"When the Bough Breaks talks hard, practical sense ... and demands the attention of every intelligent citizen."—Washington Post Book World

WHEN THE BOUGH BREAKS

The Cost of Neglecting Our Children

SYLVIA ANN HEWLETT

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Sylvia Ann Hewlett


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Winner of the *Child* magazine Book Award for Excellence in Family Issues

"Hewlett's book is one of the most thoughtful and provocative analyses to come along about what is wrong with American policies toward families."—*Washington Post*

"A convincing and foreboding picture of this country's treatment of children."—*Boston Globe*

"Pick a page, any page, of this book and learn one grim fact after another to support Sylvia Ann Hewlett's thesis. . . . She demonstrates exhaustively that neglect is producing a generation unprepared to compete in today's global economy. . . . Mercifully, she [also] offers remedies."—*Baltimore Sun*

"A powerful, solidly documented study . . . citing stunning statistics."—*Publishers Weekly*

"A powerful, extensively researched and often shocking book that explores the plight of a vast number of our children today."
—*Library Journal*

"A searing critique of the American family, our corporate leaders and public officials. Much can be learned from this compelling, well-documented study."—*Kirkus Reviews*

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"Hewlett's moving description of the cost of neglecting our children can guide our nation to a better day, when we will all benefit from putting our children first."—Senator Bill Bradley

"Very accessible and utterly convincing. . . . In this landmark study, Hewlett takes a hard-eyed, bottom-line-oriented look at the increasingly fractured lives children are being forced to lead."—*Booklist*

"Hewlett has launched an all-out indictment of how we, as a society, fail to adequately care for our children, and warns that continued neglect will drag down the entire nation." —*Chicago Tribune*

"A hard-hitting, thought-provoking study on the way America provides for its children."—*Parenting* magazine

"As a society, we have children but are unwilling to provide for their futures. *When the Bough Breaks* is a good place to start to understand what is at stake and what should be done."—Lester C. Thurow, Dean, Alfred P. Sloan School of Management, M.I.T.

"This fine book provides a powerful examination of the many ways our public and private policies undermine the successful development and education of children. The conclusion is inescapable. Unless we invest more wisely in our children today, the nation's economic and social futures are in jeopardy."
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"If this powerful account of America's neglect of its children doesn't move us, then nothing will. *When the Bough Breaks* tells a shameful story. It must be read."
—Albert Shanker, President, American Federation of Teachers

For Shira, Lisa, David, and Adam, with love

Preface

This book has two roots.

My volunteer work with homeless children in New York City and Westchester County changed my consciousness in profound ways. Touching, holding, comforting these outcast kids as they dealt with their gratuitous agony ignited my anger and seared my soul as nothing else ever has. These children provided me with a reservoir of passion that fuels this book, and I am permanently in their debt.

A second inspiration flowed out of the business community. For several years in the mid-1980s, I was the executive director of the Economic Policy Council and headed up a study panel on how corporations might help bridge the work/family divide. During the life span of this project, I spent hundreds of hours pursuing reluctant business leaders, telling them over innumerable power breakfasts that they needed to get up to speed on work/family issues and put some support policies in

place. Mostly it was an exercise in rejection. Powerful executives just didn't get the connection. How could these "soft" women's issues be worthy of serious time or attention?

Then, in 1988, everything changed. Looming skill shortages and a prospective heavy reliance on women and minorities did wonders to concentrate the corporate mind. The number of companies interested in family supports quintupled overnight, and I got upgraded from breakfast to lunch. That was when I decided there was a need for this book. I wanted to push and prod our political leaders and have them shout from the rooftops the good news: in the 1990s, conscience and convenience will come together. As this century fades, doing what is right by our kids will also be good for the bottom line. The aching pain of our children might well be cured if only we can harness the energies of enlightened self-interest.

A word about what this book does and does not do. In the following pages, I look at the world from the child's point of view. My driving purpose is to chronicle the plight of America's children; to show how and why our attitudes and policies have tilted against young people; and to demonstrate why we must create conditions under which all children can flourish.

This book does not present the adult perspective. It does not seek to explore, for example, the complicated trade-offs women face between earning power and parenthood, nor does it analyze the special problems of the impoverished elderly. These issues are alluded to insofar as they intersect with the welfare of children, but they are not dealt with in their own right. Other books, including my 1986 book *A Lesser Life,* focus on these topics and give them central attention.

I make no apology for adopting the voice and vantage point of children. In 1991, they are the least heard and the most seriously disadvantaged group in our population. Besides, if

we continue to squander our children, we will incur huge costs in the quality and possibilities of our own adult lives. Child neglect diminishes our potential—and our humanity.

As is true of much of my recent writing, this book represents a coming together of the personal and the professional. It therefore gives me particular pleasure to acknowledge the extensive help I have received from family, friends, and colleagues.

My grestest debt is to my husband, Richard Weinert. I am grateful for his practical help with the "second shift," for the insight of his ideas and the clarity of his critical responses. But, most especially, I am grateful for his unfailing, loving support during the draining months I spent wrapped up in this book.

A special word of thanks is due to our children—Shira, Lisa, David, and Adam. Their generous love has buoyed my spirits and replenished my energies at critical junctures over the last three years. Together they have taught me much about joy, responsibility, and commitment, and much of the fierce attachment I feel to the themes of this book flows out of my love for them.

I am indebted to many others. My agent, Molly Friedrich, guided this book through its birth pangs with skill and judgment and continues to give me extravagant amounts of time and friendship. I am deeply grateful. My editor, Martin Kessler, carved out large chunks of his precious time to help shape the bones of this book. I thank him for challenging and honing my ideas and for sustaining me through the agonies of redrafting. Peggy Shiller provided invaluable research assistance throughout the life span of this project. She vested extraordinary, careful energy in this book and I give her my thanks. Phoebe Hoss, Linda Carbone, and Jen Fleissner at Basic Books contributed valuable editorial help, and Marthe

Abraham and Marie Sauveur Fils played critical roles on the home front. Few authors receive such generous support and I am extremely appreciative.

My largest intellectual debt is to David Blankenhorn, Jean Elshtain, Mary Ann Glendon, Rosabeth Kanter, Pete Peterson, David Popenoe, and Ed Zigler. In conversation and through their written works, they enriched and informed the arguments in this book and I am pleased to pay tribute to their scholarship. I would also like to thank Charles Perrow and Forrest Church for thoughtful comments on a draft of the book.

Maria and Roy Brown, Murray Cohen, Charles Frank, Loretta and Murray Haimes, Abby Hirsch, Peter and Kay Leslie, Janet Lever, Mary and Roger Mulvilhill, Madeleine and Pat Oden, René and John O'Leary, Silu and Marcello Olarte, Ernest and Rebekkah Remo, Eleanor Sebastian, Joan and Michael Spero, Thelma Weinert, and Marcia and David Welles gave generous amounts of support, advice, and affection. I thank them all.

I also wish to acknowledge all the experts I talked with. Scholars, business executives, journalists, government officials, labor leaders, and hundreds of parents around the country gave freely of their time and energy. I am particularly grateful to Ann Bedsole, Peter Bell, Andrée Aelion Brooks, Gretchen Buchenholz, John Buehrens, Dagmar Celeste, Lynette Friedrich Cofer, Candace de Russy, Frank Doyle, Vicki Ford, Dana Friedman, Geraldine Greene, David Gutmann, Sandra Hamburg, Bob Holland, Maisie Houghton, Alice Ilchman, Arlene Johnson, Kathy Lord, Nita Lowey, Marie Mackee, Ray Marshall, Sandra Maxwell, Jeanne North, Catherine O'Neill, Doug Phillips, Rennie Roberts, Rosalind Rosenberg, Carol Sanger, Ted Shatigan, Al Shanker, Jack Sheinkman, Ruth Spellman, Sandra Stingle, Art Strohmer, Claudia Wallis, and Barbara Whitehead.

Most of all I want to thank the kids I interviewed. Over the last three years I have criss-crossed the country from Tallahassee to Trenton, from Watts to White Plains, talking to and just being with children. In a profound sense they made this book possible and I am extremely grateful to them. Shira Weinert and Jenny Golden were particularly insightful and helped me conceptualize the problems of middle-class kids, and the homeless children at the Prince George Hotel in Manhattan and the Coachman Hotel in White Plains contributed significantly to my understanding of what it means to be young and poor in this society. Hundreds of children contributed their voices to this book. I cannot thank them all in person but I would like to pay tribute to the following young people: Irv Davis, Ivanne Deneroff, Jenny Fielding, Jonathan Hirsch, Erin Hollingsworth, Caitlin Johnson, Elizabeth Kunrath, Susan Lee, Margaret Munzer, Jenny Pommiss, Kaia Stern, Lisa Weinert, and Michael Welles.

Finally, my heartfelt thanks go to my mother, Jean Hewlett, and my late father, Vernon Anthony Hewlett. They gave their best energies to their six daughters and any perspective I have found is grounded in the family they created.

Bronxville, New York
February 1991

Rockabye baby, on the treetop
When the wind blows, the cradle will rock
When the bough breaks, the cradle will fall
And down will come baby, cradle and all.

About the Author

Sylvia Ann Hewlett is an economist and former director of the Economic Policy Council, a labor-management think tank. She is also the author of *A Lesser Life: The Myth of Women's Liberation in America* (1986). A consultant to major corporations, Hewlett lectures widely throughout the country and writes frequently for such publications as *Time, Family Circle,* the *New York Times,* and the *Harvard Business Review.*

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Prologue

Fractured Childhoods

Fatima, age six, sank her teeth into my upper arm. "Let go!" I said sharply, trying to stay calm. "That hurts." She peered up at me, her black button eyes bright and challenging. She bit down again, this time much harder. "Fatima," I said slowly and deliberately, "if you don't let go, I will never let you brush my hair again." The threat worked. Fatima slowly let go. She spent a minute looking with pride at the teeth marks and small drops of blood on my arm and then quickly snatched the brush from inside my purse, plunked her frail six-year-old body on my lap, and started to stroke my hair with care and tenderness.

We had known each other only an hour, but I already knew that Fatima loved brushing and braiding my hair. My first thought was that long, straight hair was different and therefore interesting to this small black child. But I soon realized that her fascination with the activity had much more to do with

Fatima's desperate need for any form of physical intimacy. Biting, braiding, pinching, and cuddling all helped fill the void in a way that games and storytelling didn't. And with Fatima's short attention span—she found it impossible to concentrate on Candy Land for longer than three minutes—playing board games was a painful business.

Ernie, the large, genial man who ran the services in the Prince George's ballroom for the Children's Aid Society, filled me in on the family background before I left the hotel that day.

Fatima had four siblings, two older, two younger. Between them these children had three fathers, none of them currently on the scene. According to Ernie, their mother, Regina, was "totally out of it." She spent most of her waking hours servicing her crack habit, "weighed at most ninety-five pounds, and jangled all over." The children rarely made it to school, as their mother had a hard time getting them down to the hotel lobby in time to catch the school bus. Instead, they spent their days drifting around the hallways of the hotel. The oldest, Tyrone, a boy of ten, already spent much of his time on the streets.

The Prince George Hotel, where Fatima lived, was, in 1988, a welfare hotel populated with some 800 homeless families.[1] Located on Madison Avenue at 28th Street in Manhattan amid quiet residential streets, publishing houses, and coffee shops, it was an oasis of noise and action in a genteel part of town. There was always plenty of commotion in front of the Prince George. Mothers and children hanging out, joking and bickering with one another. Toddlers in strollers, babies straddling most women's hips. Circling the edges were a few men, some of them sharply dressed. They seemed to be sizing up the women, hoping to strike a deal for either drugs or sex.