

THE WHITE HOUSE

Office of the Press Secretary

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QUESTION & ANSWER SESSION WITH THE FIRST LADY AT THE GEORGE
WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY COMMUNITARIAN EVENT

Question: (inaudible)

Answer: Well you know as a mother there are some days where there are negative impulses that need to be controlled. But I think you've asked an important question because when I was writing and had time to actually think about what I'd seen and heard over the last 25 years or so, it did strike me that we have something of a disconnect in America, between our rhetoric about children, which is excessive, and the many ways out of bounds of reality, the way children are talked about, and you know the slogans, "our greatest resource" and "our future." All that sort of stuff which comes off of everyone's tongues. But that both in individual cases and socially we often did not act in that way. And I do think that part of it is demographic; there are many, many people who have no responsibility any longer for raising children. Either their children are grown or they don't have children. And so the numbers of people who are focused on the primary responsibility for children are less than they were in previous times in our history.

But I think it's fair to say that people are driven by many of the stereotypes and images of children that are portrayed in the mass media. And I think that's what the little boy in Philadelphia was saying to me. That if you only watch television, you would have a very different view of what's happening in children's lives than if you're actually in a classroom or raising kids or working with them on a daily basis. And I think it does a grave disservice to us as a nation and to our children that they are being so stereotyped. But that does affect how people think about kids. And it drives what people are willing to invest in kids, and how they view their responsibilities toward them. So I think that there is a need for a more rounded view of our children and more credit given to the vast majority of kids who are coping with situation, even if they are in very stable families, that are unprecedented historically.

And I guess the final thing I would say is that I think there is a real opportunity now or us to do some extensive public education about child development and children. The Carnegie Corporation is investing quite a bit into trying to educate America about the first three years of life. There will be a

conference in Chicago next week where brain development is going to be looked at. Because we now know what a difference it makes, how a child is treated and stimulated in those first three years. And not only their academic success but how they behave in many settings. I think the astonishing success of Daniel Goldman's book is in some measure due to people's hunger to find out about what they can do that will help kids and that would make it better for kids, both individually and together.

So I think your comment is a fair one, that there are people who basically think that kids aren't worth much, or at least the kids they hear about and see aren't worth much or are just negative. And I think we do have some task ahead of us to try to reverse that and then act upon that. Yes sir.

Question: (inaudible)

Answer: I think time and the pace of our lives is one of the biggest obstacles to doing what we all know needs to be done for our children. Uri Bronfmanbrenner (phonetic) told me a story about a colleague of his from Europe who came over here on some fellowship to study child development. And at the end of his time he said he was just astonished because it looked as though children were being raised in automobiles, you know pushed into the car to get to day care or school, somewhere else. He said he would go down the freeway and he would see children being fed, being dressed, being groomed, in the car. And he saw that as a metaphor for the hectic pace of American life which is just sapping the capacity of families to support each other, and to support their children, and to support institutions like their schools.

I think this is sort of one of those "good news bad news" stories. I believe that within the next couple of years time and how spend time will become a major political issue. And I don't just mean electoral politics. Within corporations and in other institutions, people will be bargaining for time as much as for money. Because it has gotten to the point that people feel very stretched and unable to fulfill the basic requirements of not only making a living but living a life. And I think there are some... You know the President had this summit with corporate heads who have begun to understand some of the trade-offs that are possible for family-friendly time and for flex-time and the like. I visited a large insurance company in Minneapolis a couple of weeks ago and sat with a group of workers who told me how they were making some of these trade-offs of time versus money and advancement. And it was so important for them to have the time when their children were particularly young.

So I think there's going to be a growing awareness of this and some effort, perhaps organized even, not so long from now, to begin to take this on as an issue. And I think it's long overdue because I believe there are some stark similarities between our

era and the Progressive era, and if you remember one of the great battles in the Progressive era was to cut the number of working hours. For children. For women. Institute some kinds of restraints on the number of hours worked. I think we're going to see something comparable. Now the bad news, from my perspective anyway, is I don't know how successful that's going to be because the pressures in this global economy for commercial advantage and for competitive reasons are such that it's going to be very difficult for individual companies to feel as confident as they need to to make some of these trade-offs. And I think in many other societies the trade-offs are not going to be seen as important yet because of the economic pressures to just raise the standard of living. So I think you're going to see some real conflict around that. And I'm hoping that by using the bully pulpit and by examples such as his conference, at least the President is going to bring to the attention of other business leaders what is possible. What can be done right now to help ameliorate some of these time pressures. There are trends that you can read about, you know, more working at home and other things that I think are going to take some time to sort out. But I believe that this is one of the biggest problems. And it's not only a problem for children and family life. It's one of the overwhelming problems for civil society. How do you get people to participate with each other if they have no time?

I guess the final thing though that really does concern me, and I don't know any way to address that, is that the seductiveness of individualized media, like television and computers, is such that people get sucked out of interaction. We have many families where individuals are living in the same space and are never interacting with one another, except maybe through email. There are very few ways for people to have those human contacts. I think it's an even greater problem in the political arena, where you're going to see increasing pressures on television, cable, interactive, to be more and more stimulating, which will be more and more seductive, which will take up more and more of people's time, which will further separate them from other kinds of activities where they have to deal with people. Now my friends who are much greater fans of cyberspace than I am say, "Oh but that's what's so great about this; we'll be able to solve all of these problems on cyberspace. We'll have electronic town meetings and we'll make all these decisions!" I don't think that's going to work for a lot of the hard choices we face. I don't think we've evolved to the point where we can do all this anonymously, and I'm worried about that.

So I see trends going in both ways. But I think it's a major problem. For anyone who's concerned about community, how we deal with time has to be at the top of the list.

I'm going to confess, I'm looking for a woman's hand. (Laughter from audience.)

Question: (inaudible)

Answer: Well, I believe that intensity often gets disproportionate attention than the numbers represent. So if I were thinking about how to increase the support of and visibility of the programs like the ones you're involved in, I would redouble my efforts on things like phone calls and letters. I would enlist even more people. I would find unlikely allies, you know, the successful businessman who was a product of vocational education, who knows the local congressman. I would train people ... this is very old-fashioned, non-cyberspace kind of stuff... who were comfortable talking about these issues. I would have them show up everywhere your local congressman showed up. I'd have them asking questions about vocational education or whatever the issue was every time there was a town meeting, any time there was a radio call-in. I think a lot of that makes sense. And then for people who are into the world of computers and the rest, use that resource, because all congressional offices I think now get messages through computers as well as through what my daughter's friends call "snail mail," which I'm still very attached to.

So I think there are lots of things you could do to make a difference. But you have to be intense about it. And you have to see it as something that is competing for attention with thousands of other subjects. And it is I think unfortunately true that many of the other subjects it's competing with have many more people who are paid to be there all the time.

I remember when my husband introduced education reform in Arkansas in 1983. I had worked on the committee that had made the recommendations. And we had very positive support from all kinds of groups, from the PTA, and the League of Women Voters, and all different sorts of folks who had really studied it. But when the legislature opened those weren't the people walking the halls. It was a great lesson about how you try to get people who really will be committed to this to take it on and do it just as hard and often as they possibly can.

So I think you're doing what needs to be done, but I think you probably have to just increase the intensity of it and look for other allies and look for new ways of communicating. Yes.

Question: (inaudible)

Answer: Well I know that there are many educators and others who believe that. And I respect that, because I think that for many years schools were asked to do a lot of things that were very difficult for them to do. And their mission became quite garbled. And they were not sure how they were supposed to do anything very well because of the blizzard of expectations that was raining down upon them. And I think that for many veteran teachers it's kind of like, "This too shall pass." What's the latest fad, and all the rest of it. And I don't have any argument with that

because I think that there have been a lot of difficult times for teachers and for American education in the last 30 years.

But I guess I would say three things. First of all, it's almost impossible for me to imagine standing in front of a class of 25 or 30 kids teaching any course where there wasn't a chance, an opportunity, nearly every day, to say or do something about values and about character. I mean even if it's "Jack you were late today, it kind of disadvantages everybody else. We can't wait for you. I want you to think about that." Something as simple as that. So even if an academic teacher doesn't think about what he's doing in those terms, I bet if you were to engage in a conversation with him, he'd say, "Well is that what you mean? I do that. It may not be a set formula or curriculum, but yea, I'm doing that."

And I think the second thing is that most veteran teachers I know feel that the quality of life within most of their schools has deteriorated over the years. It has been more difficult to get what they believe is good, positive attitudes out of kids, cooperation out of faculty members. There's something about the community of the school itself that needs some shoring up. Most teachers recognize that. And having some uniform approach to character education is one way of doing it, which some schools are adopting. But even having the conversations about "what kind of community do we want?" And "how do we want to exhibit that to kids?" And "what am I willing to try to give to get back what I used to have?" This is not going to happen with everybody. Some people are just putting their time in and waiting for retirement, and looking for something else. That's human nature, that's not just in education, that's in every profession and walk of life.

But I have found, for example, in another charter school I'm aware of in Long Beach, California, they worked on a mission statement. What kind of school did they want? What kind of kids did they want to turn out? How do they want to be able to say they could recognize a student from that school because of certain traits or the way that kid behaved. That's how they came up with everything from uniform policy to service requirements and the like. So engaging a teacher on that level as well.

Then thirdly, I think when it comes to a formal character education curriculum it is going to take some "proof is in the pudding" for a lot of people to think it's real. Because when you think of all of the programs that have been touted, and all of the curricula that they've had to deal with, there's a natural and I think understandable skepticism. So showing some results from the kind of curriculum that is more substantive and is being implemented, as least in some aspects of the school experience, will bring around those who are willing to be brought around.

And then finally if a district or a school is set upon it, requiring it. That's why I like competition in public schools, and why I like charter schools, because I think you should

transfer people out and people should be encouraged to retire, and if they don't like what's going on because of the new mission of the school, they should opt out and go somewhere else. So you can create a community that does do for the kids what the teachers and parents in that community think should be done.

Question: (inaudible)

Answer: Well. (laughter) How old is he? Oh, that's great. Well, we might be able to work that out. What O would have to do is ... I'm leaving in the morning to go to, you don't want to know, Pittsburgh, Dallas, Orlando, St. Petersburg, things like that. Your name is Michelle? What I would like you to do Michelle is... I have some people here with me. Maybe just excuse yourself and walk up back there and one of the people here with me will talk with you and we'll see if we can get your number and everything and we'll see if we can work something out. OK? (applause) Yes, the woman in blue, yes?

Question: (inaudible)

Answer: I think that's something that all teachers should consider and ask about. And I think that there are a lot of people who can be pointed to and there are a lot of qualities of people that can be pointed to. I remember being in a group some years back of young men who were in kind of a diversionary program. They were not going to prison, but they had committed some minor crimes and people were attempting to work with them. And I was talking to the whole group, and this one young man just sat there with his arms crossed, and his hat on, and his head down, and he wasn't paying much attention. He was obviously not happy to be there. And he kind of interrupted and said, "You know, you can't give me any advice. You don't know what my life's been like. My life's been terrible. I don't even know who my father is, you know, I don't have any future." On and on and on. And I said, "Well, I don't know what your life is like, I don't know you. But there are many, many people who have overcome a lot of obstacles." I said, "My husband never knew his father. He could have decided..." (time lost -- turn over tape)

...Person, nearly anybody once they burst into public awareness at a certain level. It's going to be very difficult for kids not to get a mixed picture of these people, because that's the way we present them. I was talking to a friend of mine who said, "Just think of how depressing it would have been during the Depression if we'd had constant reports about President Roosevelt's paralysis or that he'd had a hard day, or he couldn't move." Instead he was our voice of hope, and nothing interfered with that picture in our minds.

Well today that's impossible. So part of what we have to do is tell people there isn't any perfect person. Nobody. People do the best they can. And we need to give each other more of a benefit

of the doubt. But we also need to look at how people deal with tough times and difficult circumstances and how they act: do they become bitter? Do they become mean? Do they become violent? do they become aggressive? Or do they try to solve problems, try to keep going? I think there are many, many examples. If you've got kids who are sports fans, we know Scotty Pippen, he's from Arkansas. He was a nobody player, from nowhere. He was a walk-on on a small team. And it was because of his persistence, not because anybody anointed him, that made him what he is, if that's the kind of the role model that you can talk to people about. But that characteristic of resilience, and confidence, and optimism, and empathy, those characteristics I think you can find many, many examples of. And there are many people in the current administration, I mean they come flooding into my mind. Anybody who sees Secretary Reich on television knows he's very, very short. Now that could have just ruined his life as a young boy growing up in the '50's and '60's in America. But because he had parents who invested in him and he was given chances to prove his other abilities, he kept going. He never gave up. I just think there are lots of ways to end this feeling that is fed in the country that nobody is any good, everybody isn't worthy of respect. I think there are literally tens of millions of people in America who are worthy of respect. They may not make the headlines on the TV, but they get up every day, they do the best they can, and we ought to be giving them more respect. And students ought to start thinking about people and the attributes they have that are worthy of respect. Because it is much easier for somebody to acquire an attribute by looking at another life than to be that person. And I think that is something that we have overlooked. We've kind of thrown the baby out with the bath: now that we know so much about everybody, and we know that everybody is a human being and they have strengths and weaknesses and flaws and imperfections, there's this kind of metaphorical throwing up of hands. But the real question is, what are the attributes? That's what character education is all about. Attributed we're trying to inculcate in young people. We don't say, "Go out and be fill-in-the-blank." We say, "Here are examples of people who have overcome obstacles and challenges in their lives. Now how did they do that? What were the circumstances, even when they had very little, that you can point to as setting up the environment where they should have been able to overcome that?"

So that's how I think we should start talking about it. And it's really in line with what you're doing by teaching character education. You know when somebody says to me, "Oh you're my role model," I think, "What does that mean?" Because by sheer genetics, there isn't anybody else who is going to have this mixture of genes and experience. But if it means maybe something I've done or I've said or some experience I've had can help somebody illuminate their own lives and figure out ways to solve their own problems, that's character building. And that's what I think we ought to be doing. And it's a tough battle because the push of the mass media is to personalize everything,

sensationalize everything, and essentially knock the props out from under the more difficult task of really talking about what it takes to be an integrated, whole person. And how do we get there. And that's why what I think you're doing is important because it's not to turn anybody into another person, it's to use examples from history, from religion, from literature, and from real life, to illuminate those character attributes that any of us can achieve. I will never be able to shoot a basket like Scotty Pippen. I will never, I hope, face a lot of the terrible deprivations that people whom I admire in the past have faced. But I can learn and I can try to apply those lessons to my own life. And that's what I wish children would be listening to and learning about, and what all of us as adults have an obligation to try to teach. Thank you all very much.