

CHILDHOOD DEV.

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# Remarks by The President and First Lady At the Conference

THE WHITE HOUSE  
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## The East Room

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.

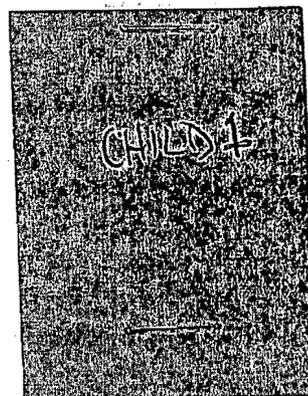
Now, at first glance, it may seem odd to hold a conference here at the White House devoted to talking about baby talk. But that discussion has never been more important, because science, as we will hear from the experts who are with us today, has now confirmed what many parents have instinctively known 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 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.

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.)

THE PRESIDENT: Thank you. Thank you very much. Thank you very much, and welcome to the White House. I was relieved to hear Hillary say that the brain is the last organ to fully develop. It may yet not be too late for me to learn how to walk down steps. (Laughter.) Or maybe I was thinking it was because I was always hugged when I fell down as a child, I did this subconsciously on purpose. (Laughter.)

Let me begin by thanking the members of the Cabinet who are here. I see Secretary Riley and Secretary Glickman. I thank Governor Romer and Governor Chiles for being here. I think Governor Miller is coming. There are many others who are here. Congresswoman De Lauro is either here or coming. Thank you, Governor Miller. I see I was looking to the left there. (Laughter.) He's from Nevada -- he just went up five points in the polls when I said that. (Laughter.)

Let me say, first of all, the first time I met Hillary, she was not only a law student, she was working with the Yale Child Study Center, and she began my education in these issues. And for that, I am profoundly grateful. And I thank her for bringing the scientists, the doctors, the sociologists, the others whose work is the basis for our discussion today here. And I, too, want to thank the thousands of others who are joining us by satellite.

This unique conference is a part of our constant effort to give our children the opportunity to make the most of their God-given potential and to help their parents lead the way, and to remind everyone in America that this must always be part of the public's business because we all have a common interest in our children's future.

We have begun the job here over the last four years by making education our top domestic priority, by passing the Family Leave act and now trying to expand it and enact a form of flex time which will give parents more options in how they take their overtime in pay or in time with their children, by the work we have done to expand the Family and Medical Leave Act and by the work we've tried to do to give parents more tools with the v-chip and the television rating system, and the work we are still carrying on to try to stop the advertising and marketing and distribution of tobacco to our children, and other work we've

done in juvenile justice and trying to keep our kids away from the dangers of alcohol and drugs.

All these are designed to help our parents succeed in doing their most important job. Now it seems to me maybe the most important thing we can actually do is to share with every parent in America the absolutely stunning things we are learning from new scientific research about how very young children learn and develop. In that regard, I'd like to thank Rob Reiner and others who are committed to distributing this information, and I'd like to thank the media here in our Nation's Capital and throughout the country for the genuine interest that they have shown in this conference.

I think there is an instinctive understanding here that this is a very, very big issue that embraces all of us as Americans, and that if we learn our lessons well and if we're patient in carrying them out, as Hillary said, knowing that there is no perfect way to raise a child, we are likely to have a very positive and profound impact on future generations in this country. So I want to thank, again, all of you for that.

Let me say there are some public programs that bear directly on early childhood development -- the Head Start program, which we've expanded by 43 percent over the last four years; the WIC program, which we've expanded by nearly 2 million participants. I have to say that I was a little disappointed -- or a lot disappointed to see a congressional committee yesterday vote to underfund the WIC program. I hope that if nothing else happens out of this conference, the results of the conference will reach the members of that congressional committee and we can reverse that before the budget finally comes to my desk.

I would also like to remind all of you that this conference is literally just a start. We have to look at the practical implications of this research for parents, for care-givers, for policy-makers, but we also know that we're looking at years and years of work in order to make the findings of this conference real and positive in the lives of all of our children. But this is a very exciting and enormous undertaking.

This research has opened a new frontier. Great exploration is, of course, not new to this country. We have gone across the land, we have gone across the globe, we have gone into the skies, and now we are going deep into ourselves and into our children. In some ways, this may be the most exiting and important exploration of all.

I'm proud of the role that federally-funded research has played in these findings in discovering that the earliest years of life are critical for developing intellectual, emotional and social potential. We all know that every child needs proper nutrition and access to health care, a safe home and an environment; and we know every child needs teaching and touching, reading and playing, singing and talking.

It is true that Chelsea is about to go off to college, but Hillary and I have been blessed by having two young nephews now -- one is about two and one is about three -- and we're learning things all over again that, I must say, corroborate what the scientists are telling us.

We are going to continue to work on this, and I know that you will help us, too. Let me just mention two or three things that we want to work on that we think are important. We've got to do a lot more to improve the quality, the availability and the affordability of child care. Many experts consider our military's child care system to be the best in our country. I'm very proud of that, and not surprised.

The man responsible for administering the Navy's child care system, Rear Admiral Larry Marsh, is here with us today. He leads a system that has high standards, including a high percentage of accredited centers, a strong enforcement system with unannounced inspections, parents have a toll-free number to

call and report whatever concerns they may have, training is mandatory and wages and benefits are good, so, staff tends to stay on.

I am proud that the military places such importance on helping the families of the men and women who serve our country in uniform. But it's really rather elementary to know that they're going to do a lot better on the ships, in the skies, in faraway lands if they're not worried about how their children are faring while they're at work serving America.

To extend that kind of quality beyond the military, I am issuing today an executive memorandum asking the Department of Defense to share its success. I want the military to partner with civilian child care centers to help them improve quality, to help them become accredited, to provide training to civilian child care providers, to share information on how to operate successfully, and to work with state and local governments to give on-the-job training and child care to people moving from welfare to work.

I think this is especially important. Let me say in the welfare reform bill, we put another \$4 billion in for child care. In addition to that, because the states are getting money for welfare reform based on the peak case load in welfare in 1994, and we've reduced the welfare rolls by 2.8 million since then, most states, for a period of time until an extra session comes along, will have some extra funds that they can put into more child care. This gives states the opportunity they have never had before to train more child care workers, to use funds to help even more people move from welfare to work and perhaps even to provide more discounts to low-income workers to make child care affordable for them.

This welfare reform effort, if focused on child care, can train lots of people on welfare to be accredited child care workers and expand the availability of welfare in most of the states of the country. It's not true for every state, because some of them have had smaller drops in the case load and three have had no drops. But, by and large, the welfare reform bill, because of the way it's structured, gives all of you who care about child care about a year or two to make strenuous efforts, state by state, to create a more comprehensive quality system of child care than we have ever had before. And I certainly hope that what we can do here, plus the support of the military, we'll see dramatic advances in that regard.

I'd like to thank the people here who have done that work. And I'd like to say that we are going to hold a second conference, this one devoted exclusively to the child care issue here at the White House in Washington this fall. And I hope all of you who care about that will come back.

The second thing we want to do is to extend health care coverage to uncovered children. The budget I have submitted will extend coverage to as many as 5 million children by the year 2000 with the children's health initiative in the budget proposal -- to strengthen Medicaid for poor children and children with disabilities, to provide coverage for working families through innovative state programs, to continue health care coverage for children of workers who are between jobs. There is an enormous amount of interest in this issue in both parties, I'm happy to say, in the Congress in this session. And I quite confident that if we'll all work together, we can get an impressive expansion in health care coverage for children in this congressional session.

I'm pleased that Dr. Jordan Cohen, the President and CEO of the Association of American Medical Colleges is with us today to lend his association's strong support to these efforts. With the support of leaders in medicine, again I say, I am convinced we'll have a bipartisan consensus that will extend coverage to millions more uninsured children.

The third thing we want to do is this. Because we know the great importance of early education, we're going to expand Early Head Start enrollment by at least one-third next year. Early Head Start was created in 1994. It's been a great success in bringing the nutritional, educational and other services of Head Start to children aged three and younger and to pregnant women. It has been a real success and we need to expand it.

Today we are requesting new applications for early Head Start programs to accomplish the expansion. And to help parents to teach the very young, we developed a tool kit called, "Ready, Set, Read," part of our America Reads challenge, designed to make sure that every child can read independently by the 3rd grade. This kit gives tips on activities for young children. It's going out to early childhood programs all across the country along with a hotline number for anyone else who wants the kit.

The fourth thing we're going to do is to protect the safety of our children more. In particular, we have to help young children more who are exposed to abuse and violence. Let me tell you, as you might imagine, I get letters all the time from very young children. And my staff provides a significant number of them for me to read. The Secretary of Education not very long ago gave me a set of letters from children who were quite young, a couple of years ago gave me a set of letters from children who were in the 3rd grade. But sometimes I get them from kindergarten children and 1st grade children, talking about what they want America to look like.

And it is appalling the number of letters I get from five- and six-year-olds who simply want me to make their lives safe; who don't want to worry about being shot; who don't want anymore violence in their homes; who want their schools and the streets they walk on to be free of terror.

So, today the Department of Justice is establishing a new initiative called "Safe Start," based on efforts in New Haven, Connecticut, which you will hear about this afternoon. The program will train police officers, prosecutors, probation and parole officers in child development so that they'll actually be equipped to handle situations involving young children. And I believe if we can put this initiative into effect all across America, it will make our children safer. And I'm glad we're announcing it today during Victims of Crime Week.

We all know that it's going to take a partnership across America to help our children reach their full potential. But the toughest job will always belong to our parents -- first teachers, main nurturers. Being a parent is a joy and a challenge. But it's not a job you can walk away from, take a vacation from, or even apply for family leave from. (Laughter.) The world moves too fast, and today, parents have more worries than ever. Work does compete with family demands, and finding a balance is more difficult than before. That's why this must always be part of the public's business.

Let me come now to the bottom line. The more we focus on early years, the more important they become. We know that these investments of time and money will yield us the highest return in healthier children, stronger families and better communities.

Now, let me say, finally, I know that none of us who are in politics, none of us who are just parents, will ever know as much as the experts we're about to hear from today. But what they're going to tell us is the most encouraging thing of all, which is, they have found out that we can all do the job. No matter how young, a child does understand a gentle touch or a smile or a loving voice. Babies understand more than we have understood about them. Now we can begin to close the gap and to make sure that all children in this country do have that chance to live up to the fullest of their God-given potential.

Again, I thank you all for being here. I thank our experts, I thank the First Lady. And I'd like to ask Dr. David Hamburg to come up and sit there and take over the program.

David?

Thank you. (Applause.)

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