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HEADLINE: The Fight Over Orphanages

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HIGHLIGHT:
Let's move to a discussion of what is best for the children that is open, honest and fair

BODY:

Hillary Clinton recently dismissed as "absurd" the idea of taking poor children away from their homes and putting them in orphanages. Newt Gingrich retorted by suggesting that the First Lady rent the 1938 movie "Boys' Town," adding "I don't understand liberals who live in enclaves of safety who say, 'Oh, this would be a terrible thing. Look at the Norman Rockwell family that would break up.' The fact is we are allowing a brutalization and a degradation of children in this country, a destructiveness." NEWSWEEK asked Mrs. Clinton for her response:

I AM HEARTENED THAT the well-being of children and families increasingly is a focus of national attention as more and more Americans express their frustration with the failings of the welfare system, high rates of illegitimacy, irresponsible parenting, poor schooling, drugs and violence. And I applaud our nation's determination to do something about these problems.

Over the past 25 years I have spent a lot of time and energy working to strengthen families and help children. There is nothing about which I care more. I have volunteered in institutions serving children in homeless shelters, group homes, children's hospitals and schools. In Arkansas, I started programs to teach parenting skills to welfare recipients and worked with advocacy groups to improve education, health care and child care. I have served on committees to combat youth violence and child abuse. And I have written about the legal rights and responsibilities of children in their families and society.

I also understand the frustration that many Americans feel toward government bureaucracy. As a children's advocate and lawyer, I waged plenty of my own battles with government and represented foster children and parents in lawsuits against government bureaucracies. On a more personal level, I have struggled with the anguish caused by terminating the parental rights of mothers who desperately love their children but are unable to care for them. And I have had to explain to abused children, who fear loneliness more than harm, that being taken from the only home they know is for their protection and not their

punishment.

Based on these experiences, I know that when any of us talk about what is best for children, we should start with a large dose of humility, and then be willing to struggle through the hard questions posed by the collapse of families.

Take the orphanages debate, for example. There is no doubt that many Americans have benefited from being raised by caring people in orphanages. On the other hand, I disagree with those who suggest that children should be taken from their parents and put in orphanages solely because they were born out of wedlock and their parents are poor. This is big government interference into the lives of private citizens at its worst.

As we debate welfare reform, I hope we will learn from the recent verbal skirmishes over orphanages how public discussion of critical issues can be confused and bogged down by polarizing language. I agree with the recent comments of Speaker Gingrich, who said last week that the debate over orphanages had become distorted and cheap. Let's move on to a discussion that is open, honest and fair. If we do, perhaps we will be able to look back at the orphanage debate as a cautionary lesson in how to discuss sensitive and important matters, and not to characterize whole groups of Americans with broad, unfair stereotypes that will not lead us to positive or fair solutions.

Like most Americans, I too am deeply disturbed by the outrageous rates of out-of-wedlock births and the welfare dependency they bring. And my heart breaks every time I hear another story about a mother or father who abuses, neglects or kills a child.

But more than two decades of working on children's issues has taught me that there are no simple solutions to such complex human problems. I also have learned that there are some absolutely bedrock principles when it comes to ensuring the well-being of children.

First, children are almost always best off with their families. Our legal system presumes that a child should be with his or her parents unless there is convincing evidence that abuse or neglect threatens a child's well-being. That standard should not be changed. But we should look for better ways to identify children at risk, move quickly to help their families and, as a last resort, move children to the best possible out-of-home placement.

Second, those who believe poverty is a disqualification from good parenting probably have not been in the company of poor but hardworking parents. Both the President and the Speaker lost their fathers, one through death, one through divorce. Each of their young mothers eventually remarried, and each boy was then adopted by his new father. But one can only imagine what might have happened if bad luck had left those young women alone and in poverty. I doubt either mom would have given up Bill or Newt to any orphanage without one heck of a fight.

Poor parents struggle every day to give their children the most with the least. And often they are among the best parents. They know children need a secure home, strong values, consistency and love. The love can be as rich and the values as sound in the homes of Watts as in Westchester, in Harlem as in Highland Park.

Those who think otherwise are letting a handful of sensational media stories create a false stereotype in their minds. After all, only a small fraction of the 14 mi[children classified as poor currently are placed in out-of-home care.

Third, it is important to support families with special problems, including poverty, before giving up on them. Certainly there are cases -- too many, and tragically there seem to be more all the time -- where parents abuse their children or are unable or unwilling to meet their family responsibilities. Instances of abuse and neglect occur in rich as well in as poor families. But we all know that poor families are more likely to feel the stress of economic troubles and be identified for government intervention. It is more cost-effective and realistic to help avoid family breakup. That is why the President signed the Family and Medical Leave Act, which enables parents to be good parents and good workers by giving them time off without fear of losing their job when a child is born or is sick.

The President also insisted in 1993 on giving working families earning less than $ 26,000 a year a tax cut that averaged $ 1,000 a family, so that their hard-earned dollars could be spent on their children instead of sent to the government.

The President's budget plan also included funding for family preservation programs like the one I recently visited in Los Angeles. That church-run program receives state and federal funds to help families stay together. The success stories I heard were impressive, and so was the fact that the work being done was cheaper than any foster care or orphanage could ever be.

Fourth, whenever dangerous circumstances do exist, children must be protected from harm and moved into alternative settings outside their family. But this should only occur as a last resort to keep the child safe.

When children are endangered and only the government has the right to intervene, government must act quickly and decisively to protect them. But removing children from their parents is -- and should be -- difficult because of the seriousness of the matter, and because available options outside the family are not always good ones. Too often, children are left to languish in the insecurity of the foster care system or with inadequate institutional care. When the government is forced to remove a child, it should be required to find the right solution promptly.

The point I have tried to make for years is that any decision to separate a child from his parents should be made solely on the basis of the child's safety and well-being. We should never permit children to be taken from their families simply because the parents are poor, unmarried or lacking education.

So let's put first things first. Our greatest energy should be spent promoting responsible parenting and independence from the welfare system -- all with a view toward building strong families and creating conditions in which children can flourish. Children's welfare should always be the underlying principle in welfare reform. It is the crux of welfare reform legislation the President presented to Congress last year. And it is what the President was working for when he gave 24 states waivers to promote their own versions of welfare reform.

In the coming debate, I hope we can all agree to launch a national campaign to discourage teenage pregnancies and to require fathers to take responsibility for their children and pay child support when marriage doesn't occur or divorce does. We should insist that young men who casually father children admit paternity. We should help young women on welfare who are yearning to be good mothers acquire the skills they need to move out of welfare and into work. We should encourage the adoption of children who cannot be returned to their parents. We should insist that any institution we establish for children meet standards of care and safety that we would demand for our own children.

I grew up in a Republican family and, although I'm now a Democrat, I always thought the Republican Party believed in the value of family -- not in government intrusions into family life. It is my hope that we can now put the war of words about orphanages and the slogans about welfare families behind us and join together -- as parents, teachers, ministers, community leaders and policymakers -- to fulfill our responsibilities to America's children. Too often in the past, we've assumed that only the family, or only the government, was responsible for ensuring the well-being of children. But personal values and national policies must both play a role.

As the National Conference of Catholic Bishops said in its 1992 pastoral letter entitled, Putting Families First: "No government can love a child, and no policy can substitute for a family's care. But, government can either support or undermine families. There has been an unfortunate, unnecessary and unreal polarization in discussion [about] how best to help families. The undeniable fact is that our children's future is shaped both by the values of their parents and the policies of our nation."

I have a feeling if Father Flanagan were here to take part in this debate, his view would reflect the wisdom of the bishops. Taking responsibility for the children in our own lives and all children is the most sacred duty we have.

GRAPHIC: Picture 1, The First Lady, LARRY DOWNING -- NEWSWEEK; Picture 2, Promoting Father Flanagan: Gingrich autographs a photo from 'Boys' Town' at a Georgia screening, ROB NELSON -- BLACK STAR

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