



Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri

NATIONAL BIOETHICS COMMITTEE

CHILDHOOD AND THE ENVIRONMENT

(17th July 1997)

abstract

This opinion analyses childhood not as a stage in human development that is waiting for adulthood but as a special category. 'Childhood bioethics' is not held, through approximation, to be analogous to 'adult bioethics' but is explored taking into account its specific features and issues.

The NCB emphasises the responsibility that adults have towards the environment so as to make it suitable to the health of children who are seen as weak and vulnerable subjects. The environment includes not only the physical, chemical, biological and material aspects but also the socio-cultural dimension. Stress is laid on the need to create environmental conditions that do not compromise the physical-mental and social conditions of children so as to protect them against risks and assure conditions for the protection of their lives and health.

This document analyses the incidence of genetic and epigenetic factors during the first stages of (prenatal and postnatal) individual development, bringing out the determining role of the environment in the modulation of hereditary characteristics, albeit within limits imposed by nature itself. It is held to be incumbent upon parents and society to assure the best environment as early as during the stage of prenatal development. The polluting factors are manifold and it is difficult to carry out an analysis of the incidence of each one of them, because of interactions as well: this opinion stresses the particular importance of the control of 'air-borne contaminating' and alimentary factors.

The document includes in the notion of 'the environment' also the family and schools inasmuch as they are places for relational activity that fosters a growth of a sense of responsibility. Biological aspects and the family-social context are closely interconnected in the analysis of the protection of childhood. It is argued that one must avoid 'pedagogic risk' through a suitable education of families, educators and those who work with children in order to construct a suitable 'culture of childhood'. Particular attention is paid to the situation of disabled children for whom should be created an environment that appreciates personal resources, accepting their limits. The subject of inequality and the abuse of children – both the problem of physical abuse and the problem of mental and sexual abuse – is also addressed.

Lastly, this opinion analyses the legal instruments for a suitable protection of minors, expressing the hope that they will be listened to more and that there will be a grading of their ability to act, according to their level of maturity, in order to adapt the obligation to engage in protection to the right of self-determination.