

4/17/97 WH Conference Early
Childhood Dev'p

**PHOTOCOPY
PRESERVATION**

THE WHITE HOUSE

Office of the Press Secretary

For Immediate Release

April 17, 1997

REMARKS BY THE FIRST LADY
AT THE WHITE HOUSE CONFERENCE
ON EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT AND LEARNING

The East Room

4:54 P.M. EDT

MRS. CLINTON: Well, that was a wonderful way to end this remarkable day. I want to thank everyone who participated in the panels this morning and this afternoon. I want to thank all of you who were here as members of the audience, both here in the East Room and in the Old Executive Office Building and out around the country.

When Rob was talking about his commitment to these issues of 20, 25 years, I couldn't help but look out and see Bernice and Barry and Ed Zigler and think it's about 50 or 60 years for some of the people in this audience. (Laughter.) And we are grateful for that pioneering commitment and work that you have brought to this issue. And we are finally catching up to what you have been advocating for a very long time.

Now it's time for us to leave this table and consider all of the ways that each of us can carry on the mission of enhancing the development of our children. Many of you are on the front lines doing that every day. On this panel, we have Harriet Meyer, and we have Sheila Amaning, and we have Chief Wearing, and we have Gloria Rodriguez who are out there day in and day out working with children and families. And those are the people that the rest of us have to support because, for all of the concern and caring that we may bring to this issue, it is these people and the people they work with who will actually be in those homes putting together those programs, making those connections.

And we also, I think, are blessed to have with us today business leaders like Mr. Langbo who understand that there really isn't any more important bottom line than what we do as parents of our own children and what we do as citizens of our society to enhance the potential of all children as future citizens and as future employees. And that kind of enlightened leadership and enlightened self-interest is critical to how we see the next steps in this effort to bring attention to this important set of issues, and then to act on what we now know.

We're also blessed to have public officials here, starting with the Vice President and Mrs. Gore and Governor Miller and Governor Chiles, and we have members of Congress and members of the Cabinet who also appreciate the significance of this new information. And I hope that we will be able to think of good arguments and effective ways of communicating why this is important and why it should go far beyond partisan politics and become an American issue, not an issue of any political party or ideology, as to how we try to enhance the raising of our children.

And then we have members of the media who we are all reliant upon to convey this information not just for a week, not just for one show, but as Rob has eloquently expressed, to really make it an ongoing commitment. I said this morning that there are people in the world who ask, how are the children, and all of us, I hope, will begin asking that as well, because we have so many opportunities now. As Governor Chiles said at lunch, the information and research that science is giving us provides a hook that we have not had before. And it is up to us to figure out ways of using that in our respective positions.

I hope that this conference has laid the groundwork for all of us coming together to be more committed and more effective in that commitment on behalf of American children. I thank all of you for being part of what I hope will be looked back on as a part of a historic moment that involves the research that has been done, the dissemination and communication of it, and then the follow-up. And I thank you all and invite you to join us and others who will be arriving at a reception in the tent in the back yard.

And, really, I hope you will go away from this event at the White House as inspired and fired up as Rob Reiner is. (Laughter.) Thank you all very much. (Applause.)

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The East Room

10:45 A.M. EDT

MRS. CLINTON: Please be seated. Welcome to the White House and to this very special White House Conference on Early Childhood Development and Learning. We are delighted that you can join us today not only here in the East Room, but I want to give a special welcome to the thousands of people who are joining this conference via satellite from universities, hospitals and schools around the country. There are nearly 100 sites in 37 states.

Now, at first glance, it may seem odd to hold a conference here at the White House devoted to talking about baby talk. But that discussion has never been more important, because science, as we will hear from the experts who are with us today, has now confirmed what many parents have instinctively known all along, that the song a father sings to his child in the morning, or a story that a mother reads to her child before bed help lay the foundation for a child's life, and in turn, for our nation's future.

So the President has convened this conference with a clear mission: to give the leading experts in the field of early childhood development, the scientists and pediatricians, the researchers and all of the others, the opportunity to explain their discoveries and to put this invaluable body of knowledge at the service of America's families.

But this is not just for America's families. This information is crucial for anyone in the position of leaving an impression on a young child's growing mind -- day-care workers, teachers, doctors and nurses, television writers and producers, business leaders, government policy-makers, all of us.

It is astonishing what we now know about the young brain and about how children develop. Just how far we have come is chronicled in a report being issued today by the Families and Work Institute, entitled, "Rethinking the Brain."

Fifteen years ago, we thought that a baby's brain structure was virtually complete at birth. Now, we understand that it is a work in progress, and that everything we do with a child has some kind of potential physical influence on that rapidly-forming brain.

A child's earliest experiences, their relationships with parents and care-givers, the sights and sounds and smells and feelings they encounter, the challenges they meet determine how their brains are wired. And that brain shapes itself through repeated experiences. The more something is repeated, the stronger the neuro-circuitry becomes, and those connections, in turn, can be permanent. In this way, the seemingly trivial events of our earliest months that we cannot even later recall -- hearing a song, getting a hug after falling down, knowing when to expect a smile -- those are anything but trivial.

And as we now know, for the first three years of their life, so much is happening in the baby's brain. They will learn to soothe themselves when they're upset, to empathize to get along. These experiences can determine whether children will grow up to be peaceful or violent citizens, focused or undisciplined workers, attentive or detached parents themselves.

We now have reached the point of understanding that a child's mind and a child's body must be nourished. During the first part of the 20th century, science built a strong foundation for the physical health of our children -- clean water and safe food, vaccines for preventable diseases, a knowledge of nutrition, a score of other remarkable other lifesaving achievements. The last years of this century are yielding similar breakthroughs for the brain. We are completing the job of primary prevention, and coming closer to the day when we should be able to ensure the well-being of children in every domain -- physical, social, intellectual, and emotional.

I have very high hopes not only for this conference, but for what I hope will come from it. But there are, however, two things I hope this conference will not do. The first is I hope this information will not burden or overwhelm parents. Parenting is the hardest job in the world, and the information we offer today is meant to help parents, not to make them anxious or imprison them in a set of rules. If you forget to read to your child one night, please, that's okay. (Laughter.)

Think of this conference as a map. And like any good map, it shows you a lot of different ways to get where you need to go. Many American parents have been asking for just such a map. A new survey, "From Zero to Three," the National Center for Infants, Toddlers and Families shows a real hunger on the part of parents for knowledge on how they can play a positive role in their child's early development. And I hope this conference in one of the ways we answer that call.

The second thing I hope does not happen is to create the impression that once a child's third birthday rolls around, the important work is over. The early years are not the only years. The brain is the last organ to become fully mature anatomically. Neurological circuitry for many emotions isn't completed until a child reaches 15. So there is always room for appropriate stimulation, loving and nurturing care by adults who are invested in a child.

There's always something that concerned adults can do.

And that has special relevance for adoption. Adoptive parents can make an enormous difference for a child at any time, and especially for older children.

That said, here is what I hope the conference will accomplish. I hope it will get across the revolutionary idea that the activities that are the easiest, cheapest and most fun to do with your child are also the best for his or her development -- singing, playing games, reading, story-telling, just talking and listening. Some of my best memories are reading to our daughter, even if I fell asleep in the nine hundredth reading of "Goodnight, Moon." But reading to her when she was young was a joy for Bill and me, and we think also a joy for her. But we had no idea 15, 16, 17 years ago that what we were doing was literally turning on the power in her brain, firing up the connections that would enable her to speak and read at as high a level as she possibly could reach.

I hope that the science presented in this conference will drive home a simple message, one supported in great detail by a report being issued today by the President's Council of Economic Advisors. If we, as a nation, commit ourselves now to modest investments in the sound development of our children, including especially our very youngest children, we will lay the groundwork for an American future with increased prosperity, better health, fewer social ills and ever greater opportunities for our citizens to lead fulfilling lives in a strong country in the next century.

There's a quote I particularly like from the Chilean poet, Gabriela Mistral, that reminds us, "Many things we need can wait; the child cannot. Now is the time his bones are being formed, his blood being made, his mind being developed. To him, we cannot say, tomorrow. His name is today." We have known this instinctively, even poetically; now we know it scientifically.

And I'm pleased to introduce someone who has been saying this and practicing it for a long time -- maybe not in poetry, but certainly in the countless stories and books and songs that he has shared not only with our daughter, but with our nephews and, really, any small child who ever crosses his path. As the President of the United States and as a father, he has acted on these beliefs, putting the well-being of children at the very center of national policy. So it pleases me greatly to introduce my fellow reader of "Good Night, Moon," the President, Bill Clinton. (Applause.)

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