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Address by Mr. James P. Grant
Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)
to the
International Conference on Early Education and Development (0-6 years)
Childhood in the 21st Century

"Early Childhood Development:
Ethical Responsibility; Sound Investment"

Hong Kong
31 July 1989

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"EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT:
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Madame Governor;
Fellow Participants;

I am most pleased to meet with you as you gather to share experiences, to look into the future, and to set direction in the very timely field of the development and education of young children.

You assembled here will be aware, as Lady Wilson has emphasized, of the far-ranging benefits of investing in early childhood education and development.

A society comprised of personally secure and mentally alert individuals who are not only able to cope with, but to be creative in solving the problems of a modern world, is better suited to meet its own needs, and is better equipped to make a contribution in the global community as well.

Secondly, a society that invests in health, nutrition, and education in the early years will be a more economically productive society.

Third, a society that attends to the early formation of sound values will be more likely to avoid such social ills as drug abuse and AIDS, which can only be addressed by a change of attitudes.

A society that gives all children a "fair start" by providing physical, social, and emotional support from birth will be a more egalitarian society.

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Furthermore, children have a right to develop to their potential - a right acknowledged in the soon-to-be adopted and ratified (hopefully) United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. And the rights of the child, of course, in reality, translate to an obligation by society.

With these social benefits and obligations in mind, we meet at a crucial moment for the world's children. While the industrialized countries have enjoyed relative prosperity during the 1980s, poverty in many developing countries, particularly those in Latin America and Africa, has considerably moderated the developmental progress of previous decades. It is difficult to imagine even if we know it to be true, that Third World countries are now sending tens of billions of US dollars net to the industrialized countries each year, due in part to the shocking debt total of the developing world, which now equals, US$1,300 billion.

It has been a grim decade for the world's poor. We have come to learn that it is often the poor, and the most vulnerable among the poor - especially women and children - who bear the heaviest burden of the suffering. For example, the average weight-for-age of young children is falling in many countries for which figures are available. In the 37 poorest nations, spending per head on health has been reduced by 50 per cent and on education by 25 per cent over the past 10 years.

In other words, it is children who are bearing the heaviest burden of debt and recession in the 1980s. And in tragic summary, in Africa and Latin America alone, it can be estimated that at least half a million young children died in 1988 as a result of the slowing down or the reversal of progress in the developing world.

Furthermore, these figures account for just a fraction of the 40,000 children who die each day, the vast majority of them from causes for which we have long-since discovered low-cost cures or preventions.

It is worth noting also that in 1950, four-fifths of children born in the world were born in developing countries. The United Nations Population Division trend lines indicate that by the year 2020, nine-tenths of the world's new-borns will live in developing countries. Moreover, by 1950, well under one-fifth of developing country populations lived in urban areas. By 2020, over one-half will be urban residents.

With urbanization comes a tendency for the breakdown of family ties, a removal from traditional means to meet the needs of children, and increased participation of women in the labour force.

All of these conditions challenge us to seek new ways to meet the developmental needs of children.

An insidious disparity in children's opportunities for growth and development is growing against the backdrop of a widening economic gap, creating a spectre of a privileged few and the large "underclass" of humanity in Asia and in other parts of the developing world.

Is there hope to prevent the "polarization" in children's opportunities and, rather, to guarantee every child - and every society - a "fair start"?

Although this decade has witnessed a devastating slow-down in many developing countries, advances have been made. Whereas five out of six children lived to the age of one in 1960, 12 out of 13 children now survive to that age.

In an era of economic hardship for the world's poor which so dramatically affects children, one might ask how we can speak of major advances in the health and development of children.

Our optimism comes from three lessons gleaned in the process of achieving dramatic results in one area affecting child development - health. First is the lesson that extremely low-cost/high-impact knowledge and technology can be used successfully to reach children on a large scale. In fact, in 1982, UNICEF singled out a small handful of such health measures, which, if applied fully throughout the world, could actually reduce the child mortality rates of 1980 by half before the end of the century.

Many of these interventions are, I am sure, familiar to those of you gathered for this conference. They include universal child immunization, oral rehydration therapy (ORT), growth monitoring, a return to wide-spread use of breast-feeding and proper weaning practices, proper family spacing, food supplementation, and female literacy.

From the worldwide effort to significantly reduce infant and child mortality, we have also learned that it is possible to enlist many organizations in the cause of children. One might say that today a Grand Alliance for Children is being formed of teachers and religious leaders, of mass media and government agencies, voluntary organizations and people's movements, business and labour unions, professional associations, conventional health services, non-governmental organizations, and of course, women's groups. This social mobilization effort can be called upon to serve child development as well as survival.

Third, we have learned that it is necessary to support and strengthen families and communities through empowering child caregivers with knowledge, and by assisting them in organizing for action. Perhaps even more important than learning that this is necessary, has been realizing that it is possible - it has been made possible, to a large extent, by the expansion of communication technologies and networks.

We have learned that it is possible to reach children on a large scale with programmes that are affordable, using simple and appropriate technologies.

This provision of basic health knowledge and the accompanying social mobilization has been historic in its effectiveness. According to the World Health Organization, the lives of 2.5 million children were saved last year as a result of two interventions alone - immunization and ORT. With continued and sustained efforts, this figure can be doubled by the early 1990s.

As we begin our deliberations here in Hong Kong we must ask: Can these lessons be applied to the rest of the child development field? ...to improving early childhood development and education? ...to unleashing intelligence, and to fostering an ability to cope and create in the early years? The answer to all of these questions is clearly "Yes". But it is yes if. The potential exists to make great strides in early childhood development. These possibilities will become realities, however, if - and only if - the popular and political will is present to make them happen.

Let me back up one step. Development of young children encompasses their survival and good health. It also involves their cognitive, emotional, ethical and social growth.

As the field of child development has changed rapidly in the past two decades, research findings have emerged that the international community has not yet fully digested or appropriated for its policies and programmes. Here lies a great potential.

For instance, it has long been accepted that health and good nutrition support the psychological and social development of the child. This has, in fact, been one of the many justifications for major efforts the world over to guard the health of children.

But scientists have more recently alerted us to the reverse relationship - to the fact that psychological and social well being have an impact on nutrition and health, hence on growth and survival. We now know that interactions which satisfy the needs for security, exploration through play, and stimulation can be as important to growth as the actual nutritional quality of the food a child receives. The import of these findings is that health, nutrition, early stimulation, and education must be considered together in programming for both survival and development.

It has not been widely enough known that meeting the social and psychological needs of young children and integrating them with nutritional and health needs, can be accomplished at relatively low cost. No expensive supplies are required. Indigenous materials adapted appropriately - bottle caps for counting and sorting, or, sections of bamboo for grading and matching - are not inherently inferior to expensive imported development and education materials for young children.

Most of all children need loving attention and interaction. That does take time and energy, which can be considerable, and we must, therefore, find ways to support families and caregivers in "Developing the child through love."

What really needs to be shared, as you are well aware, is information, passed on through the training and education of parents as well as centre-based caregivers. Information should be shared in such a way that people who attend children know how best to use the simple materials and to respond effectively to the active child.

There is another source of optimism that lets us believe that programming for early childhood development can be effective. Since the International Year of the Child, 10 years ago, literally thousands of demonstration projects and programmes have shown that it is possible to have a measureable effect on child development at very low cost.

For example, in China, the All China Womens Federation, has created over 200,000 parent-education programmes at the local level during the past four years. These programmes begin by bringing together local people with expertise in health, nutrition, education, and other fields, to work out their own local curriculum.

In Colombia, a programme of home day care has been organized in selected communities where young children are at risk of debilitated or delayed development. In each community a local organizer works with the government's Family Welfare Institute to identify women who can, with the help of other participating mothers, provide care in their homes for children of neighbours, up to a total of 15 children between 1 and 6 years of age, including their own. In the brief period of two and a half years, the programme has grown to cover 700,000 children. It works!

In Nepal, women engaged in income-generating activities are organized into groups of six, and each woman takes one day per week to watch the six children of the group. Thus, women are freed for five days each week while their children are attended by caregivers who devote full attention to their needs. The very minimal programme costs include a four-day training course conducted by a district trainer who fulfills other responsibilities as well, and some basic indigenous materials adapted for developmental activities for children from birth to age 3.

In India, the Integrated Child Development Service (ICDS) takes as its principal participants pregnant and lactating mothers and children from birth to 6 years of age. The programme, which includes non-formal preschools for children from ages 3 to 5, now covers 40 per cent of India's development blocks in areas of the country where children are most in need. Programme monitoring shows that ICDS has not only improved the survival rate and nutritional status of children but also gives participating children a strong advantage in school over children not served by the programme. And the cost? US$1.49 per child per year.

In Indonesia, a "Mothers' Awareness" component dealing with early childhood stimulation, is now being integrated into the nutrition and growth monitoring network throughout the country.

In the Philippines, an Early Childhood Enrichment Programme delivers learning opportunities to disadvantaged preschoolers in daycare centres and through a parental education programme.

These examples demonstrate that while children's developmental needs are universal, the circumstances in which they are being met and the approaches used vary immensely.

Those of you gathered in this room are aware of the wide variety of situations in which parents suffer overwhelming hurdles in meeting the developmental needs of their children. Chances are very good, were you yourselves able to access the situation and design a programme to meet those needs, it would be a very effective and low cost programme.

As the Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund, I seek your advice. How best can those of you who have this important and even life-sustaining knowledge extend the benefits of that knowledge to parents and children with whom you will never personally be able to work?

The international community looks to you, as experts in early childhood development and education, for guidance and leadership in meeting the needs of children removed form the channels of easy access to care and services.

It is time to take a quantum leap in order to move the field of early childhood development to a new level. In 1960, five out of six children lived to age one. Today, 12 out of 13 children survive to that age - and the future depends on them. Can their needs be met? It is time to look beyond experiments with pilot and demonstration projects to see how this work can be applied to a vastly larger number of children.

It is time to advocate and to provide guidance to policy makers and programmers, helping them to move to a larger scale.

We must ensure that early childhood development components are woven into existing large-scale programmes affecting children. We must ensure that child care programmes - whether centre- or home-based - are provided to children whose needs would not otherwise be met. And we must move to a new level in our training of people in child development and education activities.

Allow me to highlight six specific challenges as we look to the future.

A first challenge is to ensure that a major effort is made to work directly with parents and communities to empower them with knowledge that will increase survival and promote development. Especially during this era of economic restraint, limited resources must be used to reach the largest number of people possible with the most effective approaches. I am convinced that working with parents and other caregivers must take preference over increased expansion of expensive centre-based programmes which reach only relatively few of those in need. Where centre-based programmes are operating, parents and other caregivers must be involved.

A second challenge is to pursue the programme combination of health, nutrition, and education which has been proven to increase rates of survival and to help children develop to their full potential. Educators must find ways to incorporate health into their programmes and, those in the health field must seek allies in education and other fields.

Third, we must insist that where technology can be applied to help children it be applied to reach those most in need. For instance, in mobilizing the mass media, TV "spots" may show how to use local materials for developmental activities. Radio may be much more effective than television in some places to reach the masses. Out-of-the-way areas may benefit most from video cassettes designed for use with portable video systems.

Fourth, we must turn the attention of professional and academic groups from the most advantaged sectors towards those most in need. In so doing, a challenge for professionals will be to carve out a new role in which their expertise is used more for training and for motivating paraprofessionals than for direct attention to children in classrooms.

The fifth major challenge that will require creative thought and action as we approach the 21st century relates to the readiness of children for school. This challenge is very much on my mind as we approach a world conference on education to be held in Bangkok in March 1990. The world conference, much like the 1978 Alma Ata conference on "Heath for All" will seek commitment and a plan of action aimed at providing "education for all".

A fundamental part of the "education for all" initiative must be the strengthening of early childhood development. Although there is a tendency for educators to concentrate on teachers and materials and facilities, we must recognize that the most important input to primary schooling is the child. We must improve the readiness of children for school without, however, falling into the trap of simply teaching them the alphabet at an earlier age. We must also be aware that readiness lies as much in overcoming iron or vitamin A deficiency, and in ensuring good health, as it does in improving the cognitive ability or social and emotional security of a child.

At the same time, all of the responsibility for adjustment must not be placed on the child or on the child's family. Schools need to consider, for instance, what language of instruction is best for children at the time they enter school. They need to seek ways to incorporate culturally appropriate materials into the curriculum. They need to prepare teachers for children who have learned to be inquisitive in a variety of early education programmes. As we look to future, the artificial split between "preschool" and "school" responsibilities needs to be muted, and we must focus anew on child development for the important years from birth to age 7 or 8.

Finally, perhaps the greatest challenge as we approach the 21st century is to continue to expand the Alliance of governmental and non-governmental institutions that will promote childrens' rights and welfare. We must fight for needed investments in early childhood development, and we must fight to overcome sectoral barriers against working with the whole child.

The international community seeks to make the most of the limited resources available for the survival, protection and development of the coming generation. UNICEF, for its part, stands ready to support and assist your efforts at the national level to meet these challenges. We firmly believe that early childhood development is a good investment. As we make that investment, we must remember that it is the child whose needs we must listen to and discover, and to whom we must respond.

This was eloquently expressed by Margaret Alva, Minister of State for Youth Affairs in India, speaking to the first meeting of the South Asian Association for Regional Co-operation (SAARC):

"A child is born without barriers. Its needs are integrated and it is we who choose to compartmentalize them into health, nutrition or education. Yet the child itself cannot isolate its hunger for food from its hunger for affection or its hunger for knowledge. The same unity extends to the child's perception of the world. The child's mind is free of class, religion, colour or nationality barriers, unless we wish it otherwise. It is this intrinsic strength in the unity of the child that we need to exploit, for building a better world."

To that end, we also need unity. We need more partners in the Grand Alliance for Children. It is my firm hope that this conference will build unity and expand the Alliance. We must move beyond the momentary exchange of ideas to provide vision and a basis for common action as we approach that most important of all tasks - the strengthening of childhood in the 21st century. We must put children first among our priorities at all levels of society. Such an ethic will help ensure the development of children for generations to come and it will offer evidence that we are progressing as a more just and humane society.

Thank you.