

People often say that today's children are the future of our nation and our greatest resource. Although these sentiments may suggest that Americans value every child and support the well-being of all children, they do not translate into the health, safety, and overall well-being for all of America's children.

In 2015, more than 14.5 million children (19.7%) were living in poverty in the United States. Children under age 18 were only 23.1 percent of the population, but they represented 33.6 percent of those living in poverty (Kollar, Proctor, & Semega, 2016). One-third of the children in the United States live in homes where no parent has full-time, year-round employment (Casey Foundation, 2015). This is very troubling because poverty has a negative and long-lasting effect on children (Eaton, 2000; Engle & Black, 2008). In 2015, 5.3 percent of children in the United States under age 19 did not have any health coverage, and 7.5 percent of children living in poverty did not have health coverage (Barnett & Vornovitsky, 2016). In 2015, 4 million child abuse reports were made to state agencies, involving 7.2 million children, and an estimated 1,670 children died from abuse and neglect (Administration for Children and Families, 2017). Millions of children suffer from emotional and behavioral disorders, and many of them do not receive treatment for these problems (Health Resources and Services Administration, 2013). Suicide is the second leading cause of death, and homicide is the third leading cause of death among teens (Heron, 2016). These and other statistics cause many people to ask: What should be done about such significant and far-reaching problems? Who will advocate for this vulnerable population?

Although the statistics may be discouraging, they can be used to raise awareness and demonstrate the needs of children in the United States. Prior to the regular collection of data related to children, it was easy to overlook problems affecting youth. Children are unable to advocate for their own needs. Data on the current status of children in the United States provide social workers with the information they need to advocate on individual, community, and national levels for the well-being of children and their families. This knowledge frames interventions and makes it possible to work with children to improve their day-to-day living. Children are our future, and we are theirs.



EP 5a

The Importance of Theory

Regardless of the role a social worker maintains while intervening with children and families, such work must be based on sound social work theory. The history of child welfare practice clearly indicates that early work with children involved diverse and often opposing methods for effecting change. For example, children whose parents could not or would not care for them were placed in orphanages in some cases, and with substitute families in others. Similarly, there was controversy over how to handle problems of delinquency, such as running away, theft, or violence. Some people advocated separating children from their families so as to eliminate the negative effect of the family, whereas others believed that delinquent children needed a loving family environment in which to grow. Opposing theories continue to be debated. Should punitive measures be used to teach children how to behave, or will rehabilitation and retraining alter behavior (see Box 7.1)?

Box 7.1 What Do You Think?

Do you believe that the United States is a society that values children? Why?

Without theory that directs practice, social work would involve contradictory interventions based on opinion and anecdotal experience rather than consistent intervention established through research and collaboration. Therefore, a solid understanding of the theories that relate to work with children and families is required of social workers intervening in the lives of children and families.

Theories of Child Development



EP 6a, EP 8b

Many of the terms used when discussing social work practice with children are common ones; others are unique to professionals. The first period of life is generally referred to as **childhood**. Legally, **childhood is defined as a stage of life that begins at birth and ends at age 18**. In the United States, anyone under the age of 18 is considered to be legally dependent and is classified as a child.

The growth period of childhood involves several developmental stages. Understanding a child's social, cognitive, physical, and emotional development helps social workers understand what services are needed to best enhance the child's well-being. Theories of development are discussed later in this section.

Children in the United States are defined as being **vulnerable** to oppression and discrimination. In social work, **vulnerable populations are considered to need special attention and advocacy**. One of the cardinal values in social work is that social workers seek social justice by creating opportunities to overcome vulnerability.

Why are children so vulnerable? Children look to others to recognize their needs. They must rely on people outside of their population—namely, adults—to make their needs known to decision makers. For example, an infant failing to receive good medical care cannot make her concerns known. A seven-year-old is unlikely to tell the school principal that he or she is not receiving special education services to which the child is entitled. Because their cognitive and social functioning is not fully developed, children are reliant on people outside of their population to advocate for their needs. This dependence has led social workers to identify the population as vulnerable and to determine that children as a group are in need of advocacy on many levels.

A **family is a system of individuals who are interrelated and have significant relationships** (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2004). Although many families are related through heredity, that is not true of all families. There are many structural variations on family, and significant relationships that are not biological play an important role in a child's life and must