HEALTH PROBLEMS OF CHILDREN AND THE
MORAL RESOLVE OF ADULTS

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Abstract

Children at Risk is a theme of modern American life, a set of claims that children’s
behavior in the areas of drug use, diet, and sex are not merely potential health threats
to some children but real pathologies to all. This essay argues that adults center our
health concerns around children’s behavioral problems because we are uncomfort-
able with our own appetites, and lack the moral resolve to decide if we must protect
children from them or teach them to deal with the world as it is. It demonstrates that
American children are generally healthy, and not much in peril from unmanageable
risks. It argues that adults’ insistence on childhood “innocence” deprives us of the
capacity to take a nuanced and realistic look at children’s activities, instead expressing
our moral irresolution. And it suggests that the lack of agreement over how children
should be involved in research on health problems is a particularly pressing area where
moral resolve is needed.

KEY WORDS: child health, risk behavior, ethics, moral education.

The risk to our children is a point of concern for many Americans. For instance, over a million websites turn up in a simple Google search on the phrase “children at risk,” and they belong not only to special-interest groups and health advocates, but also to federal agencies, nonprofit groups large and small, several state governments, quite a few universities, and some businesses. “Children at Risk” is the subject of hundreds of books currently in print, too, with medical, social, and religious themes. From the clamorous public discussion on the topic, it

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would seem that our kids are sick and dying, that America’s children have suddenly become vulnerable in unprecedented ways. In fact, though, America’s children are healthier than ever before. So how can we account for the widespread belief that children are at risk?

In this essay I argue that the health problems of children are, by and large, moral problems of adults. The rhetoric of Children at Risk arises from a failure in the moral realm, a flagging of what we might call moral resolve. And it is not risky behavior on the part of children that really underlies the claim that they are in danger, but rather moral irresolution on the part of adults—or, at least, adults’ incapacity to fix our regard on real-world circumstances that are morally challenging and then translate our sense of what is right into clear guidelines for judgment. Perhaps the world is too complex.

MORAL RESOLVE AND THE MEANING OF HEALTH

The matter of moral resolve in the realm of health will be difficult to assess, because today’s health dialogue seems to move ever further away from moral and spiritual analysis. More and more, at least in the U.S., we define medical problems as machine failures; mechanical faults in the clockwork of the organism, presumed to be fixable once the breakdown is properly described and its etiology traced. It is the reason a pediatrician now refers her patient to the pediatric cardiologist as soon as she hears an unusual heart sound (and why an adult’s general practitioner refers him to a specialist when she sees it is time for his next routine colonoscopy). This makes sense, because it is surely better to have technical procedures undertaken by the more advanced technician. In part, the apparent mechanization of health is a result of advances in technology which allow medical researchers to “see” our inner workings more clearly, down to the DNA in our cells.

But surely there’s another part. If we are perfectly honest, we admit that we, as a society, have chosen to hire people to see to our health and further chosen to alter the meaning of the term “care” to fit the mechanical maintenance and repair performed by the system we refer to as health care. Health care, by which we usually mean medical treatment, has departed from the locus of home and family—moved away, that is, from the places where caring is traditionally enacted. Therefore, the fixing of mechanical faults takes place in settings where the scrupulous attention of well-meaning strangers replaces the emotionally laden give-and-take of intimate dyads (mother-child, sibling-sibling, friend-friend,