

**Chapter Four — Parents Are The First Teachers And The  
Primary Level Of Support, Protection, Safety, And Growth  
For Each Child**

We need to help mothers and fathers do what needs to be done to support every child during those first key months and years of life.

The first level of support that exists in the real world for almost every child is the child's family — with the mother for each child usually in the direct center of the safety net and serving as the primary support reality and resource for each child.

That central role for the mother of the child isn't always true and there are a number of exceptions, but when we look at the situation that exists for most children, the role of the mother tends to very consistently be at the center of each child's interaction with the world.

Mothers mother. That happens in every human setting. Mothers tend to be the heart of each child's support processes, and mothers tend to be the core of each child's support functionality.

In most homes, the mother is the primary caregiver and the mother is the primary source of both support and protection for the child. The

overwhelming majority of the initial interactions for most children in most settings are with the mother.

We need to support those interactions. We need to make those interactions easy and safe. We need to make it possible for mothers to be with their children and we need to make it possible for mothers to provide that support to their children in those key times.

We need to support mothers in all of those early functions and roles for mothers, and we need to provide that support in ways that enable all mothers to very directly engage in the right levels of interactions with their children.

We need to have each and every mother understand the great opportunity that exists to show and demonstrate direct and responsive emotional support for their child in the first three months of life, and we need each and every mother to understand both the need and the opportunity that exists to exercise and strengthen their baby's brain by interacting directly and consistently with their child in the first three years of life.

Most mothers do not know that science and most mothers do not explicitly understand those biological realities today. Very few mothers and

very few fathers in our country today know those realities in a clear, concise and science anchored way.

That lack of knowledge by both mothers and fathers about those early opportunities to help their children is actually a major and unacceptable failure of our public health agenda as a country.

That lack of knowledge by parents about those brain development biological realities is a public health deficiency of major magnitude. It is a significant and unacceptable deficiency that we need to correct soon because children are being damaged every day as a result of that information sharing failure.

Too many children being born in this country today are not getting needed levels of support in those key months and years because their families are unaware of the opportunities that exist to provide that support.

We owe it to every parent to make sure that every parent has that level of knowledge about how to help their children at those key points and times in their lives and in the lives of their children when that knowledge is most relevant. We need to change the current low knowledge levels about those issues because the consequences of parents not knowing those realities have negative impacts on far too many children.

The truth is that parents in every setting very much want to help their children — and parents in every setting very much want to know how to help their children succeed. That information exists, but we are not doing a good job of sharing that information with all parents today.

Parents can clearly do a more effective job as parents when that information is known and understood by each parent.

Parents who understand those realities can make informed decisions about the various ways of interacting with their child. Parents can make very different sets of decisions about multiple levels of parenting behaviors, and about various direct and indirect child support activities when that set of realities and opportunities to help each child is clearly understood.

Parents who know the absolute biological and functional value of those basic brain strengthening interactions can both do their own interactions with their child in ways that support that value, and — when resources are limited and when difficulties or logistical issues exist relative to their own direct activities — parents who have that knowledge can also work to seek out other resources in their families, or in their communities to help make those enabling and empowering interactions happen for their children.

Great creativity by parents and families on those issues and functions is possible, but that creativity for those issues will only happen in many situations if parents and families understand both the science and the opportunity that exists for their child.

We need every mother to know even before her baby is born what can be done to help her child achieve the high levels of success and the emotional security that mothers want for their children.

Obstetricians should communicate that science and teach that opportunity to each of their patients in the weeks and months before each birth. Obstetricians have great credibility with each mother and they have a perfectly timed opportunity to teach those points because those caregivers can share that information with each expectant mother in that highly important and highly motivated learning time that tends to happen just before each baby is born.

Pediatricians, family physicians, nurses, and other related caregivers for both mothers and babies also need to share that same set of information about the high value and the functional benefits that are created by those interactions with mothers as soon as each baby is born.

Many new and first time mothers are concerned about how to be a mother in ways that will provide the most benefit to their child. This knowledge about those very basic and direct ways of helping each child can help alleviate that concern by those mothers.

Both obstetricians and pediatricians can give comfort and a sense of security and direction to all new mothers by explaining the great value and the lifelong benefits that the mother will be able to give to her child by having those kinds of direct and loving interactions with her child in those first months and years of life.

Mothers who are concerned about their own role and their own activities as a mother can be helped with that concern when their caregivers explain clearly and explicitly that direct and on going talking, playing, and caring interactions with their child by the mother actually adds very real value for the child, and can create functional benefits that can last for the child's entire life.

We need to help all mothers understand that those kinds of basic, direct, nurturing and loving interactions with their child aren't just pleasant and emotionally rewarding things to do to get through the day. Those basic child focused interactions by each mother actually provide security, learning readiness strengthening, and enhanced learning capabilities for their child.

We also need to help each mother — often by generating support for the mother from family, community, friends, and appropriate caregivers — with appropriate resources and assistance in those times of early childhood opportunity and need. We need to help each mother with useful levels of functional support as those needs exist for each mother and each child.

All mothers deserve our support, because all children need that support.

## **Fathers Can Also Add Major Value In The Brain**

### **Strengthening Processes**

We clearly should include fathers in that education and support process as well. Fathers often have a major role in the support systems for their children. Fathers are often key members of the parenting team for children.

Fathers can help and reinforce mothers in the mother's activities, and fathers can also be the direct and key parent for their children who creates highly useful support interactions with each child.

For a significant number of children, fathers are the primary support person. Mothers are usually in that primary direct support role but fathers are actually the key and primary caregivers for a number of children. Children

can benefit significantly from fathers in that role, both doing those functions directly or sharing those functions in various ways with the mother and with the family of their child.

There are many fathers who do the basic and primary support functions for children — either alone or in partnership with the mother of their child — with great skill, competency, and high levels of benefit for the child.

The number of fathers in our country who read to their children and who interact directly with their very young children in those key years is large and growing.

Our culture is increasingly encouraging fathers to be in those roles, and the positive emotional rewards for the fathers that result from those focused and direct interactions with their children tend to reinforce those behaviors for the fathers. Fathers often fall in love with those interactions and find them to be a highlight and high point of their lives.

Even though that set of interactive and involved parenting behaviors is the approach used now by many fathers, a key point to understand relative to other fathers is that some fathers do not feel that their own functional and interactive parenting role is important to their child.



Many fathers do not know and do not understand that they are actually making a direct and positive difference in their child's life, and in their child's future abilities and future capabilities through their own direct parenting interactions with their child.

We need to do a much better job of communicating those realities and the value created by those interactions to those fathers who do not know or who do not understand their value to their child today.

It can be very empowering, motivating, and encouraging for fathers who don't know about those processes to realize that their own direct and positive parental interactions with their child in talking, reading and playing with their child actually creates and adds hundreds of millions of neuron connections in their baby's brain.

Caregivers and communities need to teach that reality to fathers as well as to mothers because fathers can be a key asset to their children with those interactions, and because many children would benefit very directly from those interactions with both parents.

The role of the father in those kinds of interactions is actually more than just pleasantly playing with their child. Those kinds of direct and loving

interactions from fathers can add substantively to their child's sense of security, learning readiness and brain strength.

## **We Need Parents To Know That Brain Exercise Creates Strong Brains**

As the most common experience, however, the usual pattern is that the primary caregiver who does most of those support behaviors for each child tends to be the mother. We need to honor, respect and support that relationship.

We need to very intentionally help mothers in those roles. We need to create ongoing levels of support for every mother. We need to help every mother help every child.

As part of the process of helping each mother provide the best support for her child, we need to be sure that we do what we need to do to help all mothers understand both the science and the basic opportunities that exist for their child. We need every mother to understand that her child can build strong muscles with physical exercise and that her child can build a strong brain with neuron connecting brain exercise.

We need to help every mother meet the neuron connection needs and brain strengthening opportunities for their child by teaching every mother

that those needs and opportunities exist, and by teaching every mother in very practical and highly functional terms what she can do to help create those levels of neuron connection experiences, exercises, and brain strengthening activities for her child.

### **Parents Are The First Teaching Resource For Children**

Both mothers and fathers need to realize that they are actually and clearly the first teachers for their children, and the first source of learning for their child. In some situations, someone other than a parent is in that role, but most of the time, for almost all children, the first teacher is the child's parent. The first place of learning for each child is almost always the home.

Education for each child obviously and clearly starts at home — and — education for each child also, very clearly, begins at birth. To some degree, new studies tell us, education even begins slightly before birth.<sup>40,41</sup>

Children may have many teachers in their lives, but parents are clearly the first and most important teachers for almost every child. The interactions of the parents with each child in those first months and years of life sets each child on the learning path that will guide their entire life.

We need all parents to know that they are the first teachers for their child. We need every parent to know how to do the sets of things that will

functionally strengthen their child’s brain and build his or her learning readiness levels in those first key years when they are the primary teacher for their child.

We need that understanding to exist with all parents so that parents can do their job as first teachers for each child in ways that can create the maximum possible benefit in those key areas and those key time frames for each child.

### **Most Parents Do Not Know That Science Today**

This point has been made several times, but it is important enough to make it again. Most parents today do not know that basic package of science. That science about the development of their child’s brain has not been explicitly taught to most parents in America in a clear and effective way.

Parents at all income levels and parents from all groups will be able to make better decisions and more fully informed decisions about their parenting activities in those key years when that knowledge about early brain development is known to each parent.

Even the parents who do almost everything functionally “right” today for their children in those first key years of life often do everything right

now for their child for intuitive, emotional, or even cultural reasons and not because of a cognitive and intellectual understanding of the functional realities and the purely biological issues that are actually involved in the brain development of their children.

Doing things right for children based on emotional, intuitive or cultural reasons can be a very good thing to do. But doing things right for each child based on cognitive and intellect-linked reasons that are anchored in real functional realities, in solid science, in credible and effective research and in fully informed professional expertise about the science and practice of child development, and the processes of lifelong learning can be even better.

We need to make sure that every single parent and every relevant family member — mother and father, aunt and uncle, grandparents and cousins — understands the basic core science and the basic biology of early childhood development and understands the importance of exercising their child's brain in those first key months and years in order to increase the likelihood that their direct interaction with each child in their family will have the most effective impact, and create the greatest benefit for their child.

### **People Are Inventive, Smart, And Love Their Kids**

People are both inventive and smart. Parents love their children. Parents and families want to do good things for their children. Parents all want their children to succeed in life.

We need to help all parents to be able to help their children succeed.

When people understand the goal and the role of creating direct interactions for infants and babies, and when people understand the value and the direct benefit to their child that comes from building brain connection stimulation experiences in those key years for both infants and babies, then the likelihood of individual people in each setting figuring out both creative and consistent ways of doing that support for their own child goes up significantly.

Knowledge is power. In this case, knowledge is both strength and power — because that piece of knowledge about brain development processes and time frames gives parents a set of very powerful tools to use to improve the life path and the brain strength of their child.

**We Need Mothers And Fathers To Know That Talking,  
Playing, Reading And Singing All Build Brains**

The actual processes and direct interactions that can be done by parents to help each child are not complicated. They are generally easy to do.

Parents need to know that they can exercise the brain of their child and make their child's brain stronger by talking, reading, singing and playing with the child.

Children who have those very direct “talk, read, play, and sing” interactions in safe and consistent ways with their parents, or with other caring adults, end up with stronger brains.

It is a very direct and simple process. Direct interactions between the parent and the child are the functional key to the neuron-connectivity building tool kit that exists in each child's brain. Talking, reading, playing, interacting and singing to each child strengthens the brain.

Parents who understand the value of those basic functional interactions can generally figure out how to make those particular sets of interactions happen for their children in the settings where they live, and where they interact with their child.

Talking, for example, can be done almost anywhere. Talking to a child directly is a very effective and powerful way to exercise the brain of a child.

### **Talking Directly To A Child Builds Brain Strength**

Talking is often the easiest interaction tool to use and it actually leads the interaction list as a positive, useful and effective thing for a parent to do. Talking can have amazing benefits for a child. People too often do not know that those benefits exist and do not know that those benefits can be created for a child by that deceptively simple behavior.

Talking directly to a child is actually an absolutely essential tool that parents and families need to understand and use to create the needed levels of exercise for their child's brain. Talking directly in safe and positive ways is generally the single most useful brain-building tool for each child, in fact. Talking directly to a child also significantly reduces the risk of toxic stress syndrome in very young children, so that simple level of direct verbal interaction actually offers multiple levels of benefit to a child.

Baby and infant brains are stimulated in powerful ways when caring adults speak directly to the children.



Talking in direct and interactive ways to a child is a growth process and a brain exercise tool that strengthens children's brains and supports neuron connectivity processes very directly and effectively. It is overwhelmingly clear that children who are spoken to often by adults in those key months and years benefit directly and significantly from that process.

People used to think that talking to a baby was idle and useless chatter — simply a pleasant and enjoyable way of parents passing time. People also used to believe that talking to a baby when the baby was too young to talk back and too young to respond verbally was a waste of time for both mother and baby.

Those beliefs are both dangerously incorrect.

We now know that talking to a baby from the very first month of life actually very directly stimulates and exercises important neuron connectivity processes at very direct levels in each baby's brain long before any child can respond with words of their own.

Brain scans done of children by some important research programs show the positive impact of talking directly to a child. Multiple studies have been done that show better learning skills and much larger vocabularies for

the children who have been talked to directly and frequently by adults in those key years.<sup>40,44</sup>

The basic packages of adult interactions with children that build strong brains all begin by having parents or other caring and trusted adults talking directly and talking often to each child. Parental interactions with babies and small children in those first years tend to generate major functional value for developing brains. Children's brains need those direct spoken interactions for maximum stimulation of the neuron connectivity process.

Children in those first years of life actually need adults to talk directly to them for both brain growth and for emotional security and stability.

The more that a child hears direct and positive adult conversation from a caring adult in those key months and years, the stronger the neuron connections are in each child's brain.

The new brain scan research programs show that baby brains get activated in important ways when adults talk directly to a child, and when adults interact verbally in various ways with each child. Dr. Patricia Kuhl and her team at the Center for Mind, Brain, and Learning at the University of Washington have done some powerful research into those issues, which

everyone who is concerned about early brain development should know about.

### **Talking And Reading Should Lead Every List**

If no other brain building exercise interactions beyond talking happen with a child, having regular and direct verbal interactions with trusted adults builds strong baby brains and those interactions also gives each child a sense of security that directly supports the learning processes.

Talking can be golden. Children respond well to direct verbal communications. Parents can help their children in multiple ways by talking and interacting with their child. Talking directly to children creates both brain strength and emotional strength when the communications with the child are done in a positive, accepting, and loving way.

Several key studies have shown that the children who hear the most words spoken in those key years tend to have much larger vocabularies in kindergarten. Those children who are spoken to directly and often in those key months and years tend to have better reading skills — both in the third grade and in later years of school — in comparison to the children who have had the fewest words spoken to them in those key first years.<sup>4</sup>

### **Some Talking Levels Have Been Linked To Income Levels**

Even though the income levels of parents do not have a direct, operational and functional link to the numbers of words that are spoken to any child, studies have shown some very clear patterns for groups of people where higher-income people tend to speak more often in direct ways to their children.

We need to understand those patterns and those linkages and we need to know what they mean for the development of each child.

The patterns of speaking to children that are shown by those particular studies are clear. Higher-income children do tend to have more words spoken to them than low-income children in those key years. When you look at average numbers of words heard by each child each day, the average number of words heard tend to be much higher for higher-income children.

That does not need to be true.

There is not an absolute, direct, fixed, or actual functional link between income levels of parents and the number of words spoken to a child. People from any income level can speak with any frequency level to their child. Talking is free. It does not cost money to talk. Low-income people can speak to their children with no expense involved.

We know that to be true because it does happen for many children and no expense is involved. Some of the lowest income families can and often do have very high levels of words spoken to the child in their family.

The children in those low-income families who actually do hear many spoken words every day each benefit very directly from that experience.

But the very consistent pattern that multiple studies show us tends to be that the higher-income families generally speak many more words each day to their children than low-income families.

### **We Need All Children To Know Thousands Of Words**

The difference — on average — in words spoken to children at various income levels can be extreme. Low-income children often have less than one-fourth of the words spoken to them each day compared to high-income children.<sup>4</sup>

That pattern of hearing fewer spoken words results in too many low-income children who too often only know hundreds of words at age three, and who know barely 1,000 words at kindergarten — compared to higher-income children who generally know more than 2,000 words by age three, and who often understand 5-10 times that many words by kindergarten.

We need all children to hear thousands of words directly spoken to them in those key years when brain exercise levels affect the development of each brain, because we need all of our children to have that stronger learning capacity at age three — and we need all of our children to be learning ready and reading ready by the time they enter kindergarten.

That can be done. Parents, families, and child care settings for low-income children can very intentionally increase the number of words that are spoken to and heard by each child.

Communities and families at all income levels can support those processes. We need leaders from every community who understand those realities and who encourage all mothers and all families in each community to be talking extensively to their children. We need programs in all settings to encourage parents in each setting to talk to their children.

That support for the talking processes by community leaders, and by informed family members can very directly help each child who receives that support — regardless of family income levels. The final chapter of this book describes some of the successes that happen for children from every group when the number of words heard by low-income children in those key years increases.

The children in low-income homes who do hear higher levels of spoken words in those key years have life long positive impacts at multiple levels from that process and from that strategy.

We clearly need to have every mother and father understand that it is a very good thing to talk consistently and directly to their child — and we need every parent to know that talking can be a wonderful gift of love to give to a child.

### **Every Language Works**

Too many people take talking for granted or assume that talking to their child is just a pleasant thing to do. We need all parents to know that talking can be a highly beneficial and literally life-changing thing to do, and we need all parents to know that their child will benefit directly from being talked to directly in loving ways with high numbers of spoken words regardless of the language used to do the talking.

Every language works. That is important to understand. There is no advantage for those learning processes to any given language. Every language works and all languages work.

Multiple languages can create even stronger learning abilities and multi-language strengths for children. We need all families and all parents,

and the members of all communities to know that their children's lives can be enriched and improved when adults talk in loving, frequent, and direct ways to each child.

### **Reading Also Creates Major Benefits**

Talking isn't the only brain and vocabulary building tool that parents and families can use with their child to create both a sense of security and strong brains. Reading is another very useful life enrichment and brain building tool.

Reading to children also has huge benefits at multiple levels that have been consistently confirmed by a number of studies and by the observation of parenting experts in a wide range of settings.<sup>5,11,13,15,20,47</sup>

Reading works. Like talking, reading also can happen almost anywhere — and it can help children everywhere. Parents in almost any setting can use reading as a brain-strengthening tool and as a vocabulary-building tool for their child.

Reading to a child is actually one of the very best interactions and one of the most effective interventions that parents can do for their children. The value of reading to children has been proven in multiple studies. Reading has



clearly been demonstrated by experience in multiple settings to have value at several levels for the children who are read to regularly and often.

Parents who want to help their children build strong learning skills need to know that reading can be a very effective intervention and interaction approach for children. Reading is a brain building interaction that can be done and used in almost all settings by almost all parents and families, and it has a positive impact on almost all children.

Reading to a child creates several levels of benefits. Reading not only increases neuron connections — reading regularly also can help create a sense of safety, stability and security for each child.

Reading can help make children more kindergarten ready because reading to a child can teach each child that there is a cognitive link between symbols on a page and the meaning of words. Children who enter kindergarten without knowing that a direct link between symbols and meanings exist can have a more difficult time with some learning processes at that point in their education.

The children who enter preschool and kindergarten without having any significant number of reading experiences can find themselves at a significant disadvantage for some learning processes at that point in time.

We need to recognize and understand the fact that several studies have shown us that reading patterns for children also tend to differ — on averages — based on the income levels of families.

Several studies have shown us that higher-income families tend to own many more children's books than low-income families — and a number of studies have shown that high-income families tend to spend significantly more reading time with each child.<sup>5,17,22,23,28,49</sup>

### **Too Many Low-Income Homes Do Not Even Own One Book**

Again — that overall pattern linking income levels and the average reading time for children in each group exists. When we look at those patterns, we need to understand that there is not a mandatory, fixed, or absolute linkage to reading levels and to reading frequency that is tied in some inviolate and functional way to the specific income levels of families.

Any parent — regardless of income — can read to their child. Any family — regardless of income level — can read to the children in their family.

Low-income families clearly can and do read to their children. Roughly 30 percent of low-income families read daily to their very young children now. Some low-income families currently read extensively to their

children, and those low-income families who do read to their children often make reading a regular part of their child's life.

Unfortunately, however, several studies tell us that the majority of low-income families read rarely to their children, and a significant number of low-income families today do not read to their children at all.

More than half of the lowest income families do not have a single book in the home. More than half of the day care centers and the child care settings for low-income children also do not have a single book.<sup>48</sup>

The benefits that result for children who do have someone reading to them can be extensive. The opportunity that is lost for children who do not have reading done for them in those key years is significant, and it can be negative at several levels for the children for their entire lives.

One of the major reasons why low-income families do not read to their children is that most low-income homes do not know and explicitly understand the functional linkage that exists between early reading to children, and the ability of children later either being able to read or being unable to read.

Another major reason for low-income homes not reading to their children is the expense of books — a fact that can be highly relevant when every penny of income is needed to buy food and pay for housing.

Those of us who know that science and who understand those linkages should all be ashamed of ourselves for not teaching that set of linkages to all parents, and for not making adequate and affordable numbers of books available to children in all homes and in all day cares.

We need more low-income families to understand the benefits that result from the reading process — and we need more books in low-income homes and in the day cares that serve low-income children.

One study showed that making four books available to each very young child along with direct and explicit coaching to the parents about the value of reading had a learning growth improvement for the children with the books, which was roughly the equivalent of having those same children going to a direct coaching program by trained educators at that point in their lives.

That particular study only makes sense if we remember that giving those four books to each home actually resulted in the parents in those homes reading the books to the children, and creating new and additional

levels of direct parent/child communications and parent/child interactions in the process.

The books that were placed in those particular low-income homes did not do anything magical just by being there to create those learning gains. The reading process that resulted from each family having the books in their homes created the gains. The sum total of those reading related interactions with the parents created the learning gains that happened for each child whose family received the four books.

### **Reading Works For Every Income Level**

The actual biological benefit and learning capability improvements for a child that results from reading are not linked to income at any level. Parents and families of all income levels can clearly help their children build strong brains and build solid vocabularies by reading to their children.

Both strong brains and larger vocabularies are good for all children from all groups. Reading tends to increase vocabularies and reading tends to create brain patterns for children that make brains bigger and stronger for the children from every group, and from every income level who have someone reading to them.

The children who have larger vocabularies at age three and age five tend to do better in school. That particular linkage between early vocabulary levels and later scholastic successes has been shown to exist, and that linkage tells us that higher vocabulary levels need to be created for children from all groups in those early years.

The higher vocabulary levels that are created by reading are not simply due to the actual number of words that are included in each book. The higher vocabulary levels for children who are read to also result from the fact that when parents who are reading a book also talk to their children about the books they are reading, then the direct conversation that surrounds the books adds many words to the children's vocabularies, and does it in a way that is often anchored on the books and both inspired and triggered by the books.

The entire reading process also exercises and shapes baby and infant brains because it teaches each child the important intellectual concept that symbols can have meaning. That basic concept that written symbols have meaning can stimulate its own explosion in neuron connectivity in a baby brain — and that explosion can enhance each child's own capacity to actually read.

## **Reading Can Also Support Emotional Security**

Reading can also help give children a very good sense of personal security, direct connections, and positive emotional linkages with the person who reads to them. Every parent who reads to their children can easily understand that connection and benefit — because the whole process tends to feel good at multiple levels for both the parents and the children.

Children tend to love having regular reading times. Millions of children also fall in love with particular books that are read to them regularly as part of a regular reading process.

Higher-income families tend to make daily reading rituals a regular, consistent, and comforting part of each child's day. That pattern can happen as well in many low-income homes — but it doesn't happen now in as many low-income homes as we need it to happen.

The linkage between being read to in those key months and years and later being actually able to read is an important one. Reading can clearly create a sense of intellectual growth for a child and can trigger a new skill set and a new mental capability for each child as the written words on the page become functional words in each child's mind.

Parents need to understand that the moment of linkage between words on the page and words in a child's mind can be almost magical in its own right — and it can have a very positive impact on the bonds that exist at multiple levels between each parent and each child.

### **Reading Is Good But Talking Is Essential**

Both reading and talking are key tools for early childhood brain development that all parents need to understand.

As a package, the truth is that reading to children is very good and talking to children is essential. Talking is actually the single most important tool. Even in settings where there are no books and no readers, children benefit hugely from having caring adults in those settings talking directly to them.

Children each need adults to talk to them. Mothers and fathers who talk to their children give the children a great gift of brain exercise, and that exercise can have great benefit for a child in those key months and years whether or not anyone reads to a child in that time frame. Major benefits can happen for children who are spoken to even when reading is not part of the interaction process.



Talking combined with reading is good, but talking all by itself adds great value, even if no reading is included in interactions with the child.

Playing with the child is also hugely valuable as a brain-building tool and as a source of emotional security and stability. Having toys for the child, playing with the toys, and talking about the toys creates its own sets of interactions that also help to build secure and learning ready children.

Too many parents do not know and understand how much benefit children receive just from having someone who the child loves and trusts playing with them and talking directly to them. Talking directly to a child on almost any topic is a very good thing for parents to do for their child.

Talking at mealtime is a very good thing to do. Talking while giving a bath or while helping a child get dressed can be a great thing to do.

Describing what you are doing in multiple settings — like shopping or cooking — can add real value for a child.

Experts tell us that it is most effective to talk directly to your child and to make regular eye contact with your child when talking.

Waiting for a child to respond to what you say can be particularly helpful as a brain development exercise.

The Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University has done some extremely insightful research into the value of what they call “serve and return” interactions with very young children.<sup>12</sup>

Several studies have shown that interactions that involve getting a response from the child — a smile, cooing, or actual words spoken by the child — all have particular positive impact for the learning process. The serve and return interactions approach can be taught to parents and those interactions can clearly be beneficial to the children.

The Harvard website has some very good materials that deal with those issues.

The research done on direct child/mother interactions in the first months of life by Dr. Beatrice Beebe and her team at Columbia University that is described in the Three Key Months addendum to this book also describes some of the basic impacts that happen very early in the parenting processes as a result of direct mother child interactions and mother child feedback responses in the first weeks and months of life.

Educators advocate a number of ways that can be used to talk effectively to a child. In talking to a child, rhyming is used often because rhyming has great power to teach word use patterns and because rhyming

often is a good way to amuse the child. Rhymes have their own sets of learning process benefits, in addition to being fun and easy to hear and remember.

Rhyming books and reciting nursery rhymes all have powerful and positive impact on both verbal skills and thought processes.

The popular ABC song that has survived so long and is used so often as a parenting song continues to exist and to be extensively used because it is both fun and extremely effective as a lifelong learning and memory-jogging tool. Significant numbers of adults reach into their memory and pull up that ABC song when it is time to alphabetize something.

That is a lifelong gift for everyone who uses that tool in that way.

### **Asking Questions Is A Great Learning Tool**

Parents need to know that consistent and interactive conversation with their child can have significant value for the child. Pointing out things verbally to a child in any setting can be a very good thing to do for a child. Parents can do those pointing out processes at objects in almost any setting.

Asking questions regularly can also be a very effective thing to do for a child. Questions can be asked by parents in any setting — and the

questions that are asked to a child about a wide variety of subjects can create very effective levels of interaction with the child.

We need all parents and families to understand that asking and answering questions can have a very powerful and positive impact on the conversation skills of children. Some studies show that having a dialogue and a give-and-take conversation on various points with a child can be a major building tool for brain skill levels and learning skills for the child.

Creating a dialogue that involves both the child and the parent is a particularly useful way to help children learn to think, and it is a great way to exercise their brain. That is true even in those early weeks and months when the children don't speak any words and simply make noises as their contribution to the communication process.

Making it a point to have a set of dialogues with each child each and every day can be a key learning tool for parents to use to help their children even before the child can clearly carry out his or her own side of the dialogue.

### **Any Questions Can Help Stimulate Brain Growth**

The questions asked by parents to their child don't have to be based on any deeply designed agenda or specific curriculum. All questions are

good. It's the interaction with the child and the verbal dialogue and give-and-take interchange with the child that builds the most value for the child in that particular communication process.

“What color is that broom?” is a great question.

“What else here is yellow?” is a great follow-up question.

Other follow-up questions for the child tend to create themselves once the pattern of asking questions begins, and once that pattern and that behavior becomes part of parent-child interactions for any parent and child.

## **Twenty Questions Can Be A Great Intentional Interaction**

### **Tool**

Deciding to ask the baby or child 20 questions each day can be a good starting goal for parents who haven't been asking questions of their children in the past. Too many homes ask no questions at all today. So having the parents of the child setting a goal of asking each child 20 or more questions each day can be very useful in those settings where questions are new to the communication processes with a child.

Twenty each day can be a good number of daily questions that can create and trigger the pattern, the behavior, and the practice of asking questions for an adult and a child.

One question asked to a child each day generally isn't enough to create a pattern and a give-and-take conversation. But 20 questions a day with questions asked each day to a child can clearly set up a patterned interaction with the child, and the 20 questions asked each day can often clearly and easily lead to 20 more.

**Twenty Questions And Thirty Minutes Of Reading And Direct  
And Safe Interaction Can Build Brain Strength And Security  
In A Child**

Knowing what those tools are, it is possible for all parents to look at their own situation and setting and create both strategic plans and tactical approaches that can functionally build the brain strength for their child. Parents who want to build and enhance the brain strength in their child can build a plan for their child that sets specific parent interaction goals for their own daily interactions with their child.

Setting goals and setting up personal parenting plans can be very useful tools for parents to use in building strong brains for their children.

Setting specific functional goals as a parent about the number of interactions and setting specific working goals about the type of interactions as a parent can be a useful approach for parents who want to help their child,

and who want to put a successful and achievable interaction strategy and brain strengthening approach in place for their child.

Twenty questions each day can be one good goal. Deciding to do 30 minutes of reading to the child each day can be another good goal.

If each parent sets a goal of asking their child 20 simple questions each day and if each parent also sets a goal of reading to their child for 30 minutes each day — maybe using two 15 minute increments for the daily reading time for the child — that combined set of interactions with each child can trigger neuron connectivity linkages and brain strength building exercises for each child at a significant functional levels.

Those simple and measurable daily interactions that are done as part of that parenting plan can create benefits for a child that can actually last for an entire life.

We could close the learning gaps that exist for many children in this country significantly if those kinds of direct parent behavior and child interaction goals — or similar sets of goals — were set and achieved for children who otherwise would not have those levels and volumes of interactions with their families or their caregivers.

That specific package of interactions each day with an adult can also give each child the safe 30 minutes of adult interactions that are necessary for each child to prevent and buffer toxic stress syndrome.

Twenty questions, 30 minutes of reading, and 30 minutes of safe interactions every day with a caring adult can have an almost magical positive impact on a child. Children need a sense of safety and a sense of security to thrive — so having a loving adult interacting in a safe and positive way with each child each day can create that opportunity to truly thrive.

More interaction minutes and more questions for each child can be even better — but 30 and 20 of each can be very useful — and being very useful is far better than not having any significant interaction support for a child.

Questions from each child also set up very useful interaction and communication experiences for the child. Children learn in large part by asking questions. Encouraging children to ask questions instead of just answering questions is also a very good thing to do.

### **“Why” Is Often A Key Part Of The Dialogue**



The question “why” is almost always a key part of that learning process for each child. It can be very good for each child to ask “why.” It can create solid interchanges and useful learning for a child when the question “why” on any issue or topic from a child is answered in a positive and informative way by the adult in their life.

A major goal of the interaction processes between parents and children is to create intellectual capacity and to strengthen thinking ability levels for each child. Answering “why” questions can be a very useful part of that process and can build both vocabulary levels and thinking skills for a child.

### **We Need Useful, Fun, And Frequent Interactions**

Perfect interactions are not necessary. We do not need perfect interactions with each child. We need useful interactions. We need safe and friendly interactions. Fun interactions are particularly good.

Frequent interactions are essential.

Loving interactions are wonderful.

We do clearly need consistent, frequent, caring, good, and often fun interactions in order to build brain strength levels in each child — and we need every mother and father to know how powerful those seemingly

unimportant interactions with their child actually are in the development of their child's thought processes and their child's brain.

### **“Positive” Interactions Are Particularly Good**

The whole interaction process for each child is particularly beneficial when the talking that is done to or with the child, or even when the talking that is just done at the child, has both positive and encouraging components.

Positive is good. Encouraging and supportive is even better. To do really well, children need positive and encouraging comments and interactions as part of the interaction process.

Unfortunately, the reality that we face is that too many interactions that happen with children today are negative. Too many comments that are being made in too many settings are negative and even critical — including scolding children, blaming children, or using angry words and angry tones of voice with the children.

Simply scolding a child doesn't create the most effective levels of value and benefit — and being critical of a child doesn't trigger the best brain growth opportunity for a child.

But saying positive things to a child does add value for the child at multiple levels. Saying positive things to a child helps to create a sense of security and comfort that makes learning easier for that child.

### **Positive Comments Are Better Than Negative Comments**

That is another area where parents who learn about those realities in their own lives can choose to change behavior. As parents set specific goals for brain building exercise linked interactions with their child, including goals for the time spent reading every day, and goals for the number of questions asked of each child each day, it is also possible for a parent to very clearly and intentionally set the goal of having the clear majority of comments made to the child each day be positive.

A key point for all parents to look for in talking to, and talking with, their child is the relative numbers of positive comments made compared to the number of negative comments that are made each day to their child. Parents should set a goal of having more comments be positive than negative each day, and that outcome would move all children into the kind of positive feedback ratios that are now experienced primarily by children in high-income families.

Making sure that more positive than negative comments are made to the child each hour is a good way for parents to achieve their daily positive comment goals.

A baseline planning goal for parents who chose to deal with that issue can be to create a functional plan that calls for the parent to very intentionally make more positive comments than negative comments each day and each hour to their child.

Actually keeping a check list for even one day where all comments that are made to the child are rated as positive or negative can help identify both what kinds of comments are being made now, and whether the total mixture of words being said is sufficiently positive to achieve that communications positivity goal.

Many parents do not have a good sense of how many negative comments are made to their child in comparison to the number of positive comments that are made. Parents of young children are sometimes very surprised and even shocked when an observer tells them that they make more negative comments than positive comments to their children over the course of a day.

Positive comments do happen now in high proportions for some children. Many parent/child relationships and current parental communication approaches with children have positive, affirmative, and encouraging comments made by adults and parents to the child every day that far overshadow and significantly outnumber the negative, critical, and even angry comments that are made each day to the child.<sup>4</sup>

That situation of having the positive comments that are made to a child outweigh the negative comments that are made each day isn't true for all children, however. For some other children, the number of negative comments far outweighs the positive words said to the child.

Researchers have looked closely at those issues in several settings and some of their conclusions about those communication patterns were extremely useful to learn. This is important research and we will be well served if we use it to guide our thinking about parent/child interactions in ways that benefit children.

The researchers learned that a major proportion of parent/child relationships today, in a number of settings, have the number of negative or critical comments that are made each day to each child significantly overshadow the number of the positive comments that are made each day to each child.

Some children hear almost only negative comments now.

When that negative over balance of communications from adults happens for a child, the total weight of the negative comments made to a child can create negative perceptions and can even trigger some negative consequences and toxic stress issues for the child.

### **Some Settings Had More Than Twice As Many Negative Comments As Positive Comments**

One important study showed that the parents who interacted the most with their children tended to be more positive, and those parents tended to have 3-6 positive comments made to their child for every negative comment that is said.

That same study showed that the families who interacted least with their children had twice as many comments made to their child in a negative perspective compared to their positive comments.<sup>4</sup>

Again, some of the studies that looked at that particular issue showed patterns that followed the income levels of the parents and connected the income levels of parents with the ratio of positive and negative comments that were made each day to the children.

One study that looked at the positive and negative comments by income level showed that high-income families in those key months and years for their child averaged six positive comments made to their child in comparison to each negative comment made to the child.

The middle-income families in that same study averaged two positive comments made to their child for every negative or critical comment that was made to their child.

The lowest income parents in that study averaged only one positive comment for every two negative comments that were made to their children.

The lowest income families, on average, made many fewer comments in total to their children, and most of those fewer comments that were observed in that study were negative.

Again — as with reading levels and as the research reflected relative to the total words that are spoken each day to individual children — there are many low-income homes that give very high levels of positive feedback to their children. There are many low-income homes where the ratio of positive and supportive comments to negative comments equaled or exceeded those same ratios in higher-income homes.

But — on average — the lower-income homes that were studied tended to have twice as many negative comments as positive comments made to each child as the daily experience for the children in those homes.

The overall impact on the personal development processes for each set of children by that balance of negative and positive comments that are made to the children is not hard to understand.

**The Negative/Positive Comment Levels Are Not Mandated Or Inevitable**

Those studies were — as so many of those studies are — based on averages. Those results and those patterns of negative and positive comments made to children are not based on anything inevitable or on anything that is fixed, required, inviolate, or even predestined as rigid and mandatory behavior levels for any specific family or for any particular set of people.

There is no law, regulation, or mandate that requires either set of behaviors for either group of people. Many low-income families now have much higher percentages of positive comments made to their children. Some high-income homes today have the majority of comments that are made to their children made in a negative way.



Those numbers that the researchers discovered about negative and positive comments made in various settings reflect patterns — not rules. Those patterns can each be changed for each family and they can be changed for each set of people. People who are aware of those patterns and who want different communications to happen for their own children can simply and explicitly decide to change those communications and change the ratio of positive to negative comments made in their own interactions with their own children.

We are more likely to have people decide to change the nature of those comments now in various settings and in our various family interactions, because we now know that those unfortunate negative comment patterns exist for too many children. That knowledge of the existence of those negative patterns gives us both the power to make informed choices, and the functional opportunity to make a change for individual children and individual families for future communications with their children.

That change in the ratio of positive comments to negative comments can happen for each child, one at a time. Low-income parents and low-income families who become aware of those patterns can now simply decide to make the number of positive comments exceed the number of negative comments each day for their child.

## **It Doesn't Take Money To Make Positive Comments**

It doesn't take money, wealth, or resources to make positive comments to a child. It can take a conscious decision to make more positive comments — and that decision to make positive comments can be done one child at a time, one family at a time, one parent at a time, one home at a time, and even one community at a time.

When entire communities become aware of those patterns of communications with children, the culture of the community can sometimes be changed by the people who are in it. People in any setting can decide to create a culture of positive comments and continuous positive feedback to their children. Both families and communities who understand these issues can chose to encourage positive affirmations to the very young people in each family and setting.

The patterns we see too often now of having most comments made in a negative way can change for each child and it can change for each family if families decide to make having a high number of positive comments made to their child a chosen behavior for each parent and for each family.

All parents love their children. All parents want their children to do well. Negative comments are not, by themselves, a bad thing to make. The

parents who are making critical comments to their children now are often warning the children about things that really do need warnings.

“Don’t touch the hot stove” truly is a negative comment that can and should be made by parents at every income level to every child.

Warnings about those kinds of issues are a legitimate part of life and warnings and admonitions about various dangerous and undesirable behaviors are an important component of raising every child. Every home needs to make some of those negative comments to create a safe set of behaviors for each child.

What we need to change in a number of home settings now, however, is to very intentionally and deliberately add a number of positive comments to each child’s daily experience of warnings and admonitions.

“Don’t touch the hot stove” needs to be followed by — “What color is the stove?”

Or — even better — “Good girl. You are really smart not to touch that hot stove. You are really a very smart little girl and I love you so much. So let’s not touch that hot stove. Why do you think we have the stove? What color is the stove?”

### **We Need To Add Positive Comments To The Admonitions**

It can be very beneficial to our children if parents who make those kinds of admonitions also decide to very intentionally offer a range of positive comments to their children. That will be very well received by our children. Children love their parents and children tend to get particular joy from having positive and loving things said very directly to them by their parents.

Every child loves hearing those kinds of loving statements from their parents and from other trusted adults in their lives.

Children beam and glow when their parents say positive and loving things to them. It does not cost money to make positive comments to a child — and children in the lowest income homes may benefit even more when those positive comments are made.

We have not done a very good job of encouraging those positive communication approaches as a consistent part of our overall parenting culture as a nation.

We need to support behavior patterns for all groups of parents that enhance the likelihood of each child doing well in those areas by having both parents and families giving more encouraging and positive comments to each child.

We need to encourage parents and families from all income levels and all groups to deliberately and intentionally aim at having the clear majority of the comments that are made to each child each day in each setting have a positive rather than a negative tone.

Children who hear more positive comments than negative comments feel both loved and safe — and that creates a major opportunity for learning skill growth, personal security, and a sense of self-worth at the same time.

### **Some Negative Comments Are Inevitable**

We need to remember that some negative comments will happen for any child. That is natural. Negative comments like “Don’t do that” are inevitable in parent/child interactions. “Don’t burn yourself” can be a very good thing to say to a child.

Even the most positive families who had a 6-1 ratio of positive to negative comments for each child did not have a 6-0 ratio. Children often need guidance from a parent or adult, and sometimes the needed guidance involves negative comments.

But if the only perceived feedback from an adult to a child every day is negative, then that experience can unintentionally slow the learning process for the children. An overwhelmingly negative balance on the

comments made to a child can cause that child to be less eager to interact, less ready to learn, and less secure in his or her own sense of who they are.

Individual children can benefit significantly if the parents or the adults in their lives make a point of supplementing any basically negative words with positive words that, in total, outnumber the negative feedback given to a child.

As we build a continuously improving parenting culture for America, we would be well served by teaching parents to make a deliberate point of having the positive words that are said to each child each day outnumber the negative words that are said to each child each day.

That can be a good functional goal for parents to set for their own communications with their child as part of their overall strategy to build a strong brain and a secure future for their child.

### **Toxic Stress Can Be Reduced Or Avoided**

The brain development chapter of this book talked about the very real lifetime damage that can happen in the brains of very young children who face constant stress, and who have a set of basic stress neurochemicals constantly activated in their brains.<sup>26,27,45,50,51,52,55</sup>

Some extremely powerful research has been done into the life-long impact that can happen to children who have “Adverse Childhood Experiences” early in their lives. Researchers at Kaiser Permanente looked at decades of health care experience for children who faced stress and other adverse experiences, and discovered that there were a number of health conditions where the negative health consequences and the negative health outcomes for the children with early adverse experiences more than doubled in later years of their life.<sup>55</sup>

That research about the long-term damage that is done by early negative experiences for each child needs to be understood by every caregiver for young children, and by the families of young children as well.

Dr. Nadine Burke Harris has a current Ted Talk available on YouTube that explains some of those issues in a highly understandable, accessible, and family friendly way. The Center for Disease Control has looked at those issues as well and concurs absolutely with their impact.<sup>51</sup>

In some of the worst situations, the children end up fairly quickly with toxic stress syndrome. That outcome is not a good thing for children.

Toxic stress syndrome can do real biological brain damage that we should avoid if at all possible. We now know that the damage can actually

be avoided. The risk levels for toxic stress can be buffered by having parents talking, reading, and singing in positive ways to their children in those key months and years.

All of the parenting strategies that work to build strong brains and that help develop secure children — talking, reading, playing, singing, and directly interacting with each child — work to prevent toxic stress as well.

A key risk relative to that issue that very much needs to be avoided is a sense of isolation for each child. Children who feel isolated can adopt a mind-set of “presumptive negativity” where they assume that future interactions with people will be negative, and young children who feel very isolated can develop actual toxic stress syndrome.

## **Texting Can Be Distracting And Can Functionally Isolate A Child**

Interestingly, the risk of isolation for our children is entering a modern age, and there are now new factors that can increase isolation problems for the children who are being born and raised today.

Texting can, for example, increase childhood isolation levels.



Texting and other electronic connectivity interactions that focus the mother or the parent away from the child can also create their own levels of stress and isolation for each child.

We are a texting society. We text in high volumes and we tend to use our various screens and our electronic linkage tools a lot. That isn't going to change. We need to deal with that reality.

Texting is not a bad thing to do in itself. But texting can be bad and texting can be damaging if constant texting time is substituted for direct contact time with a child in a way that functionally and significantly reduces needed direct and personal, focused contact interactions for a child with a parent or caregiver.

People who text with significant frequency and who spend a lot of time texting need to be very sure that they also have sufficient, direct and focused time with their children. High levels of texting can create real levels of functional isolation for a child with no awareness by the parent that functional isolation exists for their child.

Texting can be interspersed and interwoven with a sufficient amount of direct face-to-face contact time for a parent with the child and not create damage for the child. That mixed level of interaction can be successful for

the child if the actual parent one-to-one and personal contact time with the child continues to be very direct, very focused, and clearly involves real attention that is actually paid to the child when that direct contact time for the adult with the child happens.

The key to success for parents each day relative to their child in that area of their lives is to regularly stop texting for a bit and to focus only and very directly on the child for a period of direct time that very intentionally and clearly involves no texting during that time.

Putting down the texting device or setting aside the interactive screens for real periods of time — maybe creating at least two or three 20 minute direct contact, and direct focused interaction times each day with each child — can be golden times each day for each child. And that text free, pure child focus time can be golden time, for each parent as well.

Some experts are expressing concerns that the advantages that many children from high-income families have traditionally had from consistently higher levels of direct parent interaction time with their children might be significantly eroded if high-income mothers switch their attention from their children to their various connectivity tools — with texting serving to create and maintain new levels of completely unintentional child isolation and

inadvertent levels of personal insecurity for very young higher-income children.

It would be unfortunate at multiple levels if we closed some of the most problematic intergroup learning gaps in our country by having lower scores in the future for high-income children who face and experience growing levels of unintended functional isolation by being ignored in those key brain development months and years while their parents are texting.

### **We Do Not Want To Create Inadvertent Isolation**

The value of avoiding inadvertent adverse experiences relating to child isolation is clear. It is obvious that we need to do a good job of not ignoring our children if we want our children to thrive, and it should be clear that we don't want texting to undermine thriving.

Children do not need constant and perpetual attention from parents, but frequent, focused, direct and positive conversations, and regular interactions with the parent are needed by each child.

That means that setting up and creating regular and consistent daily text free interaction times with the parent and child can be a very good strategy that meets the clear need by the child for those times of direct focus, and times of direct and clear interaction with his or her parent.

Putting down the texting device can be painful — but the pain of a child being ignored and the functional negative consequences of having the needed direct time with each child each day replaced entirely by texting interactions for the parent can be damaging at several levels for each child.

### **A Reminder App Can Be Useful**

This is actually a good time to use various creative and supportive texting processes to support parenting interactions. There are now some very valuable apps that can remind mothers who text a lot to periodically set down her texting device to focus directly on their infant or child in a more direct way for a period of time. Those are very good apps for mothers to have.

Some texting-linked pilots that have done versions of that work have had encouraging levels of success in improving parenting patterns for the children whose parents received those texts.<sup>57</sup>

One of the texting related pilot studies involved simply sending each mother periodic text messages that simply and explicitly reminded the mothers that direct interactions with their child will strengthen their child's brain development, and that it is good for their child when direct interactions happen.

## **The Children Whose Mothers Received Reminder Texts Were**

### **Two Months Ahead**

That simple text sent to those mothers clearly changed some behaviors. Children benefited. Very real improvements in measurable learning skills actually resulted in the children whose mothers received that set of text messages.

Those children whose mothers received those simple texting reminders about their child's opportunities were two full months ahead in their learning skills by the time they were only 2 years old compared to the children from a matched set of mothers who did not receive those same texts in those same key months.

That pilot was a clear success. It was very simple. The mothers who received the reminder texts each figured out their own ways of helping their child. Mothers who were reminded of that brain building process figured out various ways to help their children. The array of ways that the mothers who received the reminders figured out to help their children actually worked at a significant level for that set of children.

The expense of that pilot was almost zero and the impact was significant. We need to work off that learning to figure out a variety of ways

to use texting to parents in creative ways to improve outcomes for our children.

We need an array of innovative apps available to support parenting through text reminders that trigger specific behaviors and teach key information about child development.

Parents also need to understand that a constant level of attention to the child isn't needed for either infant stability or growth. Periodic attention works well, as long as the periodic attention is regular, dependable, and focused very clearly on the child for special and dedicated times during the day when direct focus on the child is the functional priority for the parent.

Texting apps that remind parents who text a lot to make those child-focused times part of each day can be a good thing to have.

## **We Don't Understand The Full Impact Of Interactive Devices Yet**

We actually do not know yet what the impact will be on our children's thought process and brain development from the experiences of young children, who are themselves, increasingly and sometimes almost obsessively, directly interacting with electronic devices. Large and growing

numbers of very young children are interacting directly with those devices today and some of the interactions are extensive.

It appears from some of the first studies that when parents read electronic books to children using interactive electronic devices, that parent linked reading process can create some of the same value for children as regular book reading. But that positive initial benefit apparently only happened in those studies when the parent was also interacting with the child during the reading process and when the e book was held and shared like a paper book.

We know from other research that passive screens, like basic television watching, can actually slow the learning development in young children. Studies have shown that children in those key months and years who just watch television actually lose ground on their learning levels. The American Academy of Pediatrics has long offered warnings about negative consequences that can result from extensive watching by young children of standard television shows and content.

But children who interact with parents and with interactive screens seem to get at least some of the benefits that are created by other parental interactions.<sup>58</sup>

We need to understand all of those processes more completely. Those interactive devices are already a major part of the life experience for many children. We do know that pure electronic book reading has great value, and it appears that other interactive linkage levels by young children with various electronic information sources seem may add some value as well.

Many of the best children's books are now being made available for electronic reading. Used appropriately, they can function just like a paper book. We should encourage those processes and those electronic access links to books because so many low-income homes have no books today, but many of those homes with no paper books do have electronic connectivity tools.

The final chapter of this book describes some of the programs that exist now to get both real books and video books into the hands of low-income children.

It is clear that the older children who interact with certain kinds of computerized games are creating faster mental response times for some functions. We don't know yet about the impact that whole area of brain development will have on major areas of our children's lives.



We need relevant foundations and various research funding organizations to fund studies of those functions so that we can have the best minds in academia able to spend time figuring out what those impacts are and how we can make them most beneficial for children.

That new world of connectivity for our children is not going to go away. We need to understand it so that we can create the most benefit for our children in the context of that clearly ongoing connectivity reality for our children and our society.

## **We Need To Encourage And Support The Parent Interaction**

### **Role**

We do know now from basic life experience and from all of the new brain science, and all of the new developmental process research that parents play a huge role in the lives of each baby and each infant. Parents are extremely important to children. That has always been true and that will always continue to be true.

For best results for our children in the key areas of neuron connectivity and exercising young brains, we now need all parents of all children in those age categories to know how major that role is for the

development of their child, and we need all parents to understand what can be done to give their child the best start in life.

Knowledge is power. We all need to have that basic knowledge in order to create the equivalent of a public health campaign to support brain strength development for every child. We need the information about those processes that is outlined in the first chapters of this book to be known by all parents and all families of young children in America.

We clearly need all parents to know that their children need direct interactions in those first months and years of life when the universal biological processes that happen in every brain create permanent neuron connections in each child's brain.

We also need all parents to know that if that opportunity to stimulate and exercise each brain is missed, the brain literally prunes out billions of neuron connections and those connections are gone forever.

We obviously can and should still help all children who need help after that point. Development of those capabilities after that point is more difficult, but it is not impossible.

There are actually many important levels of brain development that happen for every child after that point, and we should support all of those

processes — but the very best times that give us the biggest benefit with each child for those levels of brain exercise and building basic brain strength are in those very first key months and years.

Rather than doing damage control and creating support processes for improving learning skills and resolving economic challenges later in the lives of large numbers of disadvantaged children, it is far better and more effective for parents and families to do things that reinforce and support those extremely useful neuron connections in that key time frame when those interaction activities with the baby and with the very young child have the most positive impact.

The purpose of this book is to make that point and to call for that support — for every child from every group in America.

### **Society Needs To Support Parents In That Role**

Parents are and will be key to that process and to those goals. Every child has parents. That is a biological requirement of birth. We need to do what we can to help parents do the things that will give all children the best start in life.

That will be difficult and challenging in many settings and situations, but being difficult is no reason to abandon or give up on that incredibly important goal.

We need, for starters in that child support process, to have all parents — and all families — understand those issues. Parents who know about those opportunities become empowered to make decisions in the context of that knowledge.

In some cases, the decisions that are made can directly change and guide parent behavior. In other cases, the decisions can involve parents looking for other resources to help their children in the ways that their children need to be helped. Those are both good things to do.

We need to help and support parents in both of those approaches. We need to use multiple levels of reminders and supports for parents — and we need parents who decide to reach out to the various support programs — like early reading support settings or direct in-home nursing programs — where those resources exist and are a good fit for their child.

We need, as a society, to support and encourage that parenting role and we need to encourage and enable those parenting and learning processes

for the parents of each child. All of that support follows patterns that parents want and feel good about relative to their children.

Parenting obviously can create its own very clear and positive emotional rewards for both parents and children at multiple levels. Parents love their children. Parents want their children to succeed in life and to thrive.

Knowing that those future consequences will happen for children is a good thing, but the immediate positive feedback that parents feel and receive from those behaviors is even more important as a factor that guides behavior in the moment we live in

Many of the very best rewards for parents actually come from the direct interactions with their very young children, and we need to do what we can do to ensure that those direct interactions do happen in positive ways for as many children and parents as possible.

There is a very reinforcing and loving bond that happens with great benefit that triggers extremely positive feelings and levels of great affection for both parents and for children when those interactions happen.

### **Helping Children Can Be Extremely Difficult In Some Settings**

The truth we need to all face, however, is that it can be very difficult in some settings to have the time, energy, or opportunity to make those connections happen for a child. Many parents are too tired at the end of a hard day of work to give themselves the time, or to find the time for those interactions to happen.

When a parent is in a low-income job — or sometimes in two or more low-income jobs — and when that parent faces transportation difficulties, and when the parent faces what can be functional child care logistical nightmares — and when the income level for the parent is so low that buying day-old bread, and buying basic food at deep discounts just to make eating affordable is a daily reality — then expecting that parent to spend money on a book, or to find time every night to read the book can be more than one bridge too far.

When a parent is exhausted and logistically challenged, finding the time to interact and to ask questions, carry on conversations, and read books to their child can be an insurmountable goal to achieve.

Parents who understand the brain development science and who understand the emotional development needs, and who decide and want to make the positive feedback levels and brain exercise levels higher for their

children can just find it too difficult at times to do those activities at the levels that the parent would like to do them.

### **We Need To Figure Out Ways To Help Each Child**

Exhausted parents can have a much harder time doing the key things that children need in those key months and years. Parents with no financial resources can face major barriers to doing those activities for their child in those high opportunity time frames.

When those kinds of realities and logistical challenges are true for a family, the rest of us need to figure out how we can help the parents of young children in those settings get the time and the resources that are needed to help each child.

We cannot abandon those children. Every child we help at that point in his or her life will have a better life if those needs are met at that point in time. We need to recognize the need to help each child and we need to accept the ethical and moral obligation to help each child now that we understand what those processes and those risks are, and how they change actual lives of very real people every day.

All children will do well and we will close and prevent the learning gaps that are crippling too many of our schools today when we figure out

how to do what needs to be done to help make those needed interactions with each child in those key years a reality for each child in every setting.

Parents are very clearly the essential place to start. All parents need to have a clear sense that their own direct interactions with their children — particularly in those first years of life — are essential and invaluable to their children. The rest of society needs to help mothers and fathers and families with those kinds of pressures find the time and the resources to focus on their child, and to have their child's needs met in those key months and years when lives can be moved to better trajectories.

Every child we save is a child we save.

## **We Need Both Books And Support Resources In Homes And Day Cares**

We need various kinds of support programs — like the visiting home nurses programs — that teach mothers useful sets of parenting skills in the home and that can even model those skills by helping the actual child. We need to support those programs and make them available where they are needed to change the life trajectory of a child.

We also need other programs that help by reading to children and by getting books and educational support sources into homes. Children need



toys to learn — and helping all children have basic building blocks and other basic logistical toys that teach function and structure to each child can be a very good thing to do.

We need day cares for low-income mothers that very intentionally and deliberately help to meet those brain-strengthening processes for each child.

We need to help low-income mothers to seek out day care settings that provide those services, and we need to all expect all day cares to do those activities for the children they serve.

The logistics of daily living for low-income people truly can be draining and exhausting, and the available resources for helping children in many homes can be slim or non-existent.

### **We Need To Make Books Available To Low-Income Children**

In many low-income settings, every single available amount of money is spent on rent, food, and basic living expenses. Having discretionary money for parents to spend on books for their children can be extremely difficult.

We know from several studies that between 50 and 61 percent of low-income homes have no children's books today.

We also know that low-income mothers are eight times more likely to read to their children if the mothers are given books, and if the mothers are also told about the benefits to their child that are created by reading.

We also know that even though more than half of our low-income mothers do not read to their children now, more than 30 percent of our low-income mothers do read daily. We know from that information that it is entirely possible to have reading done in low-income homes.

The number of low-income homes that read to their children will go up significantly when more low-income homes have books in the homes. The number of low-income day cares and custodial settings who read to the children under their care will also go up significantly when more of those settings have books in them.

Those facts all create obvious opportunities. There clearly are a set of actions that we should collectively encourage and support — providing resources of various kinds to low-income families as effectively and often as we can to encourage the right levels of interactions with an adult will happen at some level for each child in those key years.

## **We Clearly Need Day Cares To Support Parents In Those Activities**

We very much need our day cares — both the institutional group day cares and the various kinds and levels of in-home day cares — to have books that they read to their children, and we need our day cares to very intentionally and very explicitly be part of the support system that creates needed brain exercise opportunities and processes for each child.

Our day cares need to be part of the brain development resources team for each child. Too many day cares today function totally as custodial, baby sitting sites with minimal interactions with the children. We need that to change and we need day cares to also understand their role in the overall development processes for the children in their care.

Many day care workers will love having that knowledge and that opportunity. People don't go into day care jobs because they hate children. People tend to very intentionally self select into day care settings and day care jobs in order to be with children.

Teaching those day care workers who are in those jobs because they want to be with children and to care for children about the great value they can add by reading and talking in positive and reinforcing ways to children can make those day care jobs better and even more meaningful for a number of day care workers.

Day cares are clearly a functional, but often underappreciated component of the relevant education infrastructure for each child.

We need the people who run our education programs for states and communities to understand that day cares are actually already a part of the educational continuum today for the children who they will be teaching in their kindergartens and in their elementary and high schools.

We need the people who lead those education systems and who run our various education institutions to do what they can do in creative ways to help those day cares with those activities, and to educate parents about those issues in various ways in order to have more students learning ready when the students actually get to the schools.

We also need to help mothers and fathers from all groups find child care support settings and approaches that provide those interaction processes and that meet those development needs for their children.

We know that low-income families can benefit from multiple levels of support — including having good day care programs that read, talk, and sing to their children and having support people who are able to visit homes and coach parents and help parents with that whole range of activities that build strong brain connectivity levels.

We all need to recognize that it can be an extremely rewarding and highly beneficial investment for us all to invest in those resources at the point in time, and in the settings and situations where that investment can change the life trajectory for a child.

Each child we save is a child we save.

## **We Need To Give Parents The Gift Of Being Able To Help**

### **Their Children**

Parents are the key to the future for almost all children.

Parents love their children. Mothers and fathers very much want their children to succeed. We need to give parents the gift of understanding about how parents can very directly help their children, and we need to give parents the gift of being able to do the very beneficial sets of things for their children that can make entire lives better for their children.

Both families and communities can help with that process. For the maximum benefit to our children, we need community leaders, community cultures, and family level understanding and support for that whole early child development process.

At the most core level, we need to focus on the family — on the mother and the father for each child. We need to help parents do the things as parents that will create real benefit for each child.

We will be making a huge mistake as a country if we do not create the equivalent of a public health campaign to teach that information about those key months and years to every single mother and to every single father as soon as we can relative to the birth of each child.

We need our full caregiver team — obstetricians, pediatricians, hospitals, and relevant nursing staff to share that science and to support that process. Another chapter of this book explains how that support from our care teams can be used to help each family and each child.

We very much need our communities and our families to support those parents in those processes. We need the whole village to support both the parents and the children so that we can, in fact, help every child in those key months and years when that help creates the most value for the child.

We know what to do. We need to do it.

This is a time and an opportunity for leadership to make a difference. We very much need leaders for all of our communities and settings who

understand these key issues and who do what needs to be done as leaders to make the future significantly better for the children in the settings they lead.

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