

PHOTOCOPY
PRESERVATION

Childcare Conference

THE WHITE HOUSE

Office of the Press Secretary

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REMARKS BY THE PRESIDENT
AND FIRST LADY
AT WHITE HOUSE CONFERENCE ON CHILD CARE

The East Room

10:00 A.M. EDT

MRS. CLINTON: Thank you and please be seated, and welcome to the White House Conference on Child Care. We are delighted to have with us in the East Room today members of Congress and the President's Cabinet, other officials from the government here in Washington. We have many elected officials from around the country and a great group of distinguished guests, including parents and experts in this important issue.

I also want to greet the hundreds of people gathered at the Departments of Agriculture, Labor, and Health and Human Services here in Washington, and to the thousands more who are joining us via satellite from the more than 100 sites at universities, hospitals and schools and businesses around the country.

I'd like to take a minute for all of us to think about what's happening in America this morning, and about what happens every morning. Parents are making the preparations to get to work, and those preparations include for most working families putting their children in the care of others. And most, even before they're out the door, are worrying about the logistics of the care that their children will receive. Some are even worrying about the safety or quality of that care.

There are many who are wondering whether they would get better quality care if they could pay more. Others are struggling to determine how they'll be able to afford next month's payment. And there are many who are in the work force who worry every day about how they'll care for their child and hold down the job that they need. Many parents will go to work, but have trouble focusing on work because they are worried about the snuffle that their daughter had or wondering how their son is faring.

And before we finish today, many more working parents will keep looking anxiously at the clock and will murmur into telephones the instructions that their children need after school, because their concerns don't end at the end of the day for their children's school time, because parents won't get home, so that they have to worry about what happens to keep their child safe and well occupied during those hours, as well.

These are just some of the questions that America's parents are asking themselves this morning and every morning that they prepare to go to work. Some parents ask themselves these questions in the afternoon, as they prepare to go to a swing shift, or at midnight as they start to work in one of the other jobs that are essential to keeping our economy strong.

Earlier this month I went to the University of Maryland to visit its center for young children, and as soon as I walked in the door I knew immediately it was the kind of place any of us would feel comfortable sending our children. I was, frankly, tempted to sign up myself. The walls were painted bright colors. There was lots of natural light. The workers there were creative, energetic and focused. Inside there were toys and crafts material. Outside there was a playground. And the children looked happy and occupied and full of energy.

Now, later I left the center to make a speech, and after the speech I opened the floor to questions. And the very first question was one that I thought summed up the dilemma that we face today. It came from a divorced mother who works full-time as a secretary at the university. To send her 4-year-old son to the center I had visited, she told me, would cost \$6,000 a year, a quarter of her income, and she just couldn't do it. She had to do some real juggling to get the situation that she told me about. She was able to send her son to another less expensive center because she

qualified for a scholarship, and she moved back in with her parents. Otherwise, she said, I would have to quit my job and go on welfare, and then I would have to worry about who would watch my child as I looked for a job.

She and so many women like her are the reason we are here today, and parents like Paula Broglio, who is here with us in the East Room, represent the millions of parents who worry about this important issue. Thirteen million American children spend all or some of their day being cared for by someone other than their parent. Yet, a recent national study found that child care at most centers in our country is, "poor to mediocre, with almost half of the infants and toddlers in rooms having less than minimal quality."

The study also concluded that fully 40 percent of the rooms serving infants in centers provided care that was of such poor quality as to jeopardize children's health, safety or development. A recent University of Colorado at Denver survey of child care in four states found only one in seven child care centers to be of good quality.

And quality care, as Paula and so many others know, when it is available is often financially out of reach. According to the 1995 census, families earning under \$1,200 a month or less than \$15,000 a year pay an average of 25 percent of their income for child care. Middle class families are hit hard as well. These families, earning up to \$36,000 a year pay 12 percent of their income for child care.

The urgency of this conference today to focus on child care is heightened by the new scientific information we have about the emotional and intellectual development of young children. As we learned at the White House Conference on Early Childhood Development in April, what happens to a child in the earliest years affects how well he or she learns for a lifetime. With 45 percent of our children under the age of one in day care regularly, the issue of quality has tremendous bearing not just on individual lives, but on the future of our nation.

What's more, we now know from other studies that good care, whether given at home or in a day care setting, is good care. Done right, day care can be beneficial for children, and it is, therefore, worth our investment.

There's another reason that compels us to act, and that is demand. Demand for quality child care is growing, hastened on by our new economy, which has meant in the last 40 years dramatic changes in the American work force and in the American family's life. We know, for example, that half of all mothers with children under one year of age are working outside the home, and not only are more parents working, they are working longer hours. Also, with welfare reform we know that many more children will be needing quality child care.

So this conference is meant to start a conversation. It is only one day, but we hope it is a day that will renew our efforts to improve child care in America. We also hope it will involve our entire national community, because every aspect of our life together must be involved in looking for solutions. The federal government has a role to play, but so do state governments, business and labor, the nonprofit and religious communities, school systems, individual citizens, and especially parents.

We also know there are models of excellent child care around the country and we will hear about some of them -- like the military's day care system or the Smart Start Program in North Carolina. These initiatives provide examples of best practices and can energize and inspire us to do more.

We also know how important it is to ensure choice for parents in their selection of child care. One size fits all child care does not fit America's families. We don't work the same hours, we don't have the same economic or other kinds of pressures that we're dealing with, so we have to provide more options and we have to empower parents with good information to enable them to become good consumers. We also have to find ways that would make it easier and more affordable for parents who want to stay home with their children for some period of time to be able to afford to do so.

So I hope we approach this conversation with a certain fearlessness, with the same kind of energy that I see on the face of a three or four-year-old who's going about some task that he knows will occupy himself. We need to have the same kind of fearless approach, asking the hard questions and then listening to the answers.

There will be a lot of questions raised today -- questions about how to ensure the safety of every child in child care; how to do a better job of training and paying care-givers; how to encourage more employers to provide child care benefits of some variety to employees; how to make successful after-school programs more widely available; how to meet the needs of children with disabilities; how to better support parents who choose, often at significant cost, to stay home with their children; how to ensure that quality and affordability do not come at the expense of one another; and how to learn from the good models that we have in every community and state of our country; and, also, how do we leave ideology at the door and honestly address the real needs of America's families.

These are tough questions, and there are many more that we will be considering today. But we consider these questions at an opportune time. And we hope that this conference will spur the conversations around kitchen tables and water coolers and standing in supermarket aisles or at soccer games, or while going to or from work in the carpool -- whatever it takes to engage more Americans in this discussion, to make it clear that we want American parents to succeed at the most important task they have, caring for the next generation, and to be good workers who contribute to the economy and the quality of life that we enjoy in our country.

Now I'd like to address your attention to a video produced by New Screen Concepts, in association with the Families and Work Institute, entitled, "Why Should We Care about Child Care?"

(Video is shown.)

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THE PRESIDENT: Thank you very much. Welcome to the White House. Thank you very much, Kathy Carliner, for your remarkable statement. And I thought you were very good in the film. Rob Reiner wants to give you a screen test. (Laughter.)

I am so happy to see all of you here. There are many people here who might well be introduced, but I think I must start with the people who are terribly important to whether we will be able to fully achieve our part of the great agenda we are going to lay out

today -- the members of Congress who are here. And I'd like to call their names, and then when I finish, ask them all to stand.

Senator Herb Kohl, who sponsored legislation on child care; Senator Jack Reed; Congressman Bill Clay; Congressman Sandy Levin; Congresswoman Rosa DeLauro; Congresswoman Lynn Woolsey; Congresswoman Sue Kelly; Congresswoman Maxine Waters; Congressman Xavier Becerra; and Congressman Nick Lampson. Would the members of Congress who are here please stand. Thank you for coming.
(Applause.)

I'd also like to thank my longtime friend -- Hillary and I have been friends of Governor Jim Hunt and his wife, Carolyn, who are here, for almost 20 years now. And I think Governor Romer is here or on his way. Mayor Clever, we're glad to see you. And John Sweeney, the head of the AFL-CIO, and others who have come to be with us today. I thank you very much.

This is a happy day at the White House, first for all the people in the administration and all those who have worked with them for months and months and months to help this day come to pass; and second, and even more important, from my point of view, this is a happy day because I have been listening to the First Lady talk about this for more than 25 years now -- (laughter) -- and it may be that I will finally be able to participate in at least a small fraction of what I have been told for a long time I should be doing. (Laughter.) And I say that in good humor, but also with great seriousness.

This is an anniversary of sorts for me. It was six years ago today as a newly-announced candidate for President that I went back to my alma mater at Georgetown and began a series of three speeches outlining what I thought America ought to look like in the 21st century and what I thought we would have to do to create a country in which everyone had an opportunity, everyone was expected to be a responsible citizen, and where we came together across all the lines that divide us into one community.

There are many things that are necessary for that to be done, but clearly two of them are, first, people in this country have to be able to succeed at work and at home in raising their children. And if we put people in the position of essentially having to choose one over the other, our country is going to be profoundly weakened. Obviously, if people are worried sick about their children, and they

fail at work, it's not just individual firms, it's the economic fabric and strength of the country that is weakened. Far more important, if people fail at home, they have failed in our most important job, and our most solemn responsibility.

Second, we'll never be the kind of country we ought to be unless we believe that every child counts and that every child ought to have a chance to make the most of his or her God-given abilities.

That's why we're here today -- to examine where we are and what we still have to do. And what we still have to do is quite a lot, to make sure we live by what we believe when we say that all parents should be able to succeed at home and at work and that every child counts. No parent should ever have to choose between work and family: between earning a decent wage and caring for a child. Especially in this day and age when most parents work, nothing is more important, as you have just heard Kathy Carliner say, than finding child care that is affordable, accessible, and safe. It is America's next great frontier, in strengthening our families and our future.

As the Catholic Conference has noted, no government can love a child and no policy can substitute for a family's care. But there is much that we can do to help parents do their duty to their children. From my days as governor of Arkansas to my service as President, strengthening families has been a central goal of what I have worked on. I'm very proud that the first bill I had the opportunity to sign into law as President was the Family and Medical Leave Act, so that no parent has to choose between caring for a child or keeping a job when a family member is ill.

The expanded earned income tax credit helps to ensure that parents who work don't have to raise their children in poverty. No one who is out there working full-time with children should have to worry about that. Expanded Head Start programs are serving more families than ever before. We've collected record sums of child support enforcement. The historic balanced budget I signed this summer provides a \$500-per-child tax credit and helps parents to pay for their children's college education through IRAs, expanded loans and Pell Grants, the HOPE Scholarship and other tax credits.

The Congress has before it now a program of Secretary

Riley's called 21st Century Community Schools in which we ask for funds to help our states keep our schools open after classroom hours for children who have no place else to go and need that environment.

We've also made some progress on child care. Since 1993, child care assistance has increased by 70 percent to help families pay for nearly a million children. Last year in the welfare reform debate, we fought and won the battle to expand child care assistance by \$4 billion over the next six years, giving states an unprecedented opportunity to lead, to innovate in efforts to make child care more affordable.

But we have to do more. With more families required to rely on two incomes to make ends meet, with more single-parent families than ever, more young children are left in the care of others even in their earliest years. And as the First Lady said, we learned at our Conference on Early Childhood and the Brain, that's when children develop or fail to develop capacities that will shape the entire rest of their lives. It's also true that more and more schoolchildren are returning to empty homes after school.

The first thing we have to do is to make it possible for parents to spend time with their children whenever possible. That's why I hope the Congress will vote to expand the Family and Medical Leave law so that parents at least can take some time off for their children's medical appointments, teacher conferences and other basic duties. And I support flex-time laws that will allow workers to choose between receiving overtime in pay or in time off with their families.

But during those times when children can't be with their parents, they must get care that keeps them safe and that helps them to learn and grow. As we all know, too often that isn't the case. Too often, child care is unaffordable, inaccessible and, sometimes, even unsafe. The cost, as Hillary said, strains millions of family budgets. And government assistance meets just about a quarter of the need. Even for those who can afford it, sometimes good care is hard to find, as Kathy said in her remarks. Waiting lists sometimes takes months or years to move, forcing many parents to cobble together unstable arrangements.

The shortage of care puts older children at risk, as

well. Five million of them between the ages of five and 14 are left to fend for themselves after school. And as they get older, that increases the chances that they'll be exposed to drugs, tobacco and crime.

Finally, studies have shown that too many child care facilities are literally unsafe. The tragedies that have befallen families who depended on child care continue to make headlines all across our nation. This conference is an important step forward in addressing all these issues. What we learn today should spur us on to find ways to help parents, all parents, afford safe, affordable, high quality child care, whether it's at home, a child care center or a neighbor's house.

In the coming months, our administration will develop a plan to be unveiled at the next State of the Union, to improve access and affordability, and to help to ensure the safety of child care in America. In the meantime, I want to announce four specific things we can do right now.

First, I'm asking Congress to establish a new scholarship fund for child care providers. (Applause.) Too many care-givers don't have the training they need to provide the best possible care. Those who do have training are rarely compensated with higher wages. The scholarship program I propose will help students earn their degrees as long as they remain in the child care field for at least a year, and it will ensure that care-givers who complete their training will receive a bonus or a raise.

Second, we have to weed out the people who have no business taking care of our children in the first place. I am transmitting to Congress the National Crime Prevention and Privacy Compact, which will make background checks on child care providers easier and more effective by eliminating state barriers to sharing criminal histories for this specific purpose. I urge Congress to pass and states to ratify this legislation.

Third, I've asked Secretary Rubin to oversee a working group on child care, composed primarily of business leaders working with labor and community representatives to find ways more businesses can provide child care or help their employees afford high quality child care. And again, I thank John Sweeney for his important support of this initiative. (Applause.) In some ways the most

gripping part of that film we saw was the father talking about how he was just consumed with worry at work. No parent should ever have to go through that.

Finally, we must use community service to strengthen and expand access to after-school programs. Today, the Corporation for National Service through its To Learn and Grow Initiative will pledge to help after-school programs all across our country to use volunteers to provide better care to children. It is releasing a how-to manual for groups who want to incorporate community service into after-school programs. And I think that Secretary Riley, if we can win in our little budget battle here on the 21 century community schools, then together, we can do some real good out there on this issue.

My friends, for centuries, over two now, the American Dream has represented a compact that those who work hard and play by the rules should be able to build better lives for themselves and for their children. In this time, and even more into the future, child care that is too expensive, unsafe or unavailable will be a very stubborn obstacle to realizing that dream. So let us commit ourselves to clearing the obstacle, to helping parents fulfill their most sacred duty, to keeping the American Dream alive for them and most important, for their children.

Thank you very much. (Applause.)

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