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CLINTON FOUNDATION

Closing the 'Word Gap'

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Nourishing a child's mind in the first five years of life is as essential as feeding her body. New scientific research confirms that what happens to children's brains in their earliest years shapes the adults they become, the success they achieve, and the contributions they make to our economy and society. Unfortunately, too many of our kids today are not getting the nourishment they need.

Researchers have identified what they're calling a "word gap." Many children who grow up in low-income families enter school with substantially smaller vocabularies than their classmates. And this disadvantage leads to further disparities in achievement and success over time, from academic performance and persistence to earnings and family stability even 20 and 30 years later.

Coming to school without words is like coming to school without food or adequate health care. It makes it harder for kids to develop their creativity and imagination, to learn, excel, and live up to their full potential. It should spur us to action just like child hunger and child poverty.

Why is this happening?

We know that children build their vocabulary by listening to and interacting with their parents and caregivers. But millions of American parents, especially those struggling to make ends meet or without strong support networks, end up talking and reading to their babies much less frequently than in more affluent families. Many parents just don't have time, between multiple jobs and significant economic pressures, or don't realize how important this really is.

Preparing America's Children for Success in the 21st Century

The Too Small to Fail Strategic Roadmap

Studies have found that by age four, children in middle and upper class families hear 15 million more words than children in working-class families, and 30 million more words than children in families on welfare. This disparity in *hearing* words from parents and caregivers translates directly into a disparity in *learning* words. And that puts our children born with the fewest advantages even further behind. Among those born in 2001, only 48 percent of poor children started school ready to learn, compared to 75 percent of children from middle-income families.

The “word gap” is a significant but solvable challenge. We know that it's possible to help parents and communities make small changes that have a big impact on our kids, whether it's teaching parents about the importance of vaccinations and regular check-ups, or putting babies down to sleep on their backs to prevent sudden infant death syndrome. Efforts like the Providence Talks project in Rhode Island and the Thirty

Million Words Project in Chicago are already experimenting with new approaches to close the “word gap.”

I have been an advocate for early childhood development for my entire adult life, ever since I was a young law student working at the Yale Child Study Center. And the more I learn about the new research in the field, the more I am convinced that this is an issue vital to the future competitiveness of our country, the strength of our families, and the health of our communities. That’s why I’ve made early childhood development a major focus of my new work at the Bill, Hillary & Chelsea Clinton Foundation.

In partnership with an innovative non-profit in San Francisco called Next Generation, we’ve launched a campaign called “Too Small to Fail.” Our first goal is to address the biggest obstacles standing in the way of parents talking, reading, and interacting with their children – a lack of awareness and a lack of time.

Research suggests that how much parents know about the importance of having quality interactions with their babies matters even more than their income or educational attainment. If they start to view reading a bedtime story as just as important as changing a diaper, then they’ll find a way to do it. To help spread the word, Too Small to Fail will conduct a public action campaign to give parents the information they need.

Of course, there are only so many hours in the day. Parents in low income families, especially those who struggle to work two jobs with few benefits or flexibility, face enormous pressures on their time and attention. So Too Small to Fail will work with employers and the business community to encourage them to give parents more flexibility and support, just as the Clinton Foundation has previously worked with the private sector to lower the cost of AIDS drugs in Africa and the calorie count of snack foods in American schools.

We hope that by moving forward on both these tracks, we can help more parents and care-givers give our kids the start they deserve. As a first step, we are releasing a strategic roadmap that lays out the research behind Too Small to Fail and the agenda ahead of it. I hope you'll take a look and share it with your friends and neighbors. We're all in this together, after all, and we all have an opportunity to be part of the solution.

Americans have always believed that, at our best, we're a land of equal opportunity; that it doesn't matter where you come from or who your parents were – you should have the same chance as anyone else to live up to your full God-given potential. Closing the “word gap” will help reduce the inequality in our society and restore a sense of mobility and possibility to American families. All our kids deserve the chance to start life on an equal playing field. They're too small to fail, so let's help them succeed. Please join us at toosmall.org.

- See more at: <http://www.clintonfoundation.org/blog/2013/10/03/closing-word-gap#sthash.zoZ90OhH.dpuf>