those under the Roosevelt-created Federal Security Agency. By the time the second postwar White House Conference on Children and Youth met in 1960, the number of agencies associated with the Interdepartmental Committee stood at twenty-eight. From its input, conference participants had detailed information at their finger-
tips. How else would they know that during the 1947–1948 school year almost 78,000 one-room schoolhouses were still operational, that national infant mortality rates were dropping, or that in 1960 over 155,000 children of servicemen killed in World War II and Korea were eligible for aid through the War Orphans’ Educational Assistance Act?²

The 1950 White House Conference on Children and Youth was the fifth in a succession of meetings that began in 1909 when activists and reformers in the national child welfare movement urged President Theodore Roosevelt to sponsor the first such conference. Reformers and child-care advocates came together in other federally sponsored meetings over the years, but the White House Conference was different. It had the power of the presidency behind it. Intended or not, the 1909 meeting (subtitled “Care of Dependent Children”) laid the groundwork for future ones and for presidential involvement. The 1909 conference was fol-

Among the 6,000 participants at the 1950 White House Conference on Children and Youth were members of the conference’s Advisory Council for Youth Participation. Dwight D. Eisenhower Library
owed by one in 1919 (subtitled “Standards of Child Welfare”); later meetings, federally funded beginning in 1930, convened on the decimal year until 1970 when the last officially titled “White House Conference on Children and Youth” occurred.

Detailed organization went into conference planning. For both the 1950 and 1960 meetings, there was a small executive committee, aided by a national committee with about 100 members. Some individuals such as child-rearing expert Benjamin Spock and social welfare leader Robert Earl Bondy were considered “musts” for the national committees and, as a rule, committee members were sought out for their expertise. Occasionally, however, a name triggered political opposition. One well-known psychologist, for instance, was dropped from consideration in 1960 because Senator Bourke B. Hickenlooper, a Republican representing Iowa, “violently objected” to the man as a liberal “New Deal Democrat.” A congressman might block a potential participant, but he or she was just as likely to intercede on behalf of an individual or organization that wanted to serve on the national committee or attend the conference. Missouri’s Senator Forrest C. Donnell, for example, put in a word for the president of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, which was headquartered in Truman’s hometown of Independence, and members of the Democratic National Committee asked the White House in 1950 to consider a judge who, although a Republican, was “very liberal, and an exceptionally good man.” Conferences were never completely free of partisan politics or conflicting political ideologies, but they did not dominate discussions or recommendations made in final reports. In fact, a chief concern of the executive and national committees was not political leanings but individuals and organizations that zealously advocated for one group of children at the expense of others. Conference goers had to be reminded that the meetings were about “all children,” unlike prewar conferences where the greatest emphasis was directed toward the most economically and socially disadvantaged.3

At each conference, many issues such as alleviating poverty and fighting juvenile delinquency were staple topics. In that sense, meetings shared similarities, but each also reflected the distinctive nature of the period in which it occurred. The 1950 conference resonated with an urgency to make up for what had not been accomplished or had been
allowed to fall by the wayside during the war years. In the face of military mobilization and the wartime culture at home, proposals and expectations advanced by the 1940 White House Conference on Children and Youth were overshadowed or put aside. To accommodate the need for home-front labor during the war, for example, states relaxed enforcement of compulsory school attendance laws, and officials at both the federal and state levels failed to vigorously enforce the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938, which was designed to eliminate child labor in particularly dangerous working conditions. The result was a pressing sense of regaining lost ground when conference participants gauged current conditions and then identified emerging issues.

The world of 1950 was vastly different from that of 1940. The United States had emerged from World War II as a superpower with nuclear capability, facing off against the Soviet Union in a Cold War. When President Truman spoke of “today’s troubled times,” his mind was on the foreign troubles that faced the country. Just months before the White House conference convened, the president approved development of the hydrogen bomb as another weapon in America’s arsenal, and many in the United States believed that the country was just a breath away from another war. International tensions escalated when North Korean troops crossed the 38th Parallel in June and Truman authorized sending U.S. troops as part of the United Nation’s contingency to stop the invasion. There were troubled times at home, too. Senator Joseph McCarthy was on television and radio with claims of finding Communist sympathizers in and out of government, and Americans demanded that lawmakers address domestic issues that affected their everyday lives. Senator Hubert H. Humphrey, elected in 1948 as a Democrat from Minnesota, called it a time of “postwar and newwar [sic] angers and problems.” He later wrote, “Letters from constituents reflected the craze. Do something about housing, do something about education, do something about unemployment, but cut taxes, slash expenditures, cut budgets, they said in obvious contradiction.”

Domestic issues and conflicts abroad were ever present in the minds of those concerned with the 1950 White House Conference on Children and Youth. Less obvious, or noticed, were reports that the child population was on the rise. While the conference was in its planning stages, the
U.S. Census Bureau was counting the population. During the late 1940s the U.S. Public Health Service noted a slight increase in the national birth rate, but it was not until the Census Bureau began issuing preliminary reports for the 1950 U.S. Census that Americans began to realize that the increasing number of children they saw in their own communities was a national trend. In 1950, the number of children under the age of fifteen stood at a startling 1.4 million, and there were over 363,000 young people between the ages of fifteen and nineteen in the United States. No one could have predicted in 1950 that growth in the child population would continue at an unprecedented rate, but the decade that followed witnessed the phenomenal “baby boom.” Between 1946 and 1960, almost 60 million children were born in the United States.5

By their sheer numbers they, as well as teenagers of the postwar period, had the capacity to impact American culture and its institutions. Their behavior and their perceived needs influenced society’s concept of childhood, as well as the formulation of public policies that affected them. Enormous expectations were invested in this group. Both parents and society in general projected the belief that these youngsters and teenagers would achieve more and have greater opportunities than any generation before them. The repeated message for children was that they lived in a country where they could grow up to be whatever they wanted, realizing any personal dream.

In a way, postwar expectations were a culmination of decades in which American society formed beliefs about childhood and the nature of children. In the 1800s perceptions evolved from defining childhood as a relatively short phase early in life to expanding the period of childhood into adolescence. Children were perceived as innocents and childhood as a time for emotional and intellectual development. In the ideal childhood, there was time to play, especially when games and playtime were adult-directed and structured. There were chores to be done, but no hard labor, and youngsters were to be nurtured in a child-centered family.

By the early twentieth century this attitude, perpetuated by the middle class, was firmly established. In fact, one commentator wrote in 1903 that “The Cult of the Child” reigned in the United States. Contemporaneously, Ellen Key proposed in The Century of the Child that in the twentieth century “all social arrangements and decisions would be based
solely on an assessment of their impact on children.” Key’s charge to the citizens of the world came during a period of heightened activity among those involved in America’s child welfare movement and at a time when the systematic application of the social sciences was touted as the modern way to cure the country’s many social ills and inequities.

Facing the future, and its demands, required progressive thinking in all things, including how society defined children and the elements that produced a nurtured childhood. The growing-up period called childhood expanded during the nineteenth century. By the end of World War I, adolescence, considered to be the period between puberty and the legal age of majority, was thought of as a developmental stage toward adulthood. No longer children, adolescents were not yet quite adults. In part this viewpoint became common because an increasing number of older adolescents lived at home for longer periods of time, attended secondary school, and entered the labor force at a later age. To accommodate that stage in life, the words “teenage” and “teenager” entered the vocabulary of twentieth-century Americans. Sometimes the words were used interchangeably with adolescent, but they took on their own meanings. “Teenage” first appeared in publication in the 1920s. “Teenager” became widely used in the 1940s when teens, too young for war duty but old enough for the home-front war effort and jobs, solidified a youth culture that was uniquely their own.

Traditionally, children and young people are defined by milestones associated with a certain age. These might be religious or cultural markers, but others are established by state laws—for instance, the age that a teenager can leave school or get married. While society generally divided youngsters into children, adolescents, or teenagers, the age at which youngsters passed from one stage to another could be rather nebulous. By the mid-twentieth century, the U.S. Children’s Bureau established new definitions for its own purposes. Using data from the 1950 census, children and “youth” were placed into five categories: 0–4 years (preschool); 5–9 years (early school ages); 10–14 (middle school ages); 15–19 (latter school ages); and 20–24 (years at the threshold of adult working lives and/or marriage). The addition of an age category beyond the teen years indicated that young people attending college or vocational schools, serving in the military, beginning their married lives,
and/or becoming parents were in a transitional phase between the teen years and full adulthood. This last category also suggested that American society felt some continuing responsibility for these young adults.7

In the postwar era, the everyday lives and experiences of children and teenagers were scrutinized by educators, child-rearing advisors, psychologists, medical personnel, child-welfare workers, and the popular press. The country had fought a war to protect itself and its young. Now that the war was won, adults faced the daunting task of ensuring that America’s youth were not only nurtured but prepared to meet the challenges of a world that now included nuclear weapons and a Cold War environment that pitted the “free” world against communism.

Children and teenagers, as well as family life, became popular topics for magazines, newspaper columns, television and radio programs, child-rearing literature, and professional forums. No topic was too important or, it seemed, too trivial. In the popular press, hosting the perfect birthday party was treated as seriously as identifying warning signs in a child’s physical development. Women’s magazines and newspaper columns offered up advice, as did authoritative parenting books. There seemed no end to expert opinions on discipline, infant feeding, nutrition, home health care, or child psychology.

Advice was not limited to the care of young children. An increasing amount of literature was devoted to the subject of teenagers. Adults, parents or not, read commentaries and advice columns concerned with teenagers’ preoccupation with cars, music, “teen town” dance clubs, and spending time on the phone. The power of words shaped society’s view of children and teenagers. They were to be nurtured, educated, and allowed to explore their talents. At the same time, public discourse painted a gloomy picture of what might happen if parents, communities, and society in general failed in their vigilance and their responsibilities.

Since the late nineteenth century, reformers and child-welfare advocates championed school attendance and child labor laws, worked to reduce juvenile delinquency, and sought welfare reforms. They pushed at municipal and state governments to enact laws; less often they lobbied for federal statutes. After its creation, the U.S. Children’s Bureau was regarded as the government’s child advocate, although a number of federal departments and agencies operated child-related programs and early
twentieth-century presidents of both political parties demonstrated interest in some aspects of problems affecting children. At midcentury, the federal role in shaping childhood experiences was small when compared to the impact of state and territorial laws and programs. The paradigm began to shift, however, after 1945. State and territorial entities, along with private-sector child advocates, regarded some issues as too enormous to be dealt with on local/state levels. Numerous problems were national, not localized or regional. Without giving up states’ rights or local options, they wanted a greater federal presence in leadership, funding, and state-federal, public-private partnerships. No one wanted the federal presence to become too large, but recommendations coming out of the 1950 White House Conference clearly signaled a shift when the call went out for more federal involvement.

Slowly, public policy formed by Congress and presidential administrations increased, affecting childhood experiences and the public expectation for government’s role. There were single-issue campaigns aimed at addressing specific problems, as well as activist-driven agendas in which youngsters were symbolic of social change or reform. Sometimes policymakers and lobbyists from the private sector were able to convince Congress that a vote against a proposed program such as the National School Lunch Program was a vote against children, but more often than not, much more was involved than the simple question of how youngsters benefited. America’s young and issues directly affecting them were considered by Presidents Truman and Eisenhower, debated in congressional committees, analyzed in the reports of special commissions, and pored over in special conferences sponsored by the White House.

The 1950 White House Conference on Children and Youth, and the one that followed in 1960 (the “Golden Anniversary” meeting), were the most comprehensive in breadth of topics and in the number of public and private citizens to come together for the purpose of discussing America’s youth. The conferences examined in detail the multifaceted state of childhood, adolescence, and the early post-teen years. They also suggested ways in which the private sector, states, and the federal government could act as partners. Working together these diverse entities could better identify pressing needs and hammer out solutions to what sometimes seemed insurmountable problems. The pronouncements,
conclusions, and discussions that took place at the White House Conferences on Children and Youth were particularly instructive because participants studied and dissected the ways in which issues of the times impacted young peoples’ lives. These meetings also solidified the cultural concept of children as beings with rights.

That children had rights was not a new, radical concept. For most of the twentieth century, the “inalienable rights” of America’s children, articulated by President Woodrow Wilson in 1919, had been forming and coalescing. During the 1920s Herbert Hoover narrowly applied the concept to child health when, as director of the American Child Health Association, the organization published a “Child’s Bill of Rights.” Then at the 1930 White House Conference on Children and Youth, President Hoover added to the list of rights with a lengthy eighteen-point charter. The itemized points specified that children had the right to an education, health care, and nutritional food. They should rightly expect protection under child labor laws, and to the child “in conflict with society,” the charter declared the “right to be dealt with intelligently as society’s charge, not society’s outcast.” Although the chief concern was the most dependent and unfortunate, the 1930 charter did not make distinctions along lines of income or social standing. Subtly, the charter implied that society was obligated to acknowledge all children. No matter their situation, gender, ethnic or racial background, America’s youth were entitled to certain considerations. Foremost, they should be able to expect that the nation in which they lived would act on their needs and enhance their growing-up years. By 1950, the idea of children’s rights seemed to be taken for granted. When that year’s White House Conference met, it drew up its own charter, a “Pledge to Children.” This reiterated much of the 1930 language, adding, “We will respect your right to be yourself and . . . to understand the rights of others.”

The pursuit of happiness was not explicitly stated in the list of rights, but society accepted the idea that children should be happy. The culture of consumerism said that youngsters would be happy with more material things. Psychologists and child-rearing literature talked about bringing greater happiness into children’s lives by relieving feelings of fear, guilt, and jealousy. Achieving happiness went hand-in-hand with self-expression. No longer was it desirable, even necessary, for youngsters to
be reared with the expectation that they might have to defer personal hopes and interests. These were not the depression or war years. Self-denial was a thing of the past. Parenting experts, including Dr. Benjamin Spock, advised a child-centered approach. What once would have been punishable behavior was now explained as a child’s normal exploration of his or her environment. If parents recognized misbehavior as a form of self-expression, it could be dealt with more easily and channeled into acceptable, productive conduct.

Although there were many who considered some child-rearing advice too permissive, there was no doubt that the principles of child happiness and personal fulfillment had entered social thought and acceptance. Youngsters who were free to pursue their own interests and talents would contribute more to a democratic society and be greater assets to the country’s future. This was largely the thinking of those participating in the White House Conferences on Children and Youth during the postwar era. In fact, “Individual Fulfillment in a Changing World” was the theme selected for the 1960 conference, but then scrapped because neither it nor any other phrase adequately captured the meeting’s extensive agenda of topics.

Abandoned or adopted slogans were telling reflections of a particular place in time. Planners for the 1940 White House Conference on Children and Youth, for example, chose “Children in a Democracy.” Although the depression of the 1930s took a toll on children and their families in innumerable ways, the conference theme proclaimed that America remained a democracy while Fascism and militarization were sweeping much of the world into war. Still, participants at the 1940 meeting felt that the country was at a crossroads, caught between the catastrophic circumstances of the Great Depression and the gathering clouds of military conflict. The conference’s final report declared, “In the interest of child welfare, we must be on guard.”

Ten years later, in 1950, democracy and America’s future were still very much on the minds of conference organizers. There was another type of war being waged—the Cold War—and Americans still needed to be “on guard” for their children. Not only should youngsters be physically protected from harm, they needed the emotional and psychological tools nec-
necessary to deal with the world as it was. In choosing a theme for the 1950 conference, organizers were influenced by President Truman’s support for the National Mental Health Act of 1946, the act’s creation of the National Institute of Mental Health, and the 1949 launch of “Mental Health Week” by a private organization, Mental Health America. Conference participants, it was decided, would approach all of the meeting’s many topics from the viewpoint of psychological well-being. The conference’s subtitle became “For Every Child a Fair Chance for a Healthy Personality.”

Mental health and child development were discussed to some extent at both the 1930 and 1940 White House Conferences. As more was learned and disseminated about child psychiatry and early development, that information began to shape educational philosophies and child-rearing advice. Professionals gave more credence to psychology and the relationship between children and their home environments. Participants at both the 1930 and 1940 meetings agreed that “the family . . . [is] the greatest power in his [the child’s] life for or against mental health.” In 1950, however, conference participants were asked to move beyond the family unit and to consider community, educational, and religious environments. They were to analyze “what is needed, socially, economically, and psychologically to render an emotionally and intellectually sound generation.”

Whether conference goers were focused on race relations or adequate health care, community resources or recreational facilities, they prefaced the discussion by asking how mental health and emotional development were encouraged or adversely affected. Said one conference proposal:

Not only is it necessary that children have families and that they receive from their parents adequate food and clothing and shelter and instruction in our way of life; it is also necessary that these . . . be provided in a way that is psychologically sound. The same is true of all other services [i.e. education, medical treatment]. . . . various professions are discovering that the new findings in psychology, sociology, and physiology have important implications in their work . . . , and the general public regards them as matters of interest and concern.
No aspect of childhood or the teenage years was to be ignored. At previous White House Conferences, a few new topics were added to those initially discussed in 1909, but the 1950 meeting substantially widened the field of subjects. Religious instruction and spiritual development, access to health care and schooling, ethnicity and race, work, leisure, and family relationships were studied and analyzed from every angle. The desired outcomes were identifying usable solutions and strategies that, once implemented, would enable youngsters to become emotionally sound “efficient workers, clear thinkers, [and] loyal citizens.”

A nagging concern, however, was ensuring a healthy outlook in the face of crises around the globe and the threat of nuclear war. How did adults strike a balance between making children and teenagers feel safe while also warning them that their world could disintegrate in a flash of a bomb or be overwhelmed by Communist forces?

News reports were filled with stories of U.S.-Soviet tensions, Communist takeovers in China and Korea, and arrests of Soviet agents working in the United States. Commentators and politicians warned of Communist subversives and infiltration. Soon after the end of World War II, an article in Life magazine proclaimed that the Soviets had thirteen U.S. cities targeted for missile attacks that would initially kill 10 million. On television, youngsters saw newsreels of above-ground nuclear tests and simulated footage of what happened during an atomic blast. Through television, radio, and the popular press, they learned about bomb shelters being constructed and provisioned in home basements or backyards. During one televised interview a woman told reporters that even if her family’s new shelter was never used for its intended purpose, it would “make a wonderful place for the children to play in.”

Considerable lines of newsprint, along with radio and television air time, were devoted to home shelters, although relatively few were actually built. Some families considered them a passing fad while many decided that if the worst happened, they would rather not live in a post-nuclear world. Other families turned existing space into a shelter. Said one boy of his parents’ solution, “A corner of the basement was weekly stocked with Spam and stuff—a few candles and jugs of water.” Pragmatically, shelter construction took money, and the government decided not to subsidize family shelters. Both Congress and the Federal
"We Stay in Safe Places" was one reminder of what to do in the event of a nuclear attack. Library of Congress
Civil Defense Administration rejected proposals for federally financed shelters, opting instead for “American-style . . . self-help defense.”  

Young people were unlikely to live in a house or apartment building with a bomb shelter or know anyone who did. Still, just the knowledge that they might be needed underscored the tenuous times, as did civil defense practices. In thousands of small towns and cities, preparedness exercises brought blaring sirens, alerts sounded over radio and television stations, and drills that rushed evacuees out of impact areas. In thousands of schools, youngsters watched the film short *Duck and Cover*. Produced by the U.S. Office of Civil Defense, the film calmly assured students that the unthinkable probably would never happen, but if it did, everyone needed to know the best ways to protect themselves. And, adults were reminded to be constantly vigilant. A disaster preparedness pamphlet distributed to local school districts, for instance, was illustrated with a mushroom-shaped cloud rising over a schoolhouse. The accompanying text warned that radioactive fallout would affect much larger areas than bombs’ intended military and industrial targets. Rural schools, cautioned the pamphlet, were as much at risk as urban ones, and school administrators around the country were admonished to take civil defense and student preparedness seriously.

Youngsters internalized the messages of doom. One baby boomer recalled, “Every Thursday night a passenger plane traveling from Denver to Dallas flew over our house. I knew what it was and where it was going, but I’d hear the engines and think, ‘Is that the bomb?’” Another child of the 1950s later wrote of *Duck and Cover* and his elementary school’s air raid practices: “I didn’t know much, but I knew enough to know the probability of this protecting us against an atomic bomb was on the order of slim to none.” And, on the subject of shelters, a boy said, “When I saw a brochure for a bomb shelter in the mail on the hall table, I couldn’t sleep for three nights. Instead, I slept on the floor outside their [his parents’] bedroom. . . . I never did tell them why.”

Most parents were probably unaware of how the talk of bombs and Communists affected their children, and they did not assume, as do adults in the postmodern world, that youngsters were cognizant of life’s unpleasant realities. The head-in-the-sand approach was aided and abet-
ted by child-rearing advisors who explained ways to handle normal childhood fears of the dark or strange surroundings, but failed to talk about children’s anxieties about more terrifying unknowns. Psychologists were, noted one historian, “strangely silent on the issue of the fear of atomic weapons.” Some adults did remark, however, on a growing sense of “individual helplessness” observed among America’s youth during the postwar years. This was articulated by a 1960 White House Conference youth participant: “I’m part of a generation that is faced with evidence daily that the H-bomb may drop tomorrow. We need something that tells us that life is worth something—has meaning.”

In the Cold War climate of the times, psychologically sound children and teenagers were essential to what Truman characterized as the “struggle between freedom and communist slavery.” The United States had just emerged victorious from a world war, but the country faced new military threats from Communist countries and what many believed was an insidious infiltration of Communist sympathizers inside America. The Soviet Union tested its first atomic bomb in 1949. Alger Hiss was put on trial in 1950 for denying his association with a Communist agent, and in the same year Julius and Ethel Rosenberg were arrested and charged with committing espionage against the United States. Senator Joseph McCarthy was making his name synonymous with a “red scare” anti-Communist campaign, and American troops were fighting in Korea.

Wherever one looked, it seemed that communism was an imminent threat to the country and its children. If they were to save themselves and their democratic society, that generation needed the moral fiber that came from good mental health and emotional stability. Speaking to the 6,000 assembled for the White House Conference on Children and Youth, Truman said, “I believe the single most important thing our young people will need to meet this critical challenge in the years ahead is moral strength.”

To some degree, White House Conference discussions mirrored the times in which they occurred. At the 1950 gathering, for instance, delegates did not fully understand or appreciate the effects of migration to the new suburbs or to “boom” states where defense/military industries offered employment. Nor could they anticipate the baby boom and the
ways in which changing demographics would impact the ability of states and local communities to provide and maintain such services as schools and hospitals.

Also largely overlooked by the 1950 conference was television, its programs for children, and the medium’s impact on learning and child development. After all, there were fewer than 100 commercial television stations in the country, and those were located in metropolitan areas. In Illinois, for instance, there were four stations, all in Chicago. In 1950 it was difficult to imagine that the number of stations would mushroom nationally and that 85 percent of all American households would have a television by the end of the decade.

By 1960, however, television had White House Conference participants talking and shaking their heads. What were children sprawled be-
fore the TV seeing and absorbing? Hugely popular with the younger set were *The Howdy Doody Show* with Buffalo Bob and the marionette Howdy Doody; *Watch Mr. Wizard*, which made science fun and understandable; *Ding Dong School* with the kind but firm Miss Frances; and *Captain Kangaroo* and his Treasure House. Saturday mornings were devoted to Westerns while early evening prime time offered *Lassie, Adventures of Rin Tin Tin*, and *The Wonderful World of Disney*. When youngsters got home after school on weekdays, they could tune in to *The Mickey Mouse Club*; teenagers had *American Bandstand* or local stations’ versions of teen dance programs. Of course, youngsters watched other shows, too; the situation comedies, game and variety shows, and sports events watched by their parents. From a kid viewpoint, it seemed perfectly normal to see a children’s program in the morning and then watch the wrestler Gorgeous George slam his opponents in the evening.

Television brought families and friends together when everyone gathered around the set for an evening of viewing. It informed with news programs and “specials” on weighty issues of the day, and it offered pure entertainment. Television also had huge potential as an educational tool. The right kind of programs could teach youngsters basic values of respect, cooperation, and teamwork. The medium could expand children’s horizons and introduce them to places and people that most were unlikely to visit or meet in person. In hindsight, the Native American characters on *Captain Kangaroo* are embarrassing stereotypes, but at the time, their intent was to teach about other cultures. Television held great educational possibilities, but many parents, commentators, and educators felt that, even in its early stages, it was falling short. Impressionable children were being exposed to potentially damaging images and messages.

One of the chief complaints was the portrayal of violence. While it was true that the good guys always triumphed in Saturday-morning Westerns and that gun fights seldom resulted in deaths, some critics did not see exciting action but uncalled-for violence. An episode of *Hopalong Cassidy*, for instance, was taken to task for showing a gang of rustlers holding a “small crippled girl” hostage. Other commentators saw violence in the slapstick comedy of Howdy Doody and Captain Kangaroo. Children could be emotionally damaged in any number of ways, and it was not beyond the realm of possibility, warned some, that more
youngsters would act out the violence they saw and become juvenile delinquents.

By 1960 when television was a common fixture in American households, participants at the 1960 White House Conference explored the influence of television violence on the young. As a reference point, they turned to the 1954 Senate Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency, which heard from television performers, network executives, and representatives from the National Association for Better Radio and Television. According to the latter, the “most objectionable” shows were Captain Midnight, Dick Tracy, and Captain Video. (Interestingly, each came to television because they were popular radio shows, comic book characters, or Saturday afternoon movie serials.) In his rebuttal to claims that these shows, and several others, fed antisocial behavior, ABC vice president Robert Hinckley was succinct: “Television is a very young industry, while juvenile delinquency is very, very old.” The new medium would not become a scapegoat for a social problem that seemed to have no single cause or cure.

Another common complaint lodged against television, unrelated to violence, was the commercialism attached to children’s programming. Children and teenagers were bombarded with images of things they “had” to have. Even the best educational programs had commercial sponsors, and the family-oriented Wonderful World of Disney was criticized as nothing more than an extended commercial for the Disneyland theme park. There was some truth in that; Disneyland loomed large on the vacation wish list of thousands of boys and girls. Nevertheless, the accusations simply would not stick. The television show was too popular, and Disney movies were considered to be an art form of quality.

Experts in education, child psychology, and early childhood development were largely disappointed in television. It was not living up to its “educational potential.” Neither were radio or motion pictures, for that matter, but television was the chief worry. At its very worst, it failed to provide positive messages of fair play, teamwork, and personal integrity. Instead, said the critics, it encouraged violence, materialism, passivity, and self-absorption. One solution was more noncommercial channels with educational programming. However, the Federal Communications Commission had licensed only eleven such stations by 1955, and only
three of those—the ones in Madison, Wisconsin; Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; and St. Louis, Missouri—were commended by the U.S. Children’s Bureau for “outstanding” children’s shows. Clearly, noncommercial television, which by the early 1960s consisted of fewer than sixty stations, was not in a position to draw the majority of viewers away from commercial stations. The answer, said critics, was to pressure the networks for more educational programming and less violent content. Ultimately, however, it was agreed that parents, who generally showed less consternation over what their children watched than child-rearing experts, were the ones responsible for their children’s viewing habits.

In the context of television and other elements of the popular culture, conference participants talked about young people as a general population. In other instances, however, children and teens were discussed in terms of race, religion, and economic and social circumstances. Within this framework, forums at the White House Conferences on Children and Youth separated and then subdivided youngsters into defined study populations. This was consistent with the approach taken at earlier White House Conferences. The final report of the 1940 “Children in a Democracy” White House Conference on Children and Youth, for instance, devoted an entire chapter to minority children. Much of it detailed the many ways in which African Americans, Filipinos, Mexicans, Chinese, Japanese, and Native Americans were deprived of social services and schooling.

One noticeable difference between the 1940 report and discussions at the 1950 and 1960 conferences, however, was the interjection of civil rights and discrimination as an issue that was uniquely African American. Other minorities faced forms of discrimination, but their experiences became even less visible as African Americans marched, organized, and staged sit-ins. Looking back on the 1960 conference where younger representatives listed “the right of nonviolent resistance” as a “youth priority,” one adult participant remarked that civil rights was “as significant as the discovery of the Salk vaccine and penicillin,” but “we couldn’t see it in 1960 enough, or clearly enough.” There was no way to predict the rapid cultural and social shifts taking place in the country as African Americans pushed for an equal place in all aspects of American life.

Aid to Dependent Children (ADC) programs offered a case study in
discrimination and regional economic differences. In southern states, racial prejudice kept African American children from receiving ADC support, and when money was provided, it was far less than that available to children in other sections of the country. In Mississippi, which had the lowest national median income of $1,200, the average grant to a child was $6 a month; by comparison, in Illinois, where the median income was $3,500, the average monthly grant was just over $26.25

This was just one disparity among many. Although other minority children often faced similar problems, the focus of postwar conferences was Black America. Issues of discrimination, civil rights, and integration were hotly debated. The 1950 White House Conference report from President Truman’s home state of Missouri called for an end to segregation because it produced “psychological insecurity” in children. Still, conference participants found it difficult, if not impossible, to find common ground. When it was suggested that the 1950 conference officially support wholesale integration, the recommendation was voted down. So, too, was the demand from younger delegates and the American Psychological Association that no future meetings or conferences be held in Washington, D.C., until the city completely integrated its restaurants and hotels. While those calls for equality were overruled, the Midcentury Conference aimed for an ideal, promising in its “Pledge to Children” that “we will work to rid ourselves of prejudice and discrimination, so that together we may achieve a truly democratic society.” The conference was a microcosm of America. Some wanted to hold back the tides of change; others wished to usher in a new social order.26

During the ten years between the 1950 and 1960 conferences, there were advances in eliminating discrimination. Public facilities in the District of Columbia were integrated; the Supreme Court ruled “separate but equal” unconstitutional in Brown v. Board of Education; federal troops escorted black students into Little Rock’s Central High; and civil rights demonstrations became a national occurrence. Reflecting these changes in America’s social and cultural life, the 1960 conference expressed perceptively different attitudes from those voiced in 1950. There was little opposition to resolutions calling for an end to segregation in schools, housing, and employment. More than half the work groups demanded an end to discrimination and Jim Crow laws. Several voted to
support sit-ins taking place at lunch counters in a number of cities. The teenage chairman of one work group announced that civil rights protesters would “not stand alone.” To make the point, a number of youth delegates, described as “aggressively progressive” by one observer, used their free time to organize picket lines in support of sit-ins.27

Changes in the social fabric of America were reflected in the White House Conferences on Children and Youth. Also apparent were what one sociologist called “trends . . . typical of the decade.” Housing, or the lack of it, was a good example of an issue that drew considerable attention in 1950, but far less notice in 1960 when adequate housing was not regarded as a national crisis but one that touched only specific groups. Most of these were marginalized, low-income families, including southern sharecroppers, Native Americans on reservations, residents of the Ozarks and Appalachians, and Latinos in urban barrios.28

In 1950, however, there was a national housing crisis that affected Americans across a broad spectrum of social, economic, and ethnic backgrounds and in all parts of the country. The public demanded that Congress and President Truman act to correct a postwar shortage that actually began in the 1930s. During the Great Depression there was little new home construction or modern improvements made to existing dwellings. Then, during the war years, building and modernization were a low priority when materials went to the war effort. By the time GIs began to come home, the problem could not be ignored. The dramatic rise in marriage and birth rates turned the housing crunch into a crisis. “More and more families are looking for a place to live,” Republican Everett M. Dirksen told his Illinois constituents. “Every Congressman’s desk is piled high with literature on the subject of housing. . . . Veterans recently discharged are writing Congressmen, clamoring for action.” In Chicago alone at least 100,000 veterans were homeless, prompting the city to sell old streetcars for conversion into housing.29

Demand for homes and apartments in large urban centers, small towns, and even in farm communities consistently rose while owners of rental properties took advantage of the situation. Inflationary rents, which the Truman administration attempted to control with the 1947 Housing and Rent Act, and the scarcity of homes for purchase forced young families to live with relatives or share space with nonrelations. A
reported 6 million families were “doubling up” with friends or relatives in 1947. Another 2 million, noted a 1948 congressional Joint Committee on Housing, wanted private housing but could find no accommodations other than those available in boarding houses, tourist cabins, or trailer parks.30

There was a general outcry for a national housing program that would meet the needs of families in every income group, in every type of community, but delegates at the 1950 White House Conference on Children and Youth were most concerned with those at the bottom of the social and economic ladder. Children in those households also deserved decent housing that, in turn, provided a nurturing, safe environment. It was recommended that the federal government help communities around the country build 800,000 low-rent housing units “at full speed.” The conference also endorsed federal legislation aimed at urban redevelopment, slum clearance, and construction of “good quality” low-cost housing. The conference was in effect backing Truman who, as early as September 1945, promoted federal support for low-income housing and redevelopment of blighted urban areas.31

By 1949, construction and urban renewal were under way as a result of that year’s Housing Act (expanded by the 1954 Housing Act that not only provided funding for new construction but for rehabilitation of deteriorating areas). The result in 1950 was 177 local housing projects opened to families of all races and religions. Nonetheless, progress was slow. Truman faced opposition from a coalition of Republicans and southern Democrats who once stood against Roosevelt’s social reforms and now tried “to block his successor.” They refused to support the 1949 bill, and the real estate lobby called it a step toward socialism. Although the goal of the 1949 Housing Act was to provide a “suitable living environment for every American family,” it never lived up to the promise. Instead of the 810,000 new low-cost housing units planned for, only about 360,000 were built.32

Part of the difference between the ideal and the reality was not enough federal funding. However, resistance at state and local levels played a significant part. In California, for example, twenty out of thirty projects were defeated by anti–public housing campaigns. Some of these efforts were led by local citizens. Others were organized by realtors and devel-
opers. Responding to the latter, Richard M. Nixon, at the time a U.S. senator representing California, tried unsuccessfully to block a $13 million federal construction contract in Los Angeles. Arguments that public housing held down real estate values or brought blight to otherwise stable communities meant that the working poor, often minorities, remained in substandard housing and neighborhoods, taking an emotional and physical toll on children. Bad housing, said one report, contributed to a breakdown in family unity, slowed child development, and encouraged juvenile delinquency. A number of social service programs existed for residents, but, said one teenager, “The agencies seem more like satellites around the [housing] project without ever touching the needs of the people there.”

The experience was quite different for youngsters whose parents were able to build or buy homes. Thousands of families were helped by the
Veterans Administration program of guaranteed mortgage insurance to returning GIs. The number of new housing starts soared, reaching a record high of 1.65 million in 1955. Although “the dream house shown in the movies, by the mass media, and on the subdivision circulars” did not represent the many types of housing that sheltered American families, the homes in new subdivisions and developing suburbs became stereotypical of the era. The suburbs themselves came to represent a changing trend in American life, accounting for more population growth during the 1950s than that found in the central cities they surrounded.34

Some real estate developers offered large homes on good-sized lots, but the suburbs became equated with the well-known Levittown model, the first large-scale style of housing development to use prefabrication techniques in construction. The tract homes were designed for young families. The basic Levitt house, for example, had two bedrooms, one bath, and was built on a slab. The Levitt Cape Cod, priced at just under $8,000 could be “all yours,” said one ad, “for $58 [down].” House designs were limited and lot size standard.35

Nationally the Levitt technique, which began with the first Levittown on Long Island, New York, was replicated by other builders in other suburban developments. Duplication did not mean, however, that everyone applauded this form of homebuilding. There were those who denounced the housing for its numbing conformity. Lewis Mumford, known for his critiques on architecture, described the new suburbs as “a multitude of uniform, unidentifiable houses, lined up inflexibly . . . inhabited by people of the same class, the same income.” Developers like William Levitt defended the overall design. In an article for Good Housekeeping magazine, he declared that “Houses are for people, not critics.”36

Home buyers, often young couples, seemed to agree. For them, a new suburban home presented a chance for home ownership, and many explained their decision to relocate to the suburbs as a move to benefit their children. The youngsters seemed not to notice the cookie-cutter similarity between homes, and like children elsewhere, their playmates were from the “neighborhood.” They played in neighbors’ yards, in the street, and took advantage of organized activities such as scouting and Sunday school.

The sameness of the homes’ exteriors in suburbia reflected the same-
ness of the people inside. The overwhelming majority were Caucasian. The most notable diversity was between being Catholic or Protestant. The new suburbs went a long way in solving the worst housing crunch the country had ever experienced, and as Lizabeth Cohen noted in her study of postwar consumerism, suburbia “promised to create a more egalitarian and democratic society as more Americans than ever before would own a stake in their communities.” When a family from a Polish neighborhood in the city moved next door to a family that came from an Irish enclave or a family that claimed English roots, the new mix seemed to prove the promised outcome. On the other hand, minority families met resistance when they tried to move into neighborhoods where they were not wanted. Discrimination in housing was lessened in some places after the U.S. Supreme Court, in Shelley v. Kraemer (1948), declared restrictive covenants unenforceable and when the Federal Housing Authority and Home Finance Agency called on lending agencies in 1955 to approve loans for purchase and construction of homes by minorities. Nevertheless, redlining by banks, the realtor practice of racial steering, and segregation of public housing in some cities continued to limit accessibility to African Americans, Latinos, Asians, and Jews.37

Inside American homes, no matter the place or their occupants’ heritage, a noticeable trend was emerging. Couples seemed determined to stay together. Except for a sharp rise in divorces in 1946 when returning servicemen and their wives found that they could not sustain their marriages in peacetime, the divorce rate began to decline. The number of divorces in 1947, for example, stood at approximately 450,000, down from the previous year’s 613,000. “With all the risks inherent in marriage,” mused Parents Magazine in 1948, “it is comforting that more than three quarters of all marriages stick.”38

The stick-to-it-iveness of couples and a continuing decline in divorce rates was not, however, readily apparent when the White House Conference on Children and Youth met in 1950, and it was certainly not anticipated when the National Conference on Family Life convened in 1946. That conference, first suggested by the American Home Economics Association in 1944 to consider problems facing the modern American family, was attended by representatives from more than 100 national organizations.39 Discussions dealt with such topics as “marriage courses”
for high school and college students, couples’ adjustment to parenthood, and marital compatibility. Also on the agenda was the subject of divorce, which was on the rise when the conference convened. Family Life delegates found the increase so disturbing that they urged President Truman to establish a presidential commission to study marriage and divorce laws. Family Life’s goal was to make it more difficult for couples to end their marriages and turn more youngsters into children of divorce.

Truman approved the idea of a conference on the American family. There was no reason to do otherwise. He also appeared before Family Life conference delegates to deliver an “off-the-cuff speech,” but he refused to do more. Truman rejected the idea of giving the meeting presidential sponsorship, and he refused to create a presidential commission to study the state of marriage and divorce in the United States. Although a number of government programs existed to help families and sustain them in times of destabilizing crises, neither the White House nor federal agencies would become embroiled in a public discussion on the subject of divorce. If states and territories decided to toughen their laws, as the Family Life conference suggested, that was up to them.

In the late 1940s, statistical evidence suggested that divorces would increase, leaving more children to be raised in one-parent households, the products of the often-studied and much-decried “broken home.” In fact, just the opposite happened. Married couples stayed together during the 1950s. In part, this was a result of the era’s emphasis on home as a refuge and the nuclear family as an American ideal. But it also had to do with a collective attitude. Both men and women believed in marriage, were determined to make it work (even when it was unhappy), and often considered unmarried men and women as somehow flawed in personality and attitude.

Marriages could survive a great deal, including mothers taking jobs outside the home. Despite dire warnings about the effect on children and despite society’s prevailing emphasis on domesticity, the number of women in the national workforce steadily rose during the 1950s. In 1958 a reported 22 million women were employed either full or part time. Of that number more than 16 million were, or had been, married, and more than 7 million of these women had children under the age of eighteen. Women with very young children were the least likely to seek outside...
employment while “older married women, once a small minority among women workers” became the largest group of employed females. According to Katherine Howard, administrator of Federal Civil Defense and one of 175 women to hold high-level positions in the Eisenhower administration, American women worked “in every category listed in the 1950 census.”

Family finances were one reason to work outside the home, but there were other factors. Women talked about having the money to purchase “extras” for the home. Some cited finding personal satisfaction, as well as having more options for employment. The decade was filled with contradictory messages about work and women’s personal experiences. A well-known professor and expert in social work, for instance, wrote that married women who were comfortably supported by their husbands were moving “toward masculinity” when they left their children in the care of others and competed with men in the workplace. These women, said the author, did not “represent a common feminine pattern in this country.”

The social pressure represented in this sort of attitude, said Betty Friedan in *The Feminine Mystique*, led educated women like her to remain home as wives and mothers, rather than carve out professional careers. That was the experience of Friedan and many others, but it was not a singular one, shared by all women. Studies conducted during the 1950s found that many working women, including African Americans, who had to support their families would have preferred to be at home rather than in the labor force. The reality of working women was that there was a wide spectrum of circumstances that included not only the question of if women worked outside the home but why.

The effect of working mothers on children received far less notice at the 1950 White House Conference on Children and Youth than at the 1960 meeting. The reason was simple. The number of working women significantly increased during the 1950s. Of the 16.6 million women in the labor force in March 1958, for instance, 7.5 million had children under the age of eighteen. This number was 80 percent higher than the 4.2 million in 1948. Speaking to the 1960 national White House Conference committee, President Eisenhower recognized that many women did not have the option to decide if they would work outside the home. He still
wondered about the impact on children and family life. The topic pro-
duced spirited debate when conference workshops later met to discuss
various aspects of the American family. Some participants argued that
working mothers lived “richer, fuller lives.” Others called them “irre-
ponsible.” Fathers were also faulted for a variety of perceived failings—
“allowing” their wives to work, putting women in the position that they
had to work, and taking over the mother’s role when she was gone.44

Teenagers had their own perspectives on working mothers. Said one
girl at the 1960 meeting, “My mother has always had to work and when
we were children, my father and mother told us why and what we had to
do and we did it. I think it is helping me become what I hope to be-
come.” As for the suggestion that working mothers inadvertently encou-
aged juvenile delinquency, the youth representatives were skeptical.
Young people were responsible for their actions. This view was articu-
lated by one young man. “I think that by the time a person is a teenager
he has a responsibility for the way he behaves and if he knows his mother
has to work he ought to be ashamed for becoming wild.”45

Not everyone thought parents were doing a bad job, but there was a
nagging concern among experts and commentators that no one knew the
long-term outcome for children of working mothers or the emotional
and physical price women paid. A number of authoritative experts, in-
cluding Dr. Benjamin Spock, were reluctant to criticize working women
too harshly. After all, some mothers had no choice but to work outside
the home. “Usually,” soothed Spock, “their children turn out all right.”
He was less sympathetic to women who could afford to stay home. His
advice to them was that a “little extra money” and their personal satisfac-
tion were “not so important” as their job of being mothers. While some
experts and commentators suggested that children of working women
were fortunate to have mothers who felt fulfilled, rather than frustrated,
many others were quick to predict adverse effects on children. “The en-
ergy output required by trying to fill two jobs,” said one study, “[made]
mothers more irritable with their children.” Many believed that it was
not only the children, but women who suffered when they strayed from
home and family. Oregon’s White House Conference report, for in-
stance, cited “a terrific increase in the sale of aspirin and whiskey” as
proof that women invited “psychological hardship” when they tried to be both homemaker and wage earner.⁴⁶

One hardship was the lack of day care. During the war years, centers operated near defense plants, but these served only about 10 percent of those needing day care. After the war ended, the continued funding of these centers was questioned. Mothers once employed in defense work were now expected to go home and look after their children there. This was, in fact, the argument made by Fritz G. Lanham, a Democrat from Texas, when he spoke from the House floor in 1945. Although Lanham sponsored the 1942 Community Facilities Act (better known as the Lanham Act), which provided, among other things, federal funds for day-care centers connected to defense plants, he considered the need over. If there were no centers, he further reasoned, women would likely give up their jobs, leaving room for returning GIs. Lanham had his way. In 1946, federally supported day care ended.⁴⁷

Not considered in this decision was the ongoing expansion of defense industries and military bases during the Cold War years. To meet the demand for workers, women were once again needed, but it was difficult to recruit women with children. Local communities whose economic lives relied on defense plants asked the government to reinstitute federal aid for day care. Wichita, Kansas, for instance, was located near a military base and had a healthy aircraft industry with military contracts. What it lacked were adequate child-care programs that would encourage women to enter the workforce. The city turned to the government for help. The response from HEW, the U.S. Children’s Bureau, and the U.S. Women’s Bureau (under the U.S. Department of Labor) was not what the city hoped for, but it reflected the agencies’ mandates, which typically conducted studies that sometimes laid the groundwork for future legislation. The study findings on the Wichita project, as well as those conducted where there were no defense or military installations, supported what working parents already knew. There was a substantial lack of day care and after-school programs in the United States. The need for these facilities increased, and by 1959, a reported 7 million youngsters under the age of twelve lived in households where mothers worked outside the home. Most of these children were cared for by relatives or private sitters. Only about one child
out of every forty was in group care, and at least another 400,000 under the age of twelve looked after themselves and younger siblings.\(^{48}\)

Both the U.S. Children’s Bureau and U.S. Women’s Bureau were prepared to document the problem and to push for more public awareness. Solutions, however, were left to local communities, industries, and the parents themselves. Stressing the importance of adequate child care, Katherine B. Oettinger, Children’s Bureau chief, and Alice K. Leopold, assistant to the Secretary of Labor, issued a joint statement in 1959 stressing “community responsibility.” Yet, “too frequently,” the statement acknowledged, the needs of mothers and their children were not addressed by either private or governmental agencies.\(^{49}\)

As for Washington politicians, there was largely silence. No matter their affiliations or philosophies, lawmakers preferred not to acknowledge that family dynamics were changing as more women entered the national workforce. To do so would have required that Congress do more than its 1954 approval of a tax deduction allowing families earning up to $4,500 per year to deduct $600 for child care from their income taxes.

Direct funding for child care was reintroduced in 1958 when Senator Jacob Javits, a Republican from New York, presented the Day Care Assistance Act. Although the Inter-City Committee for Day Care of Children (ICC) lobbied for passage and mobilized grassroots support, the bill was rejected. Child-care tax deductions were as far as lawmakers were willing to go, particularly when they knew that women, however maternal, did not vote as a bloc on child-centered issues and, therefore, would not launch a large-scale lobbying effort. Clearly, women did not share the same concerns. Nor did they project a united front that could influence politicians to give their attention to an issue or to sway their vote for legislation. This was a lesson that the Children’s Bureau learned early on when some women’s organizations wholeheartedly supported the bureau while others opposed it.\(^{50}\)

In the instance of day-care centers, the federal response was to maintain a hands-off attitude. Federal agencies could collect statistics and publish reports. The U.S. Children’s Bureau and U.S. Women’s Bureau could cosponsor the 1960 National Conference on Day Care of Children. These activities did not mean, however, that federally funded day care was likely. The issue was loaded with controversy. To some, it
smacked of state-run nurseries in the Soviet Union and its satellite countries. To others, it had the potential to weaken the nuclear family by helping women work outside the home.

In other child-related issues, there were, however, calls for action and robust activism toward improving the lives of children. A national spotlight turned on children and teenagers, partly because there were so many of them and partly because there was so much emotionally and materially invested in their futures. There was a keen cultural interest in everything to do with childhood and the teen years. Anyone likely to be part of a child’s life—parents, relatives, teachers, clergy—had a responsibility. So, too, did the nation at large.

The country’s “basic objective,” said Truman, was “improving the well-being of our children.” How to accomplish that was the driving force behind the myriad discussions, debates, and proclamations that emerged from the White House Conferences of the postwar era. And, as delegates left these conferences, they were urged to return to their organizations and local communities ready to turn talk into action. Dr. Dean W. Roberts, representing the American Public Health Association, for instance, arrived at the 1950 White House Conference a skeptic but left feeling that the meeting had accomplished much more than talk. In his estimation, it had clearly focused on the “importance of personality development in our society,” offering concrete ways to improve the positive influences of educational, social, recreational, health-care, and religious institutions. Two participants at the 1960 conference were equally impressed, adding that the meeting had produced a “useful catalogue of unmet needs on which to base future programs,” even if that meant more taxes and the “sacrifice of vested interests.”

Another conference participant, this one a teenager representing the youth of America, felt energized but somewhat overwhelmed with the task ahead. “We all hope,” said the teen, “that when we go back home we’ll be able to take what was done here and bring about the changes that are necessary.” In some instances, changes came rather quickly, as when the 1950 conference stimulated local, regional, and federal agencies to create additional programs for migrant children. Sometimes, however, it might take many years to see any results. Prior to the 1919 White House conference, for example, only eight states had child welfare departments.
Conference participants wanted to change that and set out to lobby state legislatures, but it was not until the beginning of the 1950s that every state (but not all U.S. territories) had such a department.\footnote{Lawmakers at state and federal levels might not be inclined to follow conference recommendations or bow to demands. The White House Conferences on Children and Youth did, however, serve an important purpose in the national discourse on children. The meetings involved presidential administrations and federal agencies. They drew the attention of Congress and raised public awareness. News stories reported on the meetings as they were taking place, and prior to the conference, celebrities lent their names to media promotions. In 1960, for instance, actors Walter Brennan, Robert Young, and Jane Wyatt appeared in televised public service announcements. Sports stars Jackie Robinson and Danny Kaye (far right), a popular entertainer and dedicated UNICEF spokesperson, led youth forums at the 1960 White House Conference on Children and Youth. Dwight D. Eisenhower Library}
Mickey Mantle were asked to do the same, as were well-known personalities popular with young people—Roy Rogers, Dale Evans, Ricky Nelson, and Pat Boone. Entertainer Danny Kaye, a tireless worker for the United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund (UNICEF), agreed to serve as master of ceremonies for the opening of the 1960 conference if he could participate in the conference’s youth meetings.

Young people at White House Conferences were not unheard of. A “youth band” welcomed Herbert Hoover to the 1930 conference, and during the postwar meetings, a few hundred children and teenagers provided musical entertainment, including Navajo children performing traditional dances. An innovation of these later conferences, however, was inclusion of high school and college-age “youth representatives.” Racially, ethnically, and geographically diverse, the young people were selected on recommendations from religious organizations, 4-H clubs, youth divisions of the YWCA and YMCA, and the National Scholarship and Service Fund for Negro Students. They arrived as members of state/territorial delegations and as members of the Advisory Committee on Youth Participation. Some were, noted one observer, “aggressively conservative,” while others were moderate or liberal in their views.

Seldom were young people able to step outside their adult-controlled environments and be actors in their own lives. Active engagement in the civil rights movement—integrating schools and lunch counters—was one example of youngsters moving to shape events, as was delinquent behavior, which brought an entirely different set of adult responses. White House Conferences offered another opportunity for young people to act on their own behalf. The youth representatives came together in work groups with adults and their peers. They tackled topics of family and peer relationships, community youth programs, job availability and training, educational opportunities, and the influence of spiritual values on behavior. Their views were acknowledged in conference recommendations, and more importantly, from the organizers’ point of view, these young people were potential community and neighborhood activists for the betterment of young people’s lives.

Conferences gave participants, who listened to speakers at assemblies and sat for days in deliberation with their work groups, ideas and strategies for dealing with their particular areas of concern. Delegates were
willing to work in their local communities and at the state level to produce beneficial changes, but organizers realized that enthusiasm could lag over time. To revitalize participants and keep them thinking about their conference experience, the national committees kept working after conferences ended. At its follow-up meeting in 1952, the national committee was pleased to note that every state and territory had organized its own Committee for Children and Youth, and many state governors had called “Little White House Conferences,” some of which drew over 1,000 people. A National Council of State Committees for Children and Youth was formed and established a working relationship with the Interdepartmental Committee of federal agencies. After the 1960 White House Conference on Children and Youth, a Council of National Organizations for Children and Youth was created. Serving approximately 400 individual child-service providers and state-based Committees for Children and Youth, the council also included the National Committee for Children and Youth. This committee acted as a liaison between federal agencies and local and state-based organizations; it sponsored conferences directed at identifiable populations such as rural youth or “unemployed, out-of-school” teenagers; and it prepared a mid-decade Report to the Nation in 1965 that analyzed which recommendations from the 1960 conference were showing results, identified emerging problems, and shelved once-acceptable solutions that time and changing circumstances made obsolete.55

There was fluidity to the conferences. An issue considered of paramount importance at one meeting could seem inconsequential at the next. Conferences were a lens to both long-standing problems and fleeting trends of the historical, political, and cultural period in which they occurred. Whether it was 1950 or 1960, however, conference delegates agreed that the federal government “must become a more effective partner” in the efforts to improve the lives of America’s children and teenagers.56

No one advocated that government take over the parental role. And, it was not suggested that state governments and local communities wait to follow federal mandates, rather than initiate their own solutions to a problem. The federal government was, however, expected to take a larger role in leadership and, when necessary, put forth policies that were in the
best interests of children and teenagers. How to do that was not always easy to decide. The presidents, Congresses, and government agencies did not necessarily agree on specific issues, but their decisions were both shaped and informed by what American culture at the time believed about childhood, by the belief that children had rights, and by an image of what life should be like for young people.