
HILLARY RODHAM CLINTON

It Takes
a Village



AND
OTHER LESSONS
CHILDREN
TEACH
US

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*For the family that raised me,
the family I joined,
and the family we made.*



*Of course we need children! Adults need children
in their lives to listen to and care for, to keep
their imagination fresh and their hearts young
and to make the future a reality for
which they are willing to work.*

MARGARET MEAD



It Takes a Village

*We cannot live for ourselves alone. Our lives are connected by a
thousand invisible threads, and along these sympathetic fibers,
our actions run as causes and return to us as results.*

HERMAN MELVILLE

CHILDREN are not rugged individualists. They depend on the adults they know and on thousands more who make decisions every day that affect their well-being. All of us, whether we acknowledge it or not, are responsible for deciding whether our children are raised in a nation that doesn't just espouse family values but values families and children.

I have spent much of the past twenty-five years working to improve the lives of children. My work has taught me that they need more of our time, energy, and resources. But no experience brought home the lesson as vividly as becoming a mother myself.

When Chelsea Victoria Clinton lay in my arms for the first time, I was overwhelmed by the love and responsibility I felt for her. Despite all the books I had read, all the children I had studied and advocated for, nothing had prepared me for the sheer miracle of her being. For the first time, I understood the words of the writer Elizabeth Stone: "Making the decision to have a

child—it's wondrous. It is to decide forever to have your heart go walking around outside your body."

Bill and I had wanted to start a family immediately after we married, in 1975, but we were not having much luck. In 1979, we scheduled an appointment to visit a fertility clinic right after a long-awaited vacation. Lo and behold, I got pregnant during that vacation. (I have often remarked to my husband that we might have had more children if we had taken more vacations!)

Bill was then governor of Arkansas, and my pregnancy was so widely discussed I thought the entire state might show up for the delivery. A lot of folks did, although, as far as I know, no one took pictures, or I'm sure you would have seen them by now. Friends gave us helpful hints about how they had handled pregnancy and parenting. One of my favorites, from a burly ex-football player, was: "Think of a baby like a football, and hold it tight." We read the advice books and asked endless questions of doctors, midwives, and nurses.

I persuaded Bill to attend Lamaze classes, where he and the other first-time fathers-to-be sat silently, arms crossed defensively over their chests, trying to look as if they were somewhere else. Our instructor asked how many of them had ever baby-sat or held an infant or, heaven forbid, bathed or changed one. A few mumbled, but hardly any hands went up. Then the teacher asked how many were scared to death of being responsible for a baby. Nervous laughter erupted, and many arms flapped in the air. After that you couldn't keep them quiet!

Despite all our preparation, when I went into labor, three weeks early, I wasn't ready. Governor Bill Clinton, Lamaze list in hand, rushed about trying to help me pack. One of the items on the list was a small plastic bag

to be filled with ice for me to suck during labor. As I hobbled to the car, I saw someone loading a huge sack of ice into the trunk, and I remembered what a woman reportedly said as she was helped over the railing of the *Titanic*: "I rang for ice, but this is ridiculous!"

CHELSEA's birth transformed our lives, bringing us the greatest gift of joy—and humility—any parent could hope for. Like every child, Chelsea was her own person from the beginning. She arrived with a look of determination on her face that conveyed a focus and intensity we would come to know well. I prayed that I would be a good enough mother for her.

Every uncertainty and doubt I had was mixed with wonder and astonishment. I was beginning to discover for myself a timeless truth: Parenthood has the power to redefine every aspect of life—marriage, work, relationships with family and friends. Those helpless bundles of power and promise that come into our world show us our true selves—who we are, who we are not, who we wish we could be.

From the time I was a child myself, I loved being around children, looking into their faces or listening to the stories they told. Like many firstborn children, I learned to care for children by baby-sitting my two younger brothers. As a teenager, I baby-sat for other children too, and at thirteen I got my first "real" job, supervising children at a park on summer mornings. Through my church, I helped care for the children of migrant farmworkers while their parents labored in the fruit orchards and vegetable fields near my home.

In college, I tutored children, and later, in law school, I got permission to add an extra year to the regular curriculum to study child development. I wondered about children I passed on the streets, and I worried about their journeys to adulthood. As a law professor and a staff attorney at the Children's Defense Fund, as well as in my private practice, I saw firsthand the results of our failure to invest in children at the most critical stages of their lives. Too often, the best interests of children seemed not to be a priority on either individual or national agendas. The consequences are there for any of us to see: children's potential lost to spirit-crushing poverty, children's health lost to unaffordable care, children's hearts lost in divorce and custody fights, children's futures lost in an overburdened foster care system, children's lives lost to abuse and violence, our society lost to itself as we fail our children.

And then I had a child of my own to love, wonder at, and worry about. Like most mothers, I am the designated worrier in our family. When Chelsea arrived, I went from worrying only five days a week to worrying on weekends too. My biggest challenge was to quell my longing to protect my daughter from everybody and everything that might hurt or disappoint her. As any parent knows, that is mission impossible. Life is unpredictable—and a child's impulse toward independence ultimately too powerful.

At four, my daughter refused my request to wear a sweater on what seemed to me an unusually chilly summer day. "I don't feel cold, Mommy," she said. "Maybe you do, but I have a different thermometer." Chelsea speaks up when she thinks I have exceeded the acceptable maternal worry quotient. But, like many parents, I

feel there is much to worry about when it comes to raising children in America today.

Everywhere we look, children are under assault: from violence and neglect, from the breakup of families, from the temptations of alcohol, tobacco, sex, and drug abuse, from greed, materialism, and spiritual emptiness. These problems are not new, but in our time they have skyrocketed. Against this bleak backdrop, the struggle to raise strong children and to support families, emotionally as well as practically, has become more fierce. It is a struggle that has captured my heart, my mind, my life.

Parents bear the first and primary responsibility for their sons and daughters—to feed them, to sing them to sleep, to teach them to ride a bike, to encourage their talents, to help them develop spiritual lives, to make countless daily decisions that determine whom they have the potential to become. I was blessed with a hardworking father who put his family first and a mother who was devoted to me and my two younger brothers. But I was also blessed with caring neighbors, attentive doctors, challenging public schools, safe streets, and an economy that supported my father's job. Much of my family's good fortune was beyond my parents' direct control, but not beyond the control of other adults whose actions affected my life.

Children exist in the world as well as in the family. From the moment they are born, they depend on a host of other "grown-ups"—grandparents, neighbors, teachers, ministers, employers, political leaders, and untold others who touch their lives directly and indirectly. Adults police their streets, monitor the quality of their food, air, and water, produce the programs that appear on their televisions, run the businesses that employ their

parents, and write the laws that protect them. Each of us plays a part in every child's life: It takes a village to raise a child.

I chose that old African proverb to title this book because it offers a timeless reminder that children will thrive only if their families thrive and if the whole of society cares enough to provide for them. Soon after I began writing, a friend sent me the cartoon on this page, which I think about every time I hear someone say that children are not the responsibility of anyone outside their family.

The sage who first offered that proverb would undoubtedly be bewildered by what constitutes the modern village. In earlier times and places—and until recently in our own culture—the “village” meant an actual geographic place where individuals and families lived and worked together. To many people the word still conjures up a road sign that reads, “Hometown U.S.A., pop. 5,340,” followed by emblems of the local churches and civic clubs.

For most of us, though, the village doesn't look like that anymore. In fact, it's difficult to paint a picture of the modern village, so frantic and fragmented has much



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of our culture become. Extended families rarely live in the same town, let alone the same house. In many communities, crime and fear keep us behind locked doors. Where we used to chat with neighbors on stoops and porches, now we watch videos in our darkened living rooms. Instead of strolling down Main Street, we spend hours in automobiles and at anonymous shopping malls. We don't join civic associations, churches, unions, political parties, or even bowling leagues the way we used to.

The horizons of the contemporary village extend well beyond the town line. From the moment we are born, we are exposed to vast numbers of other people and influences through radio, television, newspapers, books, movies, computers, compact discs, cellular phones, and fax machines. Technology connects us to the impersonal global village it has created.

To many, this brave new world seems dehumanizing and inhospitable. It is not surprising, then, that there is a yearning for the “good old days” as a refuge from the problems of the present. But by turning away, we blind ourselves to the continuing, evolving presence of the village in our lives, and its critical importance for how we live together. The village can no longer be defined as a place on a map, or a list of people or organizations, but its essence remains the same: it is the network of values and relationships that support and affect our lives.

One of the honors of being First Lady is the opportunity I have to go out into the world and to see what individuals and communities are doing to help themselves and their children. I have had the privilege of talking with mothers, fathers, grandparents, civic clubs, Scout troops, PTAs, and church groups. From these many conversations, I know Americans everywhere are searching

for—and often finding—new ways to support one another.

Around the country, for example, neighborhoods organize to close down crack houses and protect children as they walk to school. Businesses adopt family-friendly policies, open child care centers, offer parent education and marriage counseling. Churches, synagogues, and other religious institutions expand their traditional activities to include everything from aerobics classes and recovery groups to intergenerational day care centers. Parent-teacher associations, once lagging in attendance, find new life in some school districts as the baby boomer generation flocks to back-to-school nights and volunteers time in the classroom. Even our technology offers us new ways of coming together, through radio talk shows, E-mail, and the Internet.

The networks of relationships we form and depend on are our modern-day villages, but they reach well beyond city limits. Many of them necessarily involve the whole nation. They are the basis for our “civil society,” a term social scientists use to describe the way we work together for common purposes. Whether we harness their potential for the greater good or allow ourselves to drift into alienation and divisiveness depends on the choices we make now.

We cannot move forward by looking to the past for easy solutions. Even if a golden age had existed, we could not simply graft it onto today’s busier, more impersonal and complicated world. Instead, our challenge is to arrive at a consensus of values and a common vision of what we can do today, individually and collectively, to build strong families and communities. Creating that consensus in a democracy depends on seriously considering other points

of view, resisting the lure of extremist rhetoric, and balancing individual rights and freedoms with personal responsibility and mutual obligations.

The true test of the consensus we build is how well we care for our children. For a child, the village must remain personal. Talking to a baby while changing a diaper, playing airplane to entice a toddler to accept a spoonful of food, tossing a ball back and forth with a teenager, are tasks that cannot be carried out in cyberspace. They require the presence of caring adults who are dedicated to children’s growth, nurturing, and well-being. What we do to participate in and support that network—from the way we care for our own children to the jobs we do, the causes we join, and the kinds of legislation we support—is mirrored every day in the experiences of America’s children. We can read our national character most plainly in the result.

How well we care for our own and other people’s children isn’t only a question of morality; our self-interest is at stake too. No family is immune to the influences of the larger society. No matter what my husband and I do to protect and prepare Chelsea, her future will be affected by how other children are being raised. I don’t want her to grow up in an America sharply divided by income, race, or religion. I’d like to minimize the odds of her suffering at the hands of someone who didn’t have enough love or discipline, opportunity or responsibility, as a child. I want her to believe, as her father and I did, that the American Dream is within reach of anyone willing to work hard and take responsibility. I want her to live in an America that is still strong and promising to its own citizens and lives up to its image throughout the world as a land of hope and opportunity.

I do not pretend to know how to nurture and protect every American child so that each one fully reaches his or her God-given potential. But I do know that we are not doing enough of what works. As of this writing, one in five children in America live in poverty; ten million children do not have private or public health care coverage; homicide and suicide kill almost seven thousand children every year; one in four of all children are born to unmarried mothers, many of whom are children themselves; and 135,000 children bring guns to school each day. Children in every social stratum suffer from abuse, neglect, and preventable emotional problems.

Even though our national rhetoric proclaims that children are our most important resource, we squander these precious lives as though they do not matter. Children's issues are seen as "soft," the province of soft-hearted people (usually women) at the margins of the larger economic and social problems confronting our country. These issues are not soft. They are hard—the hardest issues we face. They are intimately connected to the very essence of who we are and who we will become. Whether or not you are a parent, what happens to America's children affects your present and your future.

I WRITE these words looking out through the windows in the White House at the city of Washington in all its beauty and squalor, promise and despair. In the shadow of great power, so many feel powerless. These contradictions color my feelings when I think about my own child and all our children. My worry for these children has increased, but remarkably, so has my hope for their future.

We know much more now than we did even a few years ago about how the human brain develops and what children need from their environments to develop character, empathy, and intelligence. When we put this knowledge into practice, the results are astonishing. Also, because when I read, travel, and talk with people around the world, it is increasingly clear to me that nearly every problem children face today has been solved somewhere, by someone. And finally, because I sense a new willingness on the part of many parents and citizens to turn down the decibel level on our political conflicts and start paying attention to what works.

There's an old saying I love: You can't roll up your sleeves and get to work if you're still wringing your hands. So if you, like me, are worrying about our kids; if you, like me, have wondered how we can match our actions to our words, I'd like to share with you some of the convictions I've developed over a lifetime—not only as an advocate and a citizen but as a mother, daughter, sister, and wife—about what our children need from us and what we owe to them.

This book is not a memoir; thankfully, that will have to wait. Nor is it a textbook or an encyclopedia; it is not meant to be. It is a statement of my personal views, a reflection of my continuing meditation on children. Whether or not you agree with me, I hope it promotes an honest conversation among us.

This, then, is an invitation to a journey we can take together, as parents and as citizens of this country, united in the belief that children are what matter—more than the size of our bank accounts or the kinds of cars we drive. As Jackie Kennedy Onassis said, "If you bungle raising your children, I don't think whatever else you do

matters very much." That goes for each of us, whether or not we are parents—and for all of us, as a nation.

In the pages that follow, we will consider some of the implications of what is known about the emotional and cognitive development of children. We will explore both big and bite-sized ideas we can put to work in our homes, schools, hospitals, businesses, media, churches, and governments to do a better job raising our own children, even when the odds seem weighted against us. Above all, we will learn ways to come together as a village to support and strengthen one another's families and our own. Most of these lessons are simple, and some may seem self-evident. But it's apparent that many of us have yet to learn them or to apply them in our families and communities.

These lessons come from family, friends, and neighbors; from dedicated volunteers and professionals; and from the many men and women whose passion is to see the promise of children fulfilled. I wish I had the space to introduce more than a few of the many people whose determination to help children has touched me and to describe more than a fraction of the innovative ways in which our villages are working right now to improve the lives and futures of my child and all our children.

Some lessons come from countries I have had the opportunity to visit. The sight of baby carriages left unattended outside stores on the streets of Copenhagen said more to me about the safety of Danish babies than any research study could, and it made me long to know what the Danes and other cultures might teach us. As Eleanor Roosevelt said, "There is not one civilization, from the oldest to the very newest, from which we cannot learn."

Perhaps most important are the lessons I have learned

from my daughter and her friends and from children all over the world. Children have many lessons to share with us—lessons about what they need, what makes them happy, how they view the world. If we listen, we'll be able to hear them. This book is about the first and best lesson they have taught me: "It takes a village to raise a child."