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CHILDREN'S HOME CONFERENCE

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THE WHITE HOUSE

Office of the Press Secretary

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REMARKS OF THE FIRST LADY
VIA SATELLITE TO CHILDREN NOW CONFERENCE,
VIA SATELLITE

Thank you all very much. I want to thank Dr. Kennedy and Mr. Steyer, for helping organize this conference and for inviting me to be a part of it.

It is an honor to speak to such this gathering that includes child advocates, academics, journalists, and educators, as Geoff already said. I know that many of you have traveled across the country to participate in the panels over the next few days, and I want to thank you for your willingness to tackle a subject as complicated, controversial and important as children and the news media. I'm only sorry I can't be there to join your discussions in person.

As you know so well, we live in an age of great promise -- and great peril -- for our children. While we have made considerable strides in improving the health, education, and job opportunities of our young people, our children continue to shoulder burdens never encountered by children in any other civilized society before this time.

To be sure, our children today have advantages that even those of us my age didn't know: things like computers and global information networks, in some ways a more united world, and the absence of Cold War tensions. But they also have disadvantages -- disadvantages that inject cynicism, anxiety, and fear into their young lives.

On the eve of the 21st century, American children are growing up in a world where competition for jobs is more intense than ever, where health care in our country is too costly, where college tuitions get higher and higher, and where poverty and neglect are increasing instead of decreasing.

And now, adding to those burdens, comes a plague of violence, both in reality and through the perceptions that

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are promoted by the media, that is claiming, in realistic terms, far too many lives, but is also engendering a climate of fear because of what children see and hear every day.

American children are immersed in a culture of violence. They see violence on television. They see violence in movie theaters. They see it on the streets where they live. They see it in their schools. They see it in their homes.

In too many neighborhoods, gunfire has become a daily ritual of life. An Uzi has become a badge of honor. A bullet wound has become an emblem of adulthood. Just this last week, on Monday, I was across the country, in New York, where I visited a very large hospital in Brooklyn, a hospital that treats gunshot wounds and knife wounds every hour.

And the doctors there told me that the most discouraging part of their work is that the age of the victims gets younger and younger, and that after they finish patching up a 13 or 14-year old from a gang shooting or a drive-by shooting, or a knife fight, they anticipate they will see that same young person in just a few months or years again.

In Washington, our nation's capital, a young four-year-old girl was shot in the head when young men opened fire on an elementary school playground as a crowd watched a pickup football game.

Last summer, again in Washington, gunshots rang out at a pool as children sought relief from 90-degree heat. A young mother is dragged by the side of her car during a car jacking that had the child in the car and the mother being killed trying to hang on to the car.

I could tell you many, many stories like that, but I think you know what happens every day in every neighborhood. This horrible chronicle of malicious violence goes on and on, every day and every week, every month, across the nation.

The reason we know about these tragic incidents -- the murders, the car jackings, the kidnappings, the beatings, the rapes -- is because the news media reports about them. And I'm sure that everyone in this audience today would agree that reporting about these sorts of incidents is part of the

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news media's job.

I think we all agree that the public needs to know about crime and violence. I'm sure that, to some degree, news coverage of crime has heightened public support for deterrents such as gun control. And it might also help this Administration and this President get a crime bill with real possible hope for change this year.

At the same time, we have to stop and ask ourselves some very important questions:

First, has the exhaustive -- and perhaps excessive -- coverage of violence contributed to increasing alienation and dysfunctional behavior on the part of our children and youth?

And second, does the news coverage engender so much cynicism and distrust among young people that they grow up with no faith in any of our institutions and little motivation to make something of their own lives?

These are questions I hope you will explore and that I think we must answer.

Over the past few years, a lot of attention has been paid to violence in movies and in television programming, and in the records that young people listen to. And on that score, things are beginning to improve. As the President said earlier this week, the entertainment industry has -- as a result of public concerns -- become much more involved in efforts to reduce violence in network programming. Their willingness to set up a voluntary monitoring system is a step in the right direction.

In the meantime, we're only now beginning to focus on the issue of violence and the news media, and it's a very tricky issue, given that information today comes from so many different sources -- newspapers, radio, local television, network television, television tabloids. This is an issue that must be addressed, even as we recognize that these different news media sometimes go about their jobs in different ways.

Just yesterday I read about the results of a new survey put out by the Center for Media and Public Affairs. It showed that network news coverage of murder and violence

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had doubled last year -- even though the nation's overall crime rate had remained the same.

Some of the coverage was a result of unusual cases, like the Branch Davidians, the World Trade Center bombing, the Menendez brothers' trial, the Polly Klass case, and the murders of tourists in Florida.

But what about the rest? Were the stories really newsworthy? Or were they part of a troubling pattern of sensationalism that threatens to desensitize viewers -- particularly children -- to the point where violence is considered a normal, accepted part of life?

Children Now's recent survey reports that young people are deeply affected by news stories they read or see on television. More than half the children surveyed said they felt angry or depressed after watching or reading the news. And about 60 percent of kids between the ages of 11 and 16 said the news too often conveyed negative images of young people.

The fact is that we all want to stop violence. We all want our children to experience their childhoods without being afraid, without being vulnerable, and without being insecure.

We want them to be able to be children -- to feel safe in school, to enjoy sports and recreation, to develop extracurricular interests, and to build healthy relationships.

But those kinds of positive childhood experiences seem less and less real to children who are routinely bombarded with words and pictures that seldom portray young people living that way. Saturating children with increasingly graphic and sensational stories of violence prevents them from developing the emotional and psychological tools they need to deal with violence.

One of the biggest dangers of excessive coverage of violence is that, in a child's eye, the stories validate, sometimes even glamorize, dysfunctional behavior. Violence becomes normal -- and, in an odd way, even painless. It becomes harder for a child to distinguish between fact and fiction. The latest drive-by shooting on the evening news looks a lot like the Terminator blowing his fictional enemy

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to bits on the movie screen.

The second danger of excessive coverage is that children become numbed -- or, as social scientists say, "desensitized" -- to violence. Children become so habituated to seeing and hearing about violence that shootings, beatings -- even death -- come to seem normal to them.

They develop an ironic detachment from life, a fatalism that prevents them from trusting anyone or anything. Recently I read a story about young children planning their own funerals. These children were so sure they were going to die violently that they had told their families what clothes they wanted to wear at their funerals, what music they wanted played, all with a casual detachment about what living and dying really means.

The third danger of excessive coverage of violence is that it exacerbates stereotypes. If African-American and Latino youth are usually portrayed on the news committing crimes, that stereotype is etched into the public consciousness. The same is true for women, who are often portrayed as victims.

Whether coverage of violence actually incites violent acts is one question we have to answer, and I know that researchers have debated it for years. Another equally important question is whether such coverage leaves us -- and particularly children -- with the impression that no one in our society ever does anything good or anything right.

For example, if children hear story after story about priests or clergy who molest children -- but never hear about those priests and clergy members who help children -- they are not likely to grow up trusting their churches. And yet, there are far more priests and ministers, and rabbis, in this country helping children than hurting them.

We need to ask ourselves whether some of our news coverage contributes to this lack of trust and whether it perpetuates a cynical detachment which, in turn, leads to abnormal behavior, including violence. Of course, I'm not suggesting that all news coverage of violence is bad or wrong, or that the media's treatment of violence alone accounts for our social ills. As I said earlier, the public has to be kept informed, including children.

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But I think there must be balance. Judgment must be exercised, and when it comes to children, prudence is certainly called for.

In past generations, children got most of their information about the outside world from their parents, their teachers, their church, their local youth organization, from intermediary adults. Today, children get most of their information from the media -- largely from television.

And frankly, children can't cope with much of what they see. Watching indiscriminate violence and sex does not strengthen a child's emotional, social or psychological development. Watching a daytime talk show about bestiality is neither educational nor informative to a small child -- nor, for that matter, I would argue, to an adult.

I know that journalists need to treat their subjects as objectively as they can. But I think that sometimes subjectivity, remembering what it's like to be a child, or be a parent raising children, is probably okay, too, as long as it's subjectivity grounded in values.

After all, we all rely on our personal experiences and feelings -- as mothers and fathers, as brothers and sisters, as daughters and sons -- to inform our judgments as professionals. And I think there are probably times when journalists should too, especially when it comes to children.

We shouldn't have to wait for the next national survey -- some objective, quantitative analysis -- to become aware of the fear that children feel when they are chronically exposed to violence on television, at the movie theater, or in their newspapers. Think about it. When you or I see violent images or read about violent acts taking place around us, we get scared. We get anxious. And we're supposedly adults. We could even put these events in context. Children, particularly small children, cannot.

When violence is newsworthy enough to be reported, it should be balanced with stories that provide children with positive images of themselves and those around them, particularly adults in authority. Journalists should work extremely hard to avoid exacerbating negative stereotypes. And they should work extremely hard not to contribute to what social scientists call the "mean world syndrome," where children become so self-critical that they take on the

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attributes of the negative world they see portrayed in the media.

After all, good judgment and caution, or prudence, do not violate the journalist's First Amendment rights. They do not deny the public their right to know. But good judgment and caution, and prudence do and can make a difference to children.

This is a debate that is long overdue. And perhaps we are having it now, in our country, because we are recognizing the unintended consequences of the explosion of information, the competition among news media outlets to try to get there first and be sensational enough to keep the audience looking.

We know that as we drive down a road where there is an accident, we can't help but turn our head and watch, and perhaps say to ourselves, thank goodness we're not among them. But a steady diet, every day, of that kind of sensational violence is not how any of us were raised or live our lives on a day-to-day basis.

And what we have to try to do is to create the sort of balance that we know is difficult but imperative if we expect our children to be given a fair shot at a childhood that allows them to develop emotionally and psychologically into adults that can be productive and deal with the world in all of its good and bad, in a constructive way.

Thank you all very much.

A PARTICIPANT: Mrs. Clinton, you've been kind enough to agree to stay for a while in the conversation, and I know you're used to cream-puff questions from journalists. We have five very positive role models here of young students who, in fact -- some of them are journalists -- who want to engage in a dialog with you, as well as asking some questions.

What I want -- I think you have some brief bios on them, but I'd like them each to introduce themselves and then to have them ask you a question or make an observation that might be helpful.

Luis, perhaps you could start.

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A PARTICIPANT: You want me to ask to ask the questions?

A PARTICIPANT: I want you to tell who you are. Introduce yourselves, and then we'll come back with questions.

MR. CRUZ: Okay. Hi. My name is Luis Cruz, and I'm 18 years old. I'm a freshman at the University of California, Berkeley, and I'm a reporter for Straight Talking Teens. You might have heard of us from Mrs. Gore, who was there, and so I just want to offer you an open invitation any time you're in town.

MRS. CLINTON: Thank you.

MS. BROWN: Hi. My name is Shawntee Brown I'm 10 years old.

MRS. CLINTON: Great.

MS. BEHR: Hi. My name is Madeleine Behr (phonetic). I'm 11 years old. I go to Wood School in Alameda, and I'm a reporter at Children's Express.

MRS. CLINTON: Great.

MS. STRASSBERG: Hi. My name is Suzanne Strassberg (phonetic). I am 12 years old, and I attend the seventh grade at California Junior High School, and I have won several Young Authors awards.

MRS. CLINTON: Good for you.

MS. CHANG: Hello. My name is Lydia Chang (phonetic). I'm the student body president of Leland (phonetic) High School. I'm also the California State Junior Miss. I'll be representing California in the America's Junior Miss competition, and I am a correspondent for CNN's Real News for Kids.

MRS. CLINTON: Good.

A PARTICIPANT: Lydia, why don't you start with the first --

MS. CHANG: Okay. Mrs. Clinton, your talks about

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cynicism, how seeing all this violence in the news presents stereotypes, negative stereotypes of a lot of people in society, not just young people -- I'm concerned that because these images are being presented, and they're at least distorted if not inaccurate images, that adults watching the news are also garnering images that are false of young people.

And I'm really concerned about people on Capitol Hill -- legislators, Mr. President, yourself, who are all policy makers -- and if you get these images and your opinions from watching the news, then perhaps they're inaccurate. And so I'm just wondering, where do you get your information about young people? Do you get them from the news? Do you think -- does it ever occur to you that some of those portrayals might be inaccurate?

MRS. CLINTON: Well, one thing that I can tell you is that my husband and I never watch the news. We consider that part of our mental health routine, and so we don't get our images about you or anybody from watching the news. We do it from actually interacting with people.

And my husband likes to spend lots of time with young people. We have many groups of young people coming into the White House. He goes out and visits young people in schools and other settings, and I do the same as often as possible. I really like to look at people face to face. I like to hear from them, like I'm hearing from you, because I think that your point is well taken.

There is a lot of fear among adults about children, particularly teenagers, because of the constant images of teenagers being threatening, particularly young men, particularly young black and Hispanic men. And I think that it does present a distorted view and makes it very difficult for individuals to be treated fairly and given the chance to be whom they are trying to be.

So it is important that you and other young people really keep insisting that you be seen as who you are and not filtered through some media image that stereotypes you along with other young people. And we'll do our part the best we can, in Washington, to try to make it clear that most American children and teenagers are good kids. They are working as hard as they can in school or on the job. They are responsible, they don't get in trouble, and they deserve

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to be treated with respect by the rest of us.

A PARTICIPANT: Suzanne?

MS. STRASSBERG: Okay. Well, my school is sort of in an upper class neighborhood, and there was a random shooting that occurred just recently, and -- sorry -- and it was covered on every news station in Sacramento. But I've noticed that if something like a random shooting happened in a sort of poor neighborhood, it's just counted as an everyday thing, like it happens every day. And what can we do to help people realize that shootings are an everyday thing everywhere?

MRS. CLINTON: Well, I think that part of what we have to do is recognize that violence is no respecter of anybody; anymore. You find it throughout our country, in rural areas as well as city areas.

And one of the things that the President has tried to do in this crime bill that I mentioned in my remarks, is to put more police on the streets, to try to come up with alternative punishments, to try to get guns out of the hands of criminals -- not just the Brady Bill, which actually went into effect this week, but try to ban some of the assault weapons and other things that kids get a hold of and use against one another. So there is at least some willingness now to recognize the problem.

It's not just somebody else's problem. It affects all of us. And so I think that once we are willing to say that, then we've got a chance to fix it. As long as it was somebody else's problem, you know, it only happened to a certain kind of people who lived in certain kinds of neighborhoods -- unfortunately there were too many Americans who were willing to ignore or deny what was happening.

Now, finally, we've got a President -- and I hope a majority of congress and the majority of the country -- who want to try to help everybody stop this epidemic of violence.

MS. BEHR: The media often covers stuff about adults without health coverage, but not usually do you hear stuff about homeless kids without education or health care. Do you think this is right? And what can we do to bring the subject up to the public?

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MRS. CLINTON: Let me make sure I heard you: what can we do to make sure that people know more about homeless kids -- who are homeless and without education?

MS. BEHR: About how that affects the need for health care -- health coverage, too.

MRS. CLINTON: Right. Well, that's one of the things we're trying to do with health care reform, is to make sure that every American and every child gets health coverage. Right now, you're right, that too many children don't have health insurance, either because their parents don't work for somebody who helps provide health care, or because they're not poor enough to qualify for government health care, or because they just get lost in the system, like some of the homeless children in shelters that I have visited or seen on the streets.

Under what the President is proposing, health care will be available to every American. It will no longer matter whether you work, or where you work, or if you've been sick. Everybody will get health care. That's particularly important for children, especially children like the ones you care about, who are in terrible situations right now without health care, and they deserve to have the same kind of health care I try to give to my daughter.

A PARTICIPANT: Were you asking the question, too, Madeleine, if there was more coverage -- about children and the problems that they have with health care -- would that help to affect the public debate on health care?

MRS. CLINTON: Oh, I think it would.

A PARTICIPANT: And how much of the coverage seems to -- of course, you don't watch the news, so you may not be a good witness on this. (Laughter.)

MRS. CLINTON: People tell me about it, though.

A PARTICIPANT: How much of the coverage has focused on children and their need for health care?

MRS. CLINTON: Well, you know, it's -- this is slightly, I guess, off the subject, but I think it's related in that part of what we need is a consistent discussion about important issues like violence or like health care. And too

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often the news media thinks if they've done it once, then they've done it, and they've got to move on to something else, and particularly with the debate over health care.

Most Americans are only now beginning to focus on health care, so they need constant information. And it may be boring to people who follow this closely or watch the news every night, but for most of the rest of us Americans, we want to see something covered over and over again, so we really do get information.

And her point about covering what happens to children, particularly children who are falling between the cracks, that are not getting health care, is something that I think we should have a lot of coverage about, because we are paying a very high price in both money terms and human terms because we don't take care of our children and give them decent health care.

A PARTICIPANT: Shontee, I know that much of what the First Lady said in her opening remarks about violence on television is part of what has concerned you. Do you want to maybe talk a little about your own feelings as well as asking her a question about it.

MS. BROWN: Okay. The way that I feel about violence, that kids -- kids of color is being portrayed by the media because if -- because if you go to (inaudible) to shoot -- to shoot up somebody, they won't -- they won't put that on the news. They'll put a white kid going on a rampage (inaudible) just shooting everybody. I think they -- the media -- is just judging on whites instead of blacks.

MRS. CLINTON: You know I think that the concerns that you express are ones that I really share with you, because we've got to get, in our country, to a point where we see individuals as individuals, not as members of groups. If someone does something wrong, that individual should be punished, and that individual should be held accountable.

But whether a person is black or white, that doesn't make any comment on everybody else who is black or white. We ought to just look at the individual behavior and try as hard as we can to eliminate, you know, racial and ethnic, and other kinds of stereotypes. And the news media needs to help us do that as best it can, because it has such influence over how people see the world. And I think you're

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right to be concerned.

A PARTICIPANT: Luis?

MR. CRUZ: Mrs. Clinton, I've noticed that there aren't too many good stories in the media about public education. How do you feel about that, and how do you feel about the fact that you seem to contribute to this perception by sending your kid to -- your daughter to a private school?

MRS. CLINTON: Well, I think that's a fair question, because all during the time that we lived in Arkansas, when my husband was the governor there, Chelsea always attended public school. And we worked very hard and believed very strongly in public school. And if her father were still the governor of Arkansas, or were not the President of the United States, she would still be in public school.

But we have, unfortunately, some special considerations having to do with security and some other things, that I wish we didn't have. I mean, I wish that we could still live like former presidents lived, who could walk out their front door and go for a walk, who didn't have to be surrounded by secret service people all the time, who didn't have to have their daughter surrounded by secret service.

But the world we're living in doesn't permit us to do that. So we had to make a decision based as parents because of her father's position. But I don't think you'll find any two people more committed to public education than we are, because it works. Again, here is an unfair characterization.

Most public education works for most kids. It doesn't work for every student, and we need to do better. But it is unfair to dismiss public education the way too many people do, when it is working. And you are a result, other people are a result of good public schools, and I think we ought to celebrate the successes.

We try to do something most other countries don't try to do, to educate all of our kids, no matter what language they speak, no matter what background they come from. And we ought to be proud of that.

A PARTICIPANT: If you have a couple of more

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minutes, I'd love to follow up with the students' feelings about some of the points you raised in your comments and maybe give you a chance to ask a question or two of them, if you'd like to.

MRS. CLINTON: They're telling, me, Geoff, that I've got about three or four more minutes, so I'd be glad to.

A PARTICIPANT: Okay. Madeleine, you told a story this morning about your father and television news, that I think might be interesting for the First Lady to hear.

MS. BEHR: Well, at my household my parents sometimes watch the news. We don't -- we don't watch it, like, daily, every night, but my dad usually doesn't like me watching the news because he knows that almost 100 of the things on it is violence, and he doesn't want me to go to sleep with bad nightmares, that I'm going to be kidnapped right out of my household or something like that. So he doesn't -- he doesn't really like me watching the news.

MRS. CLINTON: I can understand that. You know, one of the things that the news media cannot really deal with is the range of its audience -- who turns on the TV, who sits in front of it. But it is very clear to anyone who has studied it that children of a certain age and below take very literally what they see on the news. And there are just countless stories of children becoming very anxious and concerned about what they see, and thinking it was going to happen to them.

And it used to be possible, in previous times, and certainly before television was as pervasive as it is, to protect children of a certain age from that kind of information. You know, children -- when you're growing up, you have a lot of work to do. I mean, you know, babies have to learn to walk and talk, and then you've got to learn about how you write and you read, and you've got to figure out how the world works around you, like how you relate to the people in your family and everything.

I mean, I think a lot of adults forget what hard work it is to be growing up and to deal with the problems any child has to deal with. If you add on top of that a steady diet of violence that makes children feel frightened and scared, and anxious, it makes it more difficult for them to deal with what they have to do just as a daily part of

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growing up. Then you are interfering with what is or should be a kind of positive development in children's lives.

So I think your father and mother make a very good decision to try to at least act like the adults in your life, and protect you from being unnecessarily exposed to stuff that you can do nothing about, and that which only can make you anxious and block out your doing other things you should be doing and thinking about. So that's one of the problems we've got.

I mean, how do we let children be children, and grow up to be able to cope with all these things? If you get a steady diet of it too soon, it's like eating too much of anything. You get indigestion, and it interferes with your being able to deal with other problems. And I think that's happening with too many of our children.

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