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Statement by Mr. James P. Grant
Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)
at the
Fifth International Conference by the
Pontifical Council for Health Care Workers
on the theme
"The Human Mind: In Our Image and Likeness"
Society's Obligation in the Development of a Child's Intelligence

The Vatican
17 November 1990



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The Human Mind: In Our Image and Likeness

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"Society's Obligation in the Development of a Child's Intelligence"

The theme of this conference recalls from Genesis that humans are made in the image and likeness of God. It is a most appropriate subscript to the title, "The Human Mind". For is not the mind - conscious, free intelligence - the most precious of those features that distinguish us among all creatures that share in the gift of life?

Intelligence guides our first steps as children. We learn which crops to grow, we build bridges, we loosen the grip of disease. We learn how to love each other better - to care in ways that more effectively meet real needs - and to distinguish right from wrong - all with our multiple intelligences. We create and appreciate beauty. As intelligent beings we experience that uniquely human desire for the full breadth of reality, including its mysterious source - that enthrallment with more, that many would say is a reaching for God.

Would you not say that this is the greatest potential of a human being...that it is this capacity to love and to care and to be open to the radical otherness of God - which is the foundation of human dignity? Taken to another level, is not our human culture...our civilization itself...dependent upon human beings reaching their full potential?

This afternoon I will speak to you about children. For the light is snuffed out all-too-soon, and unnecessarily, for far too great a proportion of the human family. Not too long ago, there was nothing we could do, really, about the stunting of child development (among those who survive in a world in which 40,000 young children still die each day) - stunting which is a result, primarily, of the worst effects of poverty and ignorance. Nor were we aware

of the extent of the indignities which young children suffer. Today we are aware of the problems and the solutions. I will argue that for children to continue to be deprived of the full opportunities of life is not only tragic; it is a moral outrage.

A child is born with extraordinary capacities which favor survival and healthy development. A new-born can see, hear, smell, touch, and taste. A baby can move and interact. She can cry and make sounds. She arrives with a desire to learn, related to a growing sense of inner competence, and with a desire to form social attachments.

Our world would be a far different place if all children could simply activate these innate capacities as they advance in age. But something more is needed. Families and communities and societies must provide conditions that will allow these capacities to be used and enhanced. They must meet some very basic developmental needs. Too often, however, these needs are not met, with the tragic result that capacities are allowed to deteriorate, pointing the child toward a lethargic and dependent life, preventing her from reaching her fullest potential. She will never actualize that potential in society, nor before God.

It is widely recognized that the first years of life are by far the most vital for the normal development of a person, and especially for the development of his or her intelligence. The brain attains 90 per cent of its adult volume by the time the child is 6 years of age, whereas the rest of the 6-year old's body represents only 40 per cent of adult volume. The most rapid period of development of brain cells is completed by the time a child is 2.5 years old.

A child whose needs are not met in the early years has slim chances of compensating for it later in life, thus setting the wheels in motion to perpetuate the cycle of poverty that is so pervasively the major cause of the deprivation in the first place.

What children need to develop fully is not unknown. We know, today, what children need, and we have found that it is remarkably low-cost when real needs are addressed, as opposed to funding approaches that miss their target. Decades of scientific research have confirmed that for a child to develop in a healthy and normal way, it is necessary to meet not only the basic needs of protection, food and health care, but also to meet the basic needs for affection, interaction and stimulation, security (associated with experience of consistency and predictability), and learning through exploration and discovery. Where children's developmental needs are not being met, intervention programmes - either for children themselves or for primary care-givers - can be very successful and are not costly.

The interaction among the influences of health, nutrition and stimulation is such that a malnourished infant is commonly unable to elicit the responses it needs for its physical, emotional and social development from already overstressed, depleted caregivers. These children expect to fail, and even by 9 months of age, the babies who show signs that they expect to fail for the rest of their lives can be identified. Conversely, the synergy among these same influences is evident, as considerable research has shown, in the fact

that children who have experienced consistent, caring relationships will be better nourished - even if the same quantity and quality of food is taken in - and less apt to be sick than those who have been neglected.

Malnourishment, the insidious threat to children's development on several levels, is rooted in a myriad of causes, many of them far beyond the capacity of individual parents to combat - causes such as drought or famine and the enormous constellation of economic issues that keep poverty's tight grip on whole countries as well as on large pockets of populations within the richest countries in the world. Are the children of these populations doomed to bear for life the debilitating effects of social ills, never to grow to their full potential? It is clear today that there is light long before the end of this dark tunnel. There is much more room to maneuver than we have often realized...more possibility for improvement within existing conditions.

For example, we have learned that 2/3s to 3/4s of malnutrition is not the result simply of the lack of food and income at the family gate. It is what parents do with available resources that makes the vital difference. A child may be fed starchy foods that stop its cries of hunger but do not satisfy its nutritional needs, even though green vegetables and other sources of nutrition are readily available. Far too many parents are unaware that a small amount of iodine is essential to the young child's brain development, or that vitamin A will protect their child's vision and possibly its life, nor do they know which foods provide these common nutrients.

Similarly, for decades we saw, and still, unfortunately, we see families turn from the overwhelming benefits of breastfeeding to the far more expensive and child-health-threatening use of breast-milk substitutes. The nutritive, immunologic and family bonding benefits of breastfeeding, with proper weaning practices that guard the nutritional needs of the child rather than just satisfy its hunger, hold the potential to singularly make a significant impact in the fight against child malnutrition.

Health and nutrition information such as this has been known for decades. It is information capable of not only saving children's lives in massive numbers, but also of contributing to the normal development of children who do live. Knowledge alone, in the right hands, can return to children the gift of life - full of the promise to develop their full intelligence. In fact, never before in history has there been such a gap between relevant available knowledge and its use by those who need to know.

This raises a most serious question. Whose responsibility is it that this knowledge reach those who currently remain untouched by its benefits? Given the role that child development plays in the maturation of mental capacities, we can equally ask: whose responsibility is it to see that all humans - made in His image and likeness - have the opportunity to realize their full potential before God...to search for the full truth open to the human...to strive, in the language of religion, to know God?

When we as societies have the capacity to provide, at really very low cost, what is needed for the natural unfolding of the human potential to children, to those who are the most vulnerable among us...and yet our greatest hope for the future...can we in good conscience turn away? Morality must

march with our new capacity. Societies have a role to fulfill in seeing that families know what to do and that they receive the necessary support to adopt their behaviour accordingly. Ethically, this is undeniably clear. In practice, however, there is a tragic lag.

Two months ago a most provocative look at this question was published in the New York Times Magazine in a cover article by Prof. T. Berry Brazelton, a paediatrician at the Harvard Medical School and the founder of the Children's Hospital Medical Center in Boston. Dr. Brazelton documented that in the United States:

"Needy children are in double jeopardy. They have the most health problems, and the least access to care. Poor women do not receive prenatal care or adequate preventive care for their infants...

"Only for the group of desperate families willing to label themselves hopeless - unwed, unemployed, homeless - do we have handouts, like Aid to Families with Dependent Children. To qualify for help, a family must first identify itself as a failure. The labels stick. Treated as such, people will feel and act like failures. Despite the huge amount spent on welfare, the efforts are generally counter-productive, offering money without real support.

"Programmes like Head Start and W.I.C., (a supplemental food program for women, infants and children) have often succeeded because they reached out to parents. Families are educated together. As children succeed, their parents begin to feel successful. This progress has a lasting effect."

The United States example shows far too weak a mechanism for reaching out to parents to protect at-risk children during stages when low-cost interventions could still help, before the situation is so desperate that costly remedial care is needed...care which is often too late, and ineffective. It is not the only way for a society to respond. In France, by stark contrast, from the time a woman is identified as pregnant, the state ensures that a very high level of care is provided to mother and child.

In the area of ensuring that children have adequate opportunity to interact with adults - that their needs for stimulation and affection are met - society also has a major responsibility. What happens to children who have no parent nor primary care-giver, or to the child whose parents are already overstressed, addicted to drugs or who do not know how to care for their children? Their chances for normal development are slim, indeed.

Yet we know, now, that early childhood development programmes can meet a child's basic development needs, serving as a catalyst for social as well as individual change. Besides fostering proper development of a person's intelligence, early intervention programmes have positive long-term effects, research has established, on school progress, on the development of personality, on social behaviour and on economic productivity.

The difference between the state of the art in early child development and the state of the practice constitutes another great and unconscionable gap. Our knowledge about human intelligence and how to nurture it has made tremendous strides in recent years. Yet our actions, in meeting the developmental needs of our young, operate out of a level of awareness which was transcended decades ago.

But has not the Church long recognized the divine nature of, and our responsibility toward, all human beings? "What you do unto the least of these, you do unto Me. And what you do unto Me, you do not unto Me, but to the One who sent me," Jesus told us.

He also rebuked His overly protective disciples and gathered the little children to Him, insisting that "the Kingdom of God belongs to such as these".

Meeting the developmental needs of children is an absolute prerequisite to people reaching their full potency. The responsibility to ensure that those needs are met belongs to all of society.

The World Summit for Children, held six weeks ago in New York, gathered more world leaders - among whom, importantly, was His Eminence Agostino Cardinal Casaroli - to discuss issues related to children than have ever come together to discuss any topic in history. This gathering was an affirmation that the primacy of responsibilities toward children fundamental to all of the great religious and spiritual traditions now extends beyond the obligation of parent to child, to be an obligation of all society, including the family and the State. The Convention on the Rights of the Child establishes the obligation of the State to meeting children's needs. The Convention came into force in September after a more rapid process than any human rights convention in history - and with the Holy See among those to ratify it before it came into force. Increasingly, that sense of obligation is extending to the world community of nations, as evidenced by the World Summit, and to all factions and sectors of society.

Transcending its detailed provisions, the Convention embodies the fundamental principle that the essentials of child survival, protection and development should have a "first call" on society's concerns and capacities. Children should be able to depend on that commitment in bad times as well as in good, in times of emergency as well as in normal times, in times of war as well as in times of peace, in times of recession as well as in times of prosperity. This principle is the foundation for the arch of protection which could now be constructed over the great majority of the world's children. So important is this that, in UNICEF's view, it should increasingly come to influence the direction and nature of progress in all nations over the next decade and beyond.

To you who have gathered in the Vatican at this conference on "The Human Mind", you who understand so profoundly through your own religion what a child can be, to you I ask: If you do not speak out, with word and action, for those who have no voice nor possibility to act, if you do not take the lead - who will? Before your eyes is that Child through whom the meaning of reality is revealed. The child is held up as the key to the full realization of life on earth - as divine promise incarnate. If you do not translate your profound appreciation for the full potency, the full promise of children, who will?

Where does one start? Cardinal Paulo Evaristo Arns of the Archdiocese of Sao Paulo, Brazil, speaking last July at the conference of world religious leaders in Princeton organized by the World Conference on Religion and Peace, "The World's Religions for the World's Children", offered, as a starting point, five very practical steps from his own experience:

- 1) Form in each country a group of people, representatives of society, to defend child health.
- 2) Give priority to the development of basic actions, scientifically effective, in the fields of health, nutrition and education.
- 3) Concentrate on the most needed communities and with the organized participation of local leaders.
- 4) Promote co-operation with the government ministries and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to complement local efforts.
- 5) Develop an information system, starting with the communities, to assess their efforts and evaluate the results at different levels.

In these five points he summarizes, I believe, a most effective means to step in actively and support the goals and Plan of Action adopted by world leaders at the World Summit for Children, as well as the provisions of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The developmental needs of children can be met within this framework.

As we enter this final decade of the millenium we may ask what more precious legacy could be left to the 21st century than the full healthy development of those people who will comprise the societies of the future - that is, the children of today. Perhaps, in fact, there is a greater gift. But it will be given through the same efforts. We will have crafted the gift if the civilization which we are now becoming - which we are molding through our actions - takes for granted that the well-being of children is everyone's concern; if, as a matter of course, we put issues related to children high among our priorities at all levels of society. We will have crafted the gift if our care and nurturing of all children spring naturally from a profound appreciation of the sacredness of life, and of the most dear vulnerability of life as it manifests in the child. It is quite a challenge to adult society, is it not, that total dependence of the child? Such priority, a "first call", will help ensure the well-being of children for generations to come, and it will offer evidence that we are progressing as a more just and humane civilization.