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**MRS. BUSH'S REMARKS TO
THE SENATE COMMITTEE ON HEALTH, EDUCATION, LABOR, AND PENSIONS
September 11, 2001**

Thank you Senator Kennedy, Senator Gregg and members of the Committee for your warm welcome, and thank you for asking me to talk about a subject that is of the highest importance to all Americans and one that is very close to my heart - the development and education of our young children.

I am proud to be part of President Bush's effort to make sure that children are well-prepared for reading and learning when they enter school.

Earlier this year I launched an initiative called Ready to Read, Ready to Learn. This initiative has two major goals – first, to ensure that all young children are ready to read and learn when they enter their first classroom - and second, to help our nation recruit the best and the brightest to become teachers, especially in schools and classrooms in impoverished neighborhoods. I will address these goals and other related issues this morning.

My emphasis on making sure that pre-school children have stimulating activities and interactions with adults and other children so they develop strong language and pre-reading concepts stems from my own experiences as a mother, public school teacher and a school librarian.

As a mother, I learned quickly that reading to our daughters and playing language games -- even when they were babies -- brought joy and laughter to our home. As they grew physically, they also grew in their love of being read to and then reading themselves.

I must have read "Hop on Pop" to them dozens of times, and it was not uncommon for them to ask me to read the same book several times a day. It was astonishing to watch how many new words they learned as we read and talked about words and their meanings, the names of the letters, and the sounds the letters make.

Before I knew it, they could "read" many words in "Hop on Pop" and other books. Well, actually they memorized the words because we read them so much. But the important thing is they thought they were reading. Even by two years of age they knew when the book was right side up and knew that we always started to read on the left side of the page.

As they continued to grow, they became fascinated with different ways we could play with words and sounds, and delighted in hearing nursery rhymes, stories, and songs. Before they entered kindergarten they knew that the letters and words in books represented the same words that people speak to one another.

When our girls entered school they were well on their way to independent reading and their love for reading was firmly established. Little did I know at that time how all of our reading activities from their birth onward provided the foundation for their later literacy skills.

During my career as an elementary school teacher, I was fortunate to focus a great deal of my time on a love of mine - interacting with young children around books and reading. In fact, storytime was my favorite time of the day, and I was constantly thrilled at how reading opened up new worlds for the children and got their imaginations going full speed.

However, this was also a time when I observed that some children were having difficulty learning to read. It was troubling to watch these youngsters struggle with print, but it was even more troubling to see how embarrassed and frustrated they were by their failure to do what they saw other children do. It was as if their self-esteem and confidence took a blow every time they tried to read.

For many of these children, I could see that they didn't feel at home in school - it was not a place that they wanted to be, and I noticed that they began to avoid reading. As a librarian, I also noticed that some teachers developed lower expectations for these children even though many were very bright and quite adept in other academic skills.

I did not know at that time that many of these children were having difficulties learning to read because they had not developed the basic building blocks of language during their preschool years - the building blocks that are forged through language play, lap-time reading, bedtime stories and the conversations about the characters and the situations that the stories brought to life.

Why was this basic foundation missing? In some cases, the children's parents had not learned to read themselves and could not read to their kids. In some cases, limited income meant no books in the home. In some cases, parents' work schedules simply precluded any routine conversation, language play, or interactions with books if they were available.

In some cases parents, child care providers or caregivers did not know that it was important to engage preschool children in language and literacy interactions - they may have thought that was the job of the schools. In some cases the children had cognitive impairments which impeded early reading development; in some cases, all of these factors were responsible, and in some cases only one or two.

In short, I saw firsthand that many children were not lucky enough to have the early opportunities that help to develop a love for language and reading. And I learned that not having those opportunities can have devastating effects on the ability of many children to succeed in school. I realized that for many children, being left behind did not begin in elementary school - it began in the years between birth and their entry into kindergarten.

Over the years, I have been blessed by being surrounded by people who are passionate about making sure that the education of our children is of the highest priority. The advantages of being the wife of a Governor and a President for whom reading and learning are a civil right as well as an educational right are many, not to mention working with him to make sure that no child is left behind.

Recently, I convened a White House Summit on Early Childhood Cognitive Development at Georgetown University, where many experts and practitioners came together to help us understand how to help all of our children become ready to read and ready to learn. I am delighted that Senator Kennedy participated in the Summit and inspired us through his experience and his dedication to children.

My specific purpose in convening this summit was to develop a clear understanding of what parents, grandparents, early childhood teachers, childcare providers, and other caregivers can systematically do to provide children with rich and rewarding early lives during a period of development that is marked by extraordinary growth and change.

I asked the participants to focus on early cognitive development with an emphasis on the development of early language and pre-reading abilities. I wanted to make sure that all of us understood how these skills, or the absence of them, affect a child's later ability to read and thus succeed in school.

While my focus is on early language and pre-reading development, I do not want to minimize the importance of nutrition and physical development or the development of feelings, behavior, and social skills. To address early cognitive development, including language and literacy development, outside of the context of social and emotional development, would limit the progress that we can make. All of these competencies are intertwined and each requires focused attention.

The development of early language and pre-reading skills is extraordinarily important to a child's reading ability and academic success throughout school, as well as occupational success in life. And the absence of these types of development has the potential to destroy self-esteem, confidence, and motivation to learn.

My focus was also predicated on the fact that teaching vocabulary concepts, language skills and pre-reading skills (including print concepts, letter knowledge and phonological concepts) in preschool programs has not been emphasized enough in the past and has not received critical attention.

Why? Many early childhood educators and parents have thought that early learning was primarily maturational and that preschool children "were not developmentally ready" to learn about letters, sounds, writing, numbers, vocabulary concepts or other sophisticated content.

The idea has been that it is best to wait to encourage young children to read, count, and learn abstract concepts -- they will get enough of that in school. The conventional wisdom has been that teaching this type of content too early may interfere with the motivation to learn once they do arrive at school and may suppress the joy that can come from such learning.

But I have learned that this is not the case. The infant brain actually seeks out and acquires a tremendous amount of information about language in the first year of life.

Even before babies can speak, they have already figured out many of the components of language- they know which particular sounds their language uses, what sounds can be combined to create words, and the tempo and rhythm of words and phrases.

Why is this information important? Because developmental science has taught us that there is a strong connection between early language development and reading. Language and reading require the same types of sound analysis. The better babies are at distinguishing the building blocks of speech at six months, the better they will be at other more complex language skills at two and three years of age, and the easier it will be for them to grasp the idea of how sounds link to letters at four and five years old.

In short, preschool cognitive abilities, to include language and pre-reading abilities, predict school success and school completion. For example, reading scores in the 9th grade can be predicted with surprising accuracy from a child's knowledge of the alphabet in kindergarten.

It is very important to know that children need help learning these concepts - they do not develop naturally. A child will not learn the name of the letter "A" or what sound it makes or how to print it simply by being with adults who know these things, or by being with adults who read a great deal for pleasure. Children learn these critical concepts because adults take the time and effort to teach them in an exciting, engaging, and interactive manner.

To be sure, this does not mean that preschool children should be taught using the same methods and materials that are used with first and second graders. The challenge for the parent, the grandparent, the preschool teacher, or the childcare provider is to develop fun, educational language activities that also engage and develop children's interests, social competencies, and emotional health. All of these goals can be joined and met, but there must be a clear and equal emphasis on building emergent literacy skills.

Every expert who participated in the recent White House Summit On Early Childhood Cognitive Development stressed that reading is the keystone for academic and life success. A failure to learn to read not only leads to failure in school, but portends failure throughout life.

Children who can't read are humiliated emotionally and socially in school. They are unable to learn about the wonders of science, mathematics, literature and other subjects because they cannot read grade-level texts. By high school, the student who cannot read has little hope of attending college and can only look forward to meager occupational choices.

It is no wonder that 10 to 15 percent of poor readers drop out of school. And with their limited options, they are more than twice as likely as successful students to be unemployed after dropping out, to be arrested and to engage in substance abuse.

Reading failure pushes beyond school failure and occupational hardships. Without sufficient reading skills, a person cannot read a prescription, decipher a warning label, or keep up with news and advances that benefit health.

This is why reading failure does not just constitute an educational issue -- it reflects a significant public health problem. And, with great anguish we note that parents who cannot read cannot engage their children in reading activities, thus perpetuating the soft bigotry of low expectations brought about by illiteracy.

Reading provides the foundation for academic and life success, and we know that learning to read is difficult for many children. Children who fall behind in reading in early elementary school struggle to "catch up".

Most children who fall behind in the first and second grade are most frequently children who did not develop the essential language and pre-reading building blocks during early childhood. Many of these children are born into economic disadvantage, which, for many reasons, reduces the quality and quantity of language and literacy interactions critical for school readiness.

At the recent Summit, we learned that there are effective early language and early literacy programs and strategies that can be used at home and in preschool that can ensure that many children at risk of failure now can enter their first classroom ready to read and ready to learn.

We can begin to disseminate and implement the principles applied in these programs as quickly as possible through our colleges and universities, professional organizations, libraries, and research programs.

But we must also determine how these programs are best used at home, in the classroom, the daycare setting and by parents, grandparents and teachers who vary in their knowledge of the principles being taught.

The best scientific knowledge of "what works" is only effective when it is provided in an informed manner. While our early childhood preparation programs at colleges and universities are moving forward to ensure that their students are fully competent, in the interim, curricula and programs must be developed to meet the needs of teachers, parents, and childcare providers who vary considerably in their knowledge of "what works".

To meet these challenges, President Bush has asked Secretary Paige and Secretary Thompson to convene a task force on early childhood development to identify priorities for research to address these critical questions.

This effort is now underway, and a team of scientists and educators from the National Institutes of Health, the Department of Education, and the Department of Health and Human Services is moving forward with plans to disseminate what is known to the public and to conduct the research necessary to close critical knowledge gaps. Secretaries Paige and Thomson will share their findings with all of you as well.

I want to thank you for providing me with the opportunity to discuss these important national issues with you today. We are addressing something that goes to the heart and soul of our nation.

From day one the education we provide our children will shape the way they think and learn. It will drive the excitement, motivation, and effort they bring to learning, the way they interact with others, and their ability to adapt to their successes and failures throughout life.

We are embarking on a most noble mission to help their journey become as fulfilling and productive as possible; this is their birthright.

I appreciate your inviting me here today. And, I commend your efforts to ensure that all children have a strong language and literacy foundation before they board their first school bus. I look forward to our work on behalf of America's youngest children.

Thank you.

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