

Child Development Event  
Georgetown Univ. Medical  
Center 1/10/97

**PHOTOCOPY  
PRESERVATION**

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REMARKS BY THE FIRST LADY  
AT CHILD DEVELOPMENT EVENT

Georgetown University Medical Center  
Washington, D.C.

MRS. CLINTON: Thank you. I am so pleased to see all of you here and I'm delighted to be back at Georgetown Medical Center, where I have visited before, because I think that the work that is being done here and the announcement today is among the most important efforts that are going on right now in our Capital City, because if we were able to make it clear to every parent in Washington, D.C. and beyond that reading to one's child between birth and three is one of the most important jobs that a parent can do, I think we would all see remarkable progress being made in school readiness, in school performance, in relationships between parents and children.

I want to thank Dr. Rennart (phonetic) for his remarks and for his leadership as the Professor and Chair of the Department of Pediatrics. I want to ask Dr. Battle to convey to the Academy of Pediatrics our deep appreciation because of their support of this effort and so many other good works that the Academy does on behalf of children. I also want to acknowledge a few other people who are in the audience.

I want to acknowledge my friend, Leo Donovan, the President of Georgetown who has been very supportive of efforts concerning education and literacy not only here at the university, but around Washington.

I also want to thank Jules Stoddard, who is representing the Association of Book Sellers for Children and is the owner of the Cheshire Cat Bookstore in Washington, D.C., one of the nation's oldest children's bookstores.

In my book, *It Takes a Village*, I mention the Association's program called "The Most Important Twenty Minutes of Your Day -- Read With a Child." I think for many people that was originally thought to refer to older children -- children in

kindergarten or even grade school. What we are trying to do and what the Association for Book Sellers is attempting to do is to convey clearly the message that we want reading to children to start at birth, but particularly during those first three years of life.

I also want to acknowledge and thank Steven Herb (phonetic) and Susan Roman, president and executive director respectively of the Association for Library Services to Children, a division of the American Library Association. I also mentioned their national demonstration program in my book, "Born To Read," and actually contributed some of the book proceeds recently to that, because this three-year national demonstration project, which builds partnerships between libraries and health care providers such as Dr. Rennart and Dr. Battle, is helping low-income parents and others with poor literacy skills to understand the importance of reading to their children.

And finally, I want to thank Dr. Tina Cheng and Dr. Sandra Kuzi (phonetic) who are part of "Reach Out and Read" here in Washington. This is a program that inspired me greatly when I first heard about it, and I know Dr. Kuzi has just this week received a \$3,000 grant to buy books to start "Reach Out and Read" at Washington Children's Medical Center. This is a program that really exemplifies what we are talking about here today.

We know, and as Dr. Battle said, that most parents come into contact with a pediatrician -- they may not take their child to a library, they may not take that child to a preschool program until the child is over three, but they will in all likelihood come into contact with a health care provider. If that doctor or nurse who is administering the well-baby checkup or the vaccination will prescribe reading, and then take it a step further -- not merely prescribe reading, but hand that parent and child a book, we know that in most cases the parents will try to follow through on the doctor's prescription.

So that is what we are kicking off here, and so many groups have come together to be part of this.

I'm also pleased to be here today and to be in the company of a very special guest. Yesterday the President honored some of America's finest artists, writers, and thinkers with the National Medal of Arts and the Charles Frankel Prizes. One of them, Maurice Sendak, rearranged his busy schedule so that he could stay one more day and meet with some of Washington's youngest citizens,

which we will do after this presentation.

As many of you know who have read to your children, as my husband and I have, Maurice Sendak is one of our country's most beloved authors and illustrators of children's books. His stories and characters have captured and stimulated the imaginations of generations of children and, as my husband said yesterday, imaginations of countless parents as well.

When Chelsea was little, Bill and I would take turns reading "Where The Wild Things Are," and many of Mr. Sendak's other stories as well. Soon she was able to read along with us, and before long, she was able to read that story to others on her own. Like many parents, we owe Mr. Sendak a debt of gratitude for helping us to spur our daughter's imagination and reading skills. And later some of the children here at the Medical Center will have a chance to hear him do it in person.

I'm also grateful to his publisher, Harper Collins, for donating 75 of his books to the Medical Center, and I would hope other publishers of children's books would join hands with the pediatricians around our country to do the same.

I want to emphasize just a few points that Dr. Rennart and Dr. Battle made, because I noticed some quizzical looks in the eyes of some of the people who are here covering this event. We have known for a long time that reading to children is a nice thing to do. It is a way to create a quiet time between an adult and a child. We have even known that, because of recent research, reading in those early years does lay the groundwork for vocabulary and later reading success. What we have not known until recently -- and because of advances in neurobiology and other medical sciences, we now do know -- is that talking with one's child in those first three years and reading to that child actually helps make the brain grow.

Now, I want to emphasize that because it sounds almost hard to believe. But we now understand that as Dr. Rennart was explaining, that the connections between brain cells and the opportunities for the brain to do more complex work are enhanced because of time spent talking with and reading to very young children.

Now, there are many people, and we all know them, who think that children really don't learn much until they can learn to talk. Well, in fact, the work that is being done in the brain of a

child from birth to three is so profoundly significant that if we do not recognize its importance, then we will not have helped that child develop to his or her fullest potential. The earlier we expose our children to hearing stories and listening to adults talk, the better off they are.

And I want to add that the evidence so far shows the television is not substitute. The words that have come across the television screen do not have the same effect on creating that growth in a child's awareness that reading to a child and talking to a child, person to person, does. So you cannot make up for this by putting the child in front of the television set and expect that child to have the same opportunities that reading and talking provide.

We feel so strongly about this that it is one of the reasons the President is accelerating the administration's efforts to strengthen early education and raise awareness about the importance of developing children's brains in the first years of life. There will be a number of programs in these next few months that we hope will bring to broader public attention what scientists now know about brain development.

Many parents, I think, will be very surprised when they see some of the television specials, some of the magazine specials that will be coming out in the next several months, because for me as well as for many others of my generation, this is all new.

The President is challenging Americans to become involved in helping children to read on their own by third grade. But in order for that to be successful we not only need to mentor and help our children and our teachers in schools, we need to help parents know that they are a child's first teacher.

Over the years I have met many parents who told me they never really talked to their babies because they didn't think that it made any difference. I remember the first time this happened, and I recounted in my book when I was making conversation with a group of women with some toddlers. And I said, you must be having a great time reading and talking to your babies. And they looked at me with such quizzical looks because they said, why would we do that, they can't talk back. So from that point, I have made it my mission, when I see young parents with babies to ask them if they're talking and reading, and to try to stimulate that as something they want to do.

the years, because you've been very significant in bringing attention to what's going on here in the District -- I think there will be a series of efforts at partnership, to bring people together around the District's problems. And as I have said on other occasions, there is no quick fix, there is no magic wand, there is no individual who can change and fix a lot of the problems that the District has been suffering with over the years. But I believe that a concerted, carefully planned effort that enlists people of good faith from around the country -- not only just the District, because I believe strongly that this is our Nation's Capital, every American has a stake in the success of the people who live here in the District -- but I believe that kind of effort is going to take place. And if we are patient and persistent I think we will see results.

And I think you can only point to other cities around our country that were written off in the '70s and the '80s. I was recently in Cleveland and I can remember the kinds of things that were said about Cleveland not so very long ago. And going there is such an uplifting experience now because the business community, the religious community, the community leadership, individuals from every walk of life joined together to really rebuild that city. And not just in the visible way that we see with new construction, but really at the grass-roots level in reaching out to people.

So I'm very optimistic, although I'm realistic as well, I think.

Thank you all.

Q This is our "Born To Read" diaper bag. We don't get to give diaper bags to the First Lady -- (laughter.) And a little T-shirt maybe Socks could wear.

MRS. CLINTON: That is so cute. Thank you. Nobody thinks I'm trying it on. (Laughter.) Thank you very much.

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