

PHOTOCOPY
PRESERVATION

227TH STORY of Level 1 printed in FULL format.

Copyright 1997 Newsweek
Newsweek

May, 1997 (Spring/Summer, Special Edition), UNITED STATES
EDITION

SECTION: SPECIAL ISSUE; Your Child's World; Pg. 94

LENGTH: 1017 words

HEADLINE: DOING THE BEST FOR OUR KIDS

BYLINE: HILLARY RODHAM CLINTON

HIGHLIGHT:

The First Lady calls for Americans to work together and give parents the tools they need to raise their children -- and provide them with a lifetime of learning

BODY:

SOMETIMES IT SEEMS THAT TIME HASN'T always been an ally to us parents. As Bill and I have discovered at every birthday and every milestone in our daughter Chelsea's life, months and years fly much faster than we ever want. Like other parents bracing themselves for a child's departure for college, we ask ourselves every day: "How did the baby we brought home from the hospital grow up so fast?" "Is there any way we can move the White House to her college campus?"

Of course, we know that Chelsea is ready to begin a new phase of her life and that college will be a great experience. But it still doesn't keep us from reviewing the past 17 years and wondering if we've made the most of every minute to prepare her for the challenges of adulthood.

As science is now telling us, some of the most important preparation we can give our children takes place during the earliest years of life. New research has confirmed what many parents have known instinctively: infants begin learning the minute they are born. They are acutely aware of their surroundings and their brains crave and absorb all sorts of stimulation. Recently we have learned that the combination of intellectual and emotional interactions with infants and toddlers -- holding a child in your lap while reading a story, for example -- is crucial to their learning and emotional development.

Although Bill and I didn't realize it at the time, the countless hours we spent cuddling with Chelsea and reading her favorite stories not only strengthened our relationship with her but literally helped her brain grow.

Unfortunately, too many children are still missing this early stimulation. Just half of all infants and toddlers in our country are routinely read to by their parents. Over the years I have met parents who tell me they never really talk to their babies because babies can't understand what they are saying. I've also met parents who thought that they couldn't read well enough themselves to read to a child.

We must help parents understand that, no matter their educational level or reading ability, they can stimulate their children's cognitive and emotional development by talking to and reading to their children, even if they stumble over a few words here and there. Most likely, their children won't even notice. But they will notice the power of reading and the books to take them on fascinating adventures and introduce them to the world of words and ideas. And just as important, they will notice the time a parent has set aside to be with them, to hold them close and to share in a nurturing activity.

Earlier this year, I announced a nationwide effort to encourage early reading in homes across our country. I believe that few efforts can make a more dramatic difference over the next 10 years than to persuade parents of all educational and economic backgrounds to take this mission of reading, talking -- and even singing -- to babies more seriously.

At the same time, parents shouldn't go overboard. A friend of mine told me that he became so obsessed with making sure that he and his son finished reading two books a day that he rarely stopped for questions or allowed his son to look closely at the pictures. And mothers and fathers don't need to feel that they have to rush out and read the latest scientific paper on human brain development for exact instructions on how to interact with their children.

The point is that learning is a lifelong proposition -- one that, in the best of worlds, begins at the earliest stages and continues for years. Yes, the first three years of life are crucial, but they are not the only time that parents need to be engaged with their children or help them develop the skills they need to progress in the world. We should not use this new research to ignore the learning needs of older children and adults. I thought about this recently when I visited Robben Island in South Africa, the prison where Nelson Mandela and other political prisoners were jailed for many years. While doing hard labor in a nearby limestone quarry, literate prisoners taught their fellow inmates to read by writing letters and words in the dust with their shovels and picks. One prisoner who learned to read that way went on to educate himself and now is a top official in the South African government.

My greatest hope is that we can find effective ways to apply the knowledge we are gaining from science and make it more easily available to parents. It seems as if every day more new information is piled on top of what already exists about how our children develop and what they need most to grow. And yet many parents lack access to this research and others aren't sure how to interpret it. What little information they do get comes in bits and pieces, with little guidance about how to apply it to benefit their children. This month, the president and I are convening a first-ever White House Conference on Early Childhood Development and Learning. Our aim is to bring together parents, scientists, policymakers, educators, business leaders and child-care providers to discuss the new research on the brain and early-childhood development and explore how we can deliver this information to more homes.

Many things can conspire against parents as they try to provide children with the attention and stimulation they need to develop. Parents are often stretched for time and resources, and can use all the help they can get.

As I've been saying for years, it does take a village to raise a child. That's why we can all work together to make sure parents have the tools they

need to raise their children -- whether it is providing information about the importance of reading and talking to children in the early years, strengthening prenatal care, expanding Head Start or ensuring access to affordable, high-quality child care.

Our children have so much potential to grow and thrive throughout their childhood. Wherever there is patience, love and commitment, the window of opportunity for raising a healthy, happy and well-adjusted child never closes.

GRAPHIC: Picture, Reading to patients at a Kansas City, Mo., hospital, NICOLE BENGIVENO -- MATRIX

LANGUAGE: ENGLISH

LOAD-DATE: May 21, 1997