

**PHOTOCOPY
PRESERVATION**

**FIRST LADY HILLARY RODHAM CLINTON
REMARKS ON EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION
GULBENKIAN FOUNDATION
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Acknowledgments: Gulbenkian [Gull-benk-ee-an] foundation -- extraordinary support for the arts, but also for health and social welfare.

Nice sign. ["It Takes a Village" sign behind you.]

I am deeply honored to be here with you to talk about the future of our children -- particularly our youngest children. It is a pleasure to be in a country that has made the welfare of its children a top priority.

The United States is fortunate to count Portugal among its oldest and closest allies. It was in February of 1791 -- a long time in our history, perhaps a slightly shorter one in yours -- that George Washington, our first President, opened formal diplomatic relations with Portugal.

We are proud of the strong bonds that have formed between our countries over the last 200 years -- bonds of friendship, mutual respect, and shared devotion to democratic ideals. The success of the Portuguese communities in Massachusetts, Rhode Island, New Jersey, California and other parts of the United States is a tribute to the promise of America **and** to the traditional values of the Portuguese people: love of family, belief in hard work, devotion to community.

Our countries share something else: We are by nature explorers. I think we have all been transfixed by the pictures **Pathfinder** has sent back from Mars. Today, these pictures are opening up a new world.

But five centuries ago, it was the Portuguese who were the **pathfinders** to a new era in the history of humankind.

The record of Portugal's exploration fills one with awe. Portuguese ships were the first European ships to open the way into the Atlantic, to cross the Equator, to round the Cape of Good Hope. Your ancestors were the first Europeans to see Australia, to set foot in South America, to open up trade with China and Japan.

Next year will mark the 500th anniversary of Vasco de Gama's historic voyage to India. Though this voyage is memorialized for eternity in your national epic, "The Lusiads," [Luzeeahdesh] I am pleased that it will be celebrated anew with a world exposition here in Lisbon devoted to the seas: Expo '98.

I should add that the United States, in partnership with Portugal, will extend this commemoration to the skies. When the Space Shuttle "Discovery" ventures into space next May, it will carry with it a Portuguese flag and a physics experiment created, in part, by scientists from your country.

What has always struck me about Portugal's achievements is that when your forebears journeyed to the edges of the Earth, ingenuity was your natural resource. Portugal's greatness derived not from an enormous army or land that went on forever, but from a knowledge of the seas, a mastery of navigation, and the intellectual and emotional fortitude to sail beyond the horizon. Portugal's power resided in the mind.

It seems particularly fitting, then, that the newest frontier -- the one we are exploring together, the one we gather to discuss today -- is, in fact, the human mind.

Just as science made possible the exploration of land, sea, and sky, so now is it enabling us to chart and come to understand the brain.

The knowledge we are gathering on this adventure is as valuable today as opening the spice route to India was half a millennium ago.

For, if there is one truth to our time, it is this: The success of any society depends on how well it cares for, educates, and raises its children. What this science does is show us what we can do to help every child live up to his or her God-given promise.

The answer is deceptively simple. In fact, it is what many parents have known all along -- that the song a father sings to his child in the morning, or a story a mother reads to her child before bed, help lay the foundation for a child's life, and, in turn, for a nation's future.

This is such an important issue that, not long ago, President Clinton and I held a special conference at the White House to give some of America's leading experts in the field of early childhood development -- scientists, pediatricians, researchers, and others -- the opportunity to explain their discoveries and to put this invaluable body of knowledge at the service of families.

But not just families. This information is indispensable for anyone in the position of leaving an impression on a young child's growing mind -- child-care workers, teachers, doctors and nurses, business leaders, the people who create television shows, and legislators.

It is astonishing what we now know about the young brain and how children develop. Just 15 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. As one scientist told me, "nature and nurture don't compete -- they cooperate."

A child's earliest experiences, their relationships with parents and caregivers, 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 are unable to remember -- hearing a song or a story, getting a hug after falling down, knowing when to expect a smile -- are anything but trivial.

Experiences in the first three years of life can determine how well a child can learn. When we speak, read, or play with an infant, we activate the connections in that child's brain that will one day enable her to think and read and speak and solve problems herself.

Experiences in the early years also have tremendous bearing on whether or not these children will grow up to be peaceful or violent citizens, focused or undisciplined workers, attentive or detached parents themselves -- for it is during this time that children learn to soothe themselves when they're upset, to empathize, to get along with others.

Now in many homes around the world, parents have done this for years. No one has taught them. They were given that gift when they were children or they saw and learned themselves how important it was. But in many homes around the world, children are not spoken to -- they are not given the kind of attention from mothers and fathers that stimulates brain development. And so by the time they get to school, they are already far behind.

There is also a connection between the income and education level of a parent and how much conversation occurs in a home. In one study, researchers in the United States visited homes that represented three different levels of education and income.

First, the researchers went into homes like mine, where both the mother and father went to college and earned good incomes. In these homes -- even when both parents worked outside the home -- there was plenty of conversation, lots of reading, plenty of talk in the house.

Then the researchers went into stable homes where the parents' education stopped at high school and where the parents held lower income jobs. These parents loved their children as much as any parent, but they did not talk to them. The fathers often had jobs that did not depend on verbal skills. Their livelihoods depended on what they were able to do with their hands. These parents wanted their children to be successful, but for them conversation was never a means to that end. As a result, when their children were four and five years old, their vocabularies were much smaller than those of children in the first group.

Finally, the researchers went into homes of very poor families. In these households, not only was there very little talk; the talk that occurred was overwhelmingly negative. Again, these parents loved their children; they wanted them to be successful, but life had not treated them very well. Consequently, the talk was filled with warnings about the world. A child who would go to explore this microphone, for example, would be told: "No. Get away." Why? Because the child could get into trouble. And these families were worried about trouble. So, what was the result of limited talk combined with negative messages? Low verbal development, limited vocabulary, and children who, because they could not resolve their problems with words, often resorted to physical violence.

This, then, is what we know.

First, the earliest years of a child's life are critical. They cannot be overlooked, ignored, minimized, shoved to the side. The first three years can set the course for a lifetime. It's time for us to grow up and take babytalk seriously.

Second, the activities that are the easiest, cheapest, and most fun to do with a child are also the best for his or her development -- playing games, reading, storytelling, just talking and listening. My husband and I loved reading to our daughter, Chelsea, who is with me here today. We hope the reading was fun for her. But we had no idea back then 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 to read.

Third, not only do we know how the brain develops in the early years, we also know what we can do to support that development.

For starters, we can do what you in Portugal are doing. You have set a clear and important goal: To increase the availability and quality of pre-school education for children between the ages of 3 and 5.

It was with great admiration that I learned of the protocol signed just last month between the government ministries that oversee **public** pre-school and three of your leading **private** pre-school providers: the church-based network of charitable organizations, the Union of Mutual Social Support, and the Union of Private Institutes of Social Solidarity.

Under this venture, public and private pre-schools will cooperate and help

each other better meet the needs of Portugal's families. Private pre-schools will learn from what the government schools do best: focus on the academic needs of children. Government schools, on the other hand, will learn from what the private pre-schools do best: offer flexible hours, with early morning and late afternoon care; meals for children; facilities that permit a greater range of activities.

As important as **what** you are doing, is **how** you are doing it: By bringing together all sectors of society in pursuit of a common cause -- to lift your children up.

In the last few years, I have been privileged to see other initiatives around the world that are focusing on the development of children in the crucial early years.

Outline:

Visited countless programs in my country and abroad that see to it that at-risk children in at-risk families get help and guidance right from birth. Parents, many of whom are living under the intense pressure of poverty, are shown how to care for their children, to meet their infant's physical and emotional needs. Home visitations are constant. The community is encouraged to get involved. The result? Fewer incidents of child abuse and neglect. Stronger bonds between parents and children.

Early Head Start and Head Start expansion.

Child-care expansion in U.S. Studies that show good care is **good** care, whether given at home or a day-care center.

French child-care system.

Prescription for Reading: especially for poor families; pediatricians are important authority figures -- when a pediatrician prescribes an immunization schedule, he should also prescribe reading for the child. Brings together libraries, publishing houses, doctors, clinics, hospitals.

Minnesota's Early Childhood and Education Program: provides parenting education through home visits; screens health and development problems for children under the age of four.

Colorado: Campaign to encourage parents to read to children every day.

Florida: child care, adoption, and abuse prevention programs work together in comprehensive, integrated effort to promote well-being of young children.

Because so much development takes place so early, we must do everything we can to strengthen the foundation of security for our youngest

children. We must see to it that all pregnant women have access to quality prenatal care, we must ensure that children have health care coverage, and we must teach police officers how to care for very young children who have witnessed or been subject to violence.

We must remember, too, that the early years are not the only years. The brain is the last organ to become fully mature anatomically. The neurological circuitry for many emotions isn't completed until a child reaches 15. The good work we do to promote development in the first 3 years must be continued over a lifetime of learning -- from grade school, to high-school, to college, and beyond.

Modest investments in the sound development of our children will yield great returns tomorrow -- in terms of increased prosperity, better health, fewer social ills, and ever-greater opportunities for our citizens.

It takes a village: A child's life depends on so many different people; kids are not rugged individualists; everyone has responsibility.

Conclusion:

I want to close where I began -- on the subject of exploration. Why do we explore? There are a number of reasons: treasure, power, curiosity. But beneath them all, I believe, is the desire to find a better place, a place where our hopes can be realized. The time has come, as we stand at the close of this century, to realize, finally, that our pursuit need no longer be directed to the other side of an ocean or to a place beyond the stars. The frontier we are searching for can be right here. It can be as close as the nearest well-cared for child. That must be our new destination. Together, let us find the way.

Thank you and God bless you all.