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0521828783 - The Failed Century of the Child: Governing America's Young in the Twentieth Century

Judith Sealander

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The Failed Century of the Child

Governing America's Young in the Twentieth Century

Between 1900 and 2000, an unprecedented American effort to use state regulation to guarantee health, opportunity, and security to the country's children failed to reach its goals. The achievements envisioned were enormously ambitious and reflected entrenched but self-contradictory values and Americans' inconsistent expectations of government. As such, a "failed" century deserves a mixture of rebuke and cautious admiration.

Starting with the young, American public policy transformed individuals into strings of measurable characteristics. People became statistics, and if society could just get the measurements right, social policy said, progress would be possible. But children proved hard to quantify. Policies based in optimistic faith in the powers of applied scientific truth revealed perils implicit in acceptance of poorly understood social science paradigms. Definitions changed, as psychology or sociological or statistical theory changed, and good intentions foundered, as experts fiercely challenged each other's conclusions and public policies sought to respond.

Judith Sealander is Professor of History at Bowling Green State University. Her previous books include *As Minority Becomes Majority: Federal Reaction to the Phenomenon of Women in the Work Force* (1983); *"Grand Plans": Business Progressivism and Social Change* (1989); *Women of Valor: The Struggle Against the Great Depression* (1990), coauthored with Bernard Sternsher; and *Private Wealth and Public Life: Foundation Philanthropy and the Re-shaping of American Social Policy* (1997), which won the 1998 Ohio Academy of History Book Prize. She is the recipient of numerous teaching awards and research fellowships from the National Endowment for the Humanities, the American Association of Colleges, the Rockefeller Archive Center, and the Indiana University Center for the Study of Philanthropy.

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For Fuji Kawashima

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Acknowledgments

Oscar Wilde once remarked, “When people talk to us of others they are usually dull. When they talk to us of themselves, they are nearly always interesting . . . if one could shut them up.” I hope I avoid the former sin here, since the people of whom I wish to talk have made the journey toward completion of this book so satisfying.

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